

辛其氏：骨骸

Stuck in the Throat

By Xinqishi

Translated by Don J. Cohn

THERE HAD been thunderstorms every day for a week, and like punctual guests, they visited us once in the morning and once in the afternoon. It got so that the days were somehow incomplete without the rain. But that morning the weather suddenly turned fine. Since I believe that sunlight can make people happy, I decided to stop worrying about what had taken place the day before, and because my particular problem could not be solved overnight anyway, it seemed totally useless to get angry or upset about it. And then at the stroke of noon on that glorious sunny day, just as I was reminding myself that I should pay closer attention to the way I handle my problems, particularly those involving Peter Chen, the bad news made its way into my office.

I went to bed late the night before and was only half awake when I arrived at the office. Like an amphetamine, the insistent clacking of typewriters in the next room revived me and helped me to focus my mind on my work. I filed away the letters and other papers on my desk that had piled up the day before, locked up the documents stamped CONFIDENTIAL in blood-red ink, made appointments by phone with a few people the manager wanted to meet, and called the airline to check the arrival time of the flight on which the “imperial envoy” from the bank’s headquarters in the United States was travelling. Then the directors of the Research and Analysis departments called and asked to see Peter Chen, and I put them off by telling them that he had an important morning meeting. In fact, I knew perfectly well there was no such meeting. His office was empty and it was well after ten

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o'clock; he simply hadn't come to work yet. My office was right next to Peter Chen's and his office door opened into my room, so Peter Chen had to pass by my desk on his way to his office. Today he was already two hours late. Perhaps I was being over-sensitive, but as I looked through the glass wall of my office, all my colleagues appeared particularly bored with their work. There was a lot of whispering going on, and they cast their glances in my direction from time to time. Like other departments in the multitude of similar institutions in Hong Kong, the atmosphere of the Credit and Investment department of the American bank where I worked was rife with a rich collection of secrets and half secrets which in greatly elaborated form could spread through the entire building in a matter of hours. Power struggles in the upper echelons, transfers and promotions in middle management, or even a minor contretemps between lovers could significantly enliven the drab routine lives of my co-workers. In a place where human relationships were so complex, it seemed that no one had any privacy.

One of the walls in my room consisted of a large glass panel through which I could observe everything going on in the main office. But most of the time this cold and impersonal piece of glass gave me the most unpleasant feeling. When I was under pressure due to some personal or work-related problem and happened to look up from my desk, I felt like a fish swimming about in an aquarium, my every movement cruelly exposed to the scrutiny of the rest of the staff. I became accustomed to my colleagues' surveillance long ago, and after three years of practice, I'd developed an almost supernatural ability to fend off their hostile glances. In fact, if I hadn't found some way of defending myself from them I certainly would not have survived so long in the Credit and Investment department as Peter Chen's secretary.

I must admit that when I recall my first few weeks on the job, the idea of quitting occurred to me more than once. I wasn't some kid fresh out of high school with no experience in society, and I've had a fair share of ups and downs in my so-called "emotional life", so the heavy work load, complex human relationships and nasty rumours that infect the office like germs couldn't get me down. When I found myself in a new environment, I could adjust to the changing situation easily and with real enthusiasm. In fact I had switched jobs several times since I started working. If a young woman doesn't want to get married, her only alternative is to put all her energy into her career. Thus one of the things I wanted most in life was a steady job with good future prospects. When I landed my present job, I was really excited and hoped that I could climb step by step up the ladder to become a senior personal assistant. You know, it's a long hard journey from personal secretary to senior personal secretary to personal assistant to senior personal assistant. Some people may have very little respect for this sort of ambition, but what other choices did I have? I'm a middle school graduate with one year of secretarial training. I know my limitations and never make unrealistic demands on myself. I'm nearly thirty now. All I want is some security, a decent job, a nice little flat of my own and a man to love me. Is that too much to ask?

When I accepted my job in the bank I told myself: I'm no spring chicken, so if I'm going to strive for my ideals I'd better do it now while I'm young. Since it was no mean feat for me to get such a good job, I decided that I would never quit

unless I was in the most dire circumstances. But the best laid plans often go awry. What made me want to quit was not the heavy work load or the tough schedule, but a man, aged around forty, tall, thin and balding, the manager of the Credit and Investment department of the bank. It was Peter Chen, my boss.

I remember my first day at work. Mr Chen called me into his office, which was furnished with a two-seater couch and a coffee table (later I learned that this furniture was issued to departmental managers as an indication of their status), and told me what his work habits were and how he wanted things done. After he finished with that, he made a point of telling me that as his private secretary, he expected me to accompany him to social functions whenever necessary, and that at such times I should dress stylishly and be sociable and elegant. As he spoke, he looked me up and down, and it was at this moment that I first felt a terrible surge of anger inside me. What did he mean by that? I have nothing against attending social functions for business reasons, but the way he sized me up was downright insulting. At that moment I reminded myself that I had to exercise a certain amount of self control, especially considering that jobs weren't easy to come by. There's a world-wide economic depression, and I had won out over ten highly-qualified competitors. Though the bank would never hire an incompetent slob, I knew that one of the reasons I was given the job, besides the fact that I'm well-qualified, was because of my looks. Although what Peter Chen said left a bitter taste in my mouth, I walked out of his office with a smile on my face, while he, as a way of demonstrating to me that he hoped our association would be a happy one, patted me lightly on the shoulder.

Frankly speaking, working as an executive's private secretary isn't much different from being a nursemaid. First, you've got to be able to read your boss' mind and anticipate his wishes, including everything from arranging the agenda at an important meeting to getting him a soda cracker and half an aspirin when he needs it; no detail can be overlooked. You have to tell clients exactly what they want to hear for your boss's benefit, never forgetting that his interests are your interests as well—actually, as a secretary your own interests don't matter very much in the first place. This may make you a complete failure as a person, but it will certainly make you a top-notch secretary in your boss's eyes. There's a contradiction here of course, and when I got my first job, it worried me a great deal. For example, sometimes you know your boss is playing nasty tricks behind a competitor's back, and will go on doing so until the poor victim is forced into bankruptcy. But it is your job to act against your conscience, covering up the truth with clever excuses and rationalizations. You may be earning a secretary's wages, but your job is more like an accomplice in crime.

I had often thought of changing careers, but what else could I do? All my qualifications and experience involved secretarial work. If I started again from the beginning, my future prospects would certainly have been a lot worse than they were at the bank, not to mention the fact that I would probably never realize any of my dreams. Switching bosses one after another and pursuing my career like a dog year after year was terribly exhausting, but gradually I learned to resign myself to it. I could see through my situation and realized that my stubbornness and inner

struggles would never make me happy. While my friends, classmates and colleagues seemed to be able to live their lives and do their jobs successfully with very little conflict between the two, at the same time gaining both fame and fortune (despite the irresolvable contradictions involved), my old-fashioned way of standing by my principles and insisting on doing what I thought was right has been self-defeating. For years I've been stuck at the bottom of the totem pole working as an assistant personal secretary. Let me put it another way: it's as if I were trapped in a giant whirlpool in the middle of the ocean, clinging helplessly to a bunch of flimsy seaweed trying to stay alive, while everyone else has safely made their way to the shore. To go on acting like a fool in the eyes of all those on the shore is pure stupidity. And after playing the perfect fool for many years, would anyone in his right mind want to go on in this way? When I learned that my application for personal secretary had been accepted at the bank, I knew my time had come. But that's when all the trouble began.

One night about three months after I had begun working at the bank, Peter Chen and I were leaving a fancy banquet we had attended with some clients, when suddenly he turned to me and made a request that was definitely beyond the bounds of propriety. I refused him in unequivocal terms, and immediately thought of quitting my job. This was an extraordinarily painful decision for me, and the more I thought about it the worse my head ached, so that the next day I had to stay home from work. Peter Chen called me at home to apologize. He said that he had been so excited about the deal that had been concluded the night before that he had drunk more than he should have, and said what he did as a joke without thinking very much. Realizing that I had not been compromised in any way, and how immensely difficult job-hunting had been, and that if I quit then I would still have to work with Peter Chen for another month, I decided to go on and take things as they came. But this decision landed me squarely and helplessly in Peter Chen's trap, a trap from which there was no escape.

From that day on, Peter Chen treated me with extreme courtesy and kindness. He was my boss, and in that capacity started giving me gifts one after another. Sometimes I would stay late if there was some paperwork needing urgent attention; at other times, when he would come back to the office from an appointment right before closing time, I'd take shorthand in his office for the pile of letters waiting for him to draft. If the two of us were working hard, he might stop in the middle and let me rest a while, hand me a glass of water, bring up something which had nothing to do with our work, or just start shooting the breeze. My professional training had made me an excellent listener, and I'd let him go on about his family background or his own life story. Though at times like these he never mentioned his wife, I knew they had no children. I have never understood how married men totally devoted to their work managed to keep up their relationships with their wives. Though Peter Chen spent more time with me every day than with his wife, I had no desire to play the role of an interloper, and certainly didn't want to do any harm to others. I often reminded myself that my relationship with Peter Chen was strictly professional, and that it was in my professional capacity that I knew so many details about his personal affairs. Of course we had a number of common

goals, but this was simply a manifestation of our intense devotion to our work. It was this sort of dedication that made us perform so well on the job, and might lead eventually to a promotion and more power in the organization for both of us. It's true that Peter Chen treated me well—too well perhaps—but only because I took care of most of his problems in the office. I was his right-hand girl, his girl Friday. I handled all the office work without a hitch, freeing him to concentrate his energies on planning strategy and winning people over to his side, and paving the way for his future advancement. Everyone in the bank knew how Peter had his heart set on a real plum—the vice-presidency of the Hong Kong head office. This would be the crowning glory of his career, for if he were to attempt to climb one step higher and become president, he would first have to hocus-pocus himself into a blonde-haired, blue-eyed caucasian. But fate had it that Peter Chen was reincarnated in the wrong womb; a vice-presidency was the very highest honour a Chinese could aspire to. It was precisely the same sort of aspiration that motivated me to work with such enthusiasm. But events never develop along a straight course, and it's impossible to prevent something that at first glance looks quite simple from turning into a complicated mess.

I don't recall precisely when, but at some point I began to notice that all my colleagues were constantly staring at me. Whenever Peter Chen stood in front of me giving instructions or chatting about something, every one of them in the next room would exchange knowing glances and turn to look in my direction. And when I passed by them on my way to the washroom, their animated gossip would suddenly cease, as if I were a porcupine they were afraid to touch. Finally I learned from a colleague in another department that rumours about Peter Chen and me had spread through the entire bank. And when I fainted one day at work, was sent to hospital and took two days off to recover, the rumours were elaborated upon to the point where I had become Peter Chen's mistress, and had gone to hospital for an abortion. I decided then that the best way to deal with such painfully compromising rumours was to pretend they didn't exist. I also wondered whether Peter Chen knew what was going on, since he hadn't batted an eyelash about any of this since it started, but it was a difficult subject for me to bring up with him, even in private. I was still confident that I could ward off my nosey colleagues' hostile glances with my "bullet-proof shield". Since Peter Chen had hinted on more than one occasion that at the end of this year he would promote me to personal assistant, this was hardly the time to consider quitting; it was too critical a moment in my career. But though my home-made shield could protect me from the after-lunch gossip in the office, it was hardly effective against Peter Chen's neurotic wife.

Mrs Chen called the office as often as five or six times a day and was nothing but rude to me. If Peter Chen was out of the office when she called, I would tell her where he had gone, but she only half-believed me. When Peter Chen failed to return home one night, Mrs Chen barged into my office first thing the next morning and started heaping curses on me left and right. Though my office door was shut, this event set my colleagues' tongues wagging furiously. Had I actually been Peter Chen's mistress, I certainly could accept being dragged over the coals in this manner. But this was obviously a case of false accusation and I

was completely at a loss to defend myself. Peter Chen answered his wife's criticism by mumbling a bunch of wishy-washy nonsense, neither accepting her charges nor denying them, which left the three of us in an uncomfortable stalemate. I didn't know what Peter Chen had on his mind, but I was angry to the point of exploding. No matter how I explained things to her, Mrs Chen simply responded with the same line: "The two of you know what dirty tricks you've been up to." When I confronted Peter Chen later and demanded that he clear up the whole misunderstanding, he just smiled at me and said, "What's wrong with being my mistress?" He told me how much he liked me, and how he wished the rumours about us were true. He then said that he was confident that by the end of the year, or at the latest by early next year, he would be promoted to vice-president, and that if I kept working for him, we'd be in the number-two slot in the Hong Kong main office, only one step away from the very top. I naturally understood all the implications of what he was saying. Though I had rejected his advances that first time, he actually had never given up his pursuit, and tried to use all sorts of tricks and promises to get me to surrender to his desires. I had always thought Peter Chen was a bit too self-confident for his own good; he couldn't imagine any woman saying "no" to him, so he played the role of the modest and self-effacing gentleman as he attempted to lure me into his trap. I now had two choices: one was to quit my job and give up all hope for a better future; the second was to give in to Peter Chen and become his mistress. I saw right through the man; in business, he made use of every means at his disposal to get ahead, often stooping to unscrupulous practices. He found failure intolerable, and so he plotted every move with the greatest care to ensure he would never suffer a single loss. For example, a move he made today might only produce the desired result in the distant future. Peter Chen only entered into battles he was sure to win. His self-confidence and relentless drive to get ahead made him one of the most insufferably arrogant people I have ever known. He was polished to the point of slickness in his dealings with others, and had a knack for stabbing people in the back while smiling at them, so his victims never knew where the knife came from. He mobilized everyone, both close friends and casual acquaintances, who might be of some use to him in furthering his career. Naturally, a clever man like Peter Chen knew all the dirty tricks in the book and could pull them off without leaving a single fingerprint anywhere, so all those he dealt with continued to praise him for his "loyalty to his friends". Since I was the one responsible for executing his plans, I perhaps knew more than I should have about his affairs. This put me in a somewhat risky situation, since Peter Chen was the last person in the world to subscribe to the professional ethic of confidentiality. In his mind, the easiest way to control a woman was through her heart, to become emotionally involved with her. If I became his mistress, got my promotion, started taking money from him and moved into a fancy flat, I would never be able to extricate myself from his clutches and would end up as a mere pawn in his selfish designs. I understood my own needs as well as the predicament I was in. Giving up the chance of a promotion was as difficult for me as acting against the dictates of my conscience. Our discussion had led nowhere, and so our relationship remained as ambivalent and ill-defined as before.

Mrs Chen seemed to grow more neurotic by the day. Once when her husband failed to come home she called me in the middle of the night and asked for him. Peter Chen and I had parted after a social function earlier that evening, and I had no idea where he was. When I discovered that my colleagues' glances contained intimations to the effect that I was now a certain person's mistress in addition to being his private secretary, it was already too late for me to try to defend myself. I'd never felt so frustrated in my life, and needed desperately to get it off my chest, but who could I possibly speak to? The hot rumours on everybody's lips had metamorphosed into the truth, and any attempt I might have made to lay my heart bare before them would have only made me the laughing stock of the office. I was under a tremendous amount of pressure, and was torn by contradictions. It was as if some weird force were pushing me to the edge of a whirlpool; I was terrified that I might fall in. I detested the way Peter Chen devoted all of his energies to his own advancement, but I also had to admit that he always treated me very well. When you work with a man from morning to night every day, you get to know his good points as well as his faults. Although I kept telling myself that my relationship with Peter Chen was strictly professional, could anyone guarantee it would remain like that? And so this odd relationship of ours continued to develop in an atmosphere of darkness and gloom, much like the cloudy and rainy weather we'd been having over the last week.

I was sitting in my little fishbowl of an office, separated by a sheet of glass from the intermittent whispering and curious glances of my colleagues. Long experience told me that the topic of their many discussions was Peter Chen's failure to show up in the office that morning. In the eighteen years Peter Chen has been a manager in this bank, he has always come to work early and left late. When we parted the night before he had not mentioned having any early outside appointments this morning. Had the negative decision by the board of directors the day before shocked him so deeply that for the first time in nearly two decades he wasn't the first one in the office? Or did his absence stem from the insulting way I had told him off in the presence of another manager, and he was too ashamed of himself to put in an appearance? That board meeting was the event Peter Chen had long been waiting for. Every time he had weighed up his adversaries, he had concluded that the vice-president's position at the Hong Kong head office belonged to him and him alone. Thus when the board's decision was announced and the job given to another man, Peter Chen's lifelong dream burst like a bubble. Something rather odd took place when I went to the toilet that day at lunch time. I was alone for a few minutes at first, but then two women came in and through their chattering and giggling I learned, for the first time, a "secret" about Peter Chen and me that everyone in the entire office seemed to be in on: the person responsible for circulating all the rumours was none other than Peter Chen himself! In order to verify the authenticity of these rumours, the professional busybodies in the office had checked their sources carefully, and each time the accusing finger pointed at Peter Chen. Since the information was issued directly from the horse's mouth, could it possibly be false?

Though I had wondered a lot about the source of the rumours, I never

imagined that Peter Chen would go so far as to attempt to present our hypothetical relationship to others as a *fait accompli*, thus ruining my reputation forever. I decided to have it out with him then and there, and make him admit that the whole thing was a mistake. This was how it happened. Yesterday afternoon, Peter Chen had an appointment outside the office. When he got back, before he learned that he had failed to get his much-coveted promotion, he had a discussion about sales promotion with another manager in our branch. When their discussion was over, I walked into his office, asked the other man to stay in order to be my witness, and then had Peter Chen describe the true nature of our relationship in order to redress the injustice he had done. I asked him why he had spread so many rumours about us and, at the top of my voice, called him a shameless bastard. At this Peter Chen blushed and paled in turn, while the other man became embarrassed and started fidgeting, and then found an excuse and fled. Peter Chen then admitted to me that he had started the rumours, but swore that he had only told one person, even though they had now spread throughout the entire office. It was at that moment that I made up my mind once and for all to abandon all hope about my promotion to personal assistant. Though I was not and never had been Peter Chen's mistress, everyone in the office now regarded me as an immoral woman. Unfortunately, I could never act like a particular classmate of mine from middle school who very happily and openly lived the life of a kept woman. So once again my thoughts turned to quitting. Then, as I was mechanically arranging the papers on my desk and thinking about whether to stay or leave, Mr Guo, one of the bank's directors and a long-time close associate of Peter Chen, came to relate the board of directors' decision. For a few minutes no sound came from Peter Chen's office. What was going on in there? I was still stewing about my confrontation with Peter Chen and was hardly interested in the board's decision. It took me until 6:30 to finish all my work. As I was getting ready to leave, Peter Chen walked out of his office, a perfect picture of gloom. He apologized for what he had done and invited me out for a drink. I took a good look at him. I knew it was cruel to refuse him at a time like this, but I recalled my promise to myself that I would only go out with him for business reasons, especially now that the office was rife with scandal. As he walked listlessly out of the office and disappeared from view, he looked to me like an old and worn out man, though he was still in his early forties.

That night I couldn't sleep. I was trying to decide whether it was right for me to quit my job at such a difficult time in Peter Chen's life. Even if I continued working at the bank and adopted a more detached attitude, the problem remained of how to handle my complex relationship with Peter Chen in the rather absurd environment that the office had become. Could I give up my one chance for a better job and a better life and not regret it later? If I got another job elsewhere, would I have the same opportunities for advancement? Questions like these plagued me all through the night, so I slept poorly and awoke feeling woozy all over. It was a relief to discover that the weather the following morning was extremely fine. The glass walls of the office building opposite my flat glowed in the early-morning sunlight, reflecting distorted images of the objects nearby. As the noon-day sun beat down on Victoria Harbour, I tried to forget what had taken place the day before and

concentrate on my work. But Peter Chen had mysteriously failed to show up at work, and since no one knew the real reason for his absence, a rumour was circulating to the effect that he was making a silent protest for not having received his promotion. Then at noon when this rumour had become the subject of the most heated debates, the personnel department announced the terrible news that Peter Chen had died the night before.

Peter Chen was not the sort of man to commit suicide on account of a single career setback. My common sense told me that he would soon recover from the shock, make an impressive comeback and eventually attain his goal. The fact that he had died at a point in his life when death was certainly the last thing on his mind proves the notion that not even the cleverest scheming can foil the workings of Fate, especially here where death came about in such a preposterous way. This was how it happened. After a night of heavy drinking, Peter Chen returned home and had a bowl of fish soup; a fish bone got stuck in his throat, and the pain was so unbearable that while groping about for some vinegar to swallow in order to dissolve the bone, he mistakenly picked up a bottle of sulphuric acid and drank it instead. The acid burned his throat and esophagus and destroyed his insides. In less than an hour he was dead.

Peter Chen's lifetime dream was to be a vice-president in the bank. Thanks to good fortune, the position became available, but to everyone's surprise he lost out in the running. Finally, by a weird twist of fate, he lost his life as well, leaving behind a vacant post for someone else to fill. During the next few days, all of Peter Chen's associates in the office, friend and foe alike, wore looks of grief, but in most cases these were mere masks concealing ambitious plots and schemes. Of course, if the victim had been someone else in the office, Peter Chen would have displayed the same hypocritical concern. The news of Peter Chen's death had come without warning. Following a short period of general disbelief, there arose in the office the usual mixed chorus of discussions and evaluations, some of which inevitably involved me. The stares coming from my colleagues now contained a mixture of curiosity and feigned aloofness. It was as if I had suffered the sudden loss of my sole source of support and now had to struggle for my own survival in a vast and unfriendly sea. In their eyes, I had lost my good name and influence and was reduced to the pitiable status of someone's "former mistress". I couldn't tolerate this absurd situation, but there was no way for me to clarify it. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't sure whether Peter Chen's death was good or bad. On the positive side, I would never become his mistress and was thus saved from making a very unsound investment; and on the negative side, I had been an innocent victim of rumour mongering, and now the only witness who could clear my name was dead. Peter Chen's death also dashed all my hopes for a promotion, and all the hard work I had done over the years suddenly dissolved into nothingness. But what caused me the most grief was not my colleagues' sarcastic comments and glassy stares, but Mrs Chen's hysterical behaviour in the aftermath of her husband's death.

I had asked several of my colleagues to accompany me to Peter Chen's funeral service, but each of them made up a different excuse not to go, expressing their sympathy for me in odd, offhand ways, and then silently and remorsefully turning

and walking out of my office. I got so fed up with this that I shouted at the top of my voice: "I was never Peter Chen's mistress, so stop looking at me that way!" But it was too late. They showed even greater solicitude at this point and tried to get me to calm down, assuring me that with time I would recover from my loss. Since they had cut themselves off from me completely, I made up my mind to be courageous for once and attend the funeral alone.

I went to the funeral parlour dressed in a simple outfit. As I stood before the coffin, bowing three times at the behest of the funeral director, I was aware that everyone was staring at me. When everyone you know starts thinking of you as Mr So-and-so's mistress, it makes you wonder whether it's true or not. In order to get back at them, I decided to play the role of Peter Chen's mistress to the hilt, and sat down in the front row. Much to my surprise, I started crying, but whether the tears were for Peter Chen or myself it was really hard to say. Mrs Chen was kneeling down before the coffin not far from where I was sitting. There was hardly any expression on her face, and she had grown quite thin and pale, but not for a single second did she take her eyes off me. The few times I glanced at her and our eyes met, I felt terribly sad for her. The most important thing for me was to get her to believe that I had not had any sexual relations with her husband. Peter Chen may have been an unfaithful husband, but I certainly had no responsibility in that. In the end, I had innocently been made someone else's scapegoat. Can a woman blinded by hate and jealousy take seriously anything her mortal enemy says? It was clearly too late for that. Suddenly, like a ravening beast, Mrs Chen attacked me, slapping my cheeks with all her might. I said, "I'm afraid you've made a big mistake," but before I could say any more, a few of the kind-hearted busy-bodies attending the ceremony ushered me out of the funeral hall. And so by the good will of others I was denied a last opportunity to clear my name in public, though I knew full well that by confessing at that time I would have been wasting my breath.

Mrs Chen had lost her source of financial support, so the bank arranged a job for her in the import-export department of one of the branch offices. Since we worked in different parts of town, our paths never crossed, but she continued to haunt me like a ghost, and occasionally I would see her lurking around my neighbourhood. When we met, she would always say the same thing: "Give me my husband back!" At first I put up with it, but later I had to call the police to get her off my back once and for all.

Then one night I came home late from a friend's dinner party and found her lying dead drunk on my doorstep. I carried her inside, helped her clean up a bit, tidied up her filthy clothing, and gave her some ginger tea to drink. She vomited several times and then started to come around. She tried to focus her bloodshot eyes on me, muttered something unintelligible, and in a moment of clarity confessed to me that she had murdered Peter Chen. She had always loved her husband deeply. They had fallen in love in high school, and for ten years their marriage had gone quite well. But when Peter Chen started moving up in the bank his personality changed completely. Mrs Chen couldn't tolerate being ignored for days on end, not to mention being brushed aside while her husband chased after other women. She

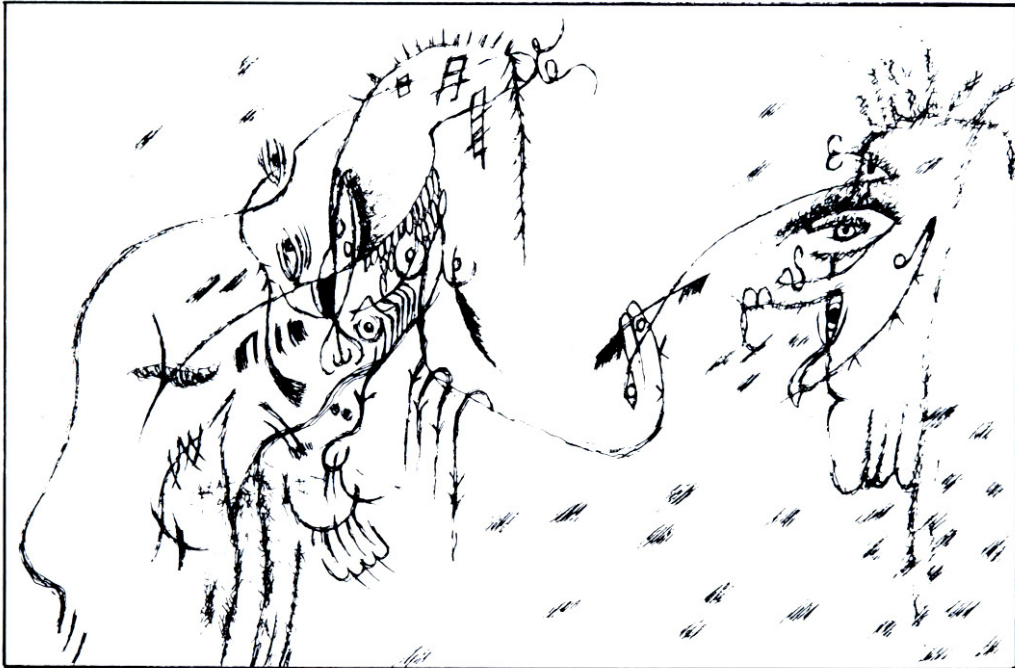
told me that she hated me because everyone had told her that I was Peter Chen's mistress. The day he died, Mrs Chen had made a pot of fish soup, a particularly good tonic, as she often did, though her husband hadn't told her whether he was coming home that night. Earlier she had put the live snakehead fish she had bought for the soup in the bathtub, but a moment later it disappeared, and she found it stuck head first in the toilet, with only the dark tip of its tail fins sticking out. It was too slippery for her to grasp, so she called in a plumber who convinced her it was better to let the fish "die in glory rather than live in dishonour"; in other words, rather than destroy the toilet to save the fish, he suggested using sulphuric acid to eliminate the fish without damaging the toilet. She concurred with him and it was the neat way the fish disintegrated in seconds with only half a bottle of sulphuric acid that gave Mrs Chen her inspiration. She went out and bought another fish, as well as another bottle of sulphuric acid At this point in her story, Mrs Chen took a deep breath and said that she had bought the sulphuric acid with me in mind. If Peter Chen didn't come home that night, she was going to eliminate me. But the course of events disrupted her plans. Peter Chen actually turned up that night, and in his drunken state drank the fish soup his wife had prepared for him. When the bone got stuck in his throat, he shouted at his wife so violently that she panicked and mistakenly handed him the bottle of sulphuric acid. In this tragicomic manner Peter Chen's life came to an end.

Between sobs, Mrs Chen told me that if I hadn't gotten involved with her husband, he would not have died in this manner. Then I swore to her that though her husband had made sexual overtures to me many times, I always refused him; and though our professional relationship was perhaps more intimate than most we had never crossed the line of propriety as she had imagined. Mrs Chen listened carefully to me, and I sensed that she was ready to accept my explanation, but all of a sudden she lashed out at me again with the allegation that I was an ingrate who had bitten the hand that fed me. She accused me of having forgotten all the favours her husband had done me, and of trying to deny everything that had gone on between us. How could I be so cruel, she said, since in a sense her husband had sacrificed his life for me? This was too much for me to bear, and I felt I was losing touch with reality. The whole world seemed topsy-turvy, and I started feeling dizzy. I had tried as best as I could to clear myself of the charge that I was Peter Chen's mistress; now I was fed up with the whole thing and couldn't tolerate any more. I saw no need to waste any more of my time and energy on this matter, since it now looked like I was going to be stuck with the title "Peter Chen's mistress" for the rest of my life.

Mrs Chen finally calmed down and fell asleep, and when I woke up the next morning, she had already left. It wasn't until some six months later, on Christmas eve, that our paths crossed again at the airport, though I only caught a glimpse of her from afar. Following Peter Chen's death, some major personnel changes took place at the bank which made working there even less attractive to me. Peter Chen's replacement was, to put it mildly, a lot less of a gentleman than Peter Chen. He constantly tried to take advantage of me, with the excuse that it was part of my job. When I refused him, he would start insulting me, and at such times would always

manage to bring up Peter Chen's name. I found this intolerable and six months later I handed in my letter of resignation, bringing to a close a period in my life that was nothing but one long nightmare. I planned a trip to Europe to do some sightseeing and visit a couple of friends who lived there. I wanted to distance myself from the shadows of my past and start a new life. Fame and fortune are nothing but a trap. I had two choices: either completely ignore the dictates of my conscience, or escape before it was too late.

On Christmas eve, the departure lounge at the airport was packed with people leaving Hong Kong on their holidays. As my flight was being announced for the third time, a familiar figure came into my view. It was Mrs Chen, arm in arm with the newly-appointed vice-president of the bank's Hong Kong head office. Dressed to kill and as happy as a pair of lovebirds, the two of them disappeared through the departure gate. I could hardly believe my eyes. The new vice-president was a married man. I wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. It was as if I had stepped into the midst of the most ridiculous dream there ever was.



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