

黃思騁：一粒大麻丸

The THC Tab

By Huang Sicheng

Translated by Jon Solomon

I

SHE WAS SITTING on the stairway, two steps away from the front door of her apartment.

She had no idea what time it was, or how long before daybreak. She had been in a daze all night.

It was dark on the stairway. Nobody turned on their lights because somebody had been stealing lightbulbs recently. She'd had to grope her way up the stairs.

She leaned her head against the wall. Her head had long since cleared, and pain and regret were now gnawing at her heart. She wished that she had the courage to jump off the balcony, or hang herself with her panty-hose.

It was that long-haired boy with the acne who had snatched her precious treasure, leaving her with nothing more than a loathsome outer shell, a torn burlap sack abandoned by the side of a trash can.

"I can't believe this is happening to me, and I don't even know the guy's name. What a slut I am. I'm as low as they come!"

Her mother had told her that if this kind of thing ever happened she ought to go drown herself, or run away with the guy—anything but come home. But she had neither the courage to drown herself nor any chance of running away with the guy. All she could do was to come home and throw herself at the mercy of fate.

It was too early for her to ring the doorbell, and she was in no hurry to face her mother anyway. She only wished she knew what time it was, and how long before daybreak, but since there was no light, she couldn't see the watch in her handbag—in fact, her watch was something like herself, an empty shell. Someone had stepped on it at the dance.

Huang Sicheng's short stories and novels have appeared in all major Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong.

"Ma, please forgive me. I didn't do it on purpose, I swear I didn't. It's just that I like dancing and music, that's all. I never imagined something like this would happen . . ."

The stillness of the night enveloped her. There was no sound of any sort.

Though she was exhausted, her restless hips would not let her sleep. She could still hear that crazy song, "I don't care about nothin'". Then there was a white pill, smaller than an aspirin. At first she did not want to take it, but when she heard it could make her hallucinate, she swallowed it right down. She felt the earth revolving. It seemed as if her arms and legs had become detached from her body and her head was a new appendage. Spinning around wildly, she followed the other dancers. As she spun, she felt giddy and weak, and gave someone free rein to embrace her tightly and caress her body.

That was no dance, but a sacrificial rite, to which everyone had to surrender themselves entirely; naturally, she was no exception. This was why she was sitting on the stairs outside her apartment rather than lying curled up in the warmth of her blanket.

Thinking about her pain and sorrow, tears welled up in her eyes. She hated herself.

Why did it happen so suddenly, so easily? She'd had a firm grasp on that pearl. How, in just a moment's time, had she come up empty-handed?

Thoroughly exhausted, she fell asleep. In her nightmares, she saw herself running naked in an open field, with a pack of wild beasts chasing after her. Their claws, only inches from her body, could at any moment rip apart . . .

II

In working-class neighbourhoods, the day begins earlier than in more exclusive residential areas. On their floor, Uncle Lin was the early bird. He always completed his three rounds of *taiji* on a nearby slope before anybody else got up.

"Is that Wanzhen? What are you doing out here so early in the morning? Why don't you go in?"

Fang Wanzhen came out of her daze. It was not yet very bright out, but she could clearly discern the objects in front of her.

"Uncle Lin . . . Uncle Lin, I . . ."

"How come you're just sitting here? Why don't you go in?"

She did not reply.

Uncle Lin already had an inkling of what had happened. Wanzhen was seventeen and beautiful, and the unemployed youths in the neighbourhood frequently made eyes at her. If not for her mother's strict vigilance, she would have degenerated into a street-walker a long time ago. It was only six o'clock now. If she'd come home the night before, there would have been no reason for her to be sitting on the stairs now.

"Ay, my child, can anyone escape from bad karma? . . . Anyhow, sitting here is no solution. You'll have to go in sometime."

She shook her head violently. She was so afraid.

"No matter what you've done wrong, you still have to face your mother. I'll ring the doorbell for you."

"No, Uncle Lin, no . . ."

"Sitting here is no solution. You think you can escape this way?"

She wept silently, caught in a terrible dilemma. She wanted to go home, but didn't dare face her mother.

"I'll ring the bell for you, then!"

Taking the situation into his own hands, Uncle Lin rang the bell twice.

A moment later, the door opened a crack. A woman with dishevelled hair poked her head half-way out.

"Oh, Uncle Lin, good morning. What can I do for you?"

"Your daughter is sitting over here. I think it'd be best to let her in."

Mrs Fang opened the door a bit wider. Glancing at the staircase in front of her, she saw her daughter sitting on the stairs, wearing an unfamiliar coat and a pair of shoes that did not match. She heaved a deep sigh. She could guess what had happened during the night.

Fang Wanzhen looked at her mother timidly: Mrs Fang was in such torment, filled with a burning urge to punish her daughter.

"And you still won't get over here."

She got up and went over to her mother. Mrs Fang was so angry she was practically foaming at the mouth. She shoved her daughter into the house.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Lin."

"I think you ought to calm down a bit, Mrs Fang. Maybe she really couldn't get away."

"I know, Uncle Lin, but she stayed out all night. You think any good could have come of it?"

"If that's the case, then you better take a philosophical view of the whole thing."

"I know, Uncle Lin."

Uncle Lin shook his head and sighed, then he turned around and went downstairs.

III

Fang Wanzhen was sitting on the sofa, surrounded by piles of cut-out garment parts and snippings of cloth. A bunch of partially-assembled plastic toys was piled up on the floor.

"Get up! Don't get my things dirty!"

Fang Wanzhen got up slowly. Mrs Fang pulled the rattan switch off the shelf. In the past, whenever Fang Wanzhen set eyes on it, she would tremble in fright. But today it seemed she was not going to beg forgiveness. She felt that her sin could not be expiated.

She went over to the portrait of her deceased father and knelt down before it. She had been doing this ever since she was little, even for the slightest naughtiness. Over the years, she must have done it a hundred times already.

The night before, Mrs Fang had worried that her daughter might get into trouble. She had waited up for her to come home, but by midnight there was no trace of her. Mrs Fang just sat in the living room, facing the door. At four o'clock, she began to lose hope. A clear-headed girl should be home by this time. But she neither reported it to the police, nor considered going out to look for her. There was no point to it anyway. Now that her daughter had come back, it proved that she had willingly debased herself.

She went over to where her daughter was kneeling. Examining the strange overcoat and the mis-matched pair of shoes, she was beside herself with anger.

"Where'd this coat come from?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Wanzhen answered without a trace of ambiguity.

"You must be out of your mind, staying out all night like this. I told you to never come back here again, but here you are, back in this wretched hole!"

Wanzhen stared at the big basket of plastic toys in front of her. She had assembled them the previous afternoon, and had even hurt her hand doing it. Her head still felt heavy, as if the effects of the THC, a synthetic form of cannabis, had not completely worn off.

"Where did you go last night? Who were you with? Out with it!"

"I went to a dance, with Ah Fa and a few other people."

"When did they let you go?"

"I don't know, probably around three or four o'clock."

"What did you do?"

She did not answer.

"Hmph. From the looks of this get-up, you must have lost it for sure."

The face of the long-haired guy with acne suddenly appeared before her. She neither admitted nor denied her mother's statement.

When Mrs Fang had become a widow ten years before, she had placed all her hopes on her two lovely daughters. Everyone who knew her daughters then said that in another eight or ten years she would be able to start leading a good life. Now they were grown up, but this terrible event had occurred. What could be more distressing to a mother?

Mrs Fang grabbed the collar of her daughter's overcoat and tore it off as if she were skinning a frog. Then she pulled off her shoes and threw them out the window.

"Who was it that messed with you? Tell me!"

"I don't know his name . . ."

"You don't know his name? You'd actually do that kind of thing with someone you don't even know?"

"They gave me a pill. I was a little out of it."

"If it isn't the same old story!" Mrs Fang said. "I already told you, none of those dance parties are any good. The men there are all goons working for the whorehouses. Both Ah Jiao and Ah Juan got nailed that way. Now it's your turn!"

Fang Wanzhen did not respond. In moral terms she felt she was already a notch lower than before; never again would she be her mother's good daughter. She would have the courage to take even a hundred lashes.

Because she had worried about her daughter all night, Mrs Fang had only dozed off for about an hour. Even now, her head felt a little heavy. Gritting her teeth, she lashed her daughter's back savagely. Fang Wanzhen's whole body convulsed for an instant. A warm current spread out from her chest, followed by a strong burning sensation. However, this condition did not last for long. The next few lashes were even more violent than the first. She gritted her teeth, fighting the pain through the ninth blow, whereupon she collapsed to one side.

"Ma, let me die, I can't take it . . ."

Her older sister Wanfang heard the noise and came out. When she saw her sister rolling on the floor and her mother waving the switch around, she called out, "Ma, what's going on?"

Mrs Fang turned to her and said, "Just as we feared, she's gone to the dogs."

"Who was it?"

"She says it was somebody she doesn't even know."

"Crazy! She's really crazy!"

Mrs Fang was already thoroughly indignant. To compensate for having endured ten years of widowhood, ten years of hard labour, she would vent her anger on her deflowered daughter. She moved forward, and the blows fell like rain.

Like a caterpillar consumed in flames, Wanzhen curled up and writhed on the floor, screaming for mercy.

"Forget it, Ma, what's the use of beating her now!" said Wanfang.

Her anger spent, Mrs Fang slumped into a chair. Wanfang wrested the rattan switch from her hands.

"Gone forever. Just like that!"

Wanfang recalled what had taken place the night before: around nine o'clock, Wanzhen had said she was going to the garment factory to pick up some pre-cut parts for making children's clothes. Afterwards, she recalled how her sister had been dressed that day. She looked like she was going on a date, but her mother didn't believe it because Wanzhen had never gone out with boys. Around eleven o'clock, Mrs Fang started to get nervous. In poor neighbourhoods, all mothers with grown-up daughters spend their days in fear. If a daughter were to stay out later than usual her mother's anxiety would become unbearable. This time Wanzhen had been gone for three hours though she said she was going to a factory only five minutes away. What else could it be but rape?

"Forget it, Ma. There's no way to change things now. If she wants to act like that, you can't blame anyone else for it," Wanfang said.

"I'm going to report it to the police. I want to see that guy in jail!"

"Ma, what good will it do? If you make a big deal out of it, people will look down on her."

"But how can I swallow it?"

"When this kind of thing happens, you have to resign yourself to it."

"I'd like to take a knife and hack that guy to pieces. I've suffered for the

two of you for over ten years, only to have it all snatched away in one night by some guy."

"She walked into the trap herself, Ma. It wasn't like she didn't know what might happen."

"Find him for me. I want to tear his face to bits so he'll be too ashamed to see anyone again."

"Ma, you know Hong Kong is full of cheap punks loafing around in gangs. What's the use of looking for him!"

"You mean I should just forget about it?"

"This kind of thing happens every day. There's nothing you can do about it."

While Mrs Fang was thinking this over, she suddenly remembered a former neighbour of hers who ran a club called the Something-or-other Pond. Once he had tried to sell her on the idea of letting her daughter work in his club, with a guaranteed income of three or four thousand dollars a month. Mrs Fang had driven him out angrily then, but now he was back in the picture.

"Just as well," Mrs Fang said, "Give Ah Quan a call and ask him to come over sometime."

"Ma, you mean . . ."

"What else is she good for? Rather than let those guys play around with her for free, she ought to be making money for me!"

Wanfang had no objection, since she knew her mother was too poor and too embittered. Seeing that her sister had already lost her way, she reasoned it was just as well that she should help her mother.

"So be it, Ma. I'll give Ah Quan a call."

A week later, a fresh talent appeared in the Hong Kong clubs.