



The Editors  
Anna, Grace & Keat

*"Next", a painting of Rita Tang, Department of Fine Arts, CUHK, 2001*

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3/F., Fung King Hey Building, Shatin, HONG KONG  
tel: (852) 2609-7005/7 fax: (852) 2603-5270  
email: English@cuhk.edu.hk  
webpage: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/eng/>

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CU Writing in English

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Volume I / 2001

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## ~~~~~ Editors' Words ~~~~~

"CU" is not only an abbreviation for "see you", but also a colloquial name of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. We, the English majors of CUHK, surely write in English. *CU Writing in English* naturally becomes the title of our journal.

By the time we read our friends' works, we felt amazed at their creativity. Starting from their personal experience, they portray the world with protean perspectives. The editing process has been a constant quest. Either to choose a suitable word, or to clarify a sentence, or to tighten the structure, all these require us to achieve a balance between alteration and authenticity. The editing has also become a creative process.

We were grateful to be invited by our department head, Prof. David Parker, to be the editors of this journal. Being pioneers is tough, and yet with the support of Prof. Parker and the energetic staff of the English Department, the editorial work became a rewarding experience.

We hope that this journal will encourage and inspire our schoolmates and our dear readers, you, to write in English.

CU Writing in English!

Keat Fan Chun Kit  
Anna Liu Tung Chi  
Grace Wong Wing Yi  
The Editors

## Introduction

2001 seems an auspicious year to be launching this first volume of *CU Writing in English*, a journal of student writing produced, selected and edited by English majors at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. With the first Hong Kong International Literary Festival earlier in the year, writing in English in Hong Kong appears to be gaining ground.

I congratulate the editors, Fan Chun Kit, Anna Liu Tung Chi, and Grace Wong Wing Yi. They had the difficult task of selecting from among pieces written by 50 students in a course on the reading and writing of short stories. I am very proud of the skill, tact and fine literary judgment they have shown in their editing. Sometimes their cuts have been very bold indeed, but in every case they have been able to bring out the strengths of the writing more clearly. I have nothing but praise for their work.

A word about the course itself. The relatively large number of students for such a course is entirely my doing. I simply could not bring myself to limit numbers in what was for many students their final opportunity to do a course in creative writing. I was more than rewarded by the great relish they showed for the opportunity to write stories in English. What I was not able to give them by way of intensive individual attention they made up

for by the quite amazing zest with which they threw themselves into the process of peer review. They were unstinting in their efforts to give constructive criticism of each other's work. I was also greatly encouraged by the efforts they made to improve their own writing. Every student came a long way in the course, and it is a pity that we could not publish more than we have.

Many things impress me about these stories. As a newcomer to Hong Kong I particularly value their often frank and penetrating insights into the inner lives of ordinary Hong Kong people. I find myself struck, again and again, by the subtlety and depth of feeling with which these students have written about the figures of grandparents, parents and siblings. There are also unexpected angles on the sometimes wild and phantasmagoric lives of students, travellers and frequenters of karaoke bars. The spirit of the Romantics is alive and well in Hong Kong apparently. After reading this volume nobody will be able to take a shower again in quite the same way.

Next year the plan is to include poetry as well. The students will be fortunate to have Professor Louise Ho to show them how an accomplished verbal artist approaches her work. I thank her for reading the whole manuscript at a late stage.

The painting reproduced on the cover is by Rita Tang, a highly talented Fine Arts major in her final year at Chinese

University. The editors came across the painting at the Graduation Exhibition and sensed affinities between her work and the stories in the collection. We thank Rita for her permission to use the painting and Professor Jenny So, Professor of Fine Arts, for securing the permission.

I must also thank Tracy Liang for her inspired design work and her unfailing administrative support.

David Parker  
Professor of English

## ~~~~~ Contents ~~~~~

My Father	<i>Louis Liu Kong Sum</i>	11
Grandpa	<i>Lam Tsui Wah</i>	21
The First Seventh Day	<i>Choco Chiu Lo Man</i>	35
The Wind Chime	<i>Anna Liu Tung Chi</i>	45
Taking Turns	<i>Becky Wong Ka Yi</i>	59
Addiction	<i>Nancy Tsui Yuk Chun</i>	65
A Sip of Memory	<i>Ken Choi Pak Cheong</i>	75
Parrotry	<i>Ivy Cheng Hui Fung</i>	83
The Dinner	<i>Winnie Yue Hoi Ning</i>	95
Shower	<i>Ma Yin Ling</i>	105
The Night Before My Wedding	<i>Sandy Wong Yuen Hei</i>	115
Room 66	<i>Charmaine Cheng</i>	123
To Victoria Park	<i>Keat Fan Chun Kit</i>	135
Indissolubility	<i>Tracy Liu Sau Lai</i>	153
Coming Clean	<i>Karen Harrison Mah</i>	163
The Angel of Lavender	<i>Grace Wong Wing Yi</i>	177

## **My Father**

Louis Liu Kong Sum

My father has been a security guard for fifteen years. He worked in a solicitor's office in Central before. A week ago he was shifted to work in Festival Mall.

One afternoon, I went to a bookshop in Festival Mall. I found him standing behind a counter outside the bookshop. He worked alone. His uniform was a white shirt and a blue tie, and a black hat that he should wear for patrol. His eyes looked sharp today. He should have slept well last night.

"Wei." I walked towards him and called him.

"Buy books?" he said when he saw me. He did not seem so lonely, I thought. He had colleagues to have lunch with, and every now and then there were some people asking him where the toilets were located. I could not bear such a routine job. I feared doing the same thing without any interesting thing to learn every day, but I thought my father enjoyed this job. After all, he has been a security guard for fifteen years.

"Yes, or maybe just looking around." Except textbooks, I bought books spontaneously. I read for pleasure.

"Keep your savings. Books are so expensive nowadays." He always reminded me to be practical. It has already cost so



much on food and drink for my life; books for pleasure were only luxuries, he said. Although the balance in my bank account was threatening, I could not keep myself from spending on books.

I said fine and got into the bookshop.

That evening I did not have any meeting with friends. I could seldom go home to have dinner since I went to university. I felt fine to come home early.

My two younger sisters were sitting around the dining table. Their hands were holding chopsticks and bowls. Their eyes were staring at the television screen. Their frowning eyebrows, however, told me they were not watching the television as intently as usual.

My father, sitting in the middle of the sitting room, shouted out, "I have told you, many many times, you are not supposed to meddle in my business! Haven't you ever listened to me? Why do you always act so nastily?"

My mother was sitting on the bed in her bedroom, eyes filled with sorrow mixed with anger.

This was the "I-don't-know-how-many-times" they quarreled over the same issue.

I passed my father and entered my bedroom. It was not an easy route. I had to avoid a few red-white-blue bags which were loaded with piles of newspaper and magazines. These bags were

not only put in front of my bedroom; they occupied nearly one third of our flat's space. I put down my bag and looked at my father. He was wearing a white T-shirt and short-pants underwear. He has just taken off his uniform. He sat on a round, folded-up chair, with his legs stretched. His two hands rested on his lap. He frowned vigorously.

"Can't you see? We can't move around." I could still hear my mother's faint voice in the next room, even amidst the television noise. I thought maybe the characters in the soap drama had also stopped their acting and watched us from the television set.

"I tell you once more," my father's eyebrows reached their most-severely bending shape. "This is my house, and it is my business. You either stay quiet or you get out of here at once!"

I can tell you what would happen next: my father will stay cool the whole night, and my mother will lie on her bed, turn her face away from us. When the dishes have been cleaned up and the television shows its last family program of the day, my father will relax his face a little and pretend to get close to my mother, and touch her back. My mother will push his hand away, and my father will touch her more tenderly, and then, the curtain drops.

I have watched the same scene a thousand times since I was very small. Sometimes I wondered why my parents never

got tired. Those were the days when I thought of playing all day long, I was afraid the ending would be a tragic one. If my father could change his habit of accumulating newspapers and magazines which have been annoying my mother all these years, I was afraid the ending might not be the happy reconciliation.

We turned off the light and went to bed at twelve o'clock. My father slept on a nylon-made fold-up bed in the sitting room. My bed was a double-decker; but the bottom deck was fuzzily occupied with different kinds of things. Most of them were newspapers, magazines, books which all belonged to my father.

I woke up in the middle of night to go to the toilet. I saw that my father was still awake. He was sitting and reading a magazine. When he saw me, he uncovered the magazine and tucked it beneath the pillow.

"Can't sleep?" I asked him.

"No, it is just too hot," he said with one hand scratching his back. Our sitting room was not air-conditioned and I forgot to open the door of my room to let the cool air out. I always forget to be considerate to my family. The irregularly piled up things in every corner piled up the disturbing heat in the sitting room. The hot air was intoxicating. The wet and hot and crowded sitting room, when unlit, was as dammed as hell. I did not want to see my father sleep in such a disgusting place.

"I had better open the door." Before I crawled back to my bed, I turned the coolness knob of the air-conditioner onto the maximum calibration.

It was nearly ten o'clock when I woke up the next morning. My mother was washing cabbage in the kitchen basin. She had started to prepare lunch for us. Sunday provided her plenty of time to choose the desirable food in the market, and time to cook thoroughly. She piled up all the cooking utensils tidily. I wondered why my father could not handle his things in the same delicate manner as my mother handled one-lunch dishes. What is for breakfast today? I asked.

She yelled out, Congee, want some? I replied from the toilet, I hate congee. I can't bear a breakfast of our homemade congee! I was not criticizing my mother's cooking technique. I have to say I have never loved congee which my mother made as the first meal of the day. Where has father gone? I asked my mother as I was putting on jeans and T-shirt. I was hurrying to Sunday church service.

"He has gone to Maxim's. He said there was no breakfast to eat at home. I don't know why he said so. The whole pot of congee isn't food?" My father and I seldom had agreement, except on our dislike of my mother's congee for breakfast. Maxim's was located near my home. I bought my favorite beef-noodle and hot

milk tea and carried my tray to my father's table.

"Jesus saves the world!" My father greeted me by parodying my Christian belief. He did not believe in that. Every religion is a lie, he occasionally said. He knew I was going to church.

"When and where will we meet in the afternoon?" I remembered that day was Ching Ming Festival. I had promised my father I would go to visit his grandmother's tomb with him. My father's grandmother had died three years ago. It was the first time after her burial that I decided to accompany my father on his visit to her tomb. My younger sister went on the first anniversary; my youngest sister did last year. I wanted to be my father's other pair of hands from this year on.

"You call me when you are ready. I will be waiting for you at the bottom of Wo Hap Shek." Wo Hap Shek was the hill, on top of that was the graveyard where my father's grandmother's coffin had been buried. There was a long slope to go up to reach the tomb. My youngest sister had told me that it was a tough and exhausting road. I did not care. I was willing to sacrifice a little comfort to help my father more. I suddenly realized that I owed him something.

After the church service I took the KCR to Fanling. I met my father at the bottom of Wo Ham Shek. He was wearing a blue-patched shirt, so tightly buttoned that his big belly bulged

out. I gripped the handle of the trolley and went upwards. My father followed me.

In the middle slice of the slope I turned around. Crowds of people were flocking upwards to the graveyards. I sought my father's face among the tides of people. Did he walk past me already or did he still lag behind? I looked uphill and looked downhill. I found no shadow of my father. I decided to stand on one side of the pavement enclosing the road where I could inspect each face clearly. Spring breeze blew and caressed my back. I hoped he lagged behind me.

Fifteen minutes had passed and my father did not show up. I guessed that he had been far ahead of me. He could not contact me because his mobile phone was inside his red-white-blue bag which, however, was placed in the trolley I was taking care of. I was stuck. Suddenly my mobile phone rang.

It was my father, "Where are you now? I don't know why I have to argue with you even in Ching Ming Festival. You are always making trouble. I am waiting for you at the top of the hill." Behind the words was suppressed anger.

I tried my best to lighten his temper, "I am just a few miles behind you. I will catch up to you very soon." I had not finished my reply when I started to drag the trolley up. I tactfully made my own fast path between the tomb-visitors because I had to steer

the wheels away from the slow legs of the children and the elderly. My T-shirt was soaked with sweat already. My eyelashes were not thick enough to stop the sweat on my forehead from falling down into my eyes. Anyway, after climbing up for a few more minutes, I reached a flat area where two roads diverged. My father was leaning against a tree on the left. He was frowning vigorously. When he saw me, he scolded me with the same words he used on the phone before. He explained to me that in order to contact me he had borrowed a mobile phone from a stranger. I kept myself indifferent to his anger. Experience taught me it was absolutely useless to explain to him and ask for understanding. I could only prevent the bad situation getting worse by shutting my mouth. The next thing I could do to protect myself from indefensible insults was to steer his eyesight by changing the subject.

"Where is your grandmother's tomb?" I thought talking about the purpose of our trip was appropriate.

"You haven't been here before?" I was glad to see I successfully alleviated his rage, although he couldn't help being sarcastic of my ignorance about his grandmother's resting place, "It is on the left." He led me to our destination.

When he was holding three sticks of incense in front of his grandmother's photograph imbedded upright on her tombstone, I

helped him take the things out of the red-white-blue bag and lay them out. There were some food, some drinks, and mostly bundles of paper money made for the living people to burn for the dead relatives during these festive days. After I took most of the things out, I found there was a magazine at the bottom of the bag. It was a local porno-magazine.

Presumably a few moments had passed and my father, who had just finished worshipping his grandmother with incense, said to me, "What are you freezing over there? Daydreaming? Help me take the paper money here to burn."

I withdrew myself from the bag, and started to burn the paper with my father.



# Grandpa

Lam Tsui Wah

Like every tomb-sweeping festival, we prepare bags of "paper gold" for grandpa. Folding the golden paper into ingot-shape, the gold is put into a paper bag and sent to him by burning. Each family in my clan is responsible for one bag. Besides the one from my family, I always prepare one more for grandpa. Because I promised.

"Don't make a promise to the dead that easily," mom warned me.

\*

Grandpa was an impetuous person. He yelled easily—when things were not done in the way he wanted, when things could not be done immediately. His sentences always began with a curse "All-family-die". "All-family-die! He forgot to phone me!" He used it to refer to people: "Who all-family-die tells you this?" He used it so often that it just became part of his style. He also had a platitude: "If you can do that, I chop off my head and let you sit on it as a chair!" I would see his body shaking when he said those words.

What contrasted with his temper was his appearance. He lost all his teeth in his thirties so he looked ten years older than his real age. When he was not talking, he looked so old that people would think he was extremely fragile.

I was born when grandpa was sixty, so we both were born in the year of the Monkey, maybe it was one of the reasons why we were so close. The main reason, I guess, is that I was his first grandchild; mom said that he was so delighted and he named me.

\*

I lived with my grandparents as both mom and dad had to work. I was the little princess of grandpa. One time I stayed in hospital because of high fever. After visiting me he kept yelling. "All-family-die! I have to get that poor thing out immediately!" In my childhood, I was deeply affected by him. I shocked the relatives once as I said "All-family-die" to a man who threw rubbish on the street; I also used a teahouse tablecloth to clean my mouth after a meal, like what grandpa did.

Grandpa and I had such a great time: we went to have barbecues, we went to the beach; he brought me home from the kindergarten, I saw him off at the airport when he and grandma went travelling. I saw those scenes in the old photos; I did not

really remember them, as I was too young to do so. From the old photos I could see our laughing faces, his mouth without teeth wide open and all kinds of his funny gestures. We must have been happy.

\*

Being a long-term smoker, grandpa was found to have emphysema at his mid-sixties and he quit smoking immediately. At the same year my younger sister was born so mom gave up her job and I moved back to live with my parents. But we always visited grandpa at the weekends and I stayed at his home in my summer holidays.

I liked spending my summers in grandpa's home, because that was my palace and I could do anything. Grandpa did not play with me any more, I wondered if he was able to do so. In those sweltering summer days, I sang and ran around in the house, talked to the mirror, measured my height and marked it on the wall, and even counted the number of windows of the buildings across the street while grandpa was watching the horse race broadcast, reading a newspaper or taking a nap. I knew there was a park at the end of the street, but I dared not ask grandpa to bring me there as there was no shelter—the scorching sun would be too much for him. I also knew there was a library nearby but I was

afraid it would bore him as he did not read books.

Anyway, I was still the princess and I was happy to keep grandpa accompanied—somebody had to keep him happy.

\*

In the following few years, heart disease and bone problems joined the emphysema dogging grandpa. His curses were mostly replaced by groans. From time to time he had to stay in hospital for days; sometimes his heart ached, sometimes he could not breathe. The first time he stayed in hospital, the relatives smuggled me into the sickroom—nurses said that children were forbidden but I had to see him. We just talked for a while because the nurse came soon. I turned back when I left and saw him lying on the bed; those white curtains and bed sheets and clothes in the sickroom made the environment so hopeless. "I want grandpa to come out as soon as possible," I told mom.

The summers had changed quite a lot since then. He needed massages badly as his bones ached. So I gave him intermittent massages in the afternoon and at night since my fingers were not powerful enough. Sometimes I moved his folded bed to the living room so that he could watch television while I was giving him a massage. Sometimes we spent the whole afternoon grinding

different pills and putting the powders separately into right proportions in different containers. We used to go for a walk, but now we went to the pharmacy only.

\*

One day he suddenly yelled at the grandchildren when we played at the teahouse. "All-family-die! Shut up and eat your b... u... ns," he began to cough so hard that he could hardly finish his line. Other grandchildren were scared to death and we finished our meal quickly and quietly.

"Strange old man," my sister said, on the way from the teahouse back to grandpa's house. "I wonder if he remembers all of our names, ha ...."

"I don't like him," one of my cousins said.

"I hate him," shouted his little brother, arms up.

"Mm... he never talks with me," another cousin said rather sadly. "He doesn't even look at me..."

He didn't even talk to me now, let alone you? Being the eldest of them, I remained silent. They hardly knew him since he did not have the energy and patience to talk to them. Maybe they did not know grandpa named us. Maybe they did not know in grandpa's drawer there was a notebook in which our birthdays were

written down—I found it when I snooped around his house—that was why he had never missed giving us birthday-red-pockets. Maybe they forgot that on grandpa's desk there were our photos. Maybe they thought these did not mean anything to them or they were just too young to notice.

\*

And he would be suddenly rapt; one day I saw him sitting on the edge of his bed, doing nothing. I did not know whether he was thinking or not, or what he was thinking. But usually I pretended that I was doing my own things instead of noticing what he was doing, in case he would scold me.

I tried to talk to him. "Grandpa, maybe you should get some hobbies, then you don't need to sit here all the day." "Maybe you go fishing." "Or plant some flowers." But whatever I said he replied with a sigh. "You don't understand... you'll never understand," he kept saying but he never further explained.

I tried to figure out the problem every time he rejected my suggestions, but no solution came up. That was why I was so happy when I found that there was cycad in his house. He started planting something! He listened to me and he tried gardening as a hobby!

Again I was discouraged as I found it was only grandma who did the watering.

I even told him jokes. I told him a joke once about horse racing: he loved horse racing but I knew nothing about it. I did not know what was so funny but I tried anyway. And it was a mistake.

He did not appreciate it. To be more accurate, he had no reaction. He was rapt again, it seemed that he did not even hear me. I stared at his face for a moment, as if to make sure that he was not listening to me, at the same time I hoped my staring would draw his attention. But he had no reaction.

No anger. Just disappointment and confusion—I did not know how to make him feel better.

\*

"I... can't stay... long enough... to... to watch... you... grow... up..." grandpa said in a vibrating voice, when I was giving him a massage on the back.

"Mm," I answered. Was it an answer?

Time to sleep. He said, "I will die anytime."

"Mm," again I answered. What kind of facial expression I should bear?

Grandma said he cried alone in his room.

Grandpa going to hospital was no longer special for him and us. I always held his hand and asked how he was going. And he always answered, "Ar...I feel very painful...er...I'm dying..."

"Don't say that..." I was distressed yet I did not know how to respond to him.

"You'll get well soon..." "No... I am just waiting to die..."

"Can I get you anything?" "Nothing helps."

"Doctor said you can go home tomorrow." "It's just the same. Sooner or later I have to come back."

I knew I should not, but I could not help being tired.

\*

One afternoon I could not find my exercise book. I kept looking around and losing my patience. "Maybe you left it at home," grandpa said, also in an impatient voice.

"No! it must be here!" I shouted. At that very moment he was just like a leaked balloon; he swallowed the word he was just about to say and walked away. It was my fault: I forgot how fragile he was. That was the last and only time I shouted at him.



\*

Just before my first secondary school summer vacation started, I found that my classmates were going to join dancing classes, or go camping, or play ballgames. "You kidding?! You are going to spend the whole summer with your grandpa? What a waste!" They were right. I had a strong desire to have a new kind of summer with all kinds of activities and plans; but I did not have the courage to tell grandpa that I would not come. What would he think? How would he react after all these summers?

Holidays started. A family gathering in grandpa's home. Everybody came, I just waited for them because I was already there.

Nurse-and-patient or police-and-robber? Grandchildren were discussing.

Unfold the table. Grown-ups' mahjong time.

Grandpa stayed in his room. That made everybody uneasy.

"Ar...maybe you go in and give him some massage," one uncle said to me while mahjong kept his hands and eyes busy. "And chat with him a little. Grandpa needs attention."

At the end of the day, I saw everybody off at the doorway; I stayed, as usual. Aunt was the last to go. She turned back when I was just about to close the door.

"Be good. Be nice to grandpa. You don't know, he likes

you best, you're his favourite grandchild, you don't know, we adults don't have time, you won't understand, so be grateful to him. Talk more to him, play more with him...Do you understand? Hah?"

"Mmm..." I answered, eyes looking down, trying to shorten her speech. I thought she was the one who did not understand.

\*

In the mid-summer my family came to visit grandpa. When they were about to go, I said, "Grandpa, I want to go home." I was only able to tell him when mom and dad were there.

"Why?" he asked.

"I ...I want to have my hair cut." It was not even a reason but that was the only one I could think of and able to say at that moment.

"And she wants to take the drawing class," mom helped.

"Then have the hair cut tomorrow morning and come back in the afternoon," he said.

I was stunned.

"Come back in the afternoon?" Didn't he hear mom? Why did he do that to me?

The fire of anger rushed to my throat so that I could not speak. I hated him to death. I frowned tightly and looked at mom

in despair for help. Instead, she gave me a suppress-yourself look.

On the way home I kicked and cried. "I ain't going back! Why me?"

Mom sighed. "Don't know...maybe he's lonely."

"But me too! I was...was bored to death... there; we don't... even talk!" I sniffled.

"Do whatever you like then," mom sighed. "But you have to go back a few more days this holiday, you know?"

That summer I joined the drawing and swimming classes. And I only stayed at grandpa's home for a week next summer.

\*

"Give grandpa a call if you've time," mom said in the late autumn. So I began to call him every day. It was not easy: he was not interested in most of the topics but kept groaning and saying how bad he felt. I did try to comfort him, but I did not think I succeeded, it might be because I could not bear his groaning any more. After a few calls we had nothing to talk about, we were always silent after greeting each other. I hated that situation: we had nothing to say but I could not hang up just after fifteen seconds.

"Mom, you've got anything to say to grandpa?" when we got dead air I always held the line and asked mom. She always said no. Weeks later mom forbid me to ask her, "Embarrassing, Grandpa will hear that," she said.

So our conversation became more stressful. The air was frozen.

"Er... umm... nothing then... so bye bye... take care of yourself."

"Mm..." he hung up.

Later I phoned him less and less, sometimes two days a call, sometimes three.

Yet I never stopped calling completely.

\*

"Grandpa had a heart attack on the street, he is now in the emergency room," mom told me once I got home.

Blank.

My heart and soul went blank.

Two minutes later they called and said he was dead—so far it was the only time I burst into tears. I used to think such a dramatic moment was so exaggerated that it could only be found in soap operas.

It took me almost a day to calm down; during that time all I was thinking was he just talked to me last night and now he was dead.

I thought I accepted his death. But I did not until the funeral. Lying rigidly in the coffin, wearing heavy make-up and being covered with that strange quilt...he looked completely different. I finally realized that he was dead.

I had longed to see him at the end of the funeral. I didn't know why I wanted to remember everything inside that coffin. The make-up powder on his wrinkled face, his jade ring, that "longevity clothes" he was wearing...

\*

"Ah, do you remember what year grandpa was born?" mom suddenly asked when the family were sitting together few days before this year's tomb-sweeping festival, folding golden paper. I did not hear what they had been discussing.

"Monkey," I said. My eyes fixed on my fingers, which were skillfully folding paper: I made hundreds of ingots that day.

"Ah yes..." she seemed surprised that I knew. "Good memory," she added, a moment later.

Yes, but I did not know why. Perhaps he was too important. Perhaps I felt guilty. Perhaps I was still too young.

# **The First Seventh Day**

Choco Chiu Lo Man

Tonight was extremely dark and long. Deadly silence filled every corner of the house. The melancholic sounds produced by the cicadas interfered with grandma's mumble, urging my eyelids to fall. I had to pay my every effort to prop them open, and kept on waiting for grandpa to come back.

\*

I saw his picture once after I discovered that he had disappeared from the house. I saw it hanging in the middle of the ancestral hall of our village, where a crowd of villagers assembled. Many of them were sobbing—I wondered why, but no one told me. I was not allowed to run around the hall, to play with other children, or to eat any of the food placed there. Every one looked so serious. Things that used to be colorful were no longer lively: clothes, pictures, wreaths, even faces grew grey. I disliked the entire atmosphere. I disliked the way people looked at me, the way they stroked my head, and said, "poor child." I begged my father to bring me home. He refused, saying that we shouldn't leave grandpa alone.

"Then just ask grandpa to come along with us." I said.

I could never have predicted that these words would be a sword stabbing my father's heart. Tears rushed out from his eyes. I was frozen by fear.

As I woke up early one morning, I found that father, with his hoe, had already gone to the farm and grandma was busy with something in the kitchen. I tossed about in bed for couples of minutes, closed my eyes, dreaming that the big and rough hand tenderly patting my back was going to awake me. I gradually opened my eyes again. Still, there was only grandma working in the kitchen. Only grandma.

I walked towards the kitchen. Grandma was paying so much attention on washing the cabbage that she didn't recognize my approaching. She slowly plucked the cabbage slice by slice in the basin. After plucking a few slices, she started to talk to herself again. Recently, grandma always liked to mumble; sometimes she sighed. I discovered that there was a little white flower stuck on her hair all the time. This little flower seemed to have some magic power. Since grandma put it on, her hair has grown white. I remembered that last year grandma's hair was still grey. Grandpa's was white.

"Grandma, I'm hungry."

I shocked her. She looked at me as if she didn't recognize

me.

"Grandma?" again, I called her, "I'm hungry."

Slowly, she nodded, and took out a steamed bun from the steamer above the stove. She told me that she was very busy and asked me to play on my own. Then she returned to her cabbage, started to cook. She had also prepared chicken and roasted meat.

"Are we going to have a big guest today, grandma?"

"A big guest... yes..." She answered weakly.

"Do I know that person?" I was curious.

"Yes... you know him of course, and he is always fond of you..." Putting the cabbage onto a dish, Grandmother answered me. It was like a whisper, barely an answer.

I know him? He's fond of me? I followed grandma back to the dining room and kept on thinking who the guest was. Grandma said nothing more. She put the dishes on the top of the cupboard, then she stopped. It seemed that she was sinking into deep thought, staring at an object—grandpa's picture. Compared with the one hung in the ancestral hall, this one was much smaller.

Beside the picture, there were three dishes—chicken, roasted meat, cabbage, and a large plate containing some fruit—peach, plum, melon—all were grandpa's favorites.

"Grandpa! Is he grandpa? It must be him! Oh, grandma, I can see grandpa again. When? When will he come back?"



Suddenly, I had this idea.

I knew I guessed right because grandma didn't say I was wrong.

I jumped out of joy.

"Can I make grandpa a beautiful wreath? Better than those in the ancestral hall! Grandpa will love it!"

Grandma's eyes were wet. She gave me a weak smile. She must be as happy as I was. No! I was much more excited. I could feel the joy spreading over my body; I could feel my blood thrilling. I had been kept quiet for nearly a week; now I wanted to dance, to sing, for grandpa was coming back home!

I spent the whole afternoon clustering the flowers one by one, and eventually finished a wreath with great satisfaction. I held it with great care on my way home. As I passed the ancestral hall, I saw Ah Ming and his guys playing under the big cypress. I tried to increase my pace.

"Ah Chuen!" That was Ah Ming's voice.

I pretended I didn't hear him and started to run. But they ran faster than I did. I was caught.

"You! Idiot! Don't you hear that I'm calling you?" Ah Ming was the strongest boy among us. Grandma always exhorted me not to argue with him for his family's high reputation in our village. I didn't know what reputation was, but Ah Ming always

emphasized that his father had more than ten cows, and we had none.

Ah Ming had many friends. They played hide-and-seek all the time. But almost every time, I was the "seek". They said I was the one who "had a father to give birth to, but no mother to educate"; thus they were superior. I was sullen to hear this, and was frustrated by the unfairness. I used to cry whenever they bullied me and swore that I would never play with them again. But, grandpa was always there, to comfort me. Grandpa said that there must be someone to be the "seek" in the game, if I was chosen, I should try with my every effort to be the best one. "One should control his own fate, but not being controlled by it"; this was what grandpa always said.

It was not out of fear that I pretended not hearing Ah Ming and ran, and it was not because I forgot grandpa's words. I didn't. I was too eager to go back home to see my grandpa. I wished they didn't see me. But they did.

"Let's play together." Ah Ming patted my shoulder. His invitation was an order.

"I can't." I saw Ah Ming stare at my wreath and frowned. My heart quivered.

I made one step backward, trying to keep a distance from him.

"What is that?" He looked crafty, kept staring at my wreath.

"It is a wreath... a wreath for my grandpa..."

"Ha... for your grandpa? Then..." He approached me, "Then it's just a rubbish!"

He stretched his hands to wrest away my wreath. I quickly held it tight in my arms. My action made him cross. He was ferocious like a wild dog, ready to bite me. I decided to run, but his guys came closer and surrounded me.

"Stop! You can't touch my wreath. It's for my grandpa! I won't let you touch it! I won't let you touch it!" I yelled.

But it was useless. There were hundreds of hands stretching out to wrest my wreath. I squatted on my heels, staying close to the ground, facing them with my back. My hair was pulled. I held my fists tightly, and could only use my legs to kick. I closed my eyes, kicked, kicked and kicked them.

"Chuen, stop!" I heard my father's voice.

Ah Ming and his guys all ran away. My father pulled me up from the ground.

"You fight with them again!" He blamed me.

I felt wronged.

Tears filled my eyes, but I didn't cry.

Father didn't ask me why I fought. He was a silent man—seldom talked, seldom smiled. He swept away the dust on my

clothes, checked my wound, and then told me to follow him back to home.

The house was quiet.

Grandpa hadn't arrived yet. I was disappointed.

After dinner, I waited and waited, still, grandpa did not show up. I asked again, "Why? Does grandpa lose his way? Why hasn't he arrived yet? Papa, when will grandpa come back? I've made a beautiful wreath for him."

"Chuen, you better go to bed first."

"No, I don't want to go to bed! It's not late yet. I must see grandpa, and give him the wreath. I want to see him! I want grandpa! I want grandpa!"

Grandma sobbed; this scared me. Would grandfather suddenly change his mind? Would I never see him again? With tearful eyes, I asked grandma, "Why do you cry, grandma? You promised that grandpa would come back tonight, didn't you? You aren't lying, right?"

Grandma slowly shook her head, "Dear boy, I'm not lying. Grandpa will be back to visit his dearest Chuen-chuen tonight. It's his *First Seventh Day*. I've been waiting for him so long."

Grandma then turned away and went checking the things she had prepared for the whole day.

But, what's the *First Seventh Day*?

\*

There was a long silence inside the house. It seemed to be endless. My eyelids started to fall and I tried very hard to prop them open. I, holding the wreath in my hands, hopefully waited for grandfather's arrival. At that very moment, my eyes stopped at the top of the cupboard, staring at an eye-catching object—not grandfather's picture, but a big cockroach which was creeping on it. Seeing its feelers wagging, its legs crawling on my grandfather's picture, I felt disgusted and offended. I decided to kill it.

"Tai-fu ~ (my grandfather's name)!" Grandmother suddenly cried.

"Grandpa!" I immediately turned my head to the door with great joy. But no one was there. I looked around the house, feeling confused, as there were still only three people inside the house. I rushed outside the house towards the garden, crying, "Grandpa! Grandpa! Where are you? I'm Chuen-chuen! I miss you, grandpa. I've made a wreath for you. Where are you?"

There was no one outside, only darkness; no reply, only cicadas' melancholic songs.

"Grandma, why..." I returned to the house with the feeling of being cheated.

Grandma and father were standing in front of the cupboard,

whispering. They paid no attention to me. It seemed that they did not even notice when I ran out to find grandpa. Why? I squeezed myself into the space between them. They were serious; tears were in their eyes. They were talking to grandpa's picture. They must be disappointed too.

Looking at grandpa's picture, I saw the nasty cockroach still creeping, thus I swept it away with my hand. All of a sudden, both of grandmother and father squalled.

"Chuen! Be careful of your grandpa!" Father scolded at me.

"GRANDPA? Grandpa? But... but... it is a cockroach!" I was totally shocked and confused. I had been waiting for grandpa for the whole day, not for a cockroach.

No one answered me.

Instead, grandma and father squatted on heels, paying their whole attention to look for "grandpa".

# **The Wind Chime**

Anna Liu Tung Chi

When I was in my second year at college, mum told me some guy would visit our home on the first Sunday in April. For the first time I got an inkling of why I felt so upset for the past week: my twin's hint might be true.

"Is it a boy?" I asked mum, who was busy washing the dishes in the kitchen.

"Yes, I think so. Why?" She turned off the tap and looked at me, a curious smile on her face.

"Nothing." I bashed at the door of my bedroom, leaving mum's shout behind the wall. "Don't be so reckless! Want to tear down the block?"

It was raining hard outside. The window was closed, still my room was a bit chilly. I put on a coat, but the skin on my arms already rose into little lumps; I let out a loud sneeze.

"Dinginginginging" That was the hum of the wind chime hanging on a hook behind the ladder of the bunk-bed. I must have given it a big blow. The five hollow aluminum tubes vibrated vigorously against the short piece of carved walnut in front. It was my twin, Mei Ling, who bought the wind chime in Temple Street some years ago. After carving her initial on that piece of

walnut, she gave it to me as a birthday present. It was so easy to spot the two letters in capitals, ML. The color darkened year after year, from apricot to coffee to dark brown. Finally it has completely changed to dull black as if the letters were originally painted on the hardwood, solid and sound.

I used to think that I was the hollow tubes and my twin the wood in the front. We were a complementary pair. Each time I climbed the ladder to the upper deck of the bed, my toes somehow touched the wind chime, usually the tubes and sometimes the piece of hardwood. Then the tubes jingled with the wood and a gentle symphony started off. Our perfect match had generated so many wondrous melodies of tinkling tunes, which I can still hear as if the wind chime were whispering the soothing words in my ear.

I knew I was with my twin. I knew I was safe.

Mei Ling was born ten minutes before me. She was not only my sister, she was my twin. Though we were not born identical, we looked alike. Since primary school, Mei Ling and I have been called by our teachers and classmates each other's "other half".

"Where's your other half?" Our friend Hiu Mui would ask me whenever I was alone. Sometimes Mei Ling would frown at the term, insisting that we were two separate physical bodies. But I was pretty comfortable with it, since we were bound together



in a womb.

My twin has been my protector and caretaker. It was she who tried to stop anybody from hurting me. Once a ten-year-old boy who was a year older than me and lived next door, saw my new set of color pencils. "I want that." He pointed to my schoolbag, but I did not respond. Suddenly he rushed to scramble at my bag. I was crying and calling, "Mei Ling. Mei Ling. Tong Tong's taken my pencils." Within half a minute, my twin quickly ran downstairs to rescue me. Two children got into a fight. When my twin almost got back my bag, an enraged voice dashed into our ear. "Stop fighting!" Dad's furious figure loomed up in front of us and the lines on his forehead deepened.

I remember dad's wrinkled fist and Mei Ling's watery eyes. I remember we cuddled together under the round table—our secret place at home. I remember Mei Ling whispering at my ear and telling me she was okay.

It was my twin who comforted me when I had a migraine headache. "Lie down on the bed." She would help me take off my slippers, and covered me with a quilt. "Take a rest, and I'm going to get the panadol." She would smile and rush to the sitting room. Sometimes she would also apply lavender oil which she had brought from Brisbane to my forehead and massage it in order to pacify my pain. She brought me stuff which she believed to be

able to cure my headache from every place she visited. "People say this herbal tea is wonderful and can help lessen the pain of a headache." She handed me one kilogram of dried tea which she had bought in Guangzhou. Once I even received her call from Toronto in the middle of the night, "Hi, guess what. I've bought some pills for you. They say they work."

That night my twin's image was flooding me, and I was also thinking about the present. At college, girls around me were eager to have a boyfriend as if dating was a symbol of being grown-up.

"Those girls, my God, are so naive." This would usually be the hint of my sharing a new funny love story of betrayal with my twin.

"Well, that's only what you think. You haven't—"

"Precisely, and I'd say they're stupid this time." I continued, "They simply think they can't do anything without boys."

My twin would then pucker in a smile and finish her comment, "The fact is that you haven't experienced the joy of being loved by a boy."

But I did not think I needed that love. I had Mei Ling's attention and love, after all. Curiously I never asked her "Do you have a boyfriend?" Each time the words jostled this question mark in my head and the whole cluster was tightly jammed at my throat. I opened my mouth, but the question didn't come out.

I noticed that my twin had been different since she entered college.

I realized that my twin had become a lady.

Somehow I was worried. My nightmare, however, approached me step by step when I observed that my twin has been receiving letters constantly since the Lunar New Year.

"You seem to receive a letter every week. Who sends it?"

"A friend." Mei Ling was not looking at me. What was wrong?

"Who?"

"A schoolmate you don't know." She tried to be calm, and immediately changed the subject.

I was sure that those letters were written by the same person. The envelopes were always a sort of long and white and ordinary in style, and the words were slipshod—didn't seem to be a girl's handwriting at all. Every time Mei Ling seemed so excited when she saw that a letter lay on her desk. She would hastily tear off the edge of the envelope and be extra careful not to read the letter in my presence. The letters kept coming for two months.

And it was time to unravel everything out. Half past ten. The rain had stopped, but Mei Ling had not come back. I opened her drawer in the desk. I heard my own heart beat faster and faster, still my hands touched the envelope. The first thing I read

was the sender's name. Kin Wei. "Who's he? Oh I remember, the president of the Maths Club at secondary school. What on earth is he doing here? Crazy, he's written three full pages." But I wasn't able to read his words.

"Hello, I'm back." Somebody opened the door, and it was too late for me to put back the letter into the envelope.

"What are you doing here?" Mei Ling just stood at the doorway, holding her handbag. I was paralyzed, holding the letter.

"Do you have any relationship with Kin Wei?" I had rehearsed the question once before letting it come out of my mouth. I tried very hard to make my voice sound natural, but my shivering tone betrayed me.

"First. Calm down, calm down." She came into the room, put down her handbag and took off her coat. "Is this the first time?" She looked into my eyes.

"What?" I was looking at the wind chime.

"Is this the first time you read my letter?"

"You sound as if I were a thief." Two rows of cold tears were steaming down my cheek. "I can't see you. You've worn a veil. If you don't lift it, I'll have to."

"I knew this would happen sooner or later." For a long time Mei Ling didn't say anything. I stopped sobbing.

"Actually I wanted to tell you, but... you know, we've never

talked about this sort of thing. And I know—" She continued.

"You should have told me. I'm your twin. I have the right to know it."

"But I know you don't want me to have a boyfriend." Our conversation ended in another long silence.

Finally I went to the upper deck of the bed, and my feet hit the wind chime again. The note of tubes struck against the hardwood so madly as if it smashed the wood. A long and chaotic melody resonated in the room. I was too restless to sleep. Those squiggly characters kept leaping out from the ashen envelopes. "This would happen sooner or later." I recalled Mei Ling's words. As the line settled into my mind, its implication seemed to ricochet through my whole body.

I wished the night would be over. And when I looked out of the window, I saw two boats parked parallel at the jetty in the dark blue sea. They swung perfectly with the rhythm of waves. Out of a sudden, a man went to one boat and untied the knot on the wooden pile—it was piloted away, followed by a long trace of breaking wave. The sound of the moving boat grew fainter and fainter in the distance, and it went southwards and slowly emerged into the dark. Silence spread over the other boat at the jetty. It was left alone, I knew.

When I woke up the next day, my nose was blocked—Mei

Ling did not cover me with a blanket—she used to check if I had put on a quilt. "My twin no longer loves me." I thought. I felt my whole world began to tilt crazily off centre.

Two days later, Mei Ling's friend came to our home to have lunch. I knew that guy. Mum was so serious about the lunch. She bought lots of fresh pork, "We'll have dumplings today." She had been humming "the Night in Moscow's Countryside" for the whole morning. She said dad sang the song the first time they met.

Then Mei Ling went into the room, "Can you say hello to Kin Wei?" So I got up, shuffled along the corridor to the sitting room, and threw a quick glance at the visitor.

"Long time no see, how are you?" Kin Wei stretched out his hand.

"I'm fine." I nodded and forced a smile. Then I saw Mei Ling was standing besides him, and I couldn't bear to be further involved in the scene.

I fled to the kitchen to help mum. She had finished making the dumplings, and so I boiled the water, washed the dishes, and finally cleaned the cabinet.

"You're usually busy and don't have time to help me. But today you've done a year's housework." Mum went on, "Nice guy, eh?"

"He's got pimples. Lots of pimples. I wonder if he washes

his face."

"My dear, that's natural. And I see you've also got two today."

"Didn't you notice his shirt is rumpled?"

"Doesn't matter. He's so polite."

"Polite? He came here empty-handed."

"It's your sister who invited him to have lunch with us. I don't think he needs to bring us anything."

I said nothing then, and still busied myself with the work. I was an outsider anyway.

"O.K. You've done enough. Time to have lunch." Mum gave me two bottles of vinegar and sesame oil, "Take them outside."

"No, I am too tired. And I've no appetite." So I went back to my room, closing the door with a bang.

"Hahahahaha" the laughter spread like a string of firecrackers from the sitting room to the crevice of the door. What was so funny? Yes, I remember Kin Wei was very sociable at school, and dad and mum must have liked him. But that was not my business. I wouldn't join her laughter. I wasn't living in their world. "How come Mei Ling abandoned me. We're twins. Nobody's more special than me." I lingered in the room, but I couldn't fill the emptiness of it.

As I was wondering about my life in the room, I heard

something fall onto the floor. A shrill cry from my wind chime. It was lying under the bed, with all the cords mixed and twisted. I picked it up and discovered that the piece of hardwood was broken off with the nylon cord; two little strings hung hopelessly in the air. My wind chime had lost its spirit. How could it function well without the wood hitting the note of the tubes? I hung it back to the hook, and I fiddled the tubes as though they were strings. They swayed in a flutter, but the sound was too sharp to appreciate—a series of unstable pitches of a soprano who had caught a cold.

In the next hour I had been searching every possible kind of glue and wax to seal back the hardwood. Unluckily I couldn't find any. Perhaps it was better for the wood to take a rest, so I put it into my drawer. The carved letters of ML remained quiet. Since then I avoided touching the wind chime. I shrank back my toes when I climbed the ladder. For a time there was less and less relieving sound in the room.

I hadn't had much good sleep since Sunday. I dared not sleep: I was constantly caught up in a dream. Twice a week I dreamt that I was hiding in the staircase. Upstairs stood my twin and Kin Wei, holding hands. My twin was holding a bunch of crimson roses and leaning on the boy's shoulder. My dream would always end with my silent tears on my cheek. I rushed to get up



and bend over, and was only relieved when I pictured her body in the dark.

After the final exams, I got a summer job in Kwai Fong. I worked as a clerk in a company from twelve to eleven. My twin was always waiting for me. She opened the door for me, then went to the kitchen, reheated the dishes in the microwave oven and peeled me an apple. We did not have much conversation.

One day after work, when I went out of the office, I found that it was raining. I hurried to the MTR station. As I was descending from the escalator in the station, I pictured a slim figure sitting at the bench. "Mei Ling." My twin was also looking at the escalator. She stood up and grinned. "I've brought you an umbrella, and this." She handed me a card. The train came, and we got into the compartment. All I said was "Thanks." We sat down, and I felt something had stuck in my throat. I took out the card. It said<sup>1</sup>:

"My Twin is someone I'm very proud to be related to. Having her as such a special part of my family has given me memories that I wouldn't trade for as long as I love. Even if there are times when the two of us are far away from each other, our thoughts will make sure we stay together. My Twin... deserves to know that even though I don't always

get a chance to show it, she is absolutely essential to the happiness that lives within my heart."

Something was whirling in my eyes. Mei Ling's eyes were watery, too. "Actually I wanted to say this a long time ago." She put her arms onto my shoulders. "I couldn't wait any more because I'm leaving for a one-month camp tomorrow. We'll be twenty next month, and I think we shouldn't depend on each other too much. We are grown-ups. One has to be independent. Independent of everything."

"Are you talking about marriage?"

"Not only marriage, but all sort of things related to life."

"We're twins."

"Yes we're twins. And you're part of my soul. But twins are two people." She stretched out two fingers. "Their spirit is united out of two physical identities."

I had been thinking about my twin's words on the way home. When I looked at the windowpane on the opposite side of the compartment, I pictured our reflections. We were sitting closely, Mei Ling's arm was on my shoulder. This was our typical posture when we took pictures together.

I felt the warmth of my twin, and I felt safe.

The next day when I woke up, I took out the wind chime from the dark corner behind the ladder on the bed, and placed it

to the handle of the window. "Even the slightest breeze can start a melody." My twin was right, and her spirit was with me everywhere. And I did not need to worry about the broken hardwood, about the quality of the sound without it. The wind chime was put on a hook near the window, and I just stood there. I felt the slide of the sunshine on my hand, and the tubes were so shiny. At the same time, I heard a heavenly flow of tunes, like the sound of a babbling brook, running into my veins and nourishing my whole body.

Years later, I'm working and living in Toronto, on my own. The wind chime is still with me.

*1. Adapted from <http://www.bluemountain.com/eng/poetry/SISdaisysis.html>  
by Ann Turrel, 2001.*

# Taking Turns

Becky Wong Ka Yi

Last time I watched a movie was at our anniversary before last. We didn't go anywhere last year; my wife was angry with me. I don't talk much, at home and in my workplace. I don't have to, and I don't want to. All I have is a job, a mortgaged flat in which the ownership is shared with my wife. My wife? Well, I belong to her.

I like driving, it is not difficult—I have driven the same bus route for the past 10 years though. Of course, I don't need a supervisor on the bus. But the route itself has something threatening, the hard turns. I should be very familiar with the route, but I could not help feeling intimidated. You know, careless driving can kill.

\*

As usual, I met the gang at lunchtime. It was boiling outside. And it was reeking inside. They squeezed in the small and packed air-conditioned refreshment corner at the bus terminus. I was tired enough after the five-hour steaming in the bus. Still, I wrestled the way to the freezer, hoping not to have any of them catch sight of me. Every one dislikes them, leaving them a strange little spatial area around the dark brown foldable table they occupied.

I queued up to reheat the effeminate lunchbox. I hate it, but I need to save up money for the mortgage. I know they would say something about my soaked shirt, or my sandals. They always do.

Ah Ming yelled at me, while flipping through the horse race papers, sucking his cigarette and chattering with his gang. "Hi Sneaky, lunchbox by your wife again?" See, this time my lunchbox. Ah Ming is often too talkative, as if he wants to draw all the secrets from me. Am I going to tell him my deposit in the bank one day? Or how many panties I have at home?

"Yes. Finished yours so soon?" taking my lunchbox out of the microwave oven, I replied without much enthusiasm. Expectedly, he said something nonsensical. I remember Confucius saying that there are three kinds of people who are not going to be successful. One of which is those who joke all the time, and speak nothing meaningful.

"Oh sure, I don't have to queue up to reheat mine. Haha... I wish soooo much I can have such a nutritious lunchbox." He threw a glance over his shoulder, and his gang chortled.

He does not want a real quarrel. He is just a bit obsessed with showing off his thick lips—he doesn't know they are as disgusting as he is. Or simply too routine a life makes us mad at each other, perhaps something else remarkable enough. No need for me to respond, is there? We just share the same room after all.

I always eat alone.

They talk behind my back.

Is it so interesting to talk behind people's backs?

Parallel lines never intercept each other, but are always side by side.

Last time he greeted me, "Wei, Sneaky! Interested in playing Mahjong? We need one more person."

I smirked.

I don't always reply.

I couldn't hear what he grumbled.

Suddenly I heard his mobile phone ring. While his gang guffawed, he said, "Hehe...Wei—what the matter? Why should I pay so much? This is unfair..."

"So troublesome...the MPF agent..." he murmured to his gang, started to loosen a few buttons and put his leg on his chair. "Why should we pay? We make so little money! And the beer costs so much!" he grumbled.

"You can't avoid that, can you? Haha! Cheers—" one of his gang said, raising and shaking a beer bottle.

\*

I drove the bus into that roundabout followed by an acute left turn

again, worried as usual. I saw them, the same group of passengers. Yea, he was one of them—the group of schoolboys who told dirty jokes. Wow, he looked smart huh. "Good Morning." "Good Morning." I replied. Young businessman! He looked mature and successful now. He even greeted a bus driver.

This man... I know! I remember him! I almost forget him. He was hardworking all the years. I always saw him waiting at the same bus stop at 8:15 sharp every morning. He must have never been late for work. He looked old and weak, but having a grandson and a bird going to the park with him is nice enough, isn't it?

They all change.

My goodness. This boy. Last Monday his mother brought him here and left him coming to the bus stop alone since after. He started snooping around on the over crowded bus, reading the back of others' newspapers, listening to others' walkmen out-side the headphone, sniffing others' breakfast and comparing with his own, asking what time it was, and at last discovered that he had something to recite for his dictation class. How can he be so swift and nosy? Every morning he boarded, my headache began.

\*

Something happened finally. He fell off the staircase, broke

his forearm and his forehead bled. He looked terrible. I could drive him straight to the hospital. Even I call the police, they still need an ambulance. And he was badly hurt. He may bleed to death. I need to drive him there...but I couldn't leave the route without permission...but here I don't have a superior...but I will lose my job, what else do I have if I lose it?

"Hey! he's bleeding, what are you waiting for?"

Yes, I can deal with it. I am a bus driver, right? Everything happens on a bus I have to take care of, right? I did not call the police; instead I hurried him to the hospital by myself. The street, the pedestrians, the buildings, all running backwards. I rushed through some traffic lights. I had never thought of being so skillful in driving! I wedged, I jostled into whatever narrow gaps between vehicles. Tyres screamed. I heard someone yelling but I did not stop. Every one was amazed, paying me attention. I've drawn attention.

Settled.

Sirens came near. I saw the mess on and off my bus.

\*

"You brainless pig! How are you related to the naughty boy? How stupid you are to throw your pension into the gutter! Who is



going to pay for the mortgage? And the children's tuition fee? I don't have money. Never think of my money..."

I stared at her. She was different. She was...novel. She was arrogant.

"Why don't you answer me, just staring at me? Idiot! Dare to hit me back huh? You don't even dare to hit your wife!" She sneered. "You can never take charge of something. Sneaky! You dare not do anything constructive. Why did I marry you? So stupid..."

This ugly sluggish ignorant housewife of no importance, how dare she to be so snobbish? Why was I submissive to her—nobody in society, not even contributive to the family? I have a job at least. I earn something at least. Who is she?

"You shut up! That's enough. 25 years already, have you ever paid me any respect? I am a man! I am your husband! The pension is mine—none of your business!" I shouted.

She uttered no words, overwhelmed.

"How about you? Have you ever earned a dollar for the family? Never! Instead you waste money all day playing Mahjong with Mrs. Something and Mrs. Something Else! You dare to scold me for money?"

I turned. I slammed the door.

# Addiction

Nancy Tsui Yuk Chun

1

A parched heart encounters a day in spring. Thoughts being trapped in a room of idleness are playing hide-and-seek. Under the sun, flowers dance painfully to welcome sweat. I shade my eyes with my hands. Sunrays peep through the cracks between my fingers. Squinting in the bright sunlight, I see pools of green splash on the linen in the air. It is safe to go across, it says. I know I should go for a walk.

Then, roses have lost their dangerous colour. Red departs from the lips. It drops a strand to the ground. A ribbon of blood. Marijuana. The aroma of delirium. (I have a good excuse for not going out today, I think). Wreaths of smoke filter the curls of clouds, and then go away.

Then, the lines on a paper meander along the trails of smoke. The slender beauty of a black snake. Then it splits. I see loads of notes jumping. Straight tights with round heels come in a blink. Sparkles give out warnings. Despair is being burnt in a small roll. Breath after breath. It is burning. Breath after breath. It is still beating.

Didactics hide their faces in the smell of peace. Abandonment cries in the glory of disgrace. Memories in a marsh.

Happiness is floating aloft. Consciousness flies high and high, and then falls off. Melancholy stands right at the tip, smiling at me, laughing at me. The betrayed kneels down before the betrayer to beg for mercy. Dogmas are standing there in mask, shooting jelly arrows. Turning and turning is the ceiling with patterns of ecstasy. The phone rang to send a shiver down my spine.

–It's Sunday. Let's hang out, she says.

–Why should we hang out? I ask.

–Everyone is going out, she answers.

Eyelids cover the entrance of light. The warmth of the newly washed quilt captures my sense of smell. My hair flops on my face to tease the heat. The air sends out the voice of palpitation. Innocence runs after wickedness in a clock. If the arms had gone in reverse, which Sunday would I have met?

The burnt out ashes land on the floor...

2

I had many weird dreams. I dreamt that several office ladies with faces of a bunch of flowers wandered along the coast of Victoria Harbour. I dreamt that men with skin made up of chocolate were running after the ladies. The chocolate was melting. I dreamt that my hallmate was in a tub filled with roses

and forget-me-nots. I dreamt that creatures from a planet came to visit my hallmate by UFO on the 14th February. I dreamt that they examined and recorded the length and duration of her smile. I dreamt that in the dark my cousin was wearing push-up bras.

I dreamt that I was invited to her wedding.

I smelt the fragrance of flowers and perfume of women pervading the wedding hall in which tears filled my Aunt's eyes, and rolled down my cousin's cheeks; and the bridegroom was allowed to shed tears; and everyone ended up with a tear-tainted face with a smile; and everyone said it was a perfect match.

Then after a long time maybe one day or two maybe a year I could not remember I left my room, and wandered about in the streets.

Then, I went to my Aunt's place, and sat by my cousin.

My cousin was suing for a divorce from her husband.

She pouted a bit, and handed me a newspaper.

Read newspaper, she said.

Then, I took a taxi to a church, and sat by my friend.

My friend was a devoted Christian, they said.

She pouted a bit, and handed me the Bible.

Read the Bible, she said.

Then, I went back to my dorm room, and sat by my computer to go online.

:-

It met me online a few months ago.

It was a good man, a decent man, a decent good man, it said.

It pouted a bit, and sent me a file.

Look at the XXXX picture!!!!, it said.

Then.

Then, I woke up.

A real awakening. A painful headache. Three o'clock in the afternoon. The ceiling is still white. The fan does not move. How long did I sleep? I turn around, and get up by the bedside. My feet touch the floor. The ashes stay on my feet. I must take a shower. Water showers on my head, my neck, my shoulders, my arms, my back...Breathless. I like to watch the whirlpool at the very eye of the tub. I like the heat of water. Back to the dorm room, wet, I pass the ashes. The computer is still on. The file is still there.

I work as a part-time translator for a network marketing company. The previous brochure I translated was an introduction of a network marketing company. Deception. To sell herbal drinks and pills to every friend and person you know. Isn't that deception? Last time I called a staff of that company to know if my translation was good. The marketing staff did not let go of me. She kept

telling me the advantages of their products.

–You can lose ten pounds in three days! One of our clients did it successfully. Don't think network marketing is something bad. It is very common nowadays.

Nonsense! I guessed she thought I was a fool. To lose ten pounds in three days... This is not a well-paid job. I do it because I do not want to be a private tutor as many of my friends are. What difference does a private tutor make, to herself or to the student? I gave private tuition to a girl years ago. Nothing was made but a few thousands bucks.

Nothing good was done.

Now I am a translator. I translate for a firm which makes money out of deception. The firm is legal, but it cheats people. Housewives and young women are their target customers. In Hong Kong, nine women out of ten think they are too fat; nine women out of ten want to lose weight; nine women out of ten do not want to eat less and work more. They want to buy slim bodies. They want to buy youth. They want to buy health. There is a large market. Smart. Those companies.

I do not need any healthy drinks or vitamin pills. I hated that staff who hard sold their products to me the other day. That was her job. I have my job too. I have to translate the brochures. I work for them. I work for those who deceive people. But I

need money.

–You can quit this job, and work for another firm. You want to become a writer, don't you? You've written a pile of stories and prose. Take those manuscripts out from the shelf, and get them published! Published? Who would publish my stories? Contact a publisher to see.

I laugh at myself. I laugh at my foolishness. Who would publish my stories? I do not write about the daughter of a banker, living in a villa in the Southern part of Hong Kong Island, who loves a guy she meets at Repulse Bay someday. They amble along the beach wandering about in breezy air, and then, have crazy sex on the beach to the wavy sound of the sea in full moon light. That is what the publishers want. That is what the best selling fiction in the bookstores in Hong Kong is all about. I do not write about that. I cannot.

I guess I should not write. I should not have written...

3

I need marijuana. Marijuana is my best companion.

Marijuana by the window catches my sight. You little plant looks so good to me...

The plant is sticking up quietly under the sun. I cut off a leaf into small bits, and rolled them with a paper. I want to light

up the roll. No, I should not taste it anymore. I have four pieces of translation to work on. The editor just called yesterday. He said if I could not hand them in today, I would be fired. No payment would be given. I have been doing free-lance translation for almost two years. Herbal supplements, diet pills, network marketing, all sorts of products which cheat people. I do the translation work because it is better to translate all that stuff than sell it as a salesperson does. I guess. I laugh.

I go to light up the marijuana roll.

The afternoon sun in early spring is warm. The campus is taking a nap. Block of buildings and the mountain beyond slide on the windowpane. Geometry distorts the harmony of circles. Three buildings. No, two. One is blurred, another also blurred.

Heat is under siege. "1" is becoming shorter and shorter, tilted, spinning in a hot desert. Sahara. Twisters come. "1" becomes "0", and then "8".

Sometimes, it is "8"; sometimes upside down. No difference whatsoever.

"8" and "8" are extremely different. Must be. The former one has two circles; the latter none.

Summer lingers around "8". Smoke encircles it. Jupiter is far away. But smoke encircles "0". Solid ascends. Smoke stays on the floor. Someone is giggling. People are good at being



cheated.

The breezes from the ocean have met Hong Kong, but do not touch it. The sun is jealous of the attractive breezes. But it surrenders to the moon. The moon is made up of two "8". A moon is at the top, and a moon bottom. 2 plus 2 equals 1. There is only one moon.

Decadence and delirium stand side by side with an "=" in between. I inhale ecstasy, and puff out despair. Good is good. "+" and "-" are the same. To be or not to be doesn't make any sense.

Circles gather on the skin. Curve by curve.

A curve moves up to touch another curve. It cuts it. They intersect. On a plain. A white plain. A net.

I must check out the intersection point of Demand Curve and Supply Curve. There comes the equilibrium price. There comes marriages. Marriages happen at the equilibrium point. Divorces are set aside in the shade beyond the point. One ring and one ring equal "8". A man and a woman make up 20. Then, 2 goes to the left, and 0 to the right. One ring and one ring equal 0.

Skin is frozen. Great joy is buried hundreds of miles down. Fossils. The woman is 5 million light years from the man. Peace appears in a place for battles. Paralyzing takes place of writhing.

Torsos speak in silence.

–The ceiling paper is so shabby; it's time to change it, she says.

–.....

–Don't forget the condom, she says.

–.....

Crowds of women masked with condoms are holding banners to ask for sexual emancipation on a road paved with contraceptive pills. Girls in Mosuo clothes stand beside, laughing at them.

Have a second go. Yes I would like to. She is waiting for you. Yes I know. Someone is knocking at the door.

–What did you do? She screams out.

Marijuana, how fascinating...

Marijuana dries up all damp memories.

## **A Sip of Memory**

Ken Choi Pak Cheong

"Here you are." I served my friends with the tea that I treasured most; not for its price, but for what it means to me.

"Wa! That is real good!" exclaimed Jimmy, "Hey, where did you buy it? The dark color shows its richness. Ah! It smells so good."

"It was given by a friend. There is not much left and I treasure it very much. Enjoy it!" I said.

"I love it so much, could you do me a favor? Check with your friend where to buy it."

I said nothing.

"Hey! It is not a big deal!" his face showed his eagerness.

"Sorry, I would like to help you, but indeed I could never find my friend. So, I just could not ask him about that." I explained.

"What a pity," Jimmy said with his head nodded downwards, "but why?"

"I could never find him...," I turned my face. My eyes fixed at the floor. Suddenly everything in my mind slipped away. I had nothing to say. I was lost in the memory of an old friend.

Five years ago, early in the morning on the second day of

the Chinese New Year, my mother woke me up and asked me whether I would go with her to visit a friend of hers. I did not know whom we were visiting; but when I thought of the red packets that I would receive from the host, I sprang out from my bed and said "yes" without hesitating.

We arrived at the person's place. Before entering the flat, I thought of several lucky wishes for the host and his family—as everybody would do during New Year. To my surprise, an old man opened the door. He had a head of silvery hair, a rather bright face with wrinkles, and he was quite tall. He dressed neatly in a deep-blue traditional Chinese suit. From his appearance, I guessed that he was at least eighty years old. I found a slight smile on his face and it seemed that keeping a smile to a mild degree showed that he was a respectable old man. To be courteous, I wished him good health. Secretly, however, I felt regretful for the visit since I thought it was so boring and time-wasting to be with the elderly.

Mr. Yiu was very willing to talk with me although I learnt that he was a quiet person, as he always used few words to express himself. But I could still understand him very well since his use of words was so concise and accurate. He seldom needed to explain his ideas because he already made them clear through his expression. I guessed that his excellent command of words came

from his study of classical Chinese literature in his childhood. When somebody asked about his past, he said that he was one of the greatest trumpeters in China and had traveled all around China to perform. He was so fond of music at that time. As I was a fan of music, I was interested in his experience.

"Mr. Yiu, what did you play mostly?" I asked curiously.

"Oh! In the past, I used to play jazz with bands in night clubs and in restaurants. But that was for a living." He replied.

"So, what music is your favorite?"

"If merely for my interest, I played the classical more. It is more concrete, durable to listen to and to play," his reply was immediate, with his fist held tight before his face; I found it a sign of spreading confidence and happiness, "those forms like Jazz and Blues may seem a bit strayed from the right road. I don't like them much."

What a strange thought! I always thought that classical music was unattractive and boring. It took me great patience to listen through a piece of it. But he was saying that it was the right path to great music.

During our conversation, I had the opportunity to look at Mr. Yiu more closely. He had short white hair, which was still quite thick. The end of his eyebrow rose up a bit, like a pair of white eagle wings flying in the sky. His irises were as clear as

crystal with a slightly brown color. The skin of his face was still shining. In fact, he did not look weak at all. His age only showed in his extraordinary thinness exacerbated by his height. His lower arm seemed a delicate branch of a weak, old tree. But, as if in defiance of age, he was constantly moving his hand while talking. These gestures made his talk more vivid. His fast-moving hand showed his strong liveliness, contrasting his condition as a patient who had to stay in bed all day.

He shared his experience of playing the trumpet. He learnt it when he was in the army in his teenage years. Somebody taught him the basic techniques, and he just kept on playing it all the time. Later, he was asked to play in a band, and then he started his music career. Everything came so unexpectedly.

"Sometimes, in late evening, when the performance was over, the whole band had Chinese sweet soup together. We talked about things that happened when we were playing. Someone talked about a guy who left the restaurant without paying the bill; someone talked about a couple who quarreled, and it ended up with the lady spilling a glass of wine onto the gentleman's shirt. When you were there, you would know that anything could happen."

I could feel his joy from his bright tone. He occasionally rubbed his index finger on his nose when talking. Perhaps because

of his age, sometimes his head uncontrollably trembled. It was strange; but it made his speech unique.

The time that we shared was pleasant. Indeed I was happy to chat with him. I wanted to stay longer; but we had to leave.

That was my first encounter with him. Since then I sometimes visited him after school. I used to bring him his favorite food, red bean soup. He was kind and served me his precious Chinese tea. When I first tasted the tea, I found it too rich and could not stand it. It was nearly dark in color. The taste was different from those cheap teas served in restaurants. A sip was impossible to grasp in its pleasant feelings.

"The fineness of tea depends on time. The smell grows. It's the trick of time."

After I learnt to tell the difference between its taste from those ordinary teas, I understood why his tea was so precious. Its taste was rich, but not strong; its colour was dark, but pure, like the fresh air in the countryside. Ordinary tea was the city air, dusty and smoky.

We enjoyed the tea and talked. Sometimes his hearing was weak, and I had to speak again loudly. I knew that he had experienced so much and had lived for so long, and there should be lots of things that I could learn from him. In fact, at that time, I regarded him as guidance. There were different sets of values

from school, parents, friends and the media. What should I commit myself to do when I was still young? Indeed, what did I live for? I hoped to find answers from him, at least some hints.

"What is the goal of life?"

He thought for a while and said, "To be a man with his own mind, thoughts and stance."

I did not understand. I was too young at that moment.

From the focus of his eyes, I learnt that he listened with intense concentration. This made me to tell him my feelings, as he loved to tell me his. Sometimes, when he recalled his memorable time playing band all day long with his friends, I saw the tension on his face as he tried to suppress something. But he was unable to do it. Before he could finish his story, his bright eyes became misty. Yet after a few blinks, they shone brighter than before.

There were also moments of laughter when we shared some of our funny experiences. I told him that once I was unexpectedly chosen to be a member of the school choir. Actually, the music teacher overestimated me. I was not able to sing at the right pitch nor at the right pace. During every practice, I put on a capable and contented mask. Ridiculously, I was successful in hiding my secret.

Mr. Yiu burst out laughing. His eyes were almost closed;



with a line remaining on each side, his mouth opened wide, and the muscles on his cheeks bulged. I was afraid that he would laugh to death. But laughter made him as young as I was.

Whenever I was anxious about my academic results or relationship with friends, his wisdom and experience always enlightened me and gave me new directions.

"Boy, imagine your sadness is like a cup of tea that you dislike, but you have to drink it. In life, there are many cups of tea," he drank up a cup in one gulp and continued, "See, how fast to finish it. I guess your sadness would go away!"

I still remembered the dimples on his face when he taught me to be optimistic.

Now I was a university student. What I had learnt from Mr. Yiu was still vivid. I began to understand what he meant by having one's own mind, thoughts and stance. I met many people in the university. They have their own mind. How about me? When confronting so many different thoughts, how did I react?

I learnt to live independently on my own; to think and to decide for myself. Just as I understood his most precious teaching, I had to say farewell to him. I had expected that he would soon leave me.

I did not go to his funeral, as he told me. He said that he would live in my mind. Before his death, he had left a bottle of his

precious tea to me. I sensed its unique smell once I opened the lid.

When I tasted his tea, I enjoyed its richness and purity. At the same time, I recalled his teaching and our friendship. They have not faded, like the taste of his tea.

## Parrotry

Ivy Cheng Hui Fung

My mum was a very traditional Chinese woman. She believed almost every Chinese proverb.

"What the elderly has said is always true and wise because it's the wisdom refined from our three-thousand-year-old culture," she would explain.

Among all the proverbs, she liked this one most, "*Troubles always come from the mouth.*" Her second favorite was, "*Too many words will induce offense and unnecessary troubles.*" However, my sister argued that it was nonsense to avoid talking for the fear of inducing offense. She was confident of her intelligence, proud of her wit.

"It is ridiculous if you believe that simply talking less can prevent you from getting involved in troubles. If you don't speak sensibly, you will be involved in troubles too," she said.

We seldom paid attention to mum's advice, instead nodded indifferently whenever she told us to talk with restraint in public places.

Not until one evening in mid spring, mum's words came true.

It was a Friday evening. I went home for dinner as usual. I

met my sister in the lobby. Her briefcase was as big as the schoolbag of a primary school student, very likely to fall on her elegant brand name high heels in the next moment. A middle-aged lady holding a Pekingese dog and her daughter with another walked in. Her daughter asked her for chocolate and cried when the lady refused coldly. The girl's face was as red as her mother's who howled like a lion.

"Stop crying or I will use the cane to beat you tonight."

Her voice was as loud as a fire alarm but her daughter cried more loudly than that alarm. She lost her temper and slapped her daughter's face. Quite surprisingly, the Pekingese dog barked at the lady.

"Stop barking or I will give you no food tonight."

The elevator came and swept their voices away in a second. I heard residents murmuring about the lady. I was intrigued and indignant at the same time. The Pekingese dog was more human-like.

More residents gathered in the lobby with a handful of plastic bags and vegetables. It became almost airless there. There were several electric fans hanging above but they gave out warm and dizzy wind. I could feel the heat evaporating from my sister's arms, which were slimy like fish skin. I hated this season—humid and muggy. Everything was languid, and melting in humidity.

So disgusting! It made me feel sick and powerless. Everyone was sweating and fanning with whatever possible. Children who came back from playing were like wet ducklings. Their hair was lying on the watery necks. Unbearably disgusting!

We gazed impatiently at the screen of the close circuit TV which showed the interior of the "stop-at-every-floor" elevator. No one was inside.

"I've seen a very pretty skirt in a boutique this afternoon." I uttered casually. "I tried the extra small size but it's still a bit loose. It hung under my waist."

"Oh, really? What does it look like?" she inquired, without looking at me but the electric buttons on the wall.

"Very simple cut." I used my hands to show her the approximate length and design of the skirt.

She turned and faced me, playing with her fingers aimlessly. "I don't think that style is good for you. It seems that it is only for those who are tall but have big thighs. We are short, mini-skirts fit our style perfectly."

"Maybe..." I doubted.

"It's hard for us to buy clothes. Don't you think so?" My sister sighed.

"Yes," I said.

Then she started to bite the cuticle of her fingernail. Her

teeth cut the edge of the cuticle with great skill. I could feel the movement of the jaw behind her cheek as the muscle contracted and relaxed rhythmically. Several drops of sweat lingered above her upper lip. She was not bothered, instead she bit one finger after another, quite happily. Her hands would look quite perfect only if the fingernail ridges were not zigzag-like.

She continued, "It's even more difficult for fat people to buy clothes. They can only wear long petticoats. No jeans or pants."

"Why?" I inquired reflexively.

She said with excitement or agitation, "Their thighs and waists are too big. No normal jeans can fit them. Have you ever seen a 200 lbs or 300 lbs person wearing jeans on the street?"

At that very moment, I spotted a familiar figure moving towards my sister's back. It was the fat lady who lived on our floor! I was petrified. My poor sister was barely aware of her and she didn't even notice that I had stopped talking. I could see the fat lady's face, which was like a layer of lime and dust.

Every resident was looking directly or indirectly at our direction, except the fat lady. But my sister sensed the embarrassment only when I gave her a slight push. She turned to the direction that no one was willing to face. Her face changed colour. We stepped in the elevator as soon as possible, so as to

bury our faces in the midst of the passengers. Normally it took only a few seconds from the ground floor to the fifth floor but at that time, we felt as if it was an hour. Everyone held their breath. I lowered my head to avoid eye contact with the crowd, especially the fat lady. My sister was standing beside me and she lowered her head as well. I peeked at her from time to time and saw a glimpse of remorse and bewilderment in her eyes.

Soon after the elevator had reached the fifth floor, we rushed home as fast as we could. The footsteps of the fat lady echoed in the hollow corridor and became exceptionally distinct. The echoes hammered at our hearts. When we reached home, I immediately burst out laughing because I had kept it pent up for a long time. I couldn't help laughing not because I had no mercy on the lady, but I was amazed at the timing of the incident. I couldn't imagine why my sister uttered the word *300lbs* so loudly when the fat lady appeared. She pretended to be unaffected while my sister tried to hide her embarrassment. Perfect timing!

I reported the incident as fast as I could, without taking a breath. I tried not to laugh while I was imitating every word of my sister. My mum hated the distraction of laughter in utterance. She glared at my sister in a huff, did not and could not say anything for a while. Her eyebrows kept frowning until she collected her thoughts and uttered bitterly, "I've told you not to talk without

restraint and let your mind go out of control. What if she commits suicide or if she hates you to death? How can you say this? You are going too far." She went into the kitchen swiftly without looking at us.

I had never seen mum behave like that since she was diagnosed with menopause. She was fierce. She was furious. We could hear the clicking sound of plates and dishes inside the kitchen.

I seized the chance to tease my sister and giggled, "Oh, you must be careful from now on. She is very fat and you are very slim. She must have hated you for a long time and since you have offended her in the public now, she must hate you more. You can't imagine what a woman will do after such a shock and insult."

"Shut your mouth up! It's you who tell mum. If you hadn't told her, she wouldn't have scolded me. Don't you think you are very nosy and ill-mannered? You always say improper words. You always cause me troubles. You are the worst creature," she rattled like a rapid firegun.

I argued, "I thought it's funny so I tell her. How can I know mum will act like this? It's not my fault after all. Who ask you to say 300 lbs?"

"I don't know why I said 300 lbs. I just felt that it's more



powerful to say 300 lbs. How could I know she was standing behind me?" she reflected with self-pity.

We stared at each other only that my eyes were filled with bewilderment whereas my sister was cursing silently.

Two days lapsed. I went to the market with my mum on Sunday. I used to go shopping there with my mum when I was young. But now, I cared more about my shoes and my clothes, which would be stained by filthy and fishy water on the wet market tiles. Anyway, I never let my mum carry a huge basket with vegetables, fruits, meat, fish and stuff back home alone. I would not go into the market stalls with her but wait outside the market entrance, standing on the dry and less dirty tiles.

She took much more time than usual that day. I did not have a watch but simply by counting the number of housewives coming in and out of the market, I knew I had been waiting for more than 30 minutes. What is she doing? Is she gossiping with Mrs. Young? Whenever my mum walked past Mrs. Young's so-called shoe shop, she must stay ten minutes or more to listen to her gossip about market people and estate people. Mrs. Young and my mum used to do morning exercises in the park, so my mum was a kind of friend of hers. Mum did not like her gossiping about that person's bad things and this person's good things but mum was too kind to reject her. So, mum would try her best to

avoid walking past her shop but bad luck would still find the victim.

At last mum came. Her green plastic environmental-friendly basket was almost empty, except that there was a bundle of spring onions and several carrots. Mum looked pale and expressionless. Her eyes remained fixed and her eyebrows frowned as if she was thinking seriously. She walked awkwardly towards me.

"What happened to you, mum? Why you've spent such a long time inside the market but you've only bought some carrots and spring onion?" I asked curiously.

She sighed and said slowly, "Mrs. Young told me that the fat lady has disappeared since last Friday. Do you think there is something to do with your sister's offence?"

How can Mrs. Young know she has disappeared? Mrs. Young is a gossipy person. She always spreads false news and pretends to know everything. Don't bother to listen to her words.

"It's not only Mrs. Young saying so, the vegetable stall owner and the butcher also tell me similar things. They said the fat lady used to go to the market every morning. But she didn't come yesterday and today. Isn't it after that event on Friday?"

It isn't a big deal after all. Maybe she has gone travelling or she is sick or she doesn't need to buy any food...there are so many possibilities. It may not have any connection with that event.

Don't be too sensitive.

"Are you going to buy food?" I asked.

"Of course. If not, what are we going to eat today? Wait here for a while." She left swiftly and disappeared in the crowd.

A while? I've been waiting here for more than an hour already.

I almost supposed that mum had bought the whole market when she came out with more than twice the amount of food that basket could hold.

The next day was Ching Ming Festival. I suddenly remembered.

Both of my arms stretched and hung beside my hip. The handles of the plastic bags were pulling my small fingers. They were hot and red and calling for help. I swore I would wear gloves next time to protect them. The first thing I should do after I go back home is a hand massage with rich moisturizing cream plus a hand mask.

All passers-by looked at us either in a quick glance or with great concentration. I checked to confirm there was no dirt on my head or on my face but they just kept looking at us and whispered secretly. What's so funny about us? Do I look exceptionally stupid or ugly today? Is there anything wrong with my clothing? What are they looking at? These silly estate fellows!

Mum was not bothered by their unfriendly glance because she simply could not feel it. She walked silently until we reached the lobby. I reluctantly loaded down the plastic bags on the dirty wet floor. Then, I observed a familiar figure in the hollow lobby. She was staring at us suspiciously with disdainful eyes. I couldn't remember who she was. She was obviously not our friend. But somehow, I had seen her once in the lobby, wearing flowered blue pants and a yellow T-shirt, staring at us with the same pair of mean and disdainful eyes.

She was the one standing behind the fat lady that day! She has tied a ponytail so I couldn't recognize her at once.

A man joined her after a minute or two. He was her husband maybe. Yawning and stretching his hairy arms towards the roof. The smell of wine spread all over the lobby. I heard them talk, mainly the lady. She said her neighbor had not come out for two days and her flat remained silent. Letters and paper slips stuck in between the iron bars of the gate. She suspected something terrible had happened to her neighbor.

"Will it be possible that she suffocated during sleep? I was told that this kind of person will suddenly die." she whispered to the man.

The man suggested that she knocked on her door but the woman immediately rejected the idea. "They will think I'm nosy

if I knock on her door without any excuse. I have had no contact with her since we've moved in." She rolled her eyes frequently.

In the following weeks, there were more rumors about the fat lady in the estate area, especially in the market. Some people said that the fat lady had gone travelling while others said that she had moved out to live with a close relative. The fish stall owner, from a reliable source of news, told my mum that the fat lady was in hospital. After several follow-up questions, the stall owner confessed that the reliable source of news was actually from the fat lady's neighbor, whom we saw tattling in the lobby the other day.

The rumors were getting more perplexing and overwhelming. A small potato suddenly became the spotlight and all estate fellows poked their noses into her private life.

I walked to the market one day, what I saw was several groups of estate women rattling away and squinting. When I walked past them, I could barely hear their voices. They looked serious as if they were discussing an academic issue. They nodded while listening and mused on from time to time. I could not withstand this kind of atmosphere and snoops.

When I got back, the lobby was crowded with schoolboys in the afternoon. They were no taller than the yellowish Urban Council rubbish bin. They chirped silly things about their

classmates and teachers. When they were entering the elevator, all people were silenced.

A brisk patter of high-heels approached. Elegantly slim, with a familiar face, a figure popped up at the threshold of the lobby. If the elevator door was not closing, I would have stood there longer.

## The Dinner

Winnie Yue Hoi Ning

When was it that I started waiting till everyone had left school and watching Leung Baak lock the school gate? I've forgotten. I often wished him sick, so I could stay at school a bit longer. But every time, I had to leave him alone and walked down the street at 7:00 p.m. sharp in the dim light without seeing a shadow.

I turned back and saw him putting the key in his pocket. He then walked towards the main building; got in and closed the door. As I walked along the street, I sensed that something was walking at my pace on the other side of the road. From the corner of my left eye, I saw a black cat. She was walking elegantly, with her head high up. She stopped when I waited before the traffic light. She then vanished among the moving cars. I turned left and walked down the stairs to the bus stop. She suddenly ran down at great speed from behind. She stopped at the podium, turned back and looked up. Her eyes were filled with the glamour of sadness. I could not take my eyes away. I walked past her. Stopped. She came forward, walked around me and licked my shoes.

"I like you, but I'm not able to look after you."

*"I have no time to look after her. I am very busy, you know"*

*very well. I can't take a breath in my work, are you expecting me to eat with her every night and talk with her?" My mother said with anger.*

*"She still needs you." Father replied in a calm soft voice.*

*"Give me a chance."*

I carried her in my arms, touched her head and held her leg with extra care. She closed her eyes. I put her head on my shoulder. I moved my hand along her back, up and down, with gentle care.

\*

Every time I got home, it was dark and quiet.

*"You're back."* I often expected someone would say this to me as I got home. I sat on the sofa and put her on my lap gently.

*"You're one of our family members now. This is my room. My father and mother live in that room. I hope you can see them very soon. We have not dined together for three months already. My father can never stop for a while from his business. I never know where he is. Maybe he is now at a conference in New York or in a plane flying to London. My mother works in Hong Kong, but I cannot understand why she has so many things to do and never comes back before midnight."*



The red light on the telephone set was flashing. Every day after school I awaited her call, saying, *"I'll be back for dinner tonight, wait for me."* Now, I did not care whether it flashed or not.

*"Sabrina, it's mummy. I'm busy. Have dinner yourself tonight. By the way, I can't go to your Speech Day next Friday. Sorry."*

Every time she said sorry. What was the meaning of saying sorry?

"Talk with me." She moved her ears.

"Where're your parents?"

"Are you hungry?"

"Will they worry about you?"

"There's only canned tuna fish."

"They won't."

\*

The heat penetrating through the curtains woke me up. Today was Sunday, not my family day. I felt uncomfortable in the quietness. Suddenly, a continuous "ling..." brought liveliness to the room. "Wake up now, we have to go out and buy something for you."

She stood up and walked out of the room. "Where're you?"

When I got out to the living room, she was sitting on the sofa. She curled herself up with her tail around her body. I sat down, put her on my lap and combed her fur with my fingers.

"You need a name. How should I call you? Hm...Mimi. Like it?"

She stood up and walked a few steps. She walked to the window slowly, jumped up to the windowsill with some difficulty, sat down, turned her head to me and "meowed" weakly.

The curtain of the window was always down. I never try to see what was out there. I curled up the curtain a bit. I peeped through the gap and saw the window of the flat next door.

They did not have a curtain.

"How many people are there?"

"The house is clean and tidy."

"Can you see? There's a young woman and a little girl. They look so alike. Both of them have beautiful long hair."

Mimi stood up and licked my face.

The little girl knelt on the carpet and played with her "jewels". The woman sat on the floor behind her, combed her hair tenderly with a brush and tied a pink ribbon on her little head. The girl picked out a bracelet from her treasure box, turned around and put it on the woman's wrist.

I looked at my green jade bracelet. I had been wearing it

since I was 10. I turned around. Mimi was crawling up the door.

"Want to go out? Let me change first."

\*

"I can't believe there're so many different kinds of cat products. You've your own shampoo, brush and canned food."

"What are you sniffing at? Hungry? Wait for me outside."

In the kitchen, I poured some hot water into a cup noodle. Two minutes and fifty-nine, two minutes and fifty-eight... I put the cans into the shelf. I opened one of them and put the crumbs of meat in a dish. A sweet smell that did not belong to the meat swam into my nose. Then, I heard water running in the water pipes and coming out of the tap. I followed the movement of water and put my ear on the wall. There was a pair of busy hands washing vegetables. The white and long fingers picked up an onion and cut it into slices "pup, pup..." Then I saw a blue fire. Some oil was poured into the wok: Splash! Onions and beef jumped in the heat. Stirred and folded; added some salt and sauce; stirred and folded. I could smell the taste of shrimps. Time was up. My seafood flavour cup noodle was ready.

I sat on the sofa and had my meal. I turned on the television, with the remote control in my hand. When I pressed the button,

the screen showed a soap drama, then a music video, a news report...I wanted some sound in the house. The cup noodle tasted bad today.

"Can you smell it?"

An old flavour.

She sniffed.

"I really want a proper dinner, have rice, soup and three dishes."

"Pork chop is mummy's best dish. These few days, I often dream that the three of us having meals at home"

"I miss them."

"Meow."

\*

"This is Agnes Chen. I'm busy right now. Please leave your message and I'll call you back as soon as possible. Beep."

"Mom, it is the first of the month again, please put money into my account. ... Hm, will you and dad be free tomorrow night? I'll prepare dinner. Please come home. I haven't met you two for a long time."

\*

Next day, school hours seemed to be longer than usual. I stepped out of school as the dismissal bell rang. I saw Leung Baak's shocking face. I ran to the market straight away. I bought fish, tomatoes and carrots for soup; pork, vegetables and shrimps for the main dishes. These were my favourite dishes. When I was a child, I used to go with my mother. This was the first time I went there by myself. Mother used to buy vegetables from an old woman. She was not there anymore.

When I got home, Mimi was at the door.

"Meow".

It was already five. They would be back in two hours. I had to hurry up. I washed all the ingredients and made the soup first. I had no experience in making proper dishes. I only learnt how to cook egg custard and bake cakes in cookery lessons, so I had to follow Mrs. Fong's recipes step by step. The attractive pictures in the cook book looked so delicious that I could not imagine how they would react when they tasted the food. I had made the kitchen into a mess and nothing was ready. Time was short.

\*

What should I say when they were here? I should tell them about school, how I found Mimi in the street...

I was a bit worried.

I should say, you're back.

"Welcome home. Dinner is ready."

"How come you didn't pay the electricity bill?" mummy said.

"I'll fix it tomorrow. Sabrina, this is your belated birthday gift. I bought it in New York. I hope you will like it. Sorry, I was not here on your birthday." Father said with a smile.

"Thanks, dad. I'll set up the table now."

\*

We three were eating together again.

*"daaih gayah sihk faahn."*

I could only hear the sound of wooden chopsticks hitting the porcelain bowls. I had waited for this day a long time. I had thought about what to say, why couldn't I say it?

"Do you like the food?" I asked.

Mummy swallowed the food and said, "yes." Then she got me a slice of pork chop.

"It tastes different. You are a better cook than Mrs. Fong."

she said to me. She smiled. I got her a shrimp and put it in her bowl.

"She can't eat that. Her skin will itch. She cannot eat seafood." Dad answered, as if he was the doctor and ate the shrimp himself.

Why didn't I know that?

"These are all your favourite dishes." He remembered.

My favourite only. Not theirs?

Silence. I was not expecting this. This was totally different from my expectation.

"Haven't seen you for months and now you're 18. So fast. You can look after yourself. You even know how to keep a cat. Today you're cooking for us. You don't need us anymore." Dad said with pride.

Silence again.

"Are you still keeping the jade bracelet? You should keep it safely. Some time later, you've to give it to your daughter." Mummy said.

\*

We were sitting on the sofa together again. Mummy was very tired and had fallen a sleep. Dad was busy reading his

documents. Although they were not watching, I didn't feel lonely. This TV programme used to be very funny. Laughter echoed in my ears.

Mimi licked my hands.

Am I wrong? I'm wrong. I shouldn't ask them to come back. They're very busy. I think it's a hard job for them to spare time to come back. Although they're here, it's not the matter.

I never try to learn about them.

Dad's hair turns grey now.

Mummy is still beautiful; but she has wrinkles.

Time has passed...



# Shower

Ma Yin Ling

It is a cold and stormy night. Outside the window, rain is pouring like a waterfall, wind is roaring... The whole hostel is in darkness, except for some light seeping out from two or three windows—like the lonely stars in the sky, blinking for nobody.

Tonight, she can't sleep. She has been thinking all night, but she doesn't know what exactly she is thinking about. She manages to catch some images and dialogues, but they are so vague and blurred that she cannot get a clear picture.

*"No I can't forget this evening, or your face as you were leaving..."* In her room, the radio is on. It is playing Mariah Carey's *Without You*. The voice fills up all the space in the room. She feels the room becoming smaller and smaller. Something is expanding—from her body! She can't breathe, she wants to scream, she wants to escape, but she is not able to... She is, as if enchanted by something, sitting by the window, staring outside. She doesn't know what she is doing or what she is looking at, she just sits there, still. A moth is attracted by the light of the room. It is outside the window, trying hopelessly to come in. She sighs and gets up from her chair. She opens the window for the moth, to her surprise, it doesn't fly in. It flies towards the window for a few seconds then flies away...

"Why do you leave me too?" she sighs again and closes the window.

"Oh! It's four already! I'd better take a shower and then go to bed. Tonight is... enough." She gets her clothes and goes to the bathroom.

Unties her hair, it spreads on her back. When she moves her head, the hair caresses her gently, as softly as his hands did...

"Oh! You shouldn't think of him anymore!" She ferociously turns the water tap on. Warm water pours out and wets her hair. Shortly, the hair is like a cloth sticking on her back, she smiles, like a victor. The hot water makes her feel comfortable and secure, she starts to enjoy her shower. The warmth of the water is getting more and more intense. She loses her defending power when every drop of water was running off her body. Her mind is gradually out of her control.... She closes her eyes, feeling the water running from her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her neck, her bosom and down to her toes. The fluid is so wild... she feels hot; her heart starts to pound fiercely. He is the guy she has known for a few months. She never admits her relationship with him, but there must be a special place for him deep in her heart. She slowly applies the thick lathered warm white shampoo on her hair. As she rinses that off, she reaches and grasps her small hands on a stiff hairy scrub brush. She rubs her body with great

care from neck to toes with the moonflower fragrance soap. From the neck down through the V of her bosom she goes with it, then down her right leg and back up. She then works her way down the left leg and back up her inner thigh. The brush stops near the most intimate of areas...

Water keeps running down...

\*

"No...Please don't! Not this... moment at least..." her mouth was covered by his lips again... his hands were searching, searching for the most joy...

"Stop that!" She pushed him away.

"I'm sorry... But not this moment... sorry."

"All right. I understand. I'm sorry." He turned his back on her.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No. No. Of course not. I understand." His voice was not even convincing enough to make himself believe so.

"Turn around," she said tenderly, and also shivery, after a while. As he turned around, he saw her standing in front of him—naked.

"Oh my! You're so beautiful!" he exclaimed.

"You know... I'm such an... old-fashioned gal. I... think... it after marriage... I... but if you want, you can have me." Her last few words were so soft that could hardly be heard. Her face was burning. She was too embarrassed to look at him; instead, she looked at the floor. Her body in the dim light was trembling, like a poor child who had made a mistake, waiting for the punishment from her parent. Her hands were, unconsciously, moving around her body—trying to cover her body and also uncover it. He caught her busy-moving hands.

"Oops." She made a small cry.

"Sorry, I hurt you?" He looked at her hands and found some new scars.

"Oh! What's happened to your hands? ... Oh! This is my name! You carved my name on your arm! You... You're such a silly little fool!" He gently kissed her scars.

"I belong to you."

"Oh... You... You're my princess!" her face was brightened by his words. He carried her in his arms and laid her on his bed. He looked at her, as if watching a masterpiece of art. She blushed again under his gaze.

"Now. I wonder if the honorable Princess Pristine could grant her loyal kinsman a kiss?" He asked in a controllable tone.

She didn't reply but closed her eyes.

He leaned towards her and kissed her passionately around her neck. Then, he suddenly stopped and pulled a blanket over her.

The blanket was so warm, just like the shower.

"You're too pure. Too pure that you don't understand I'm just an ordinary man. I have desire and impulse. You're like a goddess. Up there in the sky, so untouchable. I... I know last time you wanted to give your body to me. But, I just couldn't. I can't bear your love. It's too heavy for me. You may say I'm selfish. Yes, I admit that. But, why? I don't want to feel guilty to make love with you. I have some other girlfriends that I can get along with so comfortably. I don't want to be bound by anyone. Do you understand? I know your friends don't like me. So, now, I give them back a pure you. We're over."

\*

She looks at the scars on her arm—they are so sharp. She places her hand under the tap. Water falls on the words emotionlessly. Its strong force hurts her a bit. But she doesn't move away her arm. She gets more liquid soap with another hand and starts rubbing at the name. Her whole mind is put on the mark on her arm. She concentrates so much on the rubbing action that she doesn't notice the increasing force that she is using,

until the scar bleeds. As she sees the blood coming out from the wound, she finds her vision is blurred by water. She tries to shake off the water at her eyes, but fails. She feels unwilling to, but squats down and bursts out crying. Hot water splashes on her hair, her face and her body. Unreasonably, she feels very cold. She tries to warm her body by holding herself tighter under the hot water; however, she is shaking. She puts her fingers into her mouth and bites them fiercely. It is painful, yet not painful at all.

"You're too pure... I can't bear your love... we' re over."

"We're over."

She suddenly feels very angry. She turns off the water tap with her hand. She gets the towel and wraps her body. She doesn't put on her clothes afterwards, but she opens the washroom's door and steps out. No one is in the corridor. She opens the door of this floor and goes upstairs to the men's hostel. She looks so determined and solemn, just like a righteous goddess who is going to carry out a holy duty.

In the corridor upstairs, she has a short moment of hesitation. But very soon, she loosens the towel and drops it on the floor, all her hair stands up in the cold night. Nevertheless, she feels her body burn. She knows why she is standing here and she will not go away. She is quite nervous. She doesn't know who will come out; she doesn't know what will happen to her. Yet, she looks at

her toes when she is waiting patiently. Her will is strong. And the rain is still falling outside...

Suddenly, a cold wind from unknown places blows through the corridor:

"I love you... I love you..." the wind seems to whisper.

She feels cold and she shivers...

"Silly me! What am I doing?" She regains her mind again and rushes to the bathroom downstairs... after a minute, someone walks out from the shadow of the corner of the corridor...

She bursts into tears under the shower.

Rain, water, tears, all are falling...

\*

"I love you." He stood in front of her, holding a white rose in his hands. His eyes were sparkling with sincerity.

"I'm sorry. But... I've a boyfriend." She felt guilty to hurt him. He looked innocent and trustworthy. She noticed him for quite a long time. He used to stand at the hostel's entrance. Each time she passed by, she could feel his eyes following her. But he never talked to her, not even while she was not with her boyfriend!

"I love you." He repeated and handed over a white rose to her.

"Thank you." She took the rose so as to comfort him. "I can take your flower but I can't accept your love. And you should know that I have a boyfriend. He comes to my hostel so often and... anyway. Thanks for your love."

"I love you." He repeated the third time. "But he doesn't love you. He has affairs with other..."

"Hey!" she angrily interrupted him, "How dare you say so? I don't know you and you don't know him. It's very rude of you to say such things!" She threw the flower back on him and walked away.

"One day you'll know I love you more than he does. I'll show you and you'll see." He cried out after her. She looked back and found him standing in the shadow under the hostel's entrance. What a crazy fellow! She scolded him in her heart.

"I'll protect you if he ever hurts you..." he whispered these words and became silent again.

She didn't see that boy anymore after that day...

\*

The warmth of water brings her back, she feels much better after standing under the water for a certain time. She looks at the scar and the wounded fingers for a while. Then, she gently kisses the blood away.



The fire is put out...

She turns off the tap again. She wants to dry her body but cannot find the towel. She has put it on the rack and it is not there now! Then, like a person waking up from dreams, she realizes that she has left it upstairs. She has no other alternative but to wear her clothes and make them wet. She gets all her things and then walks back to her room.

As she is opening her door, she hears some footsteps echoing in the corridor... she doesn't look back and continues to walk.

But she stops as the footsteps stop at her door! She turns around and sees—

Nobody!

She does hear the footsteps! She goes to the corridor, but still, no one is there... She rubs her eyes, thinking that she has been too tired tonight and goes back to her room. After she locks the door and turns around:

She sees her towel on the bed

—and the familiar white rose beside!

## **The Night Before My Wedding**

Sandy Wong Yuen Hei

Everything has been settled and confirmed: the wedding gown, decoration of the new flat, air tickets to Switzerland and other trivialities. A month has already passed for such preparations, which seems only a week. Everyone congratulates me on the marriage with Ka Ming. He is highly appraised as a perfect man endowed with wealth, reputation, gentleness, intelligence and good sense of humour.

Yes, he is wealthy and famous. Yes, he is always concerned about me. Yes, he is clever and humorous. Yes, he must make a good husband. Tomorrow, I will be the wife of a perfect man whom I deserve. I tell myself.

Looking at every corner of my flat, I find it unreasonably new to me. I am just like a stranger in the place; everyone is just moving around squeakily and working on something busily without noticing my presence. Their fascinating smiles are so queer that I can hardly understand.

"Louisa, do you know what I've found? The autograph album of our school! I've lost it already!" Ka Ka says happily. She walks towards me from the bedroom and begins to glance through the album. When she turns to one of the pages, she stops and stares at a photo on it. A photo that I took with Ah Tung after

we won the overall championship of the inter-school volleyball competition in 1995; after that he became everyone's idol. Her smile begins to fade away. "I had come across him in Tsim Sha Tsui yesterday. He said he wouldn't go back to the US, coz he couldn't find a job there..." She says gingerly.

"Or..." I try to reserve myself.

"...I told him about your marriage." She utters with a very low voice that I almost cannot hear her.

"I see." I reply frigidly. It is the only appropriate response that I should have.

Seeing my indifference, she draws a big sigh and eases herself by leaning against the cupboard. "Believe me, Ka Ming will be a very good husband." She pats my shoulder and says.

"Thanks. Ka Ka... thanks a lot." I smile.

"I go and see if they need any help." She smiles too. A very sweet smile. Then she walks back to the bedroom with a light pace.

Seeing the door of the bedroom closed behind her little figure, I drag myself to the balcony and lean against the fence. The distance between my flat and the apartment opposite is too narrow that the sky above looks like an elongated belt. I try to peep at it through such an impenetrable gap. It is very clear and full of stars. They seem to foretell that I am going to have a happy marriage.

\*

It was a typical summer day in May. The sky was cloudy and dull for the whole day. I would not be astonished that it would finally burst itself open and throw up everything. But I could not stay away from that possible storm; I had to go here and there with mama to prepare for my father's funeral. Though uncle David did offer some help, mama insisted on handling all sorts of things by ourselves. She was really a strong figure. I had never seen her cry for papa's death. What she had done after his death was just to console me.

After we had booked the funeral parlor, mama asked me to go home first and take a good rest. When I went home, I walked unconsciously towards the bench in the living room and sat on it. It used to be a very small bench. Whenever papa and mama had sat on it, it had just been impossible for me to sit with them. As a result, papa had to give a seat to me and sat on a stool himself. But this day, I found it strangely wide and too vacant to sit on.

No sooner had tears streamed down my cheeks than the phone rang.

"Hello." I picked up the phone.

"Louisa?" It was a hoarse, yet soft voice, a voice that I had missed so long.

"Tung? Where have you been? I've been looking for you these few weeks!" I almost burst into tears again while talking

with him. "Papa—"

"I'm at the store downstairs, could you come down first?"

"Okay." I obeyed him, though I was a bit hurt by his interruption.

Regarding him as the greatest comfort, I ran downstairs to meet him.

"Tung—"

"Louisa," he hugged me and said happily. "I've got a good news to tell you!"

"What's that?" I suppressed my sadness and asked.

"I am finally permitted to migrate to the US. I have been there the last few weeks for observation. It's absolutely promising for both living and for my career!" He said with total joy. "I will go there next month."

"Next month?" I asked with agony. "Can you go a little bit later? I just—"

"I've already told you that I must go away, haven't I? There's no future here!" He answered with an exaggerated voice. "Believe me. When everything is settled down. I'll send you there with me."

\*

"Louisa, what are you doing here? Why don't you stay with

your friends? You will easily catch cold by staying outside." A gentle voice goes into my ears, which sounds like a voice coming from the heaven and wakes me from desperate memories.

"Mama... do you... er... did you love papa?" God! What a silly question!

The kind smile fades away from her immediately. Sometimes, a mother who understands her daughter so well; or otherwise can be a trouble to her.

"For a marriage, and a woman, whether you love the person or not isn't that important. Only that he treats you well is already okay." She says indifferently. "Your father always treated us well and ranked us in the first place of his heart. He was a very responsible father, and husband, of course. That's enough!"

Maybe she is right. Papa never scolded us for anything. No matter what serious mistakes we had made, he just solved the problems for us without any condemnation. I recall that papa, in order to spend more time with us, had given up an opportunity to work overseas, where he could earn more money and have a better career. I can hardly find anyone who can be compared to papa. Neither Ka Ming nor anyone I've met can take papa's position in my mind.

Suddenly, Uncle David's image appears in my mind. I can't help inquiring of her, "how about Uncle David? I think he treated

you well too!"

I remember well that when papa died, Uncle David had been the most helpful person, who helped us to settle all things from choosing the coffin to looking for a suitable funeral parlor. Even till now, he still occasionally sets aside a little time out of his tight schedule to see if we need any help.

"...I will never be the most important "business" in his mind, career, religion, reputation—all come before me..." she answers with a sigh. "If you really want to meet him, you almost have to make an appointment with his secretary!"

"You know, it's a matter of "to love", or "to be loved". If I could choose again, I would still choose the later one..."

"To be loved"...a very familiar term... not long ago, which in fact seems to be a century long, Ah Tung told me that someone loved him so much that he was unable to abandon her, so he chose to leave me, whose love, he said, was in no way compared to hers.

"Can reasoning really work in love?" I ask, as if a child is asking for something that already has an absolute answer.

"At least you will not get hurt in any case. Women should look for ways to protect themselves." Her face suddenly turns into a big beam, which seems like an awkward distortion. "Don't think of such things anymore. It's your own decision. Nobody

forces you... be a faithful wife, he will absolutely endear you, and never hurt you." She hugs me and goes to her bedroom with her slender, lonely shadow.

"Never hurt me"...Yes. After Ah Tung left me, what I have tried to do is not to get hurt, and to live a better life—at least better than his, so as to make him regret... I do absolutely choose the right person to be my husband. I do!

I try to put all thoughts aside by shrugging my shoulders and looking at the sky, which keeps itself taciturn all night long.

Suddenly, the phone rings, which breaks the absolute silence of the living room. I walk towards the living room with my heavy steps and pick up the phone.

"Hallo."

"May I speak to Louisa, please?" It is a hoarse, yet soft voice, such an unforgettable voice.

"Yes."

"Hey, long time no see!" It seems that he tries to moderate his awkwardness by laughing it off. "I've heard that you're going to get married, aren't you?"

Ha! He is coming to the point.

"Yes. Tomorrow." God! I can hardly organize my speech.

"I'm at the store downstairs, could you come down and see me?" He requests gravely.



"No. It's not PROPER to do so." I refuse resolutely. Some mysterious feelings are whirling in my heart.

"I know... but please, Louisa, just give me a few minutes to talk to you, PLEASE!"

Ha! What an earnest plea! Louisa, you deserve! Louisa, you've won!

The whole world seems to be covered with total darkness and a deadly silence. I can hardly see anything around me, or can I hear the squeaky voices of my friends in my bedroom. I can only hear my heartbeats, such unrhythmic riots of victory and loss—

## Room 66

~~~~~  
Charmaine Cheng  
~~~~~

For the last seven years, there had been times when I hopped delightedly, ran busily and strolled tiredly along this long and bright corridor in this karaoke box. But it seems that I never took a good look at my working place till now. After tonight, this corridor will look totally different because my boss has decided to do a large-scale renovation. But I felt bitter when he said that. I can see the corners of the wallpaper peeling off. The once clean and shining tiled floor is now stained with shoeprints and grey dust spots. But they are part of my everyday life. From time to time, I try to brush them away myself with detergent, toothpaste and even washing powder, but those stains are irremovable, they are imprinted on the floor.

It is four o'clock in the morning, the last client has gone earlier than I have expected. I am left alone to lock the front door; before that I have to walk around to double check if all the lights and air-conditioners are turned off. This inspection runs on from Room 1 to Room 65. Yet, my legs stick themselves on the floor until I reach Room 66. And uncontrollably, I turn the icy doorknob. The room—dark, empty and mute. I loosen my purple-striped tie, sit down on the cold sofa and light a cigarette.

The smoke circles and rises slowly, turning the clock backwards to the time when the Karaoke box was newly opened in the late 80s.

\*

I remembered it was a damp and stuffy Thursday night. I was the manager of this karaoke box. My colleague, Tom, told me that Room 66 had ordered a dozen beer, but the girl there looked like a third former. Pretty annoyed by the daily routine of inspecting the age of schoolgirls, I marched to the room. As I approached the corridor, there was a beautiful and mournful voice echoing in the air which took away my impatience. It was a familiar tune. The gradual crescendo of the lyrics *When two lovers woo, they still say I love you, and that you can't rely* floated to my ears. I thought it must be a woman of my age singing since it was an old song. But as I turned the doorknob, the singing in the dark purplish room stopped. A young girl in a tight yellow T-shirt, leaning on the purple and pink squared-pattern wall, looked up from the television screen, put down her microphone. She stared curiously at me and asked her friend, "Is that your friend?" Her friend shook her head in a serious manner. She asked me, "Who are you? What do you want?" "Sorry to disturb you, I am the manager here, just want to check if you are all over

eighteen! Can I look at your ID?" I showed them my name card. She grasped my name card and perused me from my head to my shoes. She turned to her friend and said, "God, do I really look that young?"

Yes, she did, I thought she was fifteen but she was already twenty. "Ok, thank you, the beer would arrive soon. Sorry for disturbing you!" "Hey, wait," she shouted, "Well, you can't just go like this! You've interrupted my singing. Now, you should stay until the beer arrives and have a toast with us as an apology! You are not going to reject me, are you?" She tabbed my shoulders hard with her head bending slightly leftward with a pair of shimmering eyes.

I was so surprised by her liveliness and naivete that I couldn't stop myself laughing. Shouldn't she be afraid of talking to strangers like me? "Oh, you laugh? Laughing means yes! Ok, stay for a while, my name is Kimberley, call me Kim!"

It was hard to reject her invitation. Making friends with clients was one of my duties anyway.

That was the first time I saw Kim.

\*

"Wei!" It is Tom.

"I thought you had gone away already? What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Yes, I've gone downstairs, but I've left my mobile behind! There is light coming from this room, so I come here to see. What are you doing?"

"Well, nothing, just relaxing!"

"Relaxing? Don't stay here, quickly fix up everything. Let's go to Lan Kwai Fong together, I guess the others are there already!"

"Lan Kwai Fong? No, I am tired."

"Come on. I'll fetch my mobile in the staff room first. Catch you in 3 minutes."

\*

I was a typical Lan-Kwai Fong visitor seven years ago. The multi-coloured flickering neon lights above the busy streets were glamorous. But they only sparkled brilliantly at night. I worked twelve hours every day mechanically. My hobbies were drinking and smoking marijuana. The one-night-stand was what I hunted for. If I met that person I slept with the next day, I even could not recognize her as for the effect of alcohol. I was thirty-eight by then, but I didn't have any desire to settle down. I had several pretty girlfriends before, but their beauty could not prolong my

interest in them. Their hunger for marriage always threatened me. I could not say I was a very good-looking guy, but my golden framed spectacles and my carefully ironed black suit won me praise as "decent", "neat" and "mature".

Well, at least Kim agreed with that. After our first encounter, Kim dropped in our karaoke box more often. I got to know her schedule. At around eight-thirty every Thursday, I would show up at the big entrance hall facing the lift lobby to wait eagerly for her arrival. At first, I treated her as an ordinary client. To fulfill the duty as a manager as well as a public relations officer, I used to give discounts to the clients. And most of them would negotiate for more. But Kim would never do so.

She did have talent for singing, I was especially fond of watching her. Her engagement caught my attention, and the others too, I knew it from the admiring eyes of her friends. Her small hazel eyes and the light frown on her forehead were excellent in conveying the mood of those sad songs.

Was she pretty? No, not really, that common word only understated her uniqueness. There was a magical and mysterious element about her. Sometimes, she dressed like a timid schoolgirl in white uniform sitting quietly at the corner of the room. Sometimes, she was an OL in her light purple suit and high-heels. Sometimes, she was a little princess wearing pink and laced gloves

smiling innocently. Sometimes, she was a sexy wild cat in tight red camisole and black trousers dancing with the music.

Of course, I had never thought of taking her out. I could almost be her father, my age nearly doubled hers. But her young and innocent appearance was tempting. The energy of Kim rekindled my passion, youthfulness and desire. Would such lovely girl fall in love with an old man like me?

There came another routine, boring and most importantly no-Kim Wednesday. It was the Mid-Autumn Festival. I wandered around the reception counter and tried to figure out how I should spend the remaining hours. I watched the clock hit ten, eleven, twelve and one in a drowsy and mechanical motion. It was two fifteen by then and the clients started to evacuate from our Karaoke, so I decided to take a rest in Room 66. I adjusted the light to the dimmest, poured myself a half-glass of wine and lay back on the sofa. I had also asked the DJ to play some oldies in my room. There was my favourite song, Daddy's Home. Da... da... the lyrics were really cunning. They seemed to say the words of my heart and I couldn't help singing along with it, *You're my love, you're my angel*. Suddenly, there was a beam of light entering from the door. I saw Kim in a pink silky blouse with her fingers combed into her messy shoulder-length wavy hair, leaning her head and elbows on the metallic doorframe, smiling at me.

I really couldn't figure out what I should do, I cleared my throat but Kim took the lead to say "Wei, shirking here? You naughty boy! Not inviting me in, huh?" She spoke really fast with words tangling together.

"Ha ha, all right, come in and take a seat! You are so late tonight, you went out and played lanterns?" I kept looking around to hide my burning face.

"Secret! I am not telling you!" She threw herself down heavily on the long grey sofa.

"You've drunk a lot?"

"Of course not! Only a little! I only had a few Screwdrivers, a few Long Islands, and some sips of brandy coke!"

"I see, that's not too much, right!"

"And 3 tequila shots too!" She laughed. Her ever-cheerful face relieved the pain, the evils and the sufferings that I had endured in life. She spoke again,

"Tell you what, sometimes when you look at me, your eyes seem to say something!"

"Really? What sort of thing?"

"Something! Something!"

"What something?"

"Well, something from your heart! Something from your mind! Something that tells me you have fallen in love with me!"



"Har?" I spurted out.

Heaven knows why, Kim climbed slowly towards me. Then she sat on my lap and chained me with her slender arms. Afterwards, she mumbled to my ears, swinging her legs up and down, "I know you like me! If not, just push me away!"

And surely, what I did was to pull her closer to me and embrace her tightly and forcefully, feeling this little child conquered in my arms. My breath got rapid. I could smell the alcoholic fragrance flowing out from her. I gave her a kiss on the forehead and she rubbed her small face gently on my black coat like a kitten. I wanted more... She said she felt sleepy so I sent her home by taxi. But as she jumped out of the taxi, I felt the disappointment of my body strangling my mind. I asked the taxi-driver to drop me off in Lan Kwai Fong.

Kim remained as the highlight of my life in the following days. Those candlelight dinners, movie watching, beach walking and chat on phone all came along like a gumdrop melting in my mouth. My working place was transformed into a fresh romantic paradise. I could still recall the appealing scent of the food she cooked and brought to me. It was hard to get into her room during weekends as our karaoke box excelled all the other entertainment spots in Causeway Bay. Yet, unpredictable Kim would suddenly sneak behind me while I was leaning on the reception and she

would whisper in a child-like voice, "Hi! Jeeorrgel!" I felt my blood running fast in my veins when I heard that. Her vital presence in the corridor not only recharged me with energy, but also caught the attention of other clients. As soon as Kim stepped out of her room, it was a natural disposition for the clients' curious, admiring and worshipping eyes, both male and female, to follow her steps. Some stupid guys whistled at her but Kim couldn't have cared less about that. Instead, she would walk past those stupid guys and wink at me with a smile. That really killed me!

\*

"Wei, George! Are you coming with us?" Tom re-enter the room. "By the way, have you packed up your things yet? Your glassless photo-frame is still on your desk when I went into the staff room."

"Oh, you mean the hand-sketch?"

"Yes, it's a nice piece of drawing, isn't it?"

"All right! But she looks all the same, right?" I ask him, picturing her in my mind.

"Yes, Kim looks as sweet as ever! She drew it?" Tom asks curiously.

"Well, didn't you see her signature on the sketch?"

"It has been seven years or so, still haven't found her?"

"No, haven't..." I sigh and close my eyes.

\*

That was on Christmas Eve—chilly and dry. Although the karaoke was fully booked, I privately reserved Room 66 for Kim and her friends to hold a Christmas Party, she said that she would come at around 9. I bought her a blue diamond ring as a Christmas present. I knew a ring meant a lot in a relationship. I was not sure if I wanted to propose to her, but at least, I hoped I could show my serious commitment to her. At 8:50, I heard the receptionist calling through the public microphone, "Room 65 is inviting George in... Room 65 is inviting George in..." So I walked to Room 65 and I spotted a woman in her mid-thirties dressed in a black nylon coat through the small window on the door, her face looked serious. I sensed something strange, so instead of entering her room, I only stood near the door, and asked dutifully, "Can I help you, Miss?"

"George, how are you?" The lady spoke out my name in her deep and flat voice.

"Fine... excuse me, you are?" She looked pretty familiar but I really couldn't recall where I had met her.

"I have been looking for you for a long time! I'm Ah Ling, don't you remember me?"

"Oh, you come here often?" I asked.

"No, this is the first time. I kept thinking of you since we met last time in Lan Kwai Fong!" She stood up and walked towards me. "It took me all these months to find you here. You said that I was the prettiest woman that you've ever seen in bed that night!"

"Did I? Which night?"

"The night before the Mid-Autumn Festival!" She leaned her whole body on me.

I had better get out of this room as soon as possible, so I said, "Ok, listen, why don't you take a seat first? I'll go and get you a drink." I slipped out of the room and shut the door behind me instantly. As soon as I turned my back, standing faced-down beside the door of Room 66, I was stunned to see Kim in front of me holding a large wooden photo-frame. She had fixed her hair all back with a sparkling light blue hair-band; she looked young and innocent. She kept her head down and remained quiet like an ice-statue. She finally put up her head, her delicate face was red and the glittering water in her eyes was about to drop, and in between her sorrowful eyes, I could see her drawing a smile. Then she nodded, shook, nodded and shook her head vigorously and she shouted at me, "Ng Chee Lung, Merry Christmas... and

goodbye!" She then pushed the wooden photo-frame to me violently, I stretched out my hand to catch it, but it fell on the floor with a furious splashing sound. Kim dashed away madly and the fragments of broken glass scattered all over the tiled floor. I chased after her immediately.

\*

I switch off the light and close the door. Then I walk slowly towards the lift lobby following the imprinted footsteps on the floor. Before I reach the end of the corridor, I look back for the last time. The dim shadows of cars and people reflected from the streets are running on the walls as usual, but tonight the shadows move slowly as if they are tired and disappointed. The wall shows the pictures of my past. These pictures attack me, strike me and invade me. I try to evade them by closing my eyes, but the pictures only become more vivid and concrete.

## **To Victoria Park**

Keat Fan Chun Kit

This staircase, made of fine polished pine, with vigor and absolute firmness, leant in the middle of the hall. An unceasing carpet of lamb's wool, red, ran through every step and clothed the stairs with a velvety dress. The pinewood, oozing a carmine complexion, was harmonizing and merging into the redness of the hall. Vermilion light trapped in several scattered, red silky lampshades, radiated onto the railings in a suppressed silence. The railings extended to infinitude, embraced entirety. Everything had grandeur.

A hand, a sweaty young man's hand, held and warmed the railings.

It was Stephen's hand.

He was mounting the stairs.

Two weeks ago when he had stepped out of Ms. Fan's office after that two-hour interview, he instinctively foresaw that he would be here tonight. At the top of the staircase, he knew nothing but concentration.

Stephen followed the waiter. The corridor looked like a gallery. The vista of the wall hung small and large pieces of oil painting. Ex-premier Deng Xiaoping shaking hands with British

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the signing of the Joint Declaration Li Peng smiling with his big jaw Premier Zhu Rongji walking in his tight western suit President Jiang Zemin toasting a million spectators. Turn by turn, painting by painting, Stephen followed the waiter, eventually to the Victoria Room. There was a gold-plated stand next to the doorframe:

*The Pre-selection Dinner of*  
**The Rhodes Scholarship**  
*1997-1998*

<b>Hosts</b>	<b>Guests</b>
MS SANDY FAN	MR MARCO AU
DR MILLER MEAD	MS JEAN RALPH
MR WILLIAM WEAR	MR CHRIS SUM
	MR STEPHEN TAM

*At Victoria Room*  
*The China Club HK*  
*8<sup>th</sup> December 1997, 7:00 p.m.*

*[A gale of laughter blew from the room. MS FAN, DR MEAD, CHRIS and JEAN were standing and chatting next to the round table. Each of them was holding a drink.]*

*Enter* STEPHEN

STEPHEN: [*shake hand*] Nice to meet you again, Miss Fan.

MS FAN: Nice to meet you, Stephen. Let me introduce Dr. Mead, Chris and Jean.

A train of "nice-to-meet-you" ran out of their mouths. Stephen was led to the conversation circle. Dr. Mead is a professor of a design school—names—Chris is a philosophy major in the University of Hong Kong—names—Jean is a comparative literature major in the University of Michigan—names—I am an English major in The Chinese University of Hong Kong—names—Miss Fan is a lawyer in—names—I had to remember.

*Enter* WAITER

WAITER: Want any drink, sir.

STEPHEN: Perrier will be fine.

DR MEAD: See, I told you every one of us is addicted to Perrier!

The waiter twisted off the cap. The pouring sound penetrated into Stephen's ears. Sparkling drink sparkling scene sparkling people.



DR MEAD: [*pointing to a small picture behind STEPHEN*] It's a nice painting, looks like an old Chinese compass.

STEPHEN: Yes, It's a compass car, probably invented by King Wang, the legendary king in pre-historic times. He used it in war and he won.

DR MEAD: Impressive. China was such an inventive and productive state in the past. They invented—

STEPHEN: The Four Great Inventions.

DR MEAD: Perfectly. But suddenly they invented nothing.

STEPHEN: I think China had scientific technology but not science.

DR MEAD: [*smiling*] But they have now!

Stephen smiled when Dr. Mead smiled. He saw that Ms. Fan, Chris and Jean, were talking absorbedly next to the window. Chris straightened up three of his fingers counting something with his lips. Ms Fan and Jean glared at the three upright fingers. What was he counting? Dr. Mead asked something about Stephen's choice in Oxford. The English Department, M.Phil. in the modernist period. He only left one finger upright, Stephen thought, it must be his last point.

STEPHEN: [*recollecting*] Yes, I applied to the English Department, M.Phil in the modernist period.

[MS FAN, *accompanied by CHRIS and JEAN, approached near DR MEAD and STEPHEN*]

MS FAN: It must be a serious congestion that holds them up on the road.

DR MEAD: Never mind, we've time. Shall we have a nice walk? There is a small library here.

MS FAN: Oh really? Some books will always be a perfect appetizer. I'm full of thoughts lately. [*smiles at the three candidates*]

CHRIS: Where is it, Dr. Mead? I'd love to see it.

DR MEAD: Follow me.

*Exit DR MEAD, MS FAN, CHRIS, MARCO, JEAN and STEPHEN*

Picking up his glass of Perrier, Dr. Mead walked out of the room meekly. A line of curious heads, in sequential order, followed him: Chris, Ms. Fan, Jean and Stephen. It was now, being at the end of a row, maneuvering his curiosity to the unknown library in a restaurant, that Stephen started to see Dr. Mead a glowing figure. Moving in that polished slender corridor, Dr. Mead's light khaki suit, as if a piece of tender, silvery tiger fur, roamed in a Siberian forest. It must be a forest at night,

Stephen thought, with his intense eyes capturing the silky flutter of those gentle trousers, every leading step was a nailing march of a powerful man. Even that halt was a special—

*Enter* WAITER

WAITER: Excuse me, Dr. Mead. The library is reserved for a party tonight.

DR MEAD: Fabulous! We would want some fresh air after such a walkathon, right?

WAITER: The balcony is this way, Dr. Mead. Door unlocked.

DR MEAD: Perfect.

*Exit* WAITER

Meandering for three more turns Dr. Mead eventually brought his disciples to the balcony. It was a huge rectangular balcony with at least three hundred square feet. Nobody was there.

*Enter* DR MEAD *and* his followers

They came together instinctively as a circle at the centre of

the rectangle, ready to talk about every incident on earth. The Bank of China was on their right, the Hong Kong Bank on their left. Under their feet were the Statue Square, the Queen's Pier and the Legislative Council, what used to be the Old Supreme Court five months ago.

DR MEAD: My wife is a club member here. Every time she comes she brings her friends to this balcony, as if this place is a never-ending discovery.

CHRIS: Your wife also works as a designer?

DR MEAD: She says that creativity is a burden of mind. I'm glad that she is not an artist; otherwise she'd possibly get insane someday. [*sips some Perrier leisurely*] She is a lawyer in London.

CHRIS: [*excitedly*] Ms. Fan is also a lawyer. What a coincidence!

JEAN: I'm applying to the Law School in Oxford too.

CHRIS: Same here.

MS FAN: So we've a balanced number of males and females in the law industry here.

DR MEAD: You forget counting my wife and you too, Sandy.

MS FAN: Oh! A bit stronger feminist power. Sorry gentlemen.

STEPHEN: Then I must consider the Law School, to make a balance. [*people laughs*]

Laughter was a perfect full stop of an excellent dialogue, Stephen thought, perhaps, instead of being a lawyer, he could change his sex to balance the gender. Male and female. Is "male" the suffix to "female" or "fe" the prefix to "male"? Dr. Mead and Miss Fan: M & F. I—. Stood still. Betwixt and between Dr. Mead and Miss Fan, Stephen looked at the view of Hong Kong. It was a very hazy night. I—. Layers of foggy veil, far from the Victoria Harbour and close to the Hong Kong Bank, blurred everything. I—. Freckles of light, yellow and white, floating and fading here and there, covered this mere Hong Kong Island. I—. Suddenly on, suddenly off, on, off, off, on, the light in mist replaced the hustle and bustle of this palpitating city. I—. Light brush of yellow spots shaped the roads and ports, hills and seas. I—. Stephen gazed at the scene. I—. It was light gala. But I—

DR MEAD: It was strangely hazy tonight.

STEPHEN: Yes. I—. [*recollecting*] It was very hazy.

Catching the word "hazy" Chris and Jean started to talk about the air pollution index, Stephen looked up to the sky. The fog gradually moved forward, and the Bank of China, floodlit, like a keen sword in the dark. The fog was cut and diverged once it met the blade and merged again afterwards. Stephen felt that

the haze passed him and roved towards the windows behind him. He glanced back and dozens of people who dressed extravagantly and held their glasses of champagne, partying inside the warm-lit library.

STEPHEN: [*to* DR MEAD] It must be the library you've talked about.

DR MEAD: Yes, quite a scene there, it seems.

CHRIS: [*facing* DR MEAD] Do you think Mr. Wear and Marco have come already?

MS FAN: [*rising tone*] Oh! We nearly abandoned them in that cold room.

DR MEAD: Maybe we should continue to abandon them. They deserve detention.

MS FAN: Mill, you're charming tonight!

DR MEAD: Sandy, you must be talking about my tie. It's a gift from my wife and it's strangling me.

Miss Fan's radiant grin orchestrated a band of laughter. Chris bugled Jean oboed Dr. Mead cymbaled Stephen bassed. The notes of delight were marching, with harmonious undulations of distinctive sound, buoyantly through the meandering corridor and back to the Victoria Room door.

[MR WEAR and MARCO were sitting at the round table and talking about the car crash on Des Voeux Road. The paper cards stood on every delicate white plate. Seats assigned. The dinner was about to be served.]

*Enter DR MEAD and the rest*

MR WEAR: [*standing up*] Hello Miller! I heard your voice igniting the air in corridor. What makes you so excited?

MS FAN: We're excited about your punctuality!

MR WEAR: Oh! Sandy, I was kept on the road. By the way, I'm not the last one. Somebody was later than me.

MARCO: [*smiles skillfully*] Mr. Wear is alluding to me. I'm terribly sorry, everybody. I was kept on the road too.

DR MEAD: By an elephant?

MARCO: Something similar to the size of an elephant. A truck actually, a car crash, on Des Voeux Road.

MS FAN: You've been hurt in the crash? Oh! Sorry Marco, I'm kidding. I swallowed too much wind on the balcony.

DR MEAD: Sandy, you're charming tonight!

MR WEAR: And discriminating the latecomers too!

CHRIS: [*wittily*] Discriminate all of us then. We just come back from the balcony; so we're all late for the dinner. And

Stephen has just stepped into this room. He should be the last one.

STEPHEN: [*acting*] Sorry, I was kept in the corridor by an elephant.

JEAN: [*acting more*] Are you alluding to me, Stephen? I was in front of you!

MS FAN: [*playfully*] And me too!

STEPHEN: [*with difficulty*] Well...

CHRIS: [*competitively*] Oh! We're all charming tonight!

Platitude always ended unendingly, Stephen thought. Ting—. Someone hit a fork against an empty wineglass while sitting. Would the sound of that car crash be so delicate? Somewhere on Des Voeux Road, there must be somebody who was involved in the crash. Somewhere there must be someone, like us, who talked about the crash. What made that difference? Sitting at this round table by accident and talked about the accident as if it was not an accident. Was this an accident too? Why—

Wine and dinner were served. Chinese food, chopsticks, dialogue, chopsticks. Eat, drink, talk and talk. No one was really dining. The round table divided people into three conversational groups: Dr. Mead with Chris, Miss Fan with Jean and Mr. Wear with Marco. Stephen was drinking his white wine. He heard that Chris was saying something about social work.



MS FAN: [*considerately*] Stephen, You told me you teach English in a rehabilitation house. [*several 'really?' thrown to the dinner table*]

STEPHEN: Yes, I did. I teach some young drug addicts English once a week.

MR WEAR: [*concerned*] How did you know them?

STEPHEN: By chance. A friend of mine is Christian and it seems like in a music concert that my friend introduces me the chairman of that Christian group, St. Matthew Society. They help people get rid of drugs. I think I can do something to help. So I teach them English.

MR WEAR: I'm very interested in the way you teach. [*CHRIS nods dramatically*]

STEPHEN: Starting from ABC, because some of them barely remember alphabets, and I'm introducing some poems to them. William Blake's Songs of Innocence, for example.

MR WEAR: Poems! Very interesting! How can they know poetry?

STEPHEN: Everyone does. I just guide them to know.

MR WEAR: [*murmurs*] Very interesting. [*enquiringly*] Are you a Christian?

STEPHEN: [*plainly*] No.

Stephen's definiteness made all wineglasses touch people's lips. No. That unknowably problematic NO craved on everyone's face. No, no, no—

MR WEAR: [*to all assuredly*] I'm just wondering about the power of religion. Those drug addicts, no doubt, regain their lives through religion. It heals them and of course many people. But what if there is no religion on earth? Will they never be healed? [*voice strengthened*] Religion, in some sense, creates another reality, which some humans depend on. A reality differs from our reality. A reality of ultimate answer to all obscurities. It is an external ultimate that fits the ignorance of mankind. What if the ultimate is not to us but from us, not external but internal? What if there is only one reality and it is the one in which we reside, regardless of the existence of all religions?

The speech convulsed the gravity of the room. Stephen felt a whirling and sucking force driving him to spin and spin like a current with the dinner table, chairs, napkins, spoons, wine and everything round and round the axis of Mr. Wear. Ultimate truth skepticism existentialism determinism atheism monism—ceaseless abstract notions were solidified by the utterances of Mr. Wear, Dr.

Mead and Miss Fan, throwing visible, concrete words into the whirl, mixing with the swinging pendulous air. Swaying with the flowing concepts, Stephen, caught sight of the vagueness on Marco's, Jean's and Chris's face, was digesting every single word in the air. Except Chris who occasionally contributed some blunt response, the other three candidates were possessed by the wordy air.

Marco didn't speak. Jean didn't speak. Stephen couldn't speak.

*Enter WAITER and tidy the table*

MS FAN: The wine is splendid, Will. I'm afraid of getting drunk.

DR MEAD: I had already. And scared them not to talk. [*people laugh*]

MR WEAR: [*playfully*] Why not to have another bottle? People talk about crazy things when they're drunk! [*people laugh again*]

MS FAN: You've already talked about crazy things, Will. [*glancing at her watch and concluding*] It's ten thirty and they need rest for the interview tomorrow.

[MS FAN, DR MEAD and MR WEAR stand up, say goodbye and lead the candidates to the door. The leaving people greet them in return.]

*Exit* CHRIS, JEAN, MARCO *and* STEPHEN

*Door closed*

A blind street.

A dying lamp.

A hollowed tram station.

Stephen, along the voluted stairs of the tram, climbed up to the upper deck and sat near the window on the left side, in middle of the compartment. Right front at the head, he was gazing at a discolored bronze tablet:

TRAMLINe from KENNEDY TOWN to SHAU KEI WAN

Completed in 1904

Opened by Sir Matthew Nathan

He had been traveling by trams since he was in his mother's womb and yet he had never recognized there was such a tablet, a birthmark of some history. 1904. What happened in this year? Must be something significant. Ting-ting-ngzz—. The tram wriggled. The winding rails, beaming weak silver, like a pair of twin snakes shed skins and elongated along the north shore of the island. Ting-ting-ngzz—. The tram wriggled slowly and haltingly, with historic difficulty. The hanging leather handgrips, the leaning window plates, the snoring heads of some passengers, rocked and echoed with the rhythmic movement of the historic compartment. Ting-ting-ngzz—. Stephen's head occasionally touched the windowpane and he felt some kinetic waves surrounding him and evoked him to move forward. To where? He chewed the question in his mind and the kinetic waves enveloped his entire body, resembling the native swing in his mother's fluid. Hot, he felt hot from his retina, though the December wind rushed through the window crack. Ting-ting-ngzz—. Where was I? Passed the Statue Square, Bond Centre, Lippo Building already. On Hennessy Road? Yes. [ 熱烈慶祝香港回歸 ] Handovered. Who would demolish these signs? Government? They put them on and pulled them down. So many signs. They put them on and would pull them down, someday. Ting-ting-ngzz—. So many ads hanging on the sky. [OXFORD DICTIONARY: THE MOST

AUTHORITATIVE DICTIONARY IN THE WORLD] Ting-ting-ngzz—. To England. To Oxford. Ting-ting-ngzz—. Why?

11:30 p.m. Great George Street was still hurled by the lingering feet of late shoppers. A city's shadow was its people, roaming like some lost unnamable nomadic tribes, from one shop to another, with paper or plastic livestock feeding on their wrists. Stephen saw no shadows from the window since the question mark manacled the nerve of his soul.

No reverie was deep enough to reconcile him. His soul was thrown into a pond without ripple. His searching mind betrayed him. He wanted to know why he had been in the China Club, dined with the people he barely knew and talked in the tone he found alien. He felt his own voice leaving his mind and his mind leaving him. He wanted to choke and puke. He wanted to leave, or to fail winning the scholarship. He didn't know why. But what matters?

The tram halted. A man climbed to the upper deck and sat beside Stephen. Stephen didn't know until the tram turned left and the man's arm patted him. He felt the man's biceps pressing softly to his biceps. He felt his warmth from his warmth.

The tram was crossing the Gloucester Road and Stephen leant his head tightly to the windowpane. The man's biceps was still pressing. He wanted to cry suddenly, crying to the

windowpane.

Just then he saw the entrance of Victoria Park receding from his window frame.

The dark Victoria Park resided in the heart of Hong Kong.

Drawing back his crying breath, Stephen recalled that it was the year 1997, and the final interview would be held tomorrow morning.

But he was passing Victoria Park.

And he had passed Victoria Park.

# Indissolubility

Tracy Liu Sau Lai

*YUEN LONG*, it should be correct.

Getting on a huge double-decker bus, which was rare in Japan, she chose a double seat on the upper deck near the window. The earphones connected with her Midi-Discman still fitted snugly inside her ears. Everything was exactly the same as it was when she was in Japan. The music, Maiya thought, was important to accompany her to come to this new city. The melody made her feel that she was at home, in Japan.

It would take about an hour, as the lady at the tourist information desk told her, to get to Yuen Long, a rural area in the New Territories, a long way to go. Maiya smirked secretly when she thought of the lady, who taught her the way to the bus terminal at the airport.

*"Ohaiyo gozaimasu."*

*"Ohaiyo gozaimasu."* Maiya responded to the trimly uniformed lady, who articulated quite well in Japanese, with a typical Japanese smile in a reflective inclining posture.

The lady must have been well trained with many languages indeed, Maiya thought, so that she could utter any form of greeting whoever she met. During the enquiry, Maiya deliberately



concealed her proficiency in Cantonese, which was her other native language, in order not to embarrass the staff. But somehow the gap between languages would affect communication. Not knowing the real reason, the lady could not catch what exactly Maiya asked about.

"*Lo Pou Pen, Hung Heung Lo Pou Pen.*" Maiya could not wait to state clearly in Cantonese that she wanted to go to an old cake shop in Yuen Long for the Wife Cake.

A pause.

Maiya regretted the choice of language, for which she had to take extra time to explain something personal, something that in fact she didn't want to explain too often.

"It's true that the world is always playing tricks on people," Maiya thought. Having such a complicated identity since she was born, people in Japan often treated her as an outsider of the country, while when she was here in Hong Kong, people regarded her as a foreigner. Sometimes she was confused about who she was, where she really belonged.

Here I am. I have already been to mom's home, she said to herself.

"I don't need to make a choice. I have already chosen my way, as a matter of fact," I confronted immovably to mom, who kept her hand on the financial records of dad's company. "I speak

Japanese, my friends are Japanese, and daddy is a Japanese. I was born here and have lived here for nearly eighteen years. For sure, I am a Japanese, both inside and outside." I was not quite sure what I was speaking at the moment, but what I knew was I must grasp an opportunity to state a will of my own. Mom did not utter a word though her silence was powerful enough to show a sense of authority.

"Take a look at the place where I was born and grew up. It's really nice, at least in my memory, and there is a lot of good food... especially the Wife Cake. Try it. Maybe you would like the city." Mom did not change her posture when she spoke to me. She wanted me to come to Hong Kong once before the confirmation of my nationality on my eighteenth birthday.

She bent down over the table. All of a sudden I recognized what I had said just now, that everything I had, belonged to Japan and people in the country. However, how about mom? I had neglected her. Her blood was running inside me and she gave me a Chinese appearance, one she was always proud of. Yet, besides all these, I was still keen on being a Japanese. I did not want to be a bit extraordinary among the people around me.

"Do you sleep on knives instead of the *tatami* at night?" A curious classmate asked me during the recess time.

"We sleep on beds." Although I was sick of her question, I

had no way to clarify my "ordinary" life style. She must have watched too many Kung fu shows and thought that all Chinese must have some mysterious power. Nonsense.

I was also asked if I had ever learnt to stop people by moving a mere fingertip. That person, as my kindergarten playmate, must have put too much attention on the Chinese martial films in which all Chinese must have acquired some killing devices. Crazy.

Whenever I went home and told mom about all these, she would talk about her understanding of Hong Kong, the place where she grew up and spent her childhood. Even though she was so enthusiastic about telling me her stories, all questions related to why she did not come back were known as taboo in our family. Even dad would not mention Hong Kong when he was sent there to have meetings. Queer.

All of a sudden, somebody patted her on the shoulder and drew her back to reality.

"Excuse me, where should I get off if I want to go to..." a man at her back asked sincerely, using the colloquial form of Cantonese in a typical man's low voice.

Although she had been trained to recognize the dialect since she was a toddler, the swift utterance was too demanding, especially when her ears were obstructed by the earphones.

"Sorry, I don't think I can help." She responded simply to

him and terminated the interaction instantly.

Without listening to the Japanese music, it was the first time she experienced a silent moment here. She seemed to get closer to the place. It was interesting to sit at a higher place to observe the view of the city, Maiya thought. A gentle breeze, like a greeting to her, was cool but kind.

*Sugo~i ne!*

Although Maiya tried to suppress her excitement, still her scream could not help leaking out. Magnificent! Though there was a famous Rainbow Bridge in Yokohama, this bridge was thousand times more stunning; it looked distinctively handsome amidst the golden harbor. "Where is the camera?" she wanted to capture the scene and bring it back to Japan for her mother. It was Hong Kong. It was a place that she belonged to. In fact she should come to have a look herself.

After getting off the bus, I walked according to the address that I jotted down from the tourist guide to look for the old cake shop. It was supposed to be a hundred-year-old cake shop, as mom told me, that was set up by the father of the father of her father... and the fame of the shop kept on spreading along with the growth of its age. The Wife Cake—mom said that it was what she was fed on—was the most famous product of the shop. I had tried it in Japan, not as tasty as the Japanese desserts but

mom said that it was totally different from its original.

HUNG HEUNG Cake Shop, yes, I got it.

The shop was really old, with the ancient shop setting—high ceiling, automatic fans, old tables and old people... It was filled with a strong scent, an overwhelming sweet scent.

"What do you want? Here are the hot Wife Cakes, just-made. Want one?" a woman in a greasy apron waved her hand to me.

I asked for one. It was just freshly baked. It nearly burned my hands when I held it. The woman asked me to try the cake as soon as possible before it got cold. Then I had a bite of it. I could not use any proper words to describe its taste and texture. The surface was crispy while the filling was soft and melting. Was it truly the Wife Cake? Why it was so different from the one I had tasted in Japan, which was hard and cold. The hot Wife Cake was like a miracle as it actualized all the things that were merely told by mom; the memories, the affection and the relations.

While I was eating the cake without being aware of any manner at all, I could perceive someone in the shop looking at me. It was a woman, who was standing over the cashier corner inside the shop. I stopped eating. When I lifted my head, I saw a pair of familiar eyes fixed at me. Was she an acquaintance of mine, or a person I had seen before?

Yes, she looked like mom, but a little fatter and older.

"*Ja-pan-lese?*" She walked towards me and asked in an experienced service tone.

I slightly shook my head.

Her sight intensified. It seemed to me that she wanted to look for something inside my eyes.

I smiled at her; I could see her eyes getting red and watery.

"Do you know Tang Yuen Kwan?" asked the woman who was standing right in front of me. She was a little shorter than mom but she got a more authoritative tone in speaking.

"It is my mother's name." I said.

"How old are you?" she asked in a sobbing voice.

"Going to be eighteen." I was not sure why I answered without any hesitation.

"So your father is a Japanese?" she continued. I replied "yes" but I started wondering how she knew about this.

Then she abruptly held my hand and took me to a tiny gloomy room beside the cashier corner. Inside there were a lot of yellowish historical photos on the walls, everywhere, I should say. She showed me a family picture, and pointed at a girl. The girl looked like me, even I myself dared to say so.

"This is your mother," she said.

The woman was my aunt, mom's elder sister. She then told

me the story about mom's marriage twenty years ago. It was a secret commitment between mom and grandfather, a typical conservative Chinese who had a profound hatred of Japan and its people. Mom could not come back home again once she had married dad, a Japanese. No other people, even mom's mother, could stop the cruel commitment. However, mom was so dedicated in pursuing something she thought was right and therefore she went silently. She had really insisted on keeping her promise of not showing up, even though the two elder persons passed away years ago.

I still felt hesitant in front of her, a person who was closely related to me but I did see the distance between us. Anyway, I took out some Japanese dessert to share with her.

"Great! Let's have them together! Sit, have a seat!" Aunt's passion made me feel that we were getting closer and closer to each other, "Oh, your name..."

"Maiya. Kimura Maiya."

"Then your mother is called K-mo-la Tang Yuen Kwan?" she asked in a peaceful tone, "It's a funny name, Maiya? She still remembers her home, I know, as she teaches you to speak Cantonese so well."

She cast a sidelong glance at me with a clever smile and I replied with a smile. The intense smile had turned out to be

laughter filling up the tiny room.

We finished the dessert together in the room. It was not much so fantastic as I had it before, though its texture was a little bit similar to the Wife Cake.

"Stay here longer. Come to my birthday party next Monday!"

"Sorry Aunt. I have to go back soon for the Adult Festival this Sunday..."

"Oh, really? Never mind, never mind. Go and enjoy the Adult Festival! It is also your birthday then?" Aunt tried to hide up her disappointment with a rapid speech. "Maiya, you are going to be an adult, you look exactly like your mother when she left home..."

Yes, we both had gone away from home to seek our identity.

"Take these Wife Cakes to your mother," said Aunt when I was going to leave.

Sure, I would take them home, but I didn't think it would taste the same when they were in mom's hands. I did think that she should come here herself to taste, to find what she was fond of, and to see her home and her remaining family. As she told me that I ought to come here before I chose my nationality.

On the way to the hotel, I got a peculiar taste inside my mouth. It was the blend of the Wife Cake and the Japanese dessert. It remained some indescribable flavor there; I could say I enjoyed



this wonderful combination. No one could understand the taste but me.

I knew that when I went back to Japan, I would have to decide the nationality in my passport. What would it be? No matter what, still, no one could undermine my inborn uniqueness. I was a special creation of two cultures, which were from two distinctive nations.

## **Coming Clean**

Karen Harrison Mah

When was the last time I showered? Maybe three days ago? I remember in the dormitory in Kunming I kept pushing the pouch with my passport back up over the exposed pipe of the shower faucet, but my identity and my cash still got a little soggy.

"What's wrong, Aunt Sandy?" my nephew Saul asks.

I turn around to face the inquisitive blue eyes of the passenger in the back seat. My hand falls on the backpack that has been my companion for two months.

"Nothing," I reply, "I just forgot where I was for a minute."

I've just returned to Massachusetts from a two-month trip to Yunnan province in China. Instead of the usual Chinese slide photos of me standing on the Great Wall and in front of Tiananmen Square I've brought back four notebooks of research on minority dialects and a half-forgotten thesis about the Naxi minority. When I booked my flight from Kunming to Shanghai to Los Angeles to Chicago to Boston, my brother Graham agreed to let me stay at his home while I sorted through my material. He met me at the airport with his seven-year-old son Saul.

"Did you like China, Aunt Sandy?" Saul asks.

"Yes, very much. I did some work at a University and

traveled around meeting different people. It was nice."

I want to tell him about the flowers and landscapes painted above the doorways, the blue skirts of the local women and the sunshine in the streams where they wash their vegetables, but somehow I cannot find the words.

"Everything was ok out there?" Graham asks, "I've heard that's a poor part of the country."

"Well, yes, but the provincial capital Kunming is developed. Most of the city was renovated for a flower exhibition a few years ago. The other towns are also developing tourist industries."

Of course the tourist industries may succeed in destroying the minority cultures where even interference by the Chinese government has failed.

"Do you mind if we stop at the grocery store?" Graham asks, "Gloria asked me to pick up a few things before we got home."

A lettuce-cooling breeze blasts us as we enter. I hope no one recognizes me here. Graham turns right toward the fruits and vegetables. There are no hand-written cardboard signs or hawkers swinging hand scales. I miss the voices calling out, "Hell-o? Hell-o?" the only English they know. I even miss the stained pavement beneath the fruit carts. The tiled floor beneath my feet seems slick and unreal. I practically ice skate after Graham. He's

looking for cereal and Saul. We checkout, return to the car and in a few moments arrive at Graham's home.

The three of us stumble through the kitchen door fully loaded with luggage and groceries. "Hello, Sandra," Graham's wife Gloria relieves me of the grocery sack. "It's nice to see you. Have you figured out how long you will be staying?"

"I... no, I haven't, not yet. It's nice to see you, too."

"Take your Aunt's things to the guestroom," Gloria says to Saul, "You'll want to shower right away, of course," she says to me.

"Yes, that would be great," I reply, I hope she can't smell me. "Hold on just a second. I want to show Saul what I brought him."

I brought him a large globe with all the countries written in English and Chinese characters that I found in Shanghai. Saul opens the box with some interest. "Oh," he said, "Thanks. Santa gave me one for Christmas. Here's where you were—China."

I point out the characters, but Saul doesn't read Chinese. He sets the globe on the floor and tells me to have a nice shower.

The towels in the linen closet are arranged in two stacks—one yellow and one white. I'm afraid of disturbing the balance as I carefully remove one of the yellow towels. I would not be showering if I did not feel a little dirty, and the pristine condition of the bathroom alienates me.

I take my time to admire the smooth polished surface of the sink. I lean towards the mirror. My brown hair is shaped over my forehead in oily steaks. My face is weathered with sunburn and I have a pimple on my left temple.

I turn away, push back the shower curtain and turn on the tap. The water rushes in an even spray from the showerhead. I run my hand through the water to test it. I'm a little afraid it will be cold.

At one hotel in Lijiang hot water never came. No matter what time of day I forced myself into the shower, I always emerged shivering and half-rinsed. After a week I began to suspect that not only was round-the-clock hot water a lie, but hot water in general was also a myth. "I want hot water." I told the manager in Chinese.

"Ok. I will send hot water to your room. It takes a minute to become hot." He said.

"I want you to solve this problem yourself." I said.

I went upstairs and turned on the water. It was still running cold when there was a knock at my door. I opened the door to find the manager standing with a fresh thermos of hot water.

"I don't want this. I want hot water there," I said pointing to the bathroom in exasperation.

"You want to wash your hair?" the manager asked.

"I want to wash my hair. I want to wash my body. I am cold."

The manager pushed up his sleeves and walked into the bathroom. He turned the hot water tap off. He turned the hot water tap back on. He tested the water periodically. "Why is there no hot water?" I asked again.

He began to make excuses. I only caught phrases over the roar of the water. I think he was talking about all the other people in the hotel using up the hot water.

I suppose he thought I meant that I didn't understand what he was saying. Maybe, he just gave up on me. After he had left I turned off the tap and refrained from taking a shower for the rest of my stay.

Now, in contrast, a flood of warm water washes over me, carrying away much of the dirt, sweat and muscle tension I have accumulated over the past several days. I lather my body with soap and my hair with shampoo. The bubbles stream off my body. Only hot water makes me feel clean.

Some people suggest that Chinese style toilets—flushing or stagnate holes in the ground that one squats over rather than sits on—are also good for people's health. Even elderly people must stay limber enough to squat and squatting is supposed to be good for the bowels. It's also nice to avoid touching toilet and

skin. Toilets in Yunnan varied widely in style and sanitation.

That toilet in the country market was the worst. But I was on the mini-bus for forty minutes and I'd had coffee for breakfast. No wonder the stench and the line weren't enough to put me off. When I went inside the sloppy shelter the light was dim. I couldn't make out and did not want to know the exact nature of the softness beneath my feet as I positioned myself. I did become aware that the old women on either side of me in the room without partitions were smiling. I felt a little ridiculous, but of course, greatly relieved. I smiled in return and gave a little bow of respect. Even the young woman in the corner smiled.

After twenty minutes I had four women following me trying to sell me trinkets I no longer wanted. I was a bad foreigner and wouldn't offer even a little more. "I don't want it." I said again.

"Do you speak English?" someone asked me.

I turned and saw the young woman who I had smiled at in the filthy toilet.

"Yes," I said with another smile, "but I also speak Chinese."

The young woman had an English name—Annie.

"You were at the University in Kunming several weeks before, is that right?" Annie said.

"Yes, I'm doing research on Dongba script."

"I'm doing research on—how do you say? —local art. Have

you bought something?"

I shook my head "That's good. There are not many art works for sale here. People will not sell cheap to you."

I want to explain that I sometimes have little choice but to buy things for more than local will pay for them, but at that moment a woman came up to us. Her skin was worn smooth like a rock on the beach and she seemed to be bundled in layers of skirts and blouses. A drop of sweat ran from the edge of her frizzy hair down her neck. She said something to Annie about necklaces. "She wants us to take a look," Annie said to me.

We followed the woman to the end of a row of vendor's stalls and tables. We squatted close to the earth. The woman drew a little velvet packet out of the basket she wore on her back. She sprinkled the contents, a dozen bracelets of tiled flowers, onto the ground, and turned them over with her thin fingers for our appraisal. "Do you like them?" Annie asked me.

I shook my head and answered in Chinese, "I don't like them."

In response the woman took out another bundle from her basket. She added a tangle of beaded necklaces to the pile of bracelets. The colors glistened in the sunlight. The woman took a bag of rings from under her blouse and a knot of earrings from up her sleeve. The small pieces of metal cascaded haphazardly



into the dust. For an instant, the mismatched earrings were overwhelmingly beautiful splashes of color and gold. I reached down and began to sort through them, only to realize that I was caught. I would buy something from this woman now and pay more than it was worth in the town. I paid for a pair of earrings.

We started to walk back to the minibus stop. I noticed on the way that many of the bronze teapots and clay statues had dust and dirt lingering in their detailing. Perhaps those objects had also once been sold straight off the ground or perhaps the dirt made it easier for the sellers to insist that the object was from the Ming dynasty.

Perhaps that was the day I started to feel so dirty, though the day wasn't over yet. I was staying in the hotel with no hot water. I must not have showered for two days after that. The sun that afternoon in the market made me sweat. The dust of the market dirt and the essence of the public toilet lingered around me.

I have had a shower since then, but I haven't shaved my legs since before I left. My leg hair is still short enough to feel coarse, but is long enough to hide my ingrown hair and dry skin. My hands seem small as they push around the foam of soap bubbles. I take the razor and scrape away a strip of soap and hair. After several moments the shape of my legs becomes clear. The

pattern of the muscles is unfamiliar, altered by the work of balancing over toilets, wandering across villages and fighting my way aboard buses.

The mini-bus Annie and I rode back from the market wasn't nearly as interesting as the bus that I had taken into the market in the morning. No mini-bus driver wants to make an hour-long trip unless he is loaded to capacity. Capacity means fifteen passengers and their respective chickens, shoeboxes and baskets of oranges. Some people have seats. Others straddle stools and packing crates. The city buses were equally crowded but it was harder for me to get off when the bus arrived at my stop.

"You said you look at the Dongba script?" Annie asked me at close proximity in the mini-bus.

I told her yes, and she switched back to English. "I have a friend. He writes the characters. I will give you an introduction."

This interested me, but Annie didn't really elaborate. I waited wondering if I should ask when she could introduce me. "Come on, he lives close to here," Annie said as the van bumped to its first stop. The village around us was quiet. I stared up at the paintings in the eaves of the doorways. "Here," Annie said stopping in front of an open door, I followed her into another world. We were in the courtyard of a house. The sun fell through a kind of dusty haze on the wooden benches in the courtyard.

Annie called out and a slight old man with a blue vest and three wispy hairs growing out of a mole on his chin came out. Annie spoke to him in the Naxi minority dialect. She indicated me and told him that I could speak standard Chinese. "*Ni hao*," he smiled, but it seemed clear that his Mandarin was as limited as my Naxi. He took me back to his "studio" —a small room, another wooden table. He carefully set out a few scrolls for me to look at. Annie helped me translate questions, dozens of details I had needed to ask about. It was rare to find an artist who practiced writing the scripts. After we had finished looking, he offered us tea. I took a dainty cup gratefully. The three of us set around in silence, our common language was barely enough to hold our simple conversations. Yet it seemed that the same contentment and desire to understand must occupy all of our thoughts.

My legs are getting smoother, but any razor is clogged. I rinse it out under a hard spray of water and start shaving again. I uncover mosquito bites and patches on my ankles where my hiking boots rubbed my skin raw when my sock slipped down inside my shoes. Both my little toes have blisters. The dry skin has split on the heel of my left foot. Yunnan was rough on me.

But, well, what did I expect to happen: I never expected to stay in first-class hotels or travel in luxury among the Chinese villages. I never expected to find things just the same as home. I

would have been disappointed if everything had been like home. The last dirt I carried back from Yunnan between my toes and behind my ears is running down the drain.

I shut off the water and step out of the shower. I look for my face over the sink to see if there are any new changes, but the mirror is frosted over steam. I rub my blistered feet, smooth legs, tummy, back, chest and arms dry. Then I wrap the towel into a turban around my hair. I put on one of Graham's Grateful Dead t-shirts and Gloria's loosest pair of jeans over my only pair of clean underwear. I feel like a new person.

I walk back to the guestroom. Saul lies on his stomach in the middle of the floor looking at the globe. "Daddy said that if I dug a tunnel through the center of the earth I would get to China."

I look at the globe. "If you dug straight down you would end up here in the Southern hemisphere. You would get pretty dirty doing all that digging anyway."

"But Aunt Sandy do you know about Christopher Columbus?"

"Yes."

"Christopher Columbus did not have a globe."

"Nope."

"How come the China people have a globe?"

"Well, Christopher Columbus lived a long time ago. No

one knew that the world looked like this. Some people thought the world was flat. Columbus thought the world was round, but he thought he could go straight from Portugal here to China over here and didn't know that he would hit America in between."

"But did he want to go underground?"

Unbelievable kid. "Well, the Portuguese liked to sail ships. That was a long time ago though, now people in all the countries know that the world is round like a globe and has seven continents."

He points to a particular spot on the globe, "Does this say China?"

"Sort of, the Chinese name for China. *Zhongguo*. These two signs mean middle country. Here is the place where I was, Kunming."

Gloria comes in. "Look, Mom," Saul says, "even if you could dig all the way through the earth you wouldn't get to *Zhongguo*. You'd come out here in the - what is it called, Aunt Sandy?"

"The Southern hemisphere."

Gloria smiles. "It's time for dinner. Go wash your hands."

I am back home again eating baked chicken and three vegetable side dishes with a knife and a fork. I am sometimes awkward separating meat and bone. So is Saul. He even picks apart brussel sprouts with his fingers. Gloria scolds him.

Strange. My mother told me to brush my teeth after every meal, change my underwear every day. As soon as I got to China I started eating greasy stuffed pancakes and street food without washing my hands and jaywalking at busy intersections.

Saul gets dirty by digging tunnels in the backyard and has to take a bath immediately afterwards. Someday, protected by a layer of earth, he will see the world, before he comes home to come clean.

# **The Angel of Lavender**

Grace Wong Wing Yi

After taking my boss's tuxedo to the dry cleaner, it is already 5:45 p.m. My legs are aching to death. However, I need a walk. I do need to take a walk under the setting sun. Victoria Harbour is soaking in the golden haze of March, damp and sticky. The buildings in Tsim Sha Tsui are blurred. This arouses my impulse to clean my glasses with the corner of my blouse.

I miss it. I do miss it. I really miss the clear golden sunshine from the endless sky together with the sweet and delicious breeze, mixing with the refreshing fragrance of purple lavender and green grass...

\*

I asked many different people and travel agents how to get to the lavender fields in Southern France, but all of them told me that there was no direct way to get there except joining a local tour or taking a taxi. Finally, I chose the latter as a sudden decision after I had broken up with my boyfriend during my journey in Marseilles. I headed for my destination with my backpack without looking back. All the information I had was the three pages that I had torn

out of the travelling magazines. I got on a train passing by a small town in the Southern France, Manosque. Once I got off the train, a few families were waving in my direction. They were waving to the women and children standing right beside me. It seemed that they were coming home after a long leave. The train was departing Manosque Station, only I was left on the pebbles beside the tracks. It was already 5:30 p.m. I did not know whether I should go directly to the small village or stay in the town until the next morning. Since the sun was beginning to set very soon, I had to find a place to spend the night before it was dark.

I walked across the little lobby of the train station and went out of it, there was an open parking lot outside and a few cars were parked there to pick up their families.

"Bonjour mademoiselle!" a plump man in a light green fine checked short-sleeves shirt and khaki pants said with a "hospitable" smile. It was a little bit too enthusiastic. He was standing next to a splendid silver grey Mercedes Benz. A middle-aged man in his early forties; the thin layer of hair in the middle of his scalp could not help exposing his age. He moved forward in my direction. I just thought that he was talking to the people behind me, but I found there was nobody around me.

"Voulez vous un taxi?" He asked as I was still hesitating whether to go to the village directly or stay in Manosque. I got to



realize that he was a taxi driver, since his taxi was so fabulous that I even missed this point. How can a taxi in the countryside be so smart? He must have been waiting many hours for his customers. Anyway, I had to ask somebody to show me how to find accommodation. I showed him the note with "Velansole" which was the nearest town to the lavender fields. I just opened my mouth to ask how long it was to get to Velansole from the station, "Combien le temps..."

"C'est 20 km d'ici. Vers vingt minutes. Ce n'est pas loin. D'accord! D'accord!" he said quickly with a grin and attempted to open the door for me. I frowned and tried to figure out what he meant. With my limited French learnt from a French course for beginners, I knew that he said that it was 20 km from the station, about twenty minutes and it was not far... and "D'accord!" meant "OK!" Since it was getting dark and it did not take too much time to get to Velansole, I decided to go to there directly.

By this taxi? —Well, I had no other choices. So, I stuttered in my poor French to tell him that I was only a student and I could only pay 200FF for the trip. He nodded his head slightly and replied in stammering English, "O-K, no pro-b-lem!" We exchanged a smirk. He opened the boot instantly and walked to my back. I took off my backpack, handed it to him. Then I reached the door handle of the back seat and attempted to get into the taxi. However, the

taxi driver approached me and insisted on asking me to sit in the front seat beside him. I was puzzled. Perhaps he noticed the expression on my face. He added immediately, "Pour une meilleure vue!" For a better view? Or other intentions? I was not sure, but I got into the front seat anyway. Everything was quite settled. He moved swiftly into the driver's seat with his plump body and tightened his seat belt with a crispy sound. We set off to my destination—Velansole.

We were now on the way to Velansole. I saw nobody along the miles and miles of bending roads, but only a few cars rushed by. The sun was sinking to the horizon.

"Je m'appelle Jean Pierre!" he suddenly uttered with a quick glance at me.

"Je suis Grace. Enchanté, Monsieur Pierre."

"Enchanté!" he replied and then took a few more glances at my left arm... or my bosom! Then, he held the steering wheel with his left hand and stretched his right hand to me. I was so nervous that I looked out of the window when his hand nearly touched me. His hand did not reach me. Instead, he was searching for the seat belt lock. Once he found it, he handed it to me and said, "C'est dangereux!" He continuously explained to me that we were at full speed... Actually, I could not really understand what he was talking about but I took a deep breath and tightened my seat belt.

He then told me that he had also driven other Japanese girls to see the lavender fields and how wonderful they were. I told him that I came from Hong Kong. We also talked about many other things but I just understood half of what he said. After bends and bends, we were speeding to a straight wide road heading towards the setting sun. The road and the fields nearby were spread with golden honey. The harvested fields glowed and sparkled right in front of my eyes. Through the windscreen, I felt I was looking the world through a fragrant glass of champagne. When I was entranced by the beautiful scenery, Monsieur Pierre touched my arm with his elbow and urged me to look at the left hand side in the front.

"C'est magnifique! Super!" I shouted when I saw patches and patches of violet lavender fields waving in the mid summer wind. I could not help stretching and inclining my whole body to the front for a better panoramic view of the purple sea.

"C'est beau? Ça va?" he smiled at me and made a "wow" sound. I realized why Monsieur Pierre asked me to sit in the front seat. At that moment, I felt light-hearted and hopeful. I could not imagine that my dream had come true. He promised to drive me to take some photos in the lavender fields the next day as we were passing them. I could not wait till the next day.

When we reached Velansole, the sky was already dim. Monsieur Pierre stopped the car outside a pub and he said that he

would help me to find a nice place to stay. According to the magazines I read, there were only two or three hotels in this village. However, there were usually rooms in the hotels since not many tourists visit this village. I was told to wait in the taxi. I could see Monsieur Pierre talking on a phone. He picked up and put off the phone receiver several times and then talked to the bartender, who seemed to be well acquainted with him.

Monsieur Pierre came out from the bar with a thin man, got in and started the car. He told me that he had phoned all the hotels of Velansole and they were all full due to the Lavender Festival the next day. The man sitting behind us was his friend. He knew some B & Bs in the village and he would show him the way to search for any vacant room for me. Monsieur Pierre was sweating. He swiped his forehead with the sleeves of his shirt. With a smile he told me not to be worried, and he promised to find a room for me. However, when he said so, he frowned.

The silver grey Benz followed the bending village paths to move under the grey blue sky and stopped at several warmly lighted village houses, but each time it turned back in a few minutes. Every time the thin man got up to the door and pointed to the direction of our car, the person who answered the door shook his or her head. Finally, the thin man got back into the car and Monsieur Pierre drove him back to the village. Is Monsieur Pierre trustful?

"Voilà, merci! À bientôt!" I regained my mind until Monsieur Pierre said good-bye to the thin man. Then Monsieur Pierre turned to me and said, "J'ai peur que nous devons retourner a Manosque." I agreed as this was the only thing I could do: getting back to Manosque and finding a hotel there. Then I could still go to see the lavender fields the next day. However, the waned moon was up and the place was covered with darkness. Could I still find a place to stay? Was it just a trap? The meter jumped up with a thousand and something...

"Mais ne t'inquiète pas! Il y a dix hôtels à Manosque. Je connais un petit hotel qui fait la très très bonne cuisine!" How could I not to be worried? Even the best French cuisine could not arouse my appetite if I had to sleep in the street! I responded to his words with a bitter smile. I hoped the ten hotels in Manosque were not full.

It was already 7:05 p.m., the streets of Manosque were empty without one single bulb light peeping from a window. Monsieur Pierre stopped his Benz at the hotel, which served very good French cuisine. Again he told me to stay in the car to wait. I stretched my neck and tried my best to peep in but Monsieur Pierre came out immediately. He said that it was full. Not a single room was left. He said that he could not believe this. What did he want to do? Not all of the windows were lighted, why there was no room left?

Then he drove his car to another hotel with a French window. I could see the reception counter inside clearly. I saw Monsieur Pierre talk to the receptionist with his dramatic body movements and he pointed to me through the window from time to time. However, the receptionist shook his head with a sorry expression. He led Monsieur Pierre to the door and shook hands with him and said, "Je suis désolé, Mademoiselle. C'est tout complet!" And then he hung up the "Complet" tablet outside the door when he went back into the hotel.

We then went to the other hotels one by one but the tablets "Complet" were hung. We tried nearly all the hotels in the town. The sky was dark completely. The car phone suddenly rang. It was Monsieur Pierre's wife, Natalie, who was the only phone operator of his taxi company. She was waiting him for dinner and it was getting late. Once Natalie knew my situation, she tried to find any possible accommodation. After a few minutes, she replied. From the frustrated expression of Monsieur Pierre, I knew that there was no room for me in the whole town! Natalie was on the other end of the phone but she was silent. Monsieur Pierre stared at the computer panel and said nothing.

I heard a lot of people say that they had slept in the train station or the church during their trips to Europe. Perhaps this time I had a chance to try. Of course, this was obviously not a good

idea. At this moment, "Peux-moi rester à la gare? Ou à l'église?" I asked.

"Es-tu folle? Tout est fermé!" he answered loudly and told Natalie how silly I was.

Suddenly, Natalie said something through the car-phone but I could not hear what she had said. Monsieur Pierre replied with excitement, "Oui! Qui!" and started the car at once.

The car drove through the streets of the town center and headed for the outskirts of the town. Finally, we went into the courtyard of a place, which looked like a school, and stopped outside a three-storey building. Some pop music was coming out from it. Monsieur Pierre asked me to get out of the car with him. When I walked past the entrance of the building, I caught a glimpse of the tablet above the entrance: "Auberge de Jeunesse." Yes, this was a youth hostel.

When the young man at the counter caught sight of us, he said, "Qu'y a-t-il pour votre service?" Monsieur Pierre talked to the man again with his dramatic facial and body expression, but the young man kept shaking his head and said something like he was not the person-in-charge of the hostel and there was no bed left that night... But Monsieur Pierre insisted on persuading him to help me. The young man was pushed to phone to the campsites to see whether there was any place left. He made several phone calls but

all failed. Suddenly, Monsieur Pierre shouted at me and asked what I decided to do now. Shocked, I replied that I could not get back and I would stay at the train station. Monsieur Pierre got more and more irritated and talked to the young man brutally. Although I could not catch his exact meaning, I understood that he was complaining that the youth hostel should serve the young people. But now, he even refused to help a foreign girl in the nighttime! What was the aim of their organization...

The young man did not know how to manage such a situation and finally he retreated and said that there was an unused kitchen just beside the main building and if I did not mind the bugs and fleas, I could spend the night there. Of course, I immediately replied him, "D'accord! D'accord!" However, I discovered that I was not the only one who nodded and answered with "D'accord" but also Monsieur Pierre. When we were following the man to get to the unused kitchen, Monsieur Pierre turned around and smiled to me with an "OK" posture.

After I had settled, Monsieur Pierre told me to take a rest and he promised to pick me up to visit the lavender fields the next morning at ten o'clock. Yes, I still had not paid him yet. When I asked how much I should pay, he just insisted on receiving 200FF, which I had promised to pay before I got on the car. However, the meter had already jumped to more than a thousand at that time.



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It is already 8:15 p.m., the Pearl of the Orient is charming and glowing under the navy blue sky. It is always a sparkling compass on the map.

Sometimes, when I think of this adventure, I still cannot figure out why Monsieur Pierre helped me. Why was there only one taxi waiting in the train station when I arrived Manosque? Why could a country taxi-driver own a fascinating Mercedes Benz with a computer-controlled-panel? Why is a taxi-driver willing to drive a foreign tourist without aiming at earning great money or taking any other advantages of her?

I am in the lobby of the MTR Airport Express Line Hong Kong Station. Ten years ago who could have imagined that we can now reach Lantau Island from Central by land in 20 minutes? Hong Kong is a place full of such miracles. No one can imagine what will happen... "The next train to the airport will arrive in 2 minutes."

I always wonder if he is not simply a taxi-driver, but an angel, a guardian angel or even the Angel of Lavender...



*This is Rita Tang's original painting, "Next".  
The proportion is altered for the sake of cover design.*