

謝宏：誰在四月飛翔

Who Flies in April?

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In 1981, Summer was sixteen years old. She would later recall that on 1 April, the sun shone brightly, and more importantly, the sandstorms had temporarily abated. Such weather was hard to come by.

She did not like springtime in Beijing. The season brought sandstorms, and the drifting willow fluff in the air were impossible to escape, leaving traces everywhere, resulting in great discomfort for allergy sufferers; the mere act of leaving one's house to run errands presented an unpleasant prospect. But on this particular day, no sandstorm in the world could have kept her from her mission.

Despite the early hour, Summer was anxious, glancing frequently at her watch and gazing constantly at the buildings outside the window. She paid no attention to the driver's continual chatter, and could hardly sense the breeze ruffling her hair. The reason behind her anxiety was not that she was going to an important meeting or celebration, or to a rendezvous with a lover. No, judging by her face, she was expecting nothing so pleasant.

At that moment, her face betrayed the cares and yearnings of springtime, and the current of her thoughts merged with the rush of spring. In the brilliant sunlight, numerous thoughts of the distant past, like new buds growing on withered twigs, opened up in the wind, ever-changing yet still clear in her mind's eye. She could not remain indifferent to the spectacle, and yet could not help wondering: what was the point of dealing with it? Springtime was always more or less the same, but something in the springtime of her heart had changed.

Summer was from the blossoming south of China. She travelled thousands of miles north to Beijing not, of course, as a springtime tourist, nor to compare the beauty of the two regions' similar enough peach blossoms. She was carrying with her a notice of political rehabilitation, which had been issued for her grandfather and which she was now bringing to his rehabilitation memorial service. Her grandfather had held an official position in Beijing before the Cultural Revolution, and Summer had only a vague impression of him, pieced together from stories now and then recounted by her mother. And those repeated retellings, along with her mother's boundlessly sentimental recollections of a bygone happiness, had somehow distorted the truth of the past.

His photograph was real, of course, but too one-dimensional. Summer's mother had cherished and meticulously preserved this last remaining photograph; still, it was a miracle that it had survived the past several decades of flight and upheaval. She could not help but relive the old days whenever she contemplated the photograph. These were not always joyful moments: Summer's mother often betrayed emotions like anger and dejection as she gazed at the portrait, stung by the stark contrast between her reminiscences and the reality in which they lived.

As Summer walked down the long red carpet, she felt a sort of vertigo akin to sea-sickness. She took a deep breath and, having unexpectedly inhaled a bit of drifting fluff, began coughing so violently that she had to stop to retch. She felt that she was perhaps too agitated. Yet she was moved by anticipation not of the beginning of the political rehabilitation memorial ceremony, but of its end, which for Summer could not come quickly enough. She suddenly had the strange feeling that her mother was fortunate to be unable to attend; after all, what could the living do for the dead?

As Summer wiped away the tears brought on by her coughing fit and soothed her chest, an old man in a blue tunic suit walked over and asked whose little girl she was. Still coughing and with tears swimming in her eyes, she glanced at the old man and took out her grandfather's rehabilitation notice from her breast-pocket. The old man read it, then with a look of deep sadness reached out and stroked her thick braid of hair. 'You've grown so big,' he said. 'You're not a bit like your mother when she was your age; she was much more headstrong.' He then asked if she still remembered him.

A host of blurry figures circled in Summer's head as she tried to recall who he was, but no name emerged, and she stared at him blankly. He told her he was her Grandpa Wu. A figure finally appeared in her mind alongside her grandfather:

Grandpa Wu had been a colleague of her grandfather's, and her mother would always mention him in her stories. Both men had been well-known democratic personages. Summer recalled that she had once as a child attended a National Day rally with her grandfather and Grandpa Wu, where the three of them had met Lin Biao 林彪, a Cultural Revolution leader.

Grandpa Wu reminded Summer to put the notice back into her pocket, and then asked why her mother had not come. Summer replied that she was ill and had been hospitalized.

'I was so afraid that we would never find your family,' he continued. 'We followed the path of your escape and searched for you everywhere in other provinces and cities. Now we've finally found you!'

Summer told him that upon receiving the notice, her mother asked her to come to the ceremony. Her father was currently abroad.

'We're just happy that all of you are well settled,' Grandpa Wu replied. 'Your grandfather can finally rest in peace.'

He took her hand and drew her onward. Other families of the rehabilitated deceased had begun to arrive. They all remained silent; those who were acquainted nodded to each other. Summer glanced around. Every brick and tile in the place seemed imbued with the heavy silence of authority. As she walked, she stumbled over a fold in the red carpet, pulling Grandpa Wu along with her.

Summer suddenly felt even more agitated, but she had to concentrate, to engrave in her memory every detail of this event. She was representing her mother, her entire family, as one link in their bloodline, quivering in painful response to a disturbance in the rest of the chain.

As the memorial ceremony began, Summer felt her soul being lifted toward the skies, light as a bit of April willow fluff, borne by the swells of the funeral music.

After the ceremony, Grandpa Wu told Summer that Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 had tried to protect her grandfather and other democratic personages from persecution at the time by sending them to a farm near Beijing, but even there they could not escape misfortune. Grandpa Wu sighed as he recounted the story.

Summer's mother had told her that after her grandfather had been imprisoned, the rest of the family had fled to the south. They could only communicate with her grandfather from time to time through intermediaries, concealing their messages in lines of traditional poetry to escape prying eyes. The last communication the family received from Summer's grandfather, which

was not so much a letter as a scribbled note, contained only five words: *'Fu chao wu wan luan'* 覆巢無完卵 (when a nest falls, no egg remains unbroken). After reading the note, Summer's mother had continued to sit for a long time on their bed, dazed and motionless. Summer's father pried the letter from her hands, read it, and burned it.

Summer's grandfather passed away in the spring, when the air was dense with floating willow fluff. Years of torture at the hands of the authoritarian government had left his health in ruins, and his terrible asthma had flared up with the change in seasons. Given his lack of access to medical care, the result is not hard to imagine.

In the end, Summer's grandfather's soul floated out of his body like a bit of spring willow fluff, completely free of its fetters, and drifted far, far away ... His daughter, living in the south, inhaled it and coughed until blood came up like the brilliant petals of peach blossoms.

Summer's mother insisted she visit her aunt while in Beijing, so, after having said farewell to Grandpa Wu, she went directly to her aunt's house. After an hour-long bus ride, she continued on foot through the Beijing streets, carrying a back-pack and lost in the thoughts that floated through her head like so many willow fluff in the air. Her uncle had long since undergone political rehabilitation, and, in accord with policy, had been able to move with his entire family back into their old house.

All this had been recounted in Summer's cousin's letters. Summer's 'aunt' was actually the daughter of a colleague of her grandfather's, who was like a sister to her mother. She had the vague impression, based on a few interactions in her childhood, that this aunt was a lady with a plump face, and instantly recognizable as being from a refined family. As she walked, she was immersed in memories.

As she passed a trash-bin, something caught her eye, almost without her being aware of it, so she didn't think too much about it. She continued on a few paces, then, as if drawn by something subconscious, stopped and turned back toward the bin, where she caught sight of a figure bent half-way inside. Judging from the visible lower half of the body, the figure seemed to be that of a woman.

Summer walked back and stopped a few feet away from the bin. When the figure withdrew her head from it, Summer felt a cold shiver run through her and could not stop herself from crying out. 'Auntie!'

The woman turned toward her, revealing a grimy and unkempt visage, and stared at her hesitantly for a few seconds. Then she beamed. Summer called her name again, and the woman came toward her with a grin, still silent. She stopped in front of Summer, leaned in close, and whispered mysteriously, 'I've got lots of money.'

Seeing Summer's blank look, the woman opened her coat to reveal pockets sewn inside, which really were stuffed with bills. Summer opened and closed her mouth several times before saying, 'Let's go home.' But upon hearing these words, the woman quickly closed up her coat and ran off. Summer could not help wondering if she had been mistaken. Only her plump face had borne some resemblance to the aunt Summer remembered; otherwise she was a totally different person. She was confused; perhaps her eyes had deceived her.

She walked on and hastily knocked at the door of her aunt's house. Her cousin let her in, reproaching her all the while for not having sent a telegram in advance so that he could have picked her up at the station. Still full of doubt, she could not restrain herself from peeking into the apartment and asking about her aunt. Her cousin seemed hesitant and did not answer right away. It was only when Summer mentioned that she had seen someone on the road who closely resembled her aunt that her cousin sighed deeply and let out: 'That was my mother.' Summer's jaw dropped.

Her cousin poured her a glass of water and began to tell the story. Because the family had been subject to frequent police searches and public denunciations, her uncle had ended up dying in the house. Afterward, her aunt could not bear living there, and staying there for any length of time would trigger the onset of her illness. She had been sent away several times for treatment and always improved while away, but would relapse as soon as she returned. In her fits, she would smash windows and kick down the door to escape outside, where she would set about rummaging through the rubbish. She seemed happiest outside. This reoccurred several times, and in the end, Summer's cousin had no choice but to let his mother do as she pleased.

Like leaves falling from a tree, the sadness on her cousin's face seemed to dissipate after he finished his narrative, and he began to ask about Summer's family in the south.

The peach blossoms were in full bloom when Summer left Beijing, but her heart was heavy and preoccupied. She did not know whether her mother would

be pleased with the outcome of her trip. On Tomb-Sweeping Day, she had gone as many did to the farm to pay respects to the deceased, but had no way to find her grandfather's grave. Those who might have known where it was had long since passed away. All she could do was to bring home a bag of earth she had gathered from the overgrown mass of grave-mounds.

Her back-pack seemed to grow heavier on her way to the station. She realized that in the future, neither she, her mother, nor her cousin would ever be able to fly again. In April, only her aunt could float freely and blissfully over the streets of Beijing, like a bit of willow fluff, with the sky for shelter and the earth for a bed, far, far away from the sighs and coughs, near and far, of her loved ones.