

亦舒：回家

## Home-coming

By Yi Shu

Translated by Eva Hung

MY LITTLE BROTHER called the other day and asked why I hadn't been in touch; why I hadn't gone home; how I was doing.

I stared at the ceiling for a long time before I said I was fine, doing all right. I asked him whether his exams were over and how he was doing at school.

Brother said he came second in class.

Came second? I demanded: How come he only came second? Why was he falling behind? Who came first this term?

Brother said that the chap who came second last year has caught up as he himself has become Honorary Secretary of the Students Union and was kept extremely busy.

Brother was very pleased that he was Secretary, and did not seem too concerned about coming second in class. He asked me to go home for a visit. I said fine; I'd go when I have the time. And then Brother asked Mother to speak to me. I was a little scared; I don't really like talking to Mother because she goes on so. All the same, I did talk to her since I'd wanted her to make me some silver carp with scallions and some stewed beef. It's a hard life having meals out all the time, and I really missed these two dishes, so I put that to her.

Mother said fine; told me to come home for them two days later and she'd have them ready. That put me in quite a good mood, so I asked how her high blood pressure was.

*Yi Shu published her first short story when she was fifteen, and has since become one of Hong Kong's most popular writers. Her works also have a wide following among Chinese readers in Southeast Asia. "Home-coming", written in 1965, is very different in style and subject matter from her more recent works.*

Mother said that a friend at the church had introduced her to a doctor. The fee was two hundred but she felt much better and could work faster now, so it was money well spent.

I asked Mother where she got that money; was it from Second Brother?

Mother complained, saying that he would never do such a thing. She paid the doctor with the money I gave her long ago, money I received when my stories were published. I'd told her to buy some sweets but she had saved it. Some days ago she had sent my Third Brother and Little Brother to Second Brother's place, and they knocked on his door for a long time but there was no answer. He hadn't been home for a visit for so long now they didn't know what had happened to him.

I told Mother that Second Brother was fine, that I had seen him a couple of weeks ago and we often talked on the phone. But Mother became even angrier, saying that in that case there's absolutely no reason why Second Brother didn't go home.

I kept quiet, only saying that Second Brother was really very busy. I also said that I'd like to have some yellow croaker soup and greens for lunch. So that was it.

I got home at half-past twelve and it was Mother who opened the door for me. "Mum," I greeted her.

"So you're here?" she asked, "I thought you weren't coming. The food's ready."

I nodded, put down my string bag and took out some clothes.

"What're these?"

"Clothes. Brought them back to wash. Actually I could have washed them but I don't have an iron."

"I'll do it for you." She took the clothes and said, "You can't be too careful now that you're living on your own."

"I know. Where's Brother?"

"Gone to school." Mother walked into the kitchen. "Though it's summer holidays now he's as busy as ever."

I opened the door of the tiny bedroom that used to be mine, and the first thing I saw was a model of an ocean liner. "So Third Brother has moved back?"

"T'was such a joke!" Mother put the rice and dishes on the table and said, "Last week he came back and complained that he had lost a stone in weight, and hadn't got any money for food. I was so annoyed that I gave him a proper telling-off and made him move back here."

I smiled. Having spread out a newspaper as a place mat I picked up a spoon and started with the yellow croaker soup. But at this point Brother came back.

"Bro."

"Sis," he put down his bag.

"Good. You can have lunch together." Mother seemed pleased and brought out two bowls with a tiny portion of rice in the bottom. Brother and me pretended not to notice and kept digging into the vegetables.

"Give me the newspaper, Sis."

"Why?"

"To look at the School Cert results. Ha! I was so nervous last year when it

was my turn." He pulled the newspaper from under my elbows and read slowly. "Mother, Peizhen from next door hasn't made it. Useless girl, not passing even the School Cert!" He waved the newspaper around.

"Well, yes," I mumbled as I ate. "She's failed. In fact she doesn't look like the kind of girl who could pass."

"Failed, did she?" Mother came out from the kitchen. "That doesn't matter. Peizhen started working in a bank a while ago; three hundred dollars a month. Quite a cushy job."

"Mother, you don't understand. Peizhen is just on probation, and when the bank knows she's failed the School Cert they'll fire her."

"That can't be. Once they've gotten to know her they won't fire her."

But Brother went on muttering, "Her father must have gotten her that job. Still, though her father knows a lot of people she is only earning three hundred."

"My salary is pretty much the same," I said, upset. "Why be disparaging about other people's earnings?"

"You're all good-for-nothing!" Brother cocked an eyebrow.

"Sure, sure . . . ." I said.

"Talking about money," Mother came over and said, "your Second Brother hasn't given me anything for the rent. What a pain! This veg is fresh; have some more. You won't get anything like that eating out, so you'd better enjoy it at home."

"I will," I said.

Mother sat herself down. "At first I thought your father was giving me too little for housekeeping, but then I couldn't sleep these couple of nights and did a bit of reckoning. It turns out I was wrong, so I'm not grumbling anymore."

"How's that?"

"Your father earns 1,300 dollars a month, and he gives me 500 dollars, keeping 800 dollars for himself. But he pays the rent, which is 400 dollars, and phone bills and electricity bills and so on, which is another 100 dollars, so in fact he only gets 300 dollars for himself."

"300 dollars?" I was surprised.

"Out of that he has to buy his lunch, get his hair cut, pay for fruit and magazines. And besides, he's got to go out with his friends sometimes." Mother calculated.

"But 300 dollars just isn't enough."

"What about me?" Mother was a bit angry. "I've got to see to a whole family with 500 dollars. Do any of the things you eat come for free?"

"Well, true enough."

"It would be a lot easier if your Second Brother would let me have the rent."

"His expenses are not small either," I said. "He's got a heavy burden too, with the children and all."

"Really? He told me that he hasn't even paid his amah."

"So you see," I said, "one's got to make a comfortable home."

"Well, you're right there."

Brother bent his head to one side, reading. He didn't say a word, and after a

while he got up.

"Why don't you eat the rice?" Mother pointed to the two bowls of rice.

"I'm full," Brother said, wiping his mouth.

"What about you?" Mother looked at me.

"I'm full, too."

"You kept saying the food is no good eating out so you want to come home for a meal, but you don't eat any more at home." She said accusingly.

"Well," I said, "the dishes were so good that I've filled up on them, so I have no room for the rice." I got up from the table.

Mother sighed before she started eating.

I picked up the few letters on the coffee table, all useless notices, some from the school and some from the club.

I looked at Mother; she was still sweating. Mum's always sweating. She's short-tempered and her health isn't good. She isn't young anymore but she still has so much work everyday.

"You're all the same, treating this place as a refuge. When you've made a fortune you run away, one after the other; and when life's too hard and you're not up to it, you all come back."

"Mum, who's made a fortune?" I asked. "We're all living from hand to mouth. Who's made a fortune now?"

"Isn't it a fortune to be able to live from hand to mouth?" Mother said obstinately: "Look at me, I've never made a cent in my life!"

"Yes, all right." I said.

Brother came out of the kitchen. I felt that there was something funny about the kitchen door. "Didn't the kitchen door used to open inwards?"

"Father took it down and fixed it." Brother replied.

"Really?" I said. And when Mother got back into the kitchen I asked: "What does Father do now to amuse himself?"

"Nothing. He's stuck to the TV day and night."

"What about you?"

"I'm stuck to my books."

"And Mother?"

"She's always running off to church, and, of course, she rambles on."

"Father should have sent me to university so I'd be earning more and could support him."

"If Father could afford sending you to university, would he need you to support him?" Brother countered.

"You're right."

"How's your French now?" Mother came out of the kitchen and asked.

"The teacher's on summer vacation and won't be back till the eighteenth."

"Your Third Brother is learning German in some institute. Tuition's a hundred a term. What about you?"

"Forty-three a month."

"That's a lot more expensive than his place." Mother thought of something else: "What about your rent?"

"Hundred and eighty."

"That's high indeed! Your Third Brother's place only cost ninety, and it was split between him and a room-mate."

"I live in Tsim Sha Tsui," I explained. "Tsim Sha Tsui is a more expensive area."

"Is the place roomy?"

"All right, but very hot. It's been so hot and stuffy these last few days you couldn't help getting into a bad temper. There are windows all around my room, but less than three yards from the windows there're other buildings, so I've got to have the blinds drawn day and night, or else dozens of eyes will be staring at me."

"Well, that's Hong Kong," Mother gave her opinion.

"Is it hot here at night?"

"Of course!" Mother started complaining again: "The dogs bark and the factories work late into the night, and the last few days the people next door had a break-in. It's been such a hotchpotch."

I laughed, "Really?"

"I'm not kidding you." Mother was upset.

And then I remembered, and asked, somewhat embarrassed, "Mum, are the carp and beef ready?"

"Of course!" She was in good spirits again and hurried into the kitchen. She came back carrying two dishes and pointed to them in turn: "Look, they took me a lot of trouble, let alone money."

"How much was it?"

"About fifteen dollars." She put the dishes on the table and covered each with a bowl.

"Oh."

Mother put the dishes in a nylon bag and then put them into my string bag. "Hold it steady. Don't let it tip sideways." She tested the string bag.

"Right," I said, and watched as she went into her room.

I immediately went over to Brother. "Brother, do you have twenty dollars?"

"Oh," he looked me up and down. "I suppose so, counting the small change."

"Will you lend it to me?"

"All right," he went into his room, climbed up on a stool and took down a tea caddy from the top of a cabinet. He poured all the change out: ten coins and a note. I watched in silence.

Brother handed me the money. I said, "I'll pay you back in a few days."

"Don't worry about it," he said, lifting his chin.

"Don't you need it yourself?" I had the money in my hands, and I felt I was somehow in the wrong.

"Not for the time being." He was really generous.

I went to Mother with the money.

"Mum, here's fifteen dollars for the food."

Mother jumped up. "Keep it if you need it yourself. Why give it to me? Forget about it!"

I didn't take the money back. "If I kept fifteen dollars on me it'd be spent in no time, but it will last you a long while."

"In that case . . ." Mother smiled. "Oh, yes, I've made you a set of silk pyjamas, nice and cool for this weather. Take them with you!" She took the pyjamas out of a drawer; they were also neatly wrapped. I took them from her.

"Mum, I've got to go to work now."

"Going straight to the office?" Mother asked.

"No, I'll leave the food at home first, before I go to the office."

"Does your landlord have a fridge?" Mother was worried.

"Yes," I replied.

Mother saw me to the door. While she wasn't looking I put the remaining five dollars into my purse. I probably had five-thirty there, or was it five-forty?

Mother went with me to the lift lobby. "Take good care of yourself," she said to me.

"I will."

"The lift's here."

I pulled the lift door open. "Good-bye."

Mother nodded. I pushed "G" and the door closed.

"Have you got the pyjamas?" Mother shouted from above as the lift descended.

"Yes!" I shouted back. The lift had reached the ground floor.

Father should have sent me to university so I'd be earning more and could support him.



By K. H. Ma