

《给我顶住》
Hold Out for Me

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Introduction

I believe that translation requires a great deal of creativity. If one were to translate a text morpheme-by-morpheme, the result would not only be dry to read, but it would also be no more “correct” than a less-restrictive translation. As a result, the goal of this translation project was to create a work that was enjoyable to read by English readers regardless of previous background in Chinese literature. This meant avoiding literal translations and footnotes whenever possible while still preserving the voice and ideas of the original text.

Wang Shuo was one of China’s most popular 20th-century writers, which makes it all the more surprising that few of his stories have been translated. Only two of his novels have been translated into English, “Playing for Thrills” and “Please Don’t Call Me Human.” The gap in translation and my previous experience with his work led me to choose one of his novellas, 《给我顶住》 *Gei wo dingzhu*, for my project.

Like most of Wang Shuo’s stories, 《给我顶住》 is full of colloquial narration and sarcastic humor, and I wanted to retain that in the English translation, which proved to be a challenge. Many idioms, slang, and jokes had no direct English equivalents, requiring me to replace them with entirely different phrases. This then required me to edit the surrounding context, sometimes significantly. The unfortunate truth of the matter is that I have no way of knowing author intent. The phrases I cut, the ideas I removed, and the connotations I skipped over may have been integral to Wang Shuo’s vision of the story. I had to rely on my own judgement as a writer to deem which parts were or were not necessary.

My translation process was simple. I first did a paragraph-by-paragraph translation by entering the English in between the lines of the original. This translation was mostly literal. Then I put the entirety of the English translation into one document and edited the entire piece for clarity and readability. Although my methods were slightly inefficient, my hope is that this process created a piece that can be enjoyed on its own.

The main problems I encountered were my imperfect source material and the rather obscure slang. My source unfortunately had numerous typos. This usually took the form of single characters being replaced by homonyms, such that the original meaning was easy to decipher and thus easy to correct. However, for the typos that I was unable to figure out, I decided to simply skip over them and translate the sentence without it; this usually amounted to a single phrase or idea here and there, so it wasn’t much of an issue. The other problem was the use of Beijing slang, which at times truly stumped me. The internet could only help to an extent, so the best option for me was to replace these parts with English slang that I felt would fit in context and call it a day.

Very few people can agree on the best approach to translation. Some may argue that my sacrifice of the original Chinese sentence structures and grammar has removed the piece’s

identity. I personally believe that if a translation can evoke the same feeling in an English reader that the original evoked in a Chinese reader, it deserves to be praised. Though I may not have fully succeeded, this was the philosophy I had in mind during this project. If the reader would like to judge for themselves if I overstepped my boundaries, the original text is also included for comparison. I hope you enjoy reading.

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Aidan Fry
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Hold Out for Me

“Take a look at that man who just came through the door,” Zhao Lei said to Zhou Jin. “The tall, thin one with the sports outfit.”

In the restaurant, the sea of heads jostled and jived in uproarious laughter. The intense midday sun was kept outside by brown glass, leaving the inside cool and dim. The man’s face looked pale in the gloomy light, yet his tall nose was still prominent.

Zhou Jin took a glance at him, then turned back around. “What’s up with him?” she whispered to Zhao Lei quietly.

“That first-seeded player from the National Romance Team I told you about—it’s him.”

“Really?” Zhou Jin again turned to look at the man, who was hovering around tables looking for an empty seat. “I don’t think he’s that attractive.”

“He looks ordinary, sure, but they say it’s his professionalism that got him into the National Romance Team: drills on the winter solstice, drills on the summer solstice, and drills on his own from time to time, so that when he enters the court, a victory is all but guaranteed – Guan Shanping,” Zhao Lei drew out the sound of his name with relish. “He’s a very interesting man. Ask him to come and chat and you’ll understand.” Hearing him behind her, she turned around with a grin and waved him over: “Come over here, there’s an empty seat.”

Looking dignified and imposing, Guan Shanping walked up to the two women. Zhao Lei picked up her handbag from the seat next to her and let him sit down.

“What brings you here?” Zhao Lei asked him with a smile. She lit a cigarette, raising it high with pursed lips as she spoke.

“All that is under the sun; is it not the king’s domain? You two came, so why can’t I?” After Gao Shanping sat down, he called a waiter to come and set the table for him, then picked up the menu and carefully read through it several times. He ended up ordering very little food. Then he returned the menu and grabbed a pair of chopsticks. Without a hint of shame, he began to gobble down Zhao Lei’s food with gusto. “You work around here, right?” He shook his head as he ate. “Too extravagant. For an ordinary Chinese woman, it’s enough for her to just fill up on food at home. What other restaurants have you been to?”

“We consider ourselves amateur restaurant-goers but professional eaters, you see. And what about you? Have your dalliances with hookers bore fruit?”

“I’ve encountered some excellent supply so far, though at most it’ll only be able to fill the gap in the domestic market.”

“And what do you think of this lady before you?” Zhao Lei pointed to Zhou Jin with glee.

“Stop fooling around.” Zhou Jin’s face reddened.

Guan Shanping's gaze lingered on Zhou Jin for a moment. "If there's support, and the judges score leniently, I'm predicting top eight at the district level."

"Don't be crazy," Zhao Lei said. "You're not looking at your own moral calibre. If you want to get to the top eight, you'd have to take advantage of other people losing their focus in the competition in order to exceed expectations."

"I'm not crazy, and I have no intention of winning any sort of World Championship." At this point, Guan Shanping had already made a clean sweep of the food. "I'm only looking for the one." Guan Shanping wiped his mouth and stood up, pointing to his head. "The one that matches the image in here."

"I'm just worried that this 'one' hasn't been born yet." Zhao Lei smiled at him.

"Oh, she has been born, I firmly believe that. All that's needed now is to go out and find her—a wide-scale hunt."

"I'm also worried you won't recognize each other when you meet face-to-face." Zhao Lei flicked a long string of cigarette ash into the ashtray.

"Not possible," Guan Shanping blinked. "Surely she'll recognize me... well, I'll leave you two to it." Away he staggered.

"I'm also worried that seeing her will make you too dumbfounded to speak," Zhao Lei said as he left.

"That's right," Guan Shanping replied without turning around.

"So, what did you think—about him? Zhao Lei asked Zhou Jin. "Incredible, right?"

"Not really." Zhou Jin shook her head. "I thought he was quite pedantic."

"Well, that just means that he left a very deep impression on you."

Zhou Jin laughed. "OK, stupid," Zhou Jin said. She noticed Zhao Lei's gaze. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Zhao Lei smiled and looked away: "You don't see this kind of thing often."

"5:30, 1 Road Station, meet you there. I'm coming right now." I hung up, locked the desk drawer, picked up my briefcase and left the office.

Outside, the sunset was dazzling, the traffic was surging, and the crowd was bustling. I walked quickly along the road opposite to the trolley station. "Hey?" A woman on the side of the road threw a greeting my way.

Looking left and right for passing vehicles, I took off through the gap between cars to sprint to the opposite sidewalk, then resumed my original pace. The woman came up to me, and we began to walk side by side.

"How did I manage to run into you?" I said as I walked. "There's millions of people in this city. It's pretty lucky, isn't it?"

"Yes, lucky. As I was passing through just now, I thought I might run into you. And then I really did."

I stopped walking and turned to her. "It's just coincidental."

"Too coincidental," Zhao Lei laughed.

In the central reservation between the fast lane and the slow lane stood several bus route signs. Articulated buses of identical make (but on different routes) streamed down the road one after the other. Crowds swarmed forward like a school of fish, sometimes gathering into clumps and other times scattering far apart. Zhou Jin stood at the station platform and

raised her head to look at every bus that sped by. When a bus arrived and its three doors opened, the flood of people nearly knocked her over. After it drove off, she was left alone to watch it fade into the distance. The unobstructed light of the setting sun scorched the station platform, and the faces of those waiting for the bus soured one by one. Zhou Jin felt a bit impatient, and she didn't want to get cooked, so she crossed the slow lane to a row of shops under the shade of trees. One of the shops was a food store with a cold drinks window, its buzzing white freezer shelved with all sorts of alluring beverages. She bought a yoghurt drink, the frost still clinging to the bottle as she stood there and slowly drank through a straw. She watched as each bus released its passengers onto the platform.

Then she saw the tall, thin, pale-faced man she had met at lunch exiting the middle door of a bus. After getting off, he stayed at the station, raising his chin to look towards the direction of incoming buses as he waited. Buses came by one after another, but the man that Zhou Jin was waiting for still hadn't come, and that man on the platform still hadn't left. He turned his head to look around. Zhou Jin quickly looked away, returning the empty bottle back into the freezer and walking into the shade of the trees to continue waiting. A tide of bicycles continuously rode in front of her, with both lines of cars in the fast and slow lanes racing side by side. From afar, one could see that the two lines of cars and the tide of bicycles were reflected onto the other side of the road, moving in the opposite direction.

She saw the man in the crowd turn to look at her again, but this time she didn't shy away. Their eyes met, and both of their gazes stayed on the other's equally expressionless face for a second or two, then moved away.

The man then got off the platform. After dodging and weaving through the chaotic and compact stream of bicycles, he got on the sidewalk and went to the cold drink window where she had just bought yogurt to buy some cold food. As he walked, he twisted sideways to take out the money in his trouser pocket with one hand.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him walk into the shade a few people away with a torn box of ice cream bars. She then could hear him chomping at the hard-frozen ice cream, his chewing muscles contracting to smash and melt the ice-cold, snow-white milk crystals between his hard teeth and hot tongue.

...She moved a few steps to the side. Another bus pulled in and stood between them, and the people around them ran to the platform and threw themselves into the dazzling sunlight.

At this moment, there was no one else around the two of them.

She couldn't help but glance at him. He swallowed the cold ice cream with all his strength, and then looked sideways at her. Not being able to turn a blind eye anymore, they both had smiles on their faces when they recognized each other.

"Are you waiting for someone?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I'm waiting too." He leaned towards her a few steps and handed over the box, still containing several ice cream bars. "Come on, I'll eat two sticks. I can't finish it anymore, and the ice cream is about to melt."

"I don't...I just ate."

"Don't be polite, it's not anything valuable."

She reached out and put her hand in the cardboard box, but hesitated as she was about to take one.

"Take two, take two," he said. He took out two ice creams and placed them in her hands. He also opened the wrapper, took it off and folded it around the stick, hissing and inhaling: "It's so cold, my teeth are going to fall out."

"Why did you buy so much?"

"The more the merrier. I was originally saving it for the girl I was waiting for, but since she didn't come, I guess it's just for you."

"Don't throw away the wrapper. There's a public health inspector," she said as she touched his hand.

He looked back and saw an old man wearing a red armband beside them, staring at the ice cream wrapper in his hand and waiting. They looked at each other and smiled. He said loudly to the old man, "Uncle, don't worry about it. I won't throw the wrapper on the ground." Then he took her wrapper and stuffed it in the cardboard box, striding over to a garbage bin not too far away. He crumpled up the box and stuffed it into the trash hole, then came back with bare ice cream in each hand. "The person you were waiting for hasn't come yet?" he asked her.

Zhou Jin looked around sadly. "Maybe something happened."

"Maybe he won't come."

"He will come, I know he'll come. We said 'see you soon.'"

"That's what they all say. Everyone says so and makes a promise, but in the end, isn't it true that the one you're counting on never shows up?"

"Did you also say 'see you soon' to this girl of yours?"

"Yes," Guan Shanping said with a smile. "Such a cliché'd phrase doesn't have much binding force to it, does it?"

"He must have run into something. He's never missed a meeting in the past."

It was dusk, and the setting sun shrank its flames into a scarlet circle, then fell straight down. The sky was still bright, the breeze was blowing, and it was a little cool. The traffic on the street was thin, but there were more idlers. The crossroads ahead were getting more and more lively: small businessowners and hawkers were leaving the city, and colorful clothing stalls were densely clustered around the intersection. "I am estimating that none of the people we are waiting for will come, at least not today."

Zhou Jin said nothing, feeling disappointed.

"Obviously this is the first time you've been hung out to dry." Guan Shanping comforted Zhou Jin. "It's okay. Just hang out a few more times, and you'll get used to it."

She rolled his eyes at him. "Really." Guan Shanping said confidently, "Look at me. There are people waiting for other people at every intersection in this city every day. I have never waited, and I can't get enough of it. Make me wait, and that settles it."

"Never waited? I don't believe it," Zhou Jin smiled.

"I've never waited, really! The people who came were people I didn't want to see."

"You don't know who you're waiting for?"

"Of course I know. If it wasn't her, I would know it in an instant."

"I've caught you!" With a shout, the old man in the red headband jumped out from behind the tree and pointed at the ground smugly. "Pick it up," he said to Guan Shanping. "Don't talk nonsense."

At some point, two ice-cream sticks had appeared on the ground. Guan Shanping's ice-cream was almost uneaten, so you could barely see half of the stick. Looking at Zhou Jin again, it was obvious that she accidentally dropped the ice-cream stick under her feet after eating it.

"If we're caught, we're caught. No need to get so excited." Before Zhou Jin could move, Guan Shanping quickly bent over to pick up the ice cream, and took out some money for the old man. He said out loud: "Is this the highlight of your life, pilfering pocket change from passers-by?"

"What are you joking about? I'm in charge here! Right?" The old man was stern.

"Yes, yes, you have authority, I am wrong, you are right."

"Let's go, let's go." Zhou Jin pulled Guan Shanping, "Don't talk with him after you pay."

"No, look. I'm just wondering, why are people like this? Trying to make sense of it is like catching a thief with a thunderbolt. If this is such a big deal to him, then I don't want to live anymore."

"What are you talking about? Give it to me. Come back!" The old man shouted after him.

"I'm not coming back, you have the ability to chase me!" Guan Shanping was dragged and pulled away by Zhou Jin, watching the old man shrink into the distance behind them.

"Why are you so angry?" Zhou Jin held Guan Shanping tightly, not letting him go. "If you can't stand getting annoyed, how are you still alive?"

Guan Shanping smiled. Zhou Jin scolded him: "You're only bringing trouble upon yourself, yet I have to be the one to console you."

"It's just because he's an old man, isn't it? I wouldn't dare say anything to someone in an official uniform." The two turned into a secluded place. After entering a tree-lined sloping street, their pace slowed down.

"Where is this? Why don't I recognize it?" Guan Shanping looked around at the dark and quiet courtyards. A long fence stretched endlessly along the street, surrounding all the doors, windows and lights, making the whole street appear empty, but not desolate thanks to the lush street greenery.

"I've never been here before either," Zhou Jin said. "I didn't expect this kind of road in the city to be so close to the main street. Where does it go?" she asked.

"I don't know. Who cares? Where were you planning to go?" he asked.

"I haven't decided. I just want to go somewhere—what about you?"

"I'm not sure either. I just thought about it now."

"Then let's go down and see where this road leads." Zhou Jin said. "Who were you waiting for?"

"My one."

"Really?" Zhou Jin looked down and counted her toes as she spoke. "I know a lot of people never find the right one."

"I know." Zhou Jin looked up at Guan Shanping as he spoke, then lowered her head again. "Of course there are some discrepancies, but I won't give up."

"Aren't you afraid it'll take too long?"

"No."

"And what if it happens? She appears suddenly, what will you do?"

"I don't know. I think I'm out of luck by now."

Zhou Jin smiled and looked up at Guan Shanping. "I'm not as romantic as you. I heard..." She trailed off.

"I know what you heard and who said it. Although I am ready to die, I will not," Guan Shanping said with mock sorrow.

"Do you really believe there is a 'one'? Does it really exist?" Zhou Jin asked curiously.

"Absolutely. I believe that the problem is just chance."

"I heard that you go everywhere for team fundraising."

"Yes. We exhaust our energy and wisdom, biding our time, moving when everyone else is standing still."

"How come?" Zhou Jin smiled. "The poorer the situation, the stronger the will, right?"

"You might as well call it a pursuit." Guan Shanping said proudly, "a very persistent pursuit."

"Something to amuse yourself, right?"

"If you say that, I don't want you anymore." Guan Shanping said solemnly to Zhou Jin. "I always turn noble feelings into vulgarities."

"No, no." Zhou Jin said with a smile, "Just kidding."

"You're obstructing me from letting everything out with you."

"Please don't, I'd rather you not."

"Just want to listen?"

"Sure," Zhou Jin smiled.

The sky was dark, and the trees were heavily shadowed. They walked over a small stone bridge. The river ditch beneath it was almost dry. The lush green grass nearly surrounded the river, and the dark green and foamy water was thickened into a slurry. If you listened carefully, you could hear the sound of rippling waves.

"It's not that there will be so much love in my life, that is. I only started really pursuing it in the last two years."

"Then what were you doing before?"

"Just playing... You mean many years ago? When I just entered life?"

"When you learned to think, I mean."

"At that time, as soon as I could think, I had a very strong desire to change my blank slate quickly."

"What happened later?"

"My grandfather died."

"What do you mean?"

"He left a house behind."

"What's wrong with that? Who doesn't leave a house behind after death? There's not many left."

"It's a place, facing the street."

"So what?"

"So I opened a restaurant, specializing in specialty meals."

"Have you made a fortune?"

"I went bankrupt. I used bad guys, and the people around me called my special meal 'Super Feet-Mud-Snot-Shit-Squirt-Balls-Phlegm and Artichoke Noodles.' I tried all sorts of things, like delivering baskets to your front door and so on, but my fortunes never improved."

"And then?"

"Later, I felt that I needed to understand things better, so I changed my pursuit to a spiritual pursuit. I will never give up until I reach the ends of the earth."

"Your life really is a life full of pursuits."

"That's right. Now I've become one of the three types of people Chairman Mao said: a noble person; a person who is free from vulgar tastes; and a person who is good for the people. Sounds so boring, doesn't it?"

"It's very touching to hear that, really. I'm so sorry for you. No good deed goes unpunished, after all."

"Do you sympathize with me?"

"No, that's too difficult for me to do. A person who is so angry that he's almost lost his conscience but still pursues even more difficult experiences and keeps moving forward. What kind of a drive is that?"

"Are you trying to make fun of me? I'm too fragile."

Zhou Jin giggled. All of a sudden, the street lamps were shining brightly, outlining the shape of the street, and they were bathed in misty light. A teenager shouted in the dark, "Hey! Holding hands isn't allowed on the street."

Zhou Jin suddenly extended her hand and blushed. Guan Shanping was also embarrassed.

Even after Zhou Jin returned home, she still had a smile on her face. She gently took out the key to open the door, crept in, and glanced at the bedroom door.

I was leaning on the bed, reading the newspaper with the lamp on, and looked up when I heard the sound of her entering. "You're back."

"You haven't slept yet?" She walked in with a smile on her face.

"I was waiting for you." I turned the newspaper over. Continued reading. "Why would I dare sleep if you haven't come back yet?"

"Why didn't you come today? I waited for a long time, standing alone at the station like an idiot, and people looked at me."

"Look, as soon as I left our department, I ran into this person who just kept pestering me to talk endlessly, and I just couldn't walk away."

"Who was it?"

"Who was it? Zhao Lei, your good friend. I consider myself an outsider, and I don't care about who I'm with, so she thought she could come up to me to complain with tears in her eyes. The snot and tears made everyone on the street stare, as if something had happened between me and her. Of course I had to comfort her, so I'm very tired now."

"People trust you." Zhou Jin said with a laugh, "She used to tell me that she liked you very much."

"Do I need her to like me? She'd better not like me. I'm not precious enough to be liked by a panda."

"You're going to make her sad to hear what you said."

"Then let her die. Anyway, if she doesn't die from her own heart, she has to die in someone else's place. I can also see that her heart will be hurt sooner or later. If others don't hurt her, she'll hurt herself."

"You're too damaged. I'll tell her about it later."

"Go ahead. Say what I said. It's best for someone like her to die as soon as possible! It's boring for her to live, and others are anxious to see it."

"I didn't. I told her that after you listened to her recounting her troubles, you went home and heaved a worried sigh. You must really feel sorry for her."

"Please forgive me."

We both laughed together.

"Where did you go after you stopped waiting for me?"

"I didn't go anywhere... I also met someone and just stood there chatting for a bit."

"I went later, at eight o'clock, and I didn't see you."

"Well, later, we went to a cold drink shop to sit and chat. We couldn't stand on the street the whole time, you know." Zhou Jin smiled calmly.

"Who is it? Do I know them?"

"No. It turned out that a colleague from our department was transferred out."

I looked at her and smiled: "A man?"

"Yes, that's right." Zhou Jin looked at me and smiled right back. "It was a man."

"I guessed it was. If it was a woman, you wouldn't have been talking for so long."

"Jealous?"

"I'm not jealous." I put down the newspaper with a smile and sat down on the bed.

"You know who looks like you? Our fellow countryman Yan Xishan."

"I'm not jealous. My brain is so sour that I can dip dumplings into it."

Zhou Jin sat down beside me. "We didn't do anything, we just chatted together."

"Don't be like that. No one asked what you were doing."

"Spare me!" Zhou Jin waved her hands and stood up. "The more you talk, the more worked up you get."

"Is this not pleasing to the eye?"

"Don't go on, just say two sentences more and be done with it." Zhou Jin threw the curtain and walked out of the bedroom. After going out, she came back and asked, "Have you eaten yet?"

"Yes," I said quietly. "How about you? Have you eaten?"

"No."

"The man didn't invite you to dinner after chatting all night? He must not be very interested in you."

Zhou Jin turned around and left.

"I also ate noodles. There's still some broth left in the pot, so you can make some yourself," I called loudly into the other room. Again I picked up the newspaper and read through it mindlessly.

Zhou Jin jingled the pots and pans in the kitchen. After a while, she came in with a bowl of noodles piled high and sat across from me, slurping as she ate.

I put down the newspaper and glanced at her.

She gave me a blank look while eating, rolling the noodles into thick bundles with her chopsticks and stuffing them into her mouth.

I held the newspaper back up and smiled to myself.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" she asked with noodles in her mouth.

"Going to work."

"Don't be stupid. I meant what you're doing after you get off work."

"Wei Dadong asked me to play mahjong at his place."

"Not bringing me along?"

"There's only going to be men, what would you be doing?"

"How come they're all men? It's not that I don't know them."

"We agreed that you're not allowed to bring your daughter-in-law."

"If you don't take me, I'll go out and have fun by myself," Zhou Jin said angrily. After eating the noodles, she left the tableware and chopsticks on the table.

"Wash it." I said, pointing to the tableware.

"What's the hurry? Can't I do it tomorrow? I'll do it tomorrow. If you can't stand it, you can do it for me."

"—Where are you going to have fun tomorrow?"

"You can't tell me where to go." Zhou Jin sat on the dressing stool in front of the mirror, removed her hairpin and loosened her hair. "I'm find someone to shack up with."

"So you are skilled enough."

"Then why were you told not to take me?"

"I said we could make three chapters of the law! You go shack up with someone, but you're not allowed to spend your family's money to shack up when you can get the same thing at home..."

"You're rotten!" Zhou Jin turned around abruptly and stood up, bringing up her hand and hitting me.

"I'll go with you tomorrow, they're not going to let me come at this rate," I relented.

"Then go play cards, I'll go shack up with someone."

The ping-pong ball bounced to and fro on the table. "Skunk it, skunk it." I chanted while chopping the ball.

"You returned my left spin, and my right spin—I'll drive it then!"

I pulled sideways and hit a big smash shot, and the ball bounced off the other side of the table and flew to the ground. The onlookers burst into laughter.

"You really aren't my match," I said to Guan Shanping, who was standing on the other side of the table. "Hurry up now, take advantage of the close score."

"What are you bragging about? Just serve." Guan Shanping threw the ball over to my side and smiled.

"I am pretty reckless, so I won't be able to let you save face here."

"If you want to say that, I won't let you. Originally, I wanted to help you establish some prestige in front of the masses."

"A pair of stinky balls will blow right past you." The female colleagues by the table laughed.

"Meeting, meeting, put your paddles down," the head of our work unit yelled at us. He walked into the conference room, holding a stack of documents.

We put down our paddles and scattered, scrambling to find a seat among the rows of benches. Colleagues from the unit came in one after another. They were holding books and wearing wool clothes, walking in groups of three to five, talking and laughing. Guan Shanping tried to grab a book from the hand of a female colleague to read, but was rebuffed. "Why are you so stingy? What are you afraid of?" Guan Shanping said.

"I won't show it to you," the female colleague said unhappily, "I don't want to."

"Quiet, quiet, the meeting is starting." The man sat down across from everyone, behind a table covered with white cloth. He was mostly thin, yet had a protruding belly. He said solemnly, "Today, we'll study a few documents. Regarding the situation. Then we'll read a few notices. Finally, we'll talk about some problems that happened in our unit—everyone sit forward, don't crowd in the back."

The boss read the document word by word from the top. Everyone in the crowd was chatting, as if starting their own meeting. I sat beside my two female colleagues and leaned forward on the back of the chair, joking with them in a low voice. "Move somewhere else, move somewhere else."

Guan Shanping bent his knees, folding up and pulling his legs to squeeze along the row of chairs. "Go, there's no place for you here," The girl beside me said to him. "What's the problem?" Guan Shanping implored, smirking and squeezing between us to sit down.

I closed my eyes and fell asleep. He poked me: "Hey, why hasn't the person I told you about not come?"

"It seems that you're just out of luck." I kept my eyes closed and rested.

"Why do you think I'm so unlucky? About who and who won't come?"

I kept my eyes closed and didn't say a word. Then, I put my head on my arm and turned my face to look at him: "You are indeed helpless."

"However, I met a girl yesterday." Guan Shanping said proudly.

"And I'm Chairman Mao. Your delusions are getting old."

"Really, I wouldn't lie to you. I was there waiting for someone, and she was waiting there too. We both decided not to wait, and we caught up with each other later."

"She must be a close relative of Zhu Bajie."

"That's okay, she's pretty," Guan Shanping said excitedly. "I'm not tricking you. I chatted with her for a long time, it was very easy."

"What did you say?"

"I just followed the routines you taught me, made some pointless chatter, and I think it was pretty effective."

"Is she your type?"

"I like her, but she's not perfectly my type."

"That's fine. For ordinary people, you shouldn't make such high demands."

"You don't think I can really hope to meet a perfect girl?"

"There is no hope, no one has hope, there is no perfect person! The pin-ups on calendars are beautiful, right? That's the part that's been artificially constructed, just to show you the part you can take out. Don't you get it? Who knows what kind of diseases she has? Even if you happen to run into a perfect match, do you like to eat dip-boil mutton? You'll get sick of it if you keep eating it day after day."

"You think I shouldn't let this opportunity slip?"

"Go for it." The surrounding people burst into laughter, with our conversation amusing them for some reason. I raised my head and continued to talk to Guan Shanping.

"You love money, don't you? Loving money and having money are two different things. You have to have your money love you, which is always consensual. Frankly speaking, the perfect girl is already standing right in front of you. You just look at it and your greed takes over."

"Yes, yes, I understand the truth."

"It's enough to be a good bastard. It's just a disguise."

"That's right, any nice house would be uncomfortable to live in without decorating it. Then I won't hesitate."

"Hesitate no longer. Your problem is not who to look for, but whether someone will look for you."

"However, this girl seems to have a husband."

I coughed. "Don't worry about that!" I raised my head to look around, then said in a low voice, "Don't worry about that. There's no order to these things. Whoever is active and takes the initiative will get on first. Squeeze together on the bus? Summon the courage, strike while the iron is hot and act on every opening. Don't you think she's hoping the situation goes a certain way? That means her and her man's eternal covenant isn't so eternal. This kind of opportunity comes once in a lifetime."

"What about the specific steps?"

"The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy retreats, we pursue; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack."

A female colleague sitting in the front row smiled and turned her head to look at me: "What're you at sixes and sevens about?"

"There aren't my words, it was written like this in 'The Pickup Artist's Bible.'" I continued to tell Guan Shanping, "You also must be as cunning as a fox and as brave as a lion. When you're going through hell, you keep going. Riches in youth are not truly riches, as riches adulthood cannot be easily lost. He who laughs last laughs best."

"You're only giving me principles." Guan Shanping complained, "What I need is something that works immediately, such as the key to open that lock."

"I can't go any further." I said, "Love is a battlefield, and tactics are universal. The key is whether you use your troops like a god."

"I saw you in the street last night. "

In the business hall of the bank, Zhao Lei and Zhou Jin sat opposite each other, chatting while writing and passing various bills. The hall was crowded and noisy.

"Where?" Zhou Jin asked.

"Don't worry about where you were, what matters is who you were with... a man?"

"No." Zhou Jin refused to admit it.

"Still not admitting it I see." Zhao Lei stared at Zhou Jin with a smile. "You two were fast enough, so it's unknown to all."

"What are you talking about? I don't understand you."

"Don't pretend to be stupid. How is he? He's interesting, isn't he?"

"I don't know, you must have seen the wrong person."

"Why are you hiding from me? I have eyes everywhere."

"Really, Zhou Jin?" Another female colleague at the same table who was listening in asked. "How romantic."

"No, look," Zhou Jin's smile wavered. "Don't listen to Zhao Lei's nonsense."

"Am I talking nonsense?" Zhao Lei smiled. "I guess I am talking nonsense."

"Next." Zhou Jin put her hand on the counter, took a deposit slip and glanced at it. Her face immediately turned red, and she clenched the deposit slip into a ball.

She looked up at the counter. Guan Shanping was standing outside with a smile.

"Why are you here?" she said, her face flushed. "Go to the door and I'll be right out."

When she looked back, her colleagues pursed their lips and smiled at her.

"What were you talking about this time?" Zhao Lei leaned over and whispered. "Don't tell us who."

Zhou Jin tried to calm her: "Actually, there really is nothing going on, I'm just going to chat with him." Zhou Jin got up, went out the counter exit, and went to look for Guan Shanping outside the door. Through the wide glass window, Guan Shanping could be seen smiling. Zhou Jin shook her head over and over again.

The phone on the table rang, Zhao Lei lazily picked up the microphone with two fingers, put it to her ear, and said in a long drawl, "Hey—"

"Please find Zhou Jin," I said on the other end of the phone.

"Are you Fang Yan?" Zhao Lei sat up abruptly and put the phone close to her ear. "I'm Zhao Lei," she said tenderly.

"Zhou Jin isn't there?"

Zhao Lei glanced at the door at Zhou Jin, who still talking with Guan Shanping. "She left work early."

"Oh..."

"Do you need something?"

"I'm good." I was about to hang up.

"Not planning to go out and have some fun?"

"No," I said. "I'm going home to sleep."

I hung up the phone. Zhao Lei slowly put the phone back down, then turned and stared at Zhou Jin outside the window for a long time. The electric bell rang out in the bank lobby. The staff at the counter immediately got busy. They quickly finished the work at hand, stood up to clean up the table and prepared to get off work. The customers outside the counter also finished queuing and dispersed.

Zhao Lei was dressed neatly and carried a small bag. She walked out through the bank door in high heels. "Still not done?" she said to the two of them. "We're off work now."

"Really?" Zhou Jin hurriedly rushed back to the bank lobby.

"So you found her after a long time." Zhao Lei said to Guan Shanping, "She has a husband."

"I'm looking for her for something else," Guan Shanping said.

"What else but that?" Zhao Lei smiled. Then she left.

Zhou Jin hurried out with a small bag on her shoulders, and Guan Shanping greeted her.

"I really can't, I have to go home." Zhou Jin said, "My husband is waiting for me at home."

"Then another day, how about tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow either. Tomorrow we'll do the billing and have to work overtime."

"You don't want to go out with me?"

"No, I really don't have time."

"Forget I asked then."

"I'm really sorry, don't get angry."

"I'm not angry." Guan Shanping turned around and walked away. After a few steps, he turned around and said, "If you don't go, the ticket will be invalidated, and it won't be given to anyone else."

"I can't." Zhou Jin said, her voice filled with regret.

Guan Shanping waved his hand and left without looking back.

Zhou Jin stood in the lobby and looked out the window. Despite grabbing the handrail, her body shook gently as cars went by. Outside the window was the flow of traffic and crowds. Couples and lovers walked hand in hand under the shade of the trees on the sidewalk, ran across the road, gave each other quick looks and laughed...

When she returned home, there was no one in each room of the apartment. She took off her shoes, dropped her bag on the sofa, changed into pajamas and walked around the house in slippers.

In the kitchen, she sliced meat and vegetables, piling them up on plates in colorful piles. The water in the pot boiled, and her stomach rumbled as she lifted the lid of the pot to let steam escape.

The electric ventilation fan was spinning rapidly, humming.

The oil in the wok ladle was hot, and there was a cloud of bluish smoke. Suddenly, it burst into flames, and the wok caught fire. She quickly put down the wok ladle and turned off the heat.

She put a bag of vermicelli into the pot, then used chopsticks to stir the snow-white slender noodles that quickly softened, warped and foamed.

The resulting plate of meat and vegetables looked delicious, even as the color brought out by the cooking was fading. She sat down in front of the TV with a bowl of noodles, eating and watching the news: meetings, floods, and farm growth.

She ate and ate, but then suddenly stopped moving. She listened carefully, and did not continue eating until the footsteps in the corridor passed.

At night, when I came home, I saw that the TV was still on, the screen was filled with static, and Zhou Jin was asleep on the sofa.

I gently went over to turn off the TV. Just as I was about to leave, she rolled over and sat up on the sofa, asking sleepily, "What time is it?"

"The next day," I said. She stood up in an instant, marched into the bedroom, fell onto the bed, pulled the towel quilt over her body, turned around and closed her eyes to sleep.

"Are you mad?" I followed her into the bedroom.

She was silent. I went to the bathroom to wash and rinse up, covering myself in water. I took a towel and went back to the bedroom. I wiped my body and said with a smile: "Weren't you going to look for someone to shack up with? Why didn't you go?"

"Just wait and see." she said in a muffled voice.

"Don't do this," I got in bed and laid next to her. "Don't ignore people."

"Don't touch me!" She twisted her body back hard. "I'm going to bed."

I got out of bed and threw the towel aside. "I stayed up so late to put you at ease."

"Don't use an excuse like that!" She rolled over and sat up in rage. "What's wrong with me, what's wrong? Is it because I came back late a day, so you feel the need to go off on your own? If that's how it is, I'll come back every day."

"What excuse did I use? What's wrong with me?" I defended myself. "Then I won't come back one day late again."

"Did you come back one day late? When have you ever come back on time?"

"When I don't have anything else to do, just play mahjong with a group of friends, or just win more and lose less."

"Who knows why you go there every day."

"You tell me why I go, since you're so tired of it."

"I don't know why you went, you know why you went."

"Why are you being unreasonable? Okay, I won't talk about it. You were the one that asked why did I go, why did I go? Who cares?"

"You're getting madder and madder now."

"What are you talking about? I'm mad? How could you ever make me mad, huh? You're the mad one. If you say kill me, then kill me. I'm a big man and I have to look at your face every day."

"If you don't want to be with me, or bother with me, you can go."

"So that's how it is. Do you girls all have this kind of character?"

"It's nothing new. If you want something fresh, you can find someone else."

"If you keep going on like this, I'm going to get really annoyed."

"If you're annoyed, then be annoyed. And if you're annoyed, then we'll get a divorce." Zhou Jin covered her head and fell back on the bed. "Who are you threatening? Who is afraid of you?"

"Yes, no one is afraid of anyone in the world now. If you really want to leave, don't just say it—you have to be ambitious, don't cry so hard just to call me Chen Shimei."

Then Zhou Jin really cried, her body twitching beneath the towel quilt.

I turned on the lamp and laid down on the bed with a newspaper and looked at her.

"Why are you crying? Can't you show some restraint?"

Zhou Jin cried louder. I ignored her, lit a cigarette, and continued to read the newspaper. "Keep your voice down, the neighbors are all asleep."

Zhou Jin got up quickly and went to the bathroom to wipe her tears and snot. After a while, she came back with red eyes. She looked at herself in the mirror, continued to weep, and said to me viciously, "Don't think that I can't be blamed if I don't dare to leave."

"Why don't you dare? You have the backbone of countless Chinese people."

I jumped out of the bed with a jerk but couldn't catch Zhou Jin, who rushed out the door and disappeared like a whirlwind. "You come back!" I shouted at the stairs. I turned back to the house to change my shoes and put on clothes, and cursed through gritted teeth: "God damn it, that stupid, mindless, insane—if I say run, she runs." I got downstairs and searched everywhere in the garden of the building, behind every tree and in every car, but no one was there. The night wind was very cold, and it made me burst out in a cold sweat after each gust. I followed the road to the main street. There was a melon stall at the intersection. The old man watching the melons was still awake. He sat on a small chair and waved a fan to enjoy the cool air. I asked the uncle if he saw a woman in pajamas, and the uncle said that she was walking along the main road. I ran along the brightly lit and empty street, and when I reached an intersection, I didn't find Zhou Jin, so I turned back. I went back to the front of the building and saw the lights were on in the room, so I rushed up quickly, entered the room and slammed the door, shouting "If you know what's good for you, don't come back."

There was no movement in the bright room. I looked around to see that no one was there, and went back to the bedroom to lie down. I was so angry I only fell asleep after lying down for a long time.

"Zhou Jin!" I shouted loudly.

Zhou Jin, who was walking out of a store with Zhao Lei, was startled and froze in place. I hurried up to her, grabbing her wrist firmly with a smile spread across my face, and said softly, "Follow me home."

"I won't!" Zhou Jin broke free from my hand with an angry expression. "Let go of me, I'm not going home." Zhao Lei looked on with a curious smile on her face.

"If we have something to say to each other, let's go home and talk." I held her tightly, and said in a low voice, "How can you not go home?"

"I won't go home, I won't go back. Isn't this exactly what you want?"

Zhou Jin and I were twisting and turning on the street, attracting some pedestrians to watch.

"Let's stop pulling each other around on the street. We're making people laugh."

"So you're afraid of being embarrassed? I thought you didn't care about anything."

"Don't be shameless." My hands silently strengthened their grip.

"You are shameless, let me go! What are you doing?" Zhou Jin shouted.

"What are you doing?" Two public security officers came over and pointed at my hand. "Let go."

I let go of my hand like it had an electric shock, and Zhou Jin walked away. I hurriedly pulled her back. I said to the angry public security officers: "We're a couple, and couples quarrel."

"Are you a couple?" the officers asked Zhou Jin.

Zhou Jin remained silent. Zhao Lei hurriedly said, "They are a couple, I can testify to that."

"If you're going to quarrel, don't do it on the street."

The crowd of onlookers laughed, and the public security officers walked away.

"Just go back with him," Zhao Lei advised Zhou Jin, "Stop making trouble."

"I have to go to work in the afternoon," Zhou Jin said.

"I'll tell them to give you leave." Zhao Lei smiled and pushed the two of us towards the station.

As soon as I entered the house, I closed the door, pointed at Zhou Jin and shouted, "What's wrong with you? Why are you like this? I was almost branded as a hooligan back there."

Zhou Jin didn't say a word. She just sat down on the sofa with a smug expression, and reached out to turn on the TV. I snapped it off as soon as an image appeared on the screen.

"You're quite proud of yourself, huh? You think it really means that much? Not only do I want to be caught as a hooligan, you'd also be the family of a hooligan." Zhou Jin didn't look at me, but instead crossed her legs, poured herself a glass of water and drank leisurely.

"Pour me a glass of water, I'm thirsty too." I ordered and sat down beside her. Seeing that she didn't respond, I grabbed her cup to drink.

"Are you scared?" she said, looking at me.

I almost choked on the water. I swallowed a mouthful and said, "What am I scared of? You thought... I was worried about you. I ran out alone at night. Don't you know there are bad people on the streets during the day?"

"You're not expecting me to get caught by bad people, are you? You're so quiet... you'll have to find me again."

"Don't be like this, don't be like this. Zhou Jin, am I that kind of person?"

"What kind of person are you, really?"

"You really pissed me off. Is just pissing me off last night not enough for you?"

"Are you angry? I'm still angry."

"Yeah, I was so angry and worried, I felt that my heart was about to break."

"Okay, did you still fall asleep?"

"Did I sleep? That's why I was confused and angry. Did you come back last night?"

Zhou Jin wiped away tears: "You don't care about me at all, and you don't care about what happens to me. Sleep all you want, you deserve it."

"Okay, okay." I said, trying to reconcile things, "Let's stop making a fuss. We can't live our lives like this."

"You don't want to live a good life at all."

"How are you worthy of saying that? Why can't I live a good life? I'm about to give you grandsons. If I grow up so big, who am I to be soft with someone? I don't even have any self-respect with you, what do you want from me? People are supposed to be reasonable, right? Did I hire you last night or what?"

"Yes, you didn't hire me, you're always reasonable, and I'm always winding you up."

"Okay, then I'm being unreasonable, I'm wrong, and it's all my fault."

"What do you mean by being unreasonable?"

"Okay, I'm really unreasonable, I'm a bastard, I shouldn't make you angry."

"If you had done this earlier, you would've be fine."

"I never dared to do anything else."

"Look at you, you won't admit your mistake again."

"Okay, okay, okay, don't say anything. In the end I'm always wrong, and in the end I'm always screwing up."

"You're incorrigible. Don't try to coax me just after you watched me cry. In fact, did you know that most of the time when I seem fine, I really want to get angry, but I just don't want to make a fuss? You think you can just comfort me—but you're not comforting!"

"Then let's make a fuss. Next time you have a temper, just shout at me. I'll just be the punching bag... okay, I didn't say that, I didn't say that. I should be honored to be a punching bag, others shouldn't want to be one."

Zhou Jin stared for a bit, then gave a tearful smile. "What are we doing?"

I smiled too, and then said earnestly, "What do you mean? We're such a perfect couple, a match made in heaven, a brilliant scholar and a beautiful woman, one farms and the other weaves... how many people envy us? We really should congratulate ourselves."

"We're not good at all." Zhou Jin said firmly.

"Why not?" I hurriedly said. "You mustn't say that, I think we're great. It couldn't be better, even if I was the emperor, I would choose you as my lover—the head of the palace concubines."

"Don't just turn around and insult someone." Zhou Jin said. "What about the good couples? Young couples go out every day, go to the park, watch performances and eat out. What about us? When we got married, you never took me out to restaurants, and we haven't seen a single movie."

"I say to you, comrade, why do you have such bourgeois ideas? Is it the true nature of our petty citizens to talk about food and clothing?"

"Yes, what about food and clothing? People are not old yet. So you're saying the citizens can't enjoy it?"

"Aren't all people enjoying a bit of vulgar fun in the intimacy of the darkness of the bedroom after eating?"

"What you're saying is so disgusting, it's just some people. Where did this talk of pairs pop up from?"

"Aren't they all unmarried? Do you compare with them?"

Zhou Jin stared at me for a long time without saying a word, twisted her face, sighed and said, "Getting married is pretty boring."

I gave a long yawn and explained to her with wide eyes: "I'm tired, I didn't sleep well last night."

"Then go to sleep." Zhou Jin said coldly.

"Are you still angry? I won't sleep if you're angry."

"I'm not angry anymore, go to sleep." Zhou Jin said impatiently.

I put my hand over hers and said with a smile on my face, "Let's sleep together."

"Okay," Zhou Jin said, pulling her hand away, "You can just go to sleep if you want, you don't have to do this."

I slept for a whole afternoon. I slept to death, fighting and running away in my dreams. It was not until dusk that I woke up sweating and exhausted, and staggered out of the bedroom in a daze. Zhou Jin was sitting in the dark room, watching TV with a smile. There was a cartoon on, Hao Mao Mimi. Four little mice lined up to walk past a sleeping cat, shouting in unison: "Mice are afraid of cats, rumor has it. But this kitten, what's so scary about it? My fellow mice, have courage and overthrow the cat. Prejudice through the ages must be overthrown!" Both the cat and the mice were childish and naïve, so it made me smile. "Let's go." I said to Zhou Jin, who sat still staring at the TV as I put on my clothes.

"Where to?" she said, looking back at me.

"Let's go to a restaurant." I put on my undershirt. "I'll see it through to the bitter end."

Zhou Jin looked at me with a smile on her face.

"Are you happy now?"

She gave an embarrassed smile, then stood up and ran into the bedroom hurriedly to get dressed. "Let's not go somewhere expensive."

"Of course. I wouldn't go that far."

We chose a mid-range restaurant and swaggered in. Although it was mid-range, it had air conditioners, heated seats and so on, which is pretty good in my book.

"This is about as low-quality as you can get and still qualify as a dinner out." I flipped through the menu and said to Zhou Jin.

"Go ahead and order." Zhou Jin was very excited.

I called the waitress over and ordered some pork dishes.

After I ordered the dishes, the waitress didn't leave and said, "Are these dishes enough for you? Our dishes here are small."

"It'll be enough," I said. "We already ate before we came."

"Do you want another shrimp dish?" The staff member pointed to the menu and said, "We have good shrimp here."

"What do you mean?" I turned around on the chair and said to the waitress, "Is slaughtering the animals not enough to satisfy you?" The waitress picked up the menu and walked away quickly.

I said to Zhou Jin, "As I said before, it would be no good if it falls into the hands of these people."

Zhou Jin smiled dryly. "She was being nice."

"Nice?" I glanced at the row of waiters standing in front of the freezer with their elbows on their hips. "Look at their poses, all of them are like killers."

Zhou Jin smiled and lowered her head to play with the bare tableware.

We got bored while we waited for the dishes. The waiters kept going to each table, but none came to ours. I stopped and asked the waitress who billed us several times, and she answered impatiently, "It's cooking." When she gave this answer again, my patience faded and I roared, "What's the matter? Are you looking down on us? Thinking we're being impatient? How long have we been waiting?"

"Why are you yelling? I'll get it to you right away, OK?"

"Give it to me right away? I haven't eaten yet!" I slapped the table. "I demand a refund!"

All the guests were startled and turned around to look. A middle-aged man who looked like the head waiter rushed over: "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter? I'll tell you what's the matter." I pointed at the waitress and yelled. "You ask her how long we've been waiting. What kind of restaurant is this? I have low blood sugar and I can't wait for everyone else to be served—this restaurant is starving people!" I stood up and shouted.

"Just forget it, just forget it." Zhou Jin exhorted me.

"It's none of your business," I yelled at her. "Don't stop me, I'll take off the sign."

"What's the matter?" the head waiter asked the waitress.

"I said I'll bring him his food right away..."

If it wasn't for Zhou Jin pulling me, I could've put my finger on the waitress' nose: "If I hadn't told you, you wouldn't have given it to me right away. What's going on? Is my money not RMB? All those who arrived later than me have finished eating. Who's going to run to the bank for me?"

"I'll serve you right away." The head waiter persuaded me and asked the waitress, "What kind of food does he want?"

"He said he wanted a refund if he doesn't get to eat."

"Yes, I'm not eating, I'm full with anger already."

"Another tantrum." Zhou Jin pulled me back.

"Don't feel ashamed, we have nothing to be embarrassed about. We come here to eat because they are serving food. We can't buy anger with money." I said to the head waiter, "I told her your restaurant should really be reorganized, it's just outrageous. When you serve dishes, are you just thinking about how we don't want your shrimp? By the way, if you won't deduct her bonus, I won't be paying this service fee."

"We'll make sure to improve our service, please calm down, we can serve you your food right away." The head waiter gave countless apologies, persuaded me to return to my seat, and told the other waiters to serve the dishes quickly.

"Why are you looking at me? Are you not convinced?" I said to the waitress relentlessly. "Do you want to do it or not? If you don't want to do it, say it to me straight. I still don't believe you'll do it."

The head waiter hurriedly pulled the waitress away to stop her from defending herself.

And so the dishes came out quickly, and we lost our appetite.

I sneered and looked at a table of dishes and said to Zhou Jin, "Do you enjoy this?"

Zhou Jin kept silent, lowering her head and eating one bite at a time. She put down her chopsticks after a few bites and said, "Let's go." The waiters standing around shouted, "Your family will have something to eat at night." The waitresses either bowed their heads or turned their faces to the side.

"Oh, the beauty of the moonlight in water intoxicates me, why, O why does my heart tremble, only for you, Ritzfeld in Florence..."

A malnourished Chinese man on the stage was wearing a sackcloth cloak, which covered him entirely except for a pair of dirty and dusty artificial leather sandals, with a layer of skin peeled off his big toe—he covered his heart and poured out his soul.

"How are you liking it?" A young man sitting next to me suddenly turned his head and asked me.

I was momentarily confused and replied, "It's not that good..."

He looked at me solemnly and said, "Even if the 'Gang of Four' came back and asked me while pinching my neck, I wouldn't say I like it either."

After speaking to me, the young man got up and walked away.

I turned to look at Zhou Jin, and she met my eyes: "Let's not suffer through this any longer."

In the evening, I propositioned Zhou Jin, and she obediently complied. Just when I was in high spirits, I realized she was laughing at me.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Don't waste your time," she said flatly.

"Are you disappointed?" In the indoor swimming pool, Zhao Lei and Zhou Jin swam around in circles, sometimes swerving to avoid people swimming backwards or with their face down. Their legs were white and soft in the clear blue water as they spread apart, curled up, and kicked out vigorously. None of them were wearing swimming caps, and their hair was black and dripping wet. They both changed to backstroke after a while, breaking the surface of the water with circular motions.

"No, disappointment is out of the question," Zhou Jin said, "and I have no way of being disappointed anyhow. I figured it out. What happens after marriage, just as it is for everyone else, is that everything will inevitably be dull."

"What changed?"

"Everything has changed, but nothing has changed. It's an inevitable rule. It's probably not a bad thing, but the dullness will last forever. Fang Yan is not a bad husband. In all fairness, maybe he's better than most men."

"Can you honestly say it's what you wanted—I mean the kind of... life you dreamed of before marriage?"

"No," Zhou Jin admitted. "Of course not. I didn't say that, I just said I figured it out."

"You don't think there is such a life?"

"I don't think so."

A man swam past and set off a wave that hit Zhao Lei in the face. She stopped kicking for a bit, came up again, swam around a few times, then returned to swimming side by side with Zhou Jin. She glanced at Zhou Jin and asked, "Do you regret it?"

"No." Zhou Jin smiled bitterly in the water. "I don't think it's possible to find someone any more suitable than Fang Yan. Plus, I'm not a princess."

"What if?"

"What if what?"

"What if there was a sudden appearance of..."

"No," Zhou Jin interrupted Zhao Lei with a smile. "That's the same. At that time, I still felt that Fang Yan was the person in my heart."

"Is it still him now?"

"It should be. He is still himself after all."

"But if you don't think it's him, then it isn't."

"Let's stop talking about this, okay?"

"Why not talk? We were just talking about something interesting. Where did that feeling come from? You were getting along for just a few moments, a few unexpectedly exciting moments. Now that moment is gone. He exists, it's just hard to see him. What's so special about people? What equipment does Fang Yan have? They're mere mortals, just like gods in the eyes of atheists." They touched the edge of the pool, grabbing on and turning around to wipe the water off their faces. "Someone called you several times yesterday." Zhao Lei smiled meaningfully at Zhou Jin. "Don't you want to meet him?"

Zhou Jin shook her head. "Do you just want to wallow in memories?"

Zhao Lei also smiled and shook her head: "You know you won't be able to do this when you're older, right?"

"But we have...To this day, I think my feelings are still by his side." Zhou Jin said earnestly as water was dripping from her locks of hair.

"Don't miss the opportunity. If you want it to be yours, grab it now—this may be your last chance. You have nothing to lose, because you're already as poor as a church mouse. It used to be like that back then, but it's not like that now," Zhao Lei said eagerly. "Don't follow the trend."

In the ballroom, Zhao Lei led a leisurely dance for Zhou Jin's group to follow. She advanced and retreated, with each step on rhythm. "You stepped on my foot."

"I can't dance very well," Zhou Jin said apologetically.

"It seems that I can't teach you anymore. I'll have to go teach someone else."

Two men came over and pulled them away. One took Zhao Lei away, and the other caught Zhou Jin and continued to lead her to dance. "Why don't you want to see me?"

Zhou Jin let her eyes droop as if to fall asleep. Wordlessly, she let him lead her.

"Do you hate me?"

Zhou Jin rolled her eyes, stared at the man and said, "I have a husband."

"So what?" The man led Zhou Jin around another couple who were spinning quickly in each other's arms. The woman's face was full of desire. "So what? You're like a flower saying to the rain, 'I've already been watered.'"

"This is good..."

"What? Speak up."

"I said this can't go on!" Zhou Jin said loudly, staring at the other party with a serious expression and sparkling eyes.

"No, no, that's not what you said just now, try again."

"I'm not allowed to be in contact with you anymore."

"You're saying that the reason for your apprehension is that you're already married, and moral conventions won't allow it?"

"Not quite, but that's a factor."

"The main factor?"

"I'd rather not answer that."

"Do you love your husband?" The music suddenly went crazy. The lights in the ballroom dimmed, and a disco ball and spotlights began to spin around. Laser beams shot out from all directions. The people who were dancing in pairs released each other and started twisting and convulsing.

"Do you love your husband?"

"Yes."

"Does he love you?"

"I think so."

"Did he tell you that?"

"..."

"I can say it to you: I love you!" Guan Shanping twitched his shoulders and twisted his hips like a giant bat, spreading his limbs and shouting loudly.

"Your parents will come back tonight and have dinner here." I laid on the bed with my eyes closed as the electric fan blowed satisfyingly. "When you weren't there, the two of them gave me a huge lecture. They thought we wouldn't be able to live a good life and the house would be in chaos. The money was spent as soon as it was available since the People's Bank wasn't willing to deposit it."

"What do you think?"

"What do I think? It's just currying favor, isn't it?"

Zhou Jin got on the bed and lay beside me. Then, she stretched out her hand to grab mine. "Don't make trouble. It's hot today. Choose a cool day, when it rains."

She stopped her hand and put it on my face. Then I put her hand on my cheek with my hand. After lying like this for a long time, I almost fell asleep. She suddenly asked:

"Do you love me?"

I opened my eyes. She was staring at me, and I closed my eyes again: "What made you ask that?"

"I want you to say it."

"How tasteless. We are old and married. Why would we need that kind of tasteless scene?"

"You didn't say anything after we got married."

"Why would I need to say that? We Chinese people are sincere in our hearts. We have no use for flattery." Zhou Jin was talking, so I turned around and tucked myself in:

"Tomorrow is Sunday. Wei Dadong invited us to play cards. You can come if you want."

It rained heavily at night, and it was still raining in the morning. I watched the rain outside from the window, and went to the bed to hurry up Zhou Jin, who was still lying on the bed. "Get up, we should go."

"Do you still go when it's raining?"

"Yes, rain or shine. Playing cards on a rainy day really hits the spot."

She sat up and stared at me with no expression on her face.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"I'm not going," she said. "I don't want to go."

"Let's go out and have fun, what's the point in staying home?" I went over to pull her.

She withdrew her hand and said calmly, "Today we're selling bonds, so I'll have to work overtime."

"Why do you always work overtime at your bank? Normal hours are boring enough—so I'll go by myself then?"

"Go," she said, "have fun."

I patted her face and left the house with a smile.

When it rained, the park felt very lonely. The pavilions were shrouded in mist and rain. There was a rustling sound coming from the trees above the slope, and a chirping sound from the lake below. The blue and white cruise ships divided the bay in two. A flower umbrella travelled along the road from the mountains. Under the umbrella, four legs were moving. Two of them were wearing long trousers, and the others were under a skirt revealing two smooth and straight legs.

"Do you know why I pester you so much? I've never been like this. Stay if you concur, and leave if you don't. I have no intention of forcing anyone, but with you, it's just..."

"...You said that."

"At first, I didn't think there was anything special. But then I got home, laid down and thought about it. I tried to deny it countless times, but finally I had to admit to myself: something did happen."

"..."

"For me, everything is clear now. I leave the rest to you. What do you want?"

"I don't know." The umbrella stopped. Zhou Jin glanced at Guan Shanping and lowered her eyes. "I really don't know."

The umbrella resumed moving. "We both have this fear, a fear of being deceived by some kind of illusion, so we have to see if this feeling really is correct."

"..."

"You don't hate me, right?"

She lowered her head and nodded.

"Are you willing to listen to me?"

She nodded.

"Do you want to see me but you're afraid to see me?"

"Yes."

"Do you miss me—when you're all alone?"

"..."

"Did you?"

"...yes."

"Was there any guilt?"

"Yes."

"You even felt guilty over me."

"Don't say it."

"I guess we don't have to suspect it anymore, huh?"

"So now what?"

"Now what? Follow your feelings, of course."

"Have you thought about the consequences? Are you fully prepared? Do you have the courage—and I don't mean now."

"Listen, Zhou Jin, we're now becoming more and more like two conspirators, as if we're planning some profitable business. If you choose to come to a scenic spot, such as this steep and beautiful mountain, how could you not have a comprehensive understanding of the road's construction, whether or not the water quality or the climate is dangerous, and whether there are wild beasts or bandits before you design a route into the mountain?"

"Standing in this mountain, it's like we're standing by a pond longing for fish. Of course I want to know your depths; but if you jump into the water, you'll get wiped out in an instant. After that, you'll only think of escaping."

"You mean you want me to make some kind of promise?"

"No, I don't want you to do anything. Can any man can prove himself? I really do...like you a little bit, and I don't want to hide this from you, but is that what you said? I don't know. It is true that I want to be good friends with you, and I am willing to be with you, as I am now. As for the rest of it, I can't promise you anything at the moment, and to be honest, I don't want to."

"..."

"Did I hurt you? Are you sad?"

"I expected it to be like this."

"Don't expect too much from me, and don't be too urgent about it. Give me more time. Let me take it slowly, and get used to it slowly. This is the first time I've run into this kind of thing, and I don't know anything about it. To tell you the truth, I'm really in a mess right now. I don't know what to do. Let me think about it. I don't want to see you unhappy, I don't want to lose you, but I'll also do exactly what you said... No! No! Don't..."

The umbrella was swept away by the wind. He hugged her tightly and pressed onto her with a kiss. Zhou Jin struggled desperately, pushing him back with both hands. After a long, breathless kiss, she pushed him away. "Don't force yourself onto me," she yelled at him, staring him down. A dense raindrop flew across, immediately wetting her hair and dress.

She turned and ran into the rain.

"It's fine to create poeticisms, a kind of poetic relationship..." I smiled. "—that is indeed what everyone yearns for, but aren't you dribbling the ball too much?"

Guan Shanping and I were smoking and talking while standing on the roof of our unit's office building. The platform was very windy, with huge gusts sweeping us, so despite the scorching sun, we didn't feel much heat. "You made an impeccable start and developed smoothly, but you're unable to quit while you're ahead. You indulge in this poeticism too much and place too much importance on this so-called perfect feeling. When both the poeticism and the perfect feeling are stretched to their limits, you lose the flexibility and momentum you need to develop further. You get stuck. At the same time, too much of this poeticism will lead to a strengthened awareness of purity. That is to say, you've set up a barrier for yourself, limiting the scope of your intentions and relationships to the cycle of imaginary pursuits. In this way, when you try to break through her defenses, you will give her great shock, disappointment and disgust, followed by angry rejection and stubborn resistance—you have pushed her to the otherworldly realm and cut her off from earthly joys."

"I understand." Guan Shanping said dejectedly, "I have paved a path for myself to go to heaven, so of course it is blasphemy to want to go to bed while travelling it. Do you still have hope that I can transition back?"

"Taking the initiative by strategy has failed. Only a strong attack can succeed now."

"This, is it okay?"

"Actually, this is also an essential step. Even if you don't make a mistake and everything works out as expected, in the end you must have this. For example, the Soviet Union during the October Revolution. The masses were mobilized, the soldiers fought, the politics of it all were temporarily isolated, and finally they had to bring down the Winter Palace. As Chairman Mao said, without a broom, the dust will not run away on its own. Furthermore, she hesitated, flinched. Besides her own psychological barriers, it's also because of an old order that shackles her and pulls her down. Lin Chong would not go to Liangshan if the fodder depot was not burned."

"Understood."

When we came down from the roof, we met Zhao Lei who was dressed in makeup at the entrance of the building.

"How fancy. Who will you be meeting with?" I asked with a smile.

"I'm not looking for you." Zhao Lei pointed at Guan Shanping with a smile. "I'm looking for him."

Three days later, I went to the Northeast on a business trip to attend a large goods fair in a seaside city. After the meeting was over, I accepted an invitation from a supplier to take a detour to Changbai Mountain for a few days. Because of this, and the round-trip journey, it was already a month before I returned to Beijing.

When I got off the train, I found that Beijing had cooled down. Although it was sunny, the unbearable sweltering heat of the previous days was gone. The wind was blowing on the street and it was cool. They said that as soon as I left, it started to rain continuously in Beijing for half a month, so one had to sleep under the towel quilt at night. Zhou Jin didn't come to pick me up at the station. When I got home, I found that she looked dark and thin, even a little haggard. I suspected she was ill during this time. She said no, she just had a stomach ache a few times but it went away quickly. She was very kind and attentive with me, and she was also very satisfied with some of the clothes I bought for her. She tried them on one by one on the spot and finally wore the one she liked the most.

She cooked a lot of dishes for me, and I couldn't eat it all. During the meal, we also drank with excitement. We talked a lot. Sitting at the dinner table, we chatted until very late. At night, we had sex. We were both in our element, and everything was just right. But I noticed her slight resistance, if not disgust—as well as some of my habitual movements. It was hard to tell if her excitement was fake, but it was short-lived. She didn't ask for caresses afterwards and quickly put on her pajamas, as if it were unnatural for her to be exposing her body in front of me. I didn't think much about it, and since I was tired from the journey, I soon fell asleep.

The next day I went to work. The weather was pleasant, and I hadn't seen many of these people in a long time. My colleagues seemed very happy, greeting me loudly and enthusiastically pulling me aside to chat, especially Guan Shanping. I took particular notice of this, and I simply felt like I was glowing with delight.

As soon as he saw me, he pulled me aside and said in a low voice, "Buddy, we did it."

"Really? Then you have to treat yourself." I left him satisfied with himself and greeted the head of the Holy Gate: "Director, when do I have to report to you about my work?"

"I'm not in a hurry. I just got back, so I have to rest for two days." The boss laughed, more interested in chatting with the girls.

"When can I have you meet her?" Guan Shanping hurriedly pulled me aside again and said. "You haven't seen her yet? You give me an estimate, see how many points she's worth, and tell me if I should go for it."

"It doesn't have to be my estimation. If you think she's worth it, then she's a winner."

"No, no, you must have a look. I believe in you, your insight is accurate."

"Then let's find a day." I said. I left the office to go to the toilet.

When I was squatting on the toilet, I suddenly felt a sense of depression and inexplicable irritability. It might be because the toilet was too dirty, or it might be because of the unpleasantness caused by the cramped environment, like a prisoner who just got out of prison. After going out for a few days, it was like being arrested again...Or maybe there was something else.

"I may be back a little late tonight." Zhou Jin said while putting on her shoes.

"I come back home and you're still coming back late almost every day."

"It's the fourth quarter, and the old man is working overtime."

"You're not going out with anyone, are you?" I walked over and said.

"Why are you talking like that?"

"Go, go," I pushed her with a smile. "You're going to be late."

She didn't leave and asked me, "Do you want me to go out with someone else?"

"I don't care about you." I was joking, but after seeing Zhou Jin's face I quickly took back my words: "Just kidding." I opened the lid of a large cologne bottle and pressed the button. I then took aim at Zhou Jin, who was a few steps away, sitting on the sofa and reading, and sprayed it in her face.

"What are you doing?" She was startled, her face sullen.

"It's pleasantly cool." I said, spraying myself a few more times. "I just did a trick: spray cologne to eliminate sweat." I put down the cologne bottle and continued to watch TV. There was a serial drama playing. The wife who had an affair had just returned home, and her husband was questioning her sternly. She didn't say a word, her demeanor cold and firm, and her eyes showing undisguised contempt. Just like Sister Jiang facing the executioner from the Sino-American Cooperative Organization. The audience sitting in the more than forty rows could see it clearly. I couldn't help but chuckle. "Isn't that right?" I turned my head and asked Zhou Jin.

"What?" She raised her eyes cautiously.

"This." I pointed at the TV with my chin, "Is this how a wife comes back after an affair?"

Zhou Jin turned around and watched the TV. "Not at all."

I then commented, "Does this face count as a full confession of everything?"

"What do you think it should be like?"

"Either firmly deny it, or pretend to be wronged. If neither works, then offense is the best defense—are you like that?" I asked with a smile on my face.

"I am a combination of all three."

I laughed and continued watching TV, as the husband waved his hands and slapped his wife. "It's not right, how can he fight? Wouldn't this fight make her a victim? He should bury the pain and grief in his heart, be more considerate, and make the other party always feel at ease."

"If I had an affair," Zhou Jin asked me. "Would you plan to do that?"

"Of course I want to do even better. Send a letter, be on patrol, and so on. You can feel free to leave it to me."

"Shameless."

"I only have one humble request: do not get with an alley boy. That would be doubly insulting to me. The salary must be more than three hundred, he should have a handsome appearance, he should be no less than 1.8 meters tall, and then I would be proud of you."

"You really are like the shameless person written in this book," Zhou Jin said, holding up the book, "it's like you."

"What book? Maybe I wrote it." I reached out and grabbed the book. Zhou Jin stepped aside. "If I had an affair, would you still be able to reciprocate my courtesy? Or maintain an admirable demeanor?"

"No!" Zhou Jin said firmly. "I'd be sure to beat you to a pulp and leave you battered and bruised."

"That's too bad! As the saying goes: If you send a peach, give back a plum."

"..."

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I looked at Zhou Jin with a smile.

"I've always wanted to ask you a question. In the past I always thought I knew the answer and never doubted it, but now I feel more and more compelled to hear you answer it again—do you love me?"

"Let's put it this way..."

"Please answer directly."

"Let's put it this way, it's higher than the mountains and deeper than the sea."

"You just refuse to say that word, huh?"

"Well, if you insist, of course I can say it. I have no trouble with that."

"I don't want to make you say it. You don't have to."

"It doesn't matter."

"Okay, don't be too long-winded!" She interrupted me rudely, put down the book and jumped up from the sofa. Then she picked up the cold tea on the coffee table and drank it, glancing at me.

"Do you want to ask me if I love you?"

"I never doubted it."

"Never doubted it?" she sneered. "How could you have never doubted it? You should doubt. You know how I feel about you now?"

"You hate me whenever I open my mouth."

"Yes!" Zhou Jin put the cup of tea on the coffee table and screamed, "When you open your mouth, I feel disgusted and get goosebumps all over..."

"But then what should I say?"

"Don't pretend to be naive!" Zhou Jin stared at me and yelled. "Stop playing stupid! You don't think I understand you by now? You're clever enough to split a thread with a sewing machine."

"I'm really not very smart, so you don't need to praise me like that."

"You are rotten to the core!"

"I don't understand what you said at all."

"Okay, if you're going to pretend to be stupid and not understand, then I'll tell you." Zhou Jin nodded and sat down opposite me: "I'm on really good terms with someone else. What will you do?"

"Congratulations." I smiled and went to take her leftover glass on the coffee table.

"This is true!" Zhou Jin cried, waving her hand and sweeping the teacup to the ground. The teacup spilled on the carpet. "It's true, I'm not kidding."

I bent down to get the tea cup, put it back on the coffee table, straightened up and looked at Zhou Jin: "I don't believe you."

"You have to believe me!" Zhou Jin went to grab the teacup and was about to throw it to the ground again.

I held the tea cup firmly: "It's impossible. If it is, you would deny it until the last second. And you wouldn't. You're not that kind of person. Besides, our relationship didn't force you to go down that road." I stood up, picked up the cologne bottle to spray myself while lifting my left and right arms.

"You want to get mad at me." I got up to leave, but Zhou Jin stood up and pulled me in. She cried, choked with tears, and grabbed my arm tightly: "I love you."

I turned around and supported her: "Why are you crying? What's the matter?"

She leaned into my arms, hugged my waist tightly, and pressed her face against my chest, crying even more: "I don't want to lose you."

"How could that be? You won't." I comforted her. "We're an unbreakable couple." For a moment, my heart softened.

"No, I can't see that friend of yours...I want to see you too."

"Why? What happened?" The hurried voice spoke from the phone.

"I can't say. I think it's over now. Don't call me again in the future."

"Tell me why! There has to be a reason..."

Zhou Jin didn't answer. She hung up the phone and walked back to her office seat.

Zhao Lei, who was sitting next to her, was burying her head the stack of bills she was filling out.

Guan Shanping pushed open the door of my office and motioned me to come out.

"Why?" I asked, standing still.

"Zhao Lei is here, I told you to come over."

"Why is she looking for me?" I said, "Go tell her I'm not here."

"Just go, I have something to do." Guan Shanping approached and said, "I already told her that you were here."

"Why is Zhao Lei so annoying, always running over here?" I stood up reluctantly and followed him out the door. "Where are all the people in your office?" There was no one else in Guan Shanping's office, only Zhao Lei sitting at Guan Shanping's desk with a smile.

"Everyone went out." Guan Shanping said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. He seemed to be in high spirits.

"I made an agreement with Guan Shanping to come to my house tomorrow to have fun," said Zhao Lei. "He'll be bringing his little 'friend' with him. You should come too."

"Why would I go?" I also pulled out a chair and sat down. "I shouldn't go when you're having fun."

"Didn't you always say you wanted to meet his little 'friend'? Guan Shanping said to find a restaurant, but I said don't bother with that. I have everything ready at home. Whatever you want to eat, it's there. After dinner, the four of us can still get together and play a game of mahjong."

"I don't play mahjong now."

"Well, we can play other games. Anyway, the four of us can play poker, dance, that's good enough." Zhao Lei stared at me. "Come on, don't spoil everyone's happiness."

"I have other things to do tomorrow."

"What's the matter with you?" Zhao Lei stared at me stubbornly. "Just do it in advance."

I avoided her gaze: "Can't it wait another day?"

"I won't be able to do it another day." Zhao Lei said coldly. "Tomorrow is just right. It's easiest for all of us to get together."

"Come," Guan Shanping said, "It'll be fun and lively. And I really want you to come, since you'll be able to create an atmosphere."

"If you don't come tomorrow, you won't be able to come." Zhao Lei said, "You might not be able to meet his little 'friend' ever again."

"She's being difficult with me." Guan Shanping smiled bitterly. "I don't know what's the matter, she suddenly doesn't want to see me again."

"I feel guilty," Zhao Lei said with a sneer. "I suddenly feel sorry for her husband. It's probably her husband. It's probably her husband that's too good to her, making her relapse back to an old flame. Since you're similarly black in the heart, you can help him come up with other ideas."

"What time is it tomorrow?" I asked.

"Four o'clock in the afternoon," Zhao Lei said. "They arrive at half past two. You can come at four o'clock. Don't arrive early. Leave some time for people to chit-chat first."

"Okay, I'll be there at four." I got up and left.

"If you don't show up, I'll come and get you." Zhao Lei said behind me.

"Did you say Zhou Jin was going?"

"Don't worry, I'll definitely get her to come," Zhao Lei said to Guan Shanping. "I've done what I needed to do, and it's too late to back off now—it's you who needs to come now."

She watched me retreat into the distance. I didn't go home that night. I played mahjong at Wei Dayong's house all night. The predicted evening heavy rain never came down. The air was damp and stuffy. We were all sweaty and sticky, and we were tired of touching the tiles. The fan blowing hard didn't help. My luck went up and down, my throat was on fire, I coughed constantly, and I drank bottle after bottle. In the morning, everyone had turned green, with unkempt hair and dull eyes. My figure was covered in a large leather jacket, and I was dying to get out of it.

I gave my unit a call. Then I took the day off and rode my bike home.

The streets were full of people riding bicycles to work with sullen faces. Passing through the shade of trees, some shirtless men who slept outside last night were still sleeping soundly on mats or wire beds.

When I got home, Zhou Jin had already left for work. The room was messy, towels were crumpled on the bed, and the pajamas that had been taken off in a hurry were thrown on the sofa outside.

She also stayed up all night last night. She had frequently gone to the window and the balcony to look into the distance. In the end, she stood on the balcony and watched the main intersection of the street until dawn.

For the first since we got married, I stayed up all night without greeting her.

I imagine that as soon as she arrived at her work unit, she called my unit first and learned that I had asked for leave, and then called the neighbor who had a phone upstairs.

I was just lying down when the young woman upstairs with the child knocked on the door and asked me to answer the phone. Zhou Jin's voice was calm on the line. I told her that I was playing mahjong at Wei Dayong's place last night, and she left the phone without saying anything further.

Zhou Jin immediately rejected Zhao Lei's invitation when she heard that Guan Shanping was also there, but Zhao Lei said to her again and again, "If you don't want to deal with him anymore, you have to make it clear to him, otherwise he will keep pestering you, and he'll be in your hair forever. And even putting that aside, who knows what he will do when he's worried? You have to see him once anyway, to put an end to all of it."

Her words finally got to Zhou Jin.

I kept coughing at home until the afternoon. I also dreamed of the rain, and the downpour washed and wetted everything. I woke up and it was pouring rain outside, lightning mixing with thunder. It was as dark as dusk, and gusts of cool wind and rain blew in from the open window. The bed and furniture by the window were already wet with raindrops.

The young woman upstairs came to ask me to answer the phone again. The call was from Zhao Lei, and she reminded me to come over. "Don't let a little rain scare you from leaving the nest."

The dense raindrops hit me so hard that I couldn't open my eyes. Even though I was wearing a raincoat, my clothes were still wet. My calves and feet felt like they were being washed by water.

I rode my bike in the wind and rain at a very slow speed. The road was flooded with rainwater. Rows of trees swayed violently in the wind, and their broken branches and leaves were floating in the water. A few sparrows with drenched feathers flew diagonally through the rain as if they were falling, eventually landing on a roadside tree.

A thunderous explosion rolled past, and a dazzling and bright lightning strike flashed across the hazy sky. The sky suddenly lit up, and then became dark again in an instant.

A cool breeze with the smell of rain blew in through the open window, and the room was as dark as nightfall. As soon as Zhou Jin stepped into the house, she made a solemn statement to Guan Shanping: "I'm just here to talk to you about me today."

Guan Shanping closed the door behind her, inserted the latch, and came up to pull Zhou Jin towards him. "Don't, don't do this." Zhou Jin resisted and pulled off the hand he reached towards her, "No, I won't today!" Guan Shanping's hand was pushed away again and again, yet he stretched it out again and again. Like the Thousand-Hand Guanyin, Guan Shanping stretched out his hands endlessly towards Zhou Jin from all directions and angles. Zhou Jin fought hard, but the inner and outer clothes on her body were still undressed and unfastened one by one, and soon she was dressed in nothing but rags. Zhou Jin's struggles turned into bitter and sincere pleas, which only made her opponent's actions more rough and urgent. In the end, she closed her mouth and her eyes...

"Are you comfortable?" Guan Shanping asked jokingly.

Zhou Jin pushed Guan Shanping out of bed, jumped up, wiped herself clean, and quickly put on her clothes. "Don't you want to talk to me? Let's talk," he said.

"There's nothing to say." Zhou Jin pulled open the latch to go out.

Guan Shanping rushed over to grab her and drag her back.

"Let go of me!" Zhou Jin forcefully broke out of Guan Shanping's grip, opened the door and rushed out. But not a moment later, she froze.

I stood up from the sofa outside, soaking wet and looking at her intently, my face pale. Zhao Lei sat on one side with her thighs pressed against her legs, her head lowered, cracking melon seeds in her teeth.

After the rain, the sky was clear and blue, and a huge rainbow appeared. There was no more rain in that autumn. The days were sunny thereafter, and it was one of the most pleasant autumns in my memory. The streets were beautiful, the leaves became mottled with different colors, and the late chrysanthemums were in full bloom in the flower beds by the roadside. There were crowds of people shopping everywhere, all of them dressed in new clothes, looking comfortable and walking leisurely. All seasons live at their parents' house, where they eat and sleep after getting off work, sometimes playing mahjong, and sometimes going to the movies alone. Zhou Jin called me several times but I didn't answer. When I came across Guan Shanping at work, he tried to talk to me several times, but I refused. One evening, I was really bored and went to a nearby lake for my first and probably last swim of the year.

In the evening, it was already very cold. There were not many swimmers on the huge lake, only a few cruise ships roaming in the sunset. I rolled my clothes into a ball and tucked it under the back seat of my bicycle. Then I swam slowly into the water. The water in the lake was cool and textured, and each of my strokes felt heavy and elastic. The water waves jumped apart behind me and got pushed farther and farther to both sides, forming a herringbone pattern that kept expanding and extending. The setting sun was almost perpendicular to the horizon, smearing the lakeside buildings, trees, and the fragile surface of the water.

I saw Zhou Jin rowing a boat by herself in the dazzling halo of the sunset, inlaid with gold and drenched in color. The sound of her oars echoed as they fell together.

In fact, I continued to swim forward, crossing her path. I swam underneath a bridge full of holes and swam into another lake. It was even more lonely there. The flourishing weeds of the nearly-deserted lake banks were submerged in the water. A row of curved willows brushed their branches low on the lake, and swarms of mosquitoes buzzed and flew close to the water. My legs occasionally touched dense and long clumps of aquatic plants.

Behind me, the sound of water churning was like a waving flag. The pointed bow of a ship appeared on the side of my head. The hull grew closer and then silently rode the waves alongside me.

We travelled a certain distance like this. Neither close or far, neither forward or backward, neither looking or talking, just like two strangers walking along the same road.

I suddenly felt very tired and stopped. The boat stopped, too, and swerved toward me. I reached out and grabbed the side of the boat. Drenched in water, I rolled over and climbed in.

Zhou Jin sat in the boat and looked at me calmly. Her unadorned yet astonishing beauty was shining like a pearl in the twilight.

"Where to?" she said without opening her lips.

"Home," I said after a long time.

Everything at home was still the same. The familiar mess and randomness was like I just left this morning. All the clothes and supplies were in the same place, making me feel relaxed and comfortable.

We took a shower, changed clothes, cooked a feast together, and ate with unrestricted appetites. There was even a bottle of cold beer in the refrigerator that we shared. I stopped avoiding her gaze, and we talked about trivial matters. Then I thought I would smile at her, but the smile immediately contorted and twisted her face, as if smiling without smiling, or as if crying without crying.

"Do you want to torture me?" she said with tears in her eyes, "I can't pretend that nothing happened."

I sighed and looked at her. I put my hands on the edge of the table, moved the chair back, got up and left. She grabbed my hand and said, "Don't go."

I glanced at her, then looked down at her holding my hand.

She released her hand and drew back: "Don't go..."

"I'll get a cigarette," I said, walking into the bedroom.

I came out of the bedroom with half a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and asked, "Do you want to explain it to me?"

She shook her head and sat on the sofa. She tucked her legs into her arms, curling up into a fetal position, and begged, "Give me a cigarette." I handed her a cigarette and a lighter.

She pressed it a few times but it didn't catch fire. I took the lighter and helped her light her cigarette.

She took a drag, shook her hair and exhaled smoke, and said calmly, "You won't forgive me, will you?"

"Do you want me to forgive you?"

She lowered her head sadly: "I know you won't forgive me."

I smoked silently, then lit another cigarette after I finished my first.

"There's nothing to say about it now!" she shouted. "What do you think we should do?"

"What to do?"

"How to punish me, maybe?"

"..."

"Divorce?"

"...Do you agree?"

Her eyes filled with tears immediately, and she said sadly: "What more can I say? You made up your mind earlier."

"Do you think you can live a life after that?"

She didn't say a word, only letting her tears fall with the ash of her cigarette onto the carpet. "You don't want to leave?"

"What if I promise to change?" she said with tears in her eyes. "Never again."

"Do you want to guarantee we forget about all of this? Just pretend it never happened?"

"I don't want to leave." She wiped her tears and said with her nose blocked, "I won't leave."

"You won't leave? You don't want to leave? Why?"

"I was wrong. Everyone gets confused for a while."

"Are you still confused now?"

"Mm." She nodded affirmatively.

"Don't start with me," I laughed angrily and then became annoyed. "So why? Let me tell you, Zhou Jin, don't think I can't be hard on you. I was pretty hard on you before, but this time..."

"You're going to be hard on me." She raised her face and gently said, "Are you going to be hard on me?"

"Tell me why." I avoided her gaze, turned my face away and said, "Why do such a thing? Didn't you know it would ruin this family?"

"..."

"Can I not satisfy you?"

"Sometimes...sometimes I feel that way."

I won't pretend to be aloof. That sentence really stung, and tears welled up in my eyes. I felt even more hurt than how much the incident itself hurt me.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't touch me," I snapped, "don't touch me!"

I got up and walked away to stand powerlessly in front of the window. I continued to cry without saying a word.

"Do you hate me that much?" She came up to me sadly, and put her hand on me again.

"Yes!" I pushed her away furiously, breathless with anger, unable to find the right words to accurately describe how I felt. "...You're more corrupt than the government."

The next morning, the sky was turning white, and she told me that she agreed to the divorce.

The room was full of smoke, like a room of government employees who had an overnight meeting. After hearing her words, my heart became numb. I was neither excited nor relieved, but instead bitter and miserable. "I don't want this to be public," she said. "We don't need a mediator or a lawyer. We can just separate quietly after we agree."

I nodded: "I won't say anything about you either."

"Then what do we say about the reason for our divorce?" She had a chipper attitude towards the whole affair. "People will definitely ask."

I said "emotional discord."

She firmly objected, saying, "It's not true."

I said "temperamental discord" and she also didn't agree. She insisted on finding a third reason that involved our relationship. I went to great lengths to convince her that it was impossible. Since two people were divorcing, it must be due to two people's differing reasons, and it had nothing to do with any grave or serious matters. She said that would definitely amount to an admission of infidelity on her side. I expressed my firm opposition: "Is the harm done to save my face? I will not allow your reputation and character to be smeared and slandered by others in the slightest—our business is our business."

In the end, we agreed to "emotional discord" as the reason for our divorce.

Next, we calmly discussed the issue of property.

"I'll give you the house and furniture," Zhou Jin said. "You have to get married again and find someone else."

"What about you?" I asked. "Are you planning to get married?"

"I don't know."

"I don't want to get married again," I said. "You have to get married again, no matter who you end up with. Your family line has to live on."

"Don't think about it too much," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Let's leave the house and furniture to you. I'll take part of the deposit. Guan Shanping is incompetent, and you are even more helpless as a woman—I'll be fine."

"Of course you're leaving everything with me. I'll have to be the one selling everything."

We glanced at everything in the room at the same time. The furniture were quietly staying in their respective positions, like a group of silent and docile slaves.

"You can beat me."

"Why would I beat you?" I said coldly. "I didn't come to settle my account with you, I just wanted to ask what you plan to do in the future."

"I can promise not to meet her again in the future."

"You have to be responsible for her. We've already started the divorce."

"But she doesn't want to see me."

"Isn't she willing to see you now? Did she stop you?"

"..."

"She still has feelings for you, she said to me herself. You can keep on showing off your charms more easily now. After all, you don't need to feel guilty anymore, you can just be in love with each other openly."

"..."

"Or, is this just a fling with her?"

"No, no, never... never."

"You know that much, at least... Still a bit of passion left?"

"Yes..."

"You must also know that is why I act like this. Whether a wife is in love with a person or a wife is seduced by someone—let's not call it rape—the nature of the two is completely different. My reaction was different too. If it was the latter... maybe not killing him, but I would have done something reckless—it's either him or me! I don't have much to miss in my life."

"I swear, I—at the very least I do it out of love..."

"That's never better. To be honest, I've always had doubts, and that doubt will continue until I see the facts that prove that you really do have love."

"You said she really did the same to me... She always told me... so..."

"Just last night, she confessed to me herself. 'After thinking about it, I'm afraid it is true. I love him a little bit.' My existence in the past has always prevented her from expressing her true feelings, don't you understand?"

"I will go to her tomorrow."

At the end of the year, when the first cold snap in Siberia hit, the long and torturous divorce process had finally been completed step by step. The house and main furniture were left to Zhou Jin, and I only took part of the cash. Zhou Jin insisted on paying me the equivalent value of the furniture. She said that her brothers and sisters had settled the accounts, and she didn't want to go to a stranger. When you really need money, you accept it without much fuss.

When our sub-district office—the place where we once registered our marriage—finished the final divorce formalities and came out with a divorce certificate, she said she would invite me to dinner. "We haven't been to a restaurant together since we got married, and the only other time was when we broke up. We won't have a chance in the future." I nodded and agreed. We randomly found a good restaurant on the side of the road and went in.

It was rare for a restaurant to be cold during a meal time, but since the cold wave arrived early, and it was before the legal indoor heating time, the heaters in the restaurant were cold to the touch.

We gripped our down jackets, curled up and sat down on either side of the table. Shivering, we stretched out chopsticks from inside our sleeves to pick up vegetables and drank cold beer.

A while after a hot stir-fry was served on the table, the oil condensed and became frozen on the surface.

Zhou Jin's eyes were usually dripping with tears all of the time. At this moment, there were no tears at all, and her eyes were completely dry. She looked old and haggard. Her hair was not well groomed, but instead messy and shriveled. Her nose became more pointed, and her eyes became bigger and bigger.

When she realized I was looking at her, she raised her eyes and smiled at me, and immediately there were fine, barely-perceptible wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She said, "You should pretend that you don't know me when we meet again in the future, right?"

"What do you mean pretend?" I also said with a smile, "I can't."

"Will we meet again?"

"Who knows, maybe. We're all in the same city, maybe we'll run into each other one day."

"Yeah, maybe I can meet you when I go see Guan Shanping. It's funny, how come I never ran into him when I went to look for you?"

"He just finished."

"I didn't know that their Landa Company and your Equipment Bureau are just one unit."

"Our distribution unit is called Landa Company by foreign businessmen, when it's actually the same thing."

"Isn't it all right if you think about it?" She looked at me with a smile.

"Then there will be another Chen Shanping, or a Deng Shanping."

"Do you really think I'm that bad? Is this kind of thing inevitable?"

"Many people get opportunities that change their lives. Many people don't get these opportunities. In life, and in death, they never change throughout their entire lives. In fact,

people are the same; it doesn't matter whether they are good or bad, nor whether they get chances or not."

"What if you had your own chance?"

"..." I smiled and said nothing.

"Maybe you won't believe it, but I still want to warn you." When we parted, we stood at the door of the restaurant, wearing our hoods and neck guards. Zhou Jin's mouth was hidden behind her down collar, revealing her eyes and most of her face, and she said:

"I have always loved you, including those moments, and until now."

I didn't speak. Her eyes were wet, and she said in a loud voice, "Don't just think that I'm feeling sorry for you, but also think about when I'm good to you."

She turned and left. "Wait." I called to her. "There's something you asked me several times and I didn't answer, and now I can tell you...I too—love you."

I turned around and walked away in a hurry, and a cold, hard snow was blowing in front of me. Up until I was gone, she stood motionless in the cold wind.

"We're holding a wedding this year. Zhou Jin asked me to tell you that," Guan Shanping said listlessly. He looked depressed and indifferent.

I picked out personal items from each drawer of my desk and put them in my handbag one by one. "Do you regret not getting married until now?" I asked him with a glance.

"No," he denied.

I then closed all the drawers of the desk that had been tidied up. Finally, I glanced at the desk and saw that nothing was missing, so I pulled the zipper closed, picked up the bulging handbag and walked out. "I'll give you a piece of advice. Don't be careless, don't be in a hurry to peel off the disguise, just live with it for the rest of your life. I'd rather she think that you're hypocritical, so don't reveal your true colors. No one likes things that are undisguised—if you want things to be smooth and steady."

"Where are you going?" he asked in confusion.

"I quit my job, I'm done with it, I'm out," I said lightly. "I will live for myself for the rest of my life." I couldn't help but smile and walk lightly through the corridor. I stopped and said to Guan Shanping, who was staying there: "Remember, we'll just pretend that we haven't met each other in this life and we don't know each other. Don't say hello to me when we meet again, and I'll ignore you if you say hello."

"They're going to get married?" I got on the bus, hummed a little song, squeezed into the crowd and stood still. After the bus started, I found Zhao Lei standing next to me.

"Are they going to get married?" she asked again.

"Yes." I blinked. "The wedding will be held within the year."

"So now you have no reason not to see me again?"

"I was going to find you."

"Forget it, I'm not looking for you, you'll never come. Don't you think I know you? What about us?"

"What about us?"

"Don't be silly, they're getting married, what about us?"

"We could also get married at the same time as them," I said with a smile.

Zhao Lei stared at me and after a long time warned me: "You mustn't play tricks with me, please! I am not Zhou Jin. I won't let you play the fool. If someone sells it, they don't know where to get the money."

"How can that be? I'm full and I'm playing tricks for the sake of playing tricks. Isn't it all for you—my crush?" I put my arms around Zhao Lei's shoulders affectionately.

She pushed me away gently and asked uncertainly, "Am I really your crush?"

"You still can't tell?"

"It seems like it, but I'm not quite sure. You're too good at acting."

"It's true that my heart is the same. If there is half a false word, I'll be struck down by heaven." I swore.

"You can fool Zhou Jin but not me," Zhao Lei said. "Anyway, no matter if you really like me or not, I have a crush on you regardless, so I'm tied to you. No matter what happens in the future, you can't get rid of me. It's good to end your relationship, and it's good to find a new love. You have a thousand plans. Anyway, it's a one-way street, and I will never divorce you, but that will cost you a lifetime."

"Don't make it sound so terrible. We'll be able to enjoy endless love and happiness together..."

"I don't believe you." Zhao Lei smiled. "You will change, and I will also change. Sooner or later we will hate each other. I told you that I'm different from Zhou Jin in this point. I have no illusions, so I only look for one thing, and that is to seize the day in this life of mine, and you—from today onwards, you and I will live together."

"That's what I'm thinking too."

"Don't talk sweetly to me. I don't believe what you say, what matters is what you do—you go back to your parents' house to pack up, and I'll call a car to pick you up later—Let's clarify the relationship with your parents first, I could pass as a prostitute."

"Where are you going now?"

"If I partner up with you to do this immoral thing, do you really think that you could still step foot in your unit? Zhou Jin hates me, and everyone in the bank looks at me funny—I had to go transfer."

"Then I'll get off at this stop?"

"Go. Remember, I'll find you on time in an hour."

I squeezed out of the crowd and got out of the bus. After waving to Zhao Lei in the car, I turned around and walked to another station. After the bus carrying Zhao Lei disappeared around the corner, I slowly paced back to the bus station. I then squeezed into a bus that had just entered the station and continued on my original route.

I got off the bus at the train station plaza and went straight to the ticket window of the station. I begged someone to buy me a platform ticket, and afterwards entered the waiting hall through the gate. I stood on the long escalator and slowly ascended to the lobby on the second floor. Then I got off the escalator, checked the ticket at the first gate I encountered, and flowed down the platform with people.

I came to the platform with the tide of people, and there were a series of green trains parked on the railways. I got into the car at an entrance that wasn't being watched by one of the attendants and found a seat. The train started, gradually leaving the bustling and complex city, and the wind from the wilderness blew in violently from the window. I stood up. Carrying a bag, I squeezed through the carriages crowded with passengers. When I came to the captain's office, I took out money and said, "Onboard ticket."

"Where to?" The young female captain asked.

"The destination." I said, "Where is the destination of your train?"

One year later, on an autumn evening, Zhou Jin held up her newborn baby girl to play with her, and the room was full of the mother's laughter and the child's babbling. Guan Shanping looked at the two of them with a smile. "Look, look, she's smiling—come and see," Zhou Jin called to Guan Shanping. He came over and fiddled with the child's delicate face.

"What a wonderful smile," Zhou Jin said happily. "I'm not being biased, I think our child really is prettier than any other children."

"That's right." Guan Shanping turned to look at to Zhou Jin with a smile. "How about you?"

"What?"

"How do you feel?" Guan Shanping looked around with his eyes, glancing at all of the people, objects and emotions in the room.

Zhou Jin understood what he meant. She smiled, then nodded heartily. She looked well-developed, beautiful, and radiant.

"You mentioned how coincidental things are in the world." Zhou Jin nodded her head up and down with the child, then turned her head and said to Guan Shanping, "If I didn't happen to go out to dinner with Zhao Lei that day and go out so far, we'd still go to that restaurant. If we didn't happen to be waiting at the same station that evening and decide not to wait, then we wouldn't know each other, and we wouldn't have this child."

"Do you think these are coincidences?"

"It's a coincidence, and it's also fate," Zhou Jin said with a smile. "If there's a bond, the two can meet across any distance."

"You never thought it might be a carefully planned artificial arrangement?" Guan Shanping asked with a smile.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Zhou Jin shook the child and said with a smile. "I already knew that Zhao Lei was interested in Fang Yan, and she was very jealous of me. On the surface, she and I were good friends, but she secretly wanted to break us up. She was always so deceptive, and I blame myself for being stupid enough to let her succeed. In fact, even after she dismantled us, Fang Yan never went to look for her. Fang Yan said it bothered her the most."

"You are too stupid to call yourself stupid. The children in the mountains are all kind-hearted. You're always assuming the best in people. Do you know who asked me to wait for someone at that bus stop that day?"

"I don't know, who?" Zhou Jin turned to tease the child. "Smile again."

"Your husband at the time, Fang Yan."

Zhou Jin's movements stopped abruptly, and she turned to face him, perplexed.

"He invited you to the station, and then invited me to the station to introduce a girl to me. In reality, it was you who he planned to introduce to me."

"But what if we didn't talk to each other? Or if one of us left early?"

"Then he would've found another chance and created more and more opportunities until we knew each other. He was very diligent."

"Why?"

"Well, why do you think he did it?"

Zhou Jin gripped her chin and held the child motionless.

"He wanted to get rid of you, but he didn't want you to notice, so he racked his brain to think of something else. I suppose it's his way of being considerate."

"He wanted to marry Zhao Lei after all! Everything he said to me was false, it was an act."

"You're right that it was all an act, but he actually didn't want to marry Zhao Lei. As far as I know, Zhao Lei is still single. Fang Yan has disappeared since the day he resigned from the unit. Zhao Lei frantically searched for him all over the city for many days. Until now, she kept asking about him, and vowed to find him. But there was no news. When I ran into her one time, she was so old that I couldn't recognize her."

"What does Fang Yan even want?"

"On the bright side, it's probably the same as me. He fantasized about some kind of adventure and living a perfect life."

"Is it possible? Do you think he can find it?"

"The world is the same everywhere. He has nowhere to go. I believe he just wanted to change his environment and people, but he must still be living the same life as here."

"Do you think that exists? That kind of perfect, ideal, hoped-for..."

"I told Fang Yan, I think there exists a general kind of happiness. I suppose just like us...right now..." Guan Shanping smiled and stretched out his arms to Zhou Jin, hugging the mother and daughter together in his arms. Zhou Jin leaned into Guan Shanping's arms and looked sideways at the child, tears streaming down her face. "They wanted to hurt us, but they ended up sacrificing themselves for us."

给我顶住

“你回头看那个刚进门男的，就是那个瘦高个穿运动衣的。”赵蕾对周瑾说。餐馆里人头攒动，笑语喧哗。正午强烈的阳光被茶色玻璃隔在室外，室内阴凉昏暗，那个男人的脸阴暗的光线下显得苍白，高高的鼻子十分突出。

“这人怎么啦？”周瑾注视了那个人一眼，转回头来低声问赵蕾。“我跟你说过的那个国家恋爱队的一号种子选手——就是他。”“是么？”周瑾又回头看了那男人一眼，那男人正在四下逡巡，寻找空座。“没觉得他特别有魅力嘛。”

“长得是挺一般，说他是国家恋爱队的是因为他那种专业态度：冬练三九，夏练三伏，时不时自己把自个集训一下，就为了一旦上场，攻必克，战必胜——关山平。”赵蕾慢悠悠地拖长声音叫那个男人。“这人特有意思，招他叫来聊聊你就知道了。”赵蕾说，堆起笑脸朝闻声回头的关山平招手：“到这儿来，这儿有空座。”

关山平神色凝重地向两个女人走来，赵蕾拿起放在一张空椅上的坤包，让他就座。

“你怎么跑这儿来了？”赵蕾点起一支烟，高高翘在撅起的嘴唇上笑咪咪地问。“普天之下，莫非王土。你们来得，我怎么就来不得？”关山平落座，招呼服务员前来为他陈设餐具，拿起菜单仔细地看了数遍，只点了很少一点饭菜，交回菜单，拣起筷子，大模大样吃起赵蕾她们的菜，津津有味。

“你就在这一带上班是么？”他边吃边摇头，“太奢侈了，一个普通的中国女人，开饭随便填点粮食也罢了，还上什么馆子？”“我们也就是业余下下馆子，专业吃粮食。”赵蕾少着说，“你呢？寻花问柳可有结果？”

“遇见一过些部优产品，充其量也只是填补一下国内空白。”“你看我们这位小姐怎么样？”赵蕾笑着指周瑾。

“别胡闹。”周瑾红了脸。

关山平的目光在周瑾脸上停留了片刻：“如果有路子，宽给分的话，也就是区级八强。”

“你别太狂”。赵蕾笑着说，“也不瞧瞧自己那德性，配个胡同八强还得趁别人

况竞技状态不佳你超水平发挥。”

“我真不是狂，也无意摘取什么世界冠军。”关山平的饭菜上了，他一扫而空。“我只是要找我那一个。”关山平抹抹嘴站起来，指指脑子。“跟这里的那形象对上就行了。”

“只怕那主儿还没生呐。”赵蕾含笑瞅着他。

“生是肯定生了，这点我坚信。现在需要的只是去找去撞——大范围捕捉。”
“只怕你面对面也认不出来。”赵蕾笑吟吟地把长长的烟灰弹落在烟缸内。“不会。”关山平眨眨眼。“她总该认出我吧……再见二位，慢慢聊着。”扬长而去。
“只怕真见了你又傻了说不出话了。”

“那就对了。”关山平头也不回地说，出了门。

“你觉得怎么样——这人？”赵蕾对周瑾笑问，“神么？”

“没觉得。”周瑾摇头。“觉得这人特酸。”

“是么，那就是说印象还挺深。”赵蕾意味深长地瞅着周瑾笑。“又傻。”周瑾说，看赵蕾。“你老看我干嘛？”

赵蕾笑着把目光移开：“这种儿不多见。”

“五点半，一路车站，不见不散，我马上出来。”我放下电话，锁好办公桌的抽屉，拎起皮包出了办公室。

街上，夕阳耀眼，车流滚滚，行人熙攘。我快步穿过马路向街对面电车站走去。
“嗨？”一个女人迎面站在马路边冲我打招呼。

我左右看着来往的车辆，从车辆间隙一个箭步窜上对面便道，继续大步往前走。那女人跟上我，同我并肩走。

“怎么碰上你了？”我边走边说，“这么大城市，几百万人，怎么就这么巧？”
“我也觉得巧，刚才我路过这里时就想，没准能碰上你，结果真碰见了你作”“真是偶然。”我停住脚，转过头。“太偶然了。”赵蕾笑着说。

快车道与慢车道隔离带上的公共汽车站牌林立，同一车型不同线路的通道式公共汽车络绎而来陆续开走。人群峰拥而上鱼贯而下，时而集聚成片时而疏疏落落。周瑾站在站台上翘首迎视每辆驶来的公共汽车。当公共汽车停下三门齐开时她便被人流淹没，公共汽车开走后她便单独剩下继续注视着车来的方向。夕阳灼热的光毫无遮拦地倾泻在站台上，等车的面孔换了一拨又一拨。她有些焦躁了，不胜烤晒，穿过慢行道来到街绿树荫下的那排商店前。一家食品店设有一个冷饮窗口，白色的冰柜嗡嗡作响，柜上排列着各色诱人的清凉饮料，她买出瓶刚从冰柜拿出结着冰霜的酸奶站在那

里用麦管慢慢在吮，眼睛仍盯着站台上每一辆公共汽车下来的人。

她看到中午吃饭时见到的那个瘦高个脸苍白的男人从一辆公共汽车的中门下来，下来后便留在了站上，仰着下颏注视着车来的方向等候。一班又一班公共汽车驶来，她等的那人没来，那个男人也没走。他回过头往向后张望寻找，她连忙转过脸，把喝完的酸奶退回冰柜，走到一片树荫下继续等候。潮水般的自行车从她面前不停驶过，快车道上并行的两条车龙争先奔驰，更远的地方同样的两条车龙和潮水般的自行车在逆行线上以同样的节奏和速度奔驰。

她看到那男人在车流人群中再次回头，这次她没有回避。两个人的视线相遇了，目光在对方同样毫无表情的脸上停留了一两秒钟，然后各是移开。

那男人下了站台，停停绕绕穿过纷乱紧凑的自行车流，上了便道，到她刚才买过酸奶的冷饮窗口去买冷食，边走边侧着身子用一只手掏裤兜里的钱。

她用眼角余光注意到他捧着一个撕坏的雪糕包装盒走进这片树荫。隔着几个人她也能感觉到听到他在大口喀哧喀哧咬冻得硬梆梆的雪糕，咀嚼肌一下一下地牵动冰冷雪白的奶晶在热烘烘紧硬的齿腭间粉碎融化。……她向一边悄悄移挪了几步。又一辆公共汽车进站，站在他们之间，周围的人纷纷跑向站台，投入耀眼的阳光中。

这一瞬间，他们四周没有任何人。

她情不自禁看了他一眼，他佝着腰哈着嘴皱着眉全力以赴地吞咽着冰凉的雪糕，接着，侧眼看她。再也不能视若无睹了，他们俩脸上都作出认出对方的笑意。

“你也等人？”她点点头。“我也等人。”他向她靠了几步，递过仍盛有数支雪糕的纸盒。“快帮我吃两根，我不行了，雪糕也快化了。”

“我不……刚吃过。”“就别客气了，又不是什么值钱的东西。”

她犹犹豫豫伸手在纸盒里，欲拿又止。

“拿两根，两根。”他不由分说，拿出两根雪糕拍在她手里，自己也又拿起一支绕着解纸，嘴里边嘶嘶吸着气：“真凉，牙都倒了。”“干嘛买这么多？”“多买多吃呗。本来是给我等那主儿预备的，她没来，就只当是给你买的吧。”“纸别扔，小心卫生检查。”她碰了一下他的手。

他回头一看，见一个戴红袖章的老头儿在他们身旁，盯着他手里的雪糕纸等待。他们相视一笑。他对老头儿大声说：“大爷，你甭费劲我这纸不会扔在地上。”接着他连她的纸一并拿过，塞在纸盒里，大步向不远处的一个果皮箱走去，把纸盒团成一团塞入投掷孔，一手各举一支裸体雪糕回来。“你等的那个人还没来？”

周瑾抑郁四顾：“也许出了什么事。”

“说不定不来了。”“会来，我想他会来，我们说过，不见不散。”

“都这么说，都约得死死的，可到头来该来的总是不来又有几个是等到的？”
“你们也说了不见不散？”

“一样。”关山平微笑着说，“这个俗套儿不具有任何约束力。”“他一定是碰上了什么事，过去从不失约。”

时已黄昏，夕阳敛尽光焰，缩为猩红浑圆一团，直线坠落。天仍很亮，微风袭来，些许凉意。街上的车流稀了但闲人更多了。前方十字路口愈见热闹，小商小贩出市了，五光十色的服装摊密密丛丛布满路口四周。“估计咱们等的人全不会来了，起码今天不会来了。”

周瑾闷闷不乐地一语不发，十分失望。

“显然你是第一次挨涮。”关山平安慰周瑾。“没关系，多涮几次就好了，就习以为常了。”

她白他一眼。“真的。”关山平推心置腹地说，“你瞧我，天天在全城各个路口等人，从来没等到过，仍然乐此不疲。别让我等着，等着便一劳永逸。”“从来没等到过？我不信。”周瑾微笑。

“从来没等到过！来的都是我不想见的人。”

“你等谁自己都不知道？”

“当然知道，所以来的不是我等的我一眼就能认出。”

“可逮着你啦！”随着一声喝，那个戴红箍的老头儿从树后跳出来得意地指着地对关山平说：“捡起来。甭废话。”

不知什么时候，地上出现了两根雪糕棒，关山平的雪糕几乎没吃因而没化成半截，再看周瑾，显然她吃完雪糕随手无意地把棒丢在脚下。“有什么呀，有什么呀，逮着就逮着您何必那么兴奋。”周瑾未及动作，关山平已迅速弯腰将雪糕棒捡起，掏出钱给老头。大声说：“不就是点款么，搞得跟打了多大的胜仗似的。”

“什么叫兴奋？我这是管你！不对呵？”老头儿声色俱厉。

“对对，您全，我全错，您可有理了。”

“走吧走吧。”周瑾拉关山平，“交了钱就别跟他说了。”

“不是。我就纳闷，人怎么都这样，占点理就跟雷霆万钧逮贼似的，这要让他占个天大的理儿，我还别活了。”“你什么呢？你给我回来！”老头儿在后厉喝。

“我不回来，你有本事追我！”关山平被周瑾拉拉扯扯地快步走，挣着身子回头冲老头喊。

“你治什么气呀？”周瑾紧紧挽着关山平，不让他停步。“这点气就受不了还是人么？”

关山平笑了。周瑾含笑责备道：“真是给自己找不自在，还得我安慰你。”“不就因为是个老头儿么，真正穿官服的我也敢对他说什么。”二人拐入一条僻静林荫斜街，脚步慢下来。

“这是哪儿呵？我怎么不认得？”关山平打量着四周黑黢黢静悄悄的院落房脊。长的围墙沿街曲伸逶迤不休，遮住了所有门之窗口灯方人语，使整条街显得空旷但不荒凉，因为街树郁郁葱葱。“我也没来过。”周瑾说，“没想到城里还有这样的路离大街那么近。”“这下去通哪儿？”她问。

“不知道。管他呢。你们原来打算上哪儿？”他问。

“没说好，只想见了再定——你呢？”

“也没准，只想到了再说。”

“那咱们就走下去吧，看这条路通哪儿。”

“你本来等谁？”“我的那一个。”周瑾低头看着自己一眼交替的脚尖说。“真是么？我可知道很多人经常搞错。”

“我想是，”周瑾抬头看了关山平一眼，又低下头。“当然有些出入，但我不挑剔。”

“等不及，怕耽误？”“怕没有。”“万一有了呢？突然出现了，你怎么办？”

“不知道，自认倒霉呗。”周瑾笑着抬头注视关山平。“我没你那么浪漫。听说……”她笑着往下说了。

“我知道你听说了什么，听谁说的。”关山平故作悲壮。“我虽准备死等，不将就。”

“你真相信有么？真的存在？”周瑾好奇地问。

“绝对相信，问题仅仅是机缘。”

“听说你到处化缘。”“殚精竭智，始终待机，相对而动。”

“怎么想的？”周瑾笑。“穷且益坚？”

“你不妨将其称之为一种追求。”关山平得意地说，“相当执著的追求。”“怕到闷的吧？”“你这么说不就不行了。”关山平严肃地对周瑾说，“老是把高尚的感情庸俗化刺打击。”

“没有没有。”周瑾笑着说，“说着玩呢。”

“你这么着特别妨碍我跟你掏心窝子。”

“千万别，我不啦。”“爱听？”“还行吧。”周瑾笑。

天暗下来，林荫上树影重重，他们走过一座小石桥，桥的河沟接近干涸，茂盛青草几乎覆没了小河，墨绿淳着白沫的河水稠成浆体，小心听才能听到静止水面下的汨汨流淌声。

“不是生下就会这么多情，也就是这二年才开始追求。”

“那你生下来都干嘛了？”

“玩来着……你是说多年前吧？刚走进人生？”

“刚懂事。”“当时，刚懂事我就坏有特别强制想要改变迅速改变自己一穷二白面貌的愿望。”“后来呢？”“我爷爷死了。”“什么意思？”“留下一间房呵。”“怎么啦？谁死不留房？留一间都是少的。”

“是地方呵，临街。”“于是呢？”“于是的就开了一个饭馆，专门经营特色饭菜。”

“你发财了？”“我倒闭了。用了坏人，周围群众把我的特色饭菜称之为妙脚丫泥鼻涕芡鸣屎余丸子粘痰打卤虫面广为传播，我于屡次大酬宾提篮小卖送货上门仍毫无起色。”

“后来呢？”“后来我觉得特别需要理解，于是便改了追求为精神追求。放弃荣华富贵天涯海角不达目的誓不罢休。”

“你的一生真是充满追求的一生。”“对对，说的太对了。现在我已成了毛主席说的那三种人：一个高尚的人；一个脱离了低级趣味的人的人；一个有益于人民的人。听着特腻是么？”

“听着特感动，真的真的，特为你难过，真是好人没好报。”

“同情我？”“不是，就觉得特别不易。一个民愤极大的几乎丧尽天良的人尚且不忘追求越是艰验越向前，那是一种什么精神？”

“嘲笑我？拿我开心？我这人可脆弱。”

周瑾咯咯笑。路灯忽然华光齐放，勾勒出一条街的轮廓，他们沐浴在雾状的光明中。有少年在黑暗处憋着嗓子喊：“嘿！街上不许手拉手。”

周瑾蓦地伸回自己的手，羞红脸。

关山平也讪讪的。周瑾回到家时，脸上仍自带着笑意。他轻轻拿钥匙开了门，蹑手蹑脚走进来，到卧室门口看了一眼。

我正倚在床上，开着台灯在看报纸，闻声抬头。

“回来了。”“你还没睡？”她走进来，面带笑意。“等你呢。”我把报纸翻了过来。继续浏览。“你不回来我哪敢睡？”

“你今天怎么没去？害得我等了半天，傻子似地一个人站在车站，人家都看我。”“还说呢，刚出单位门就碰上一个人，缠着我没完没了地说话，走都走不开。”“谁呀？”“谁呀？赵蕾，你的好朋友。真拿自个不当外人，也不知又跟个什么人了，找我哭诉。当街一把鼻涕一把泪的，惹得人都看，好像我跟她怎么啦似的，什么事呵？我还得安慰她，烦透了。”“人家信赖你。”周瑾笑着说，“她老跟我说，特喜欢你。”“我用得着她喜欢么？她还是别喜欢我的好。我又不是熊猫不被喜欢就不珍贵了。”

“你这话要让她听见伤心死了。”

“那就让她死吧，反正她不死在心这儿也得在别人那儿死。我也看出来了，她那颗心是迟早要伤，别人不伤，自己也得伤了。”“你太损了，回头我小告她。”

“告吧，就说我说的，像她这样的趁早死了算啦！活着也怪没劲的，别人看着也着急。”

“我不，我告她你听了她的诉说回家就长吁短叹，打心眼儿里心疼她。”“你饶了我吧。”我俩一起笑。“你后来去哪儿了没等着我？”

“哪儿也没去……也碰见一个人，就站在那儿聊了会几天。”“我后来去了，八点钟，没看见你们。”

“后来我们就到一家冷饮店坐着聊去了，我们也不能老站街上。”周瑾笑，神态从容。“谁呀？我认识么？”“你不认识，原来我们单位的一个同事，后来调走了。”

我看着她笑：“男的吧？”

“对，没错。”周瑾晃着头笑，看着我。“是男的。”

“我猜也是男的，要是女的哪至于聊那么长时间。”

“吃醋了？”“我才不吃醋呢，”我笑着把报纸放下，从床上坐好，“谁像你呀？整个一个阎锡山的老乡。”

“哟哟，还说不醋呢，脑酸得都能蘸饺子了。”周瑾在我身边坐下。“我们什么都没干，就是一起聊天来着。”

“不要那么我岢嘛，谁也没说你们干嘛了。”

“德性！”周瑾一甩手站起来。“越说你还越来越劲了。”

“这就瞧我不顺眼了？”

“别没完呵，说两句得了。”周瑾摔帘子出卧室。出了门又回来问：“你吃饭了么？”

“吃了。”我安详地说，“你呢？吃了么？”

“没有。”“聊了一晚上那男的也不请你吃顿饭？真不够意思。”

周瑾转身就走。“我吃的也是面条，锅还剩点卤，不够你再自己做点。”我在屋里大声说，随手又捡起报纸看起来。

周瑾在厨房把锅碗瓢盆弄得叮当响，一会儿，端着一碗堆得高高的面条进来，坐在我对面吸吸溜溜地吃。

我放下报纸看她一眼。

她边吃白我一眼，用筷子把面条卷成厚厚一捆往嘴里塞。

我举起报纸，嘿嘿一笑。

“你明天干嘛？”她含着面条问。

“上班呵。”“别装傻，我问你下班后呢？”

“魏大冬叫我去他那儿打麻将。”

“不带我去？”“都是男的你去干嘛？”

“都是男的怎么啦？我又不是不认识他们。”

“说好了不许带媳妇的。”

“你要不带我去，我就自己出去玩了。”周瑾吃完面条，把碗筷往桌上一搁，赌气说。

“刷了刷了。”我指着碗筷说。

“着什么急？明天刷不成？我就明天刷，你要看不下去你替我刷。”“——你明天上哪儿玩去？”

“这你就管不着了。”周瑾坐在梳妆凳上对着镜子卸发卡头绳，松齐头发。“找‘情儿’去。”

“你够长本事的。”“那谁叫你不带我去的？”

“我说咱们可约法三章！找‘情儿’可以，但不许花家里的钱给‘情儿’往家里挣奖励……”

“你就坏吧！”周瑾蓦地转身站起，举着拢子打我，我骂道：“我明天还就偏跟你去，想不让我去都不成了。”

“那你去打牌，我找‘情儿’。”

乒乓球在桌上一来一去地飞速跳跃。“吃转儿。”我一边削球一边念咒。“你接我这左旋，你这右旋——我可抽了！”我侧身拉步一个大扣杀，球弹在他方的台边一个变线飞到地上。围观同事们哗地一声笑了。

“你真不是我对手。”我对站在球桌另一侧的关山平说，“赶紧下去吧，趁着比分比较接近。”

“你吹什么呀！快发球吧。”关山平把球扔过来笑着说。

“真不知死，那我可真不给你留面子了。”

“你要这么说，我也不让着你了。本来说帮你在群众面前树立点威信你还不识趣。”

“一对臭球，就会吹。”球台旁的女同事们笑。

“开会了开会了，那边打球的把拍子放下吧。”单位头儿拿着一叠文件走进会议室，边走边冲我们这边嚷嚷。

我们放下球拍，一哄而散，乱哄哄地在一排排长椅间找坐位。单位的同事们陆续

进来，拿书的挟着毛线的，三五成群，说说笑笑。关山平夺一个女同事手里的书看，挨了一顿抢白。“你怎么那么抠呵？看怕什么？”关山平说。

“就不给你看，”女同事不高兴地说，“不愿意。”

“静一静静一静，咱们开会了。”瘦瘦的但有个肚子的头在大家对面铺着白布的桌后坐下。威严地说，“今天咱们学习几份文件。关于形势的，然后念几份通知，最后再讲讲咱们单位发生的一些问题——大家往前坐坐，别都挤在后面。”

头儿在上面一字一顿地念起文件，大家在底下叽叽喳喳开起小会。我坐在两个女同事身边趴俯前边椅背上低声和她们说笑。“给挪个地儿给挪个地儿。”关山平曲膝弓腰拨拉着人腿沿着这排椅子挤过来。“去去，这儿没你的地儿。”我身边的姑娘说他。“怎么那么烦呀？”关山平涎着脸笑，央告着，硬挤在我们之间坐下。

我闭眼假寐。他捅我：“哎，我跟你说咋儿那人没来。”

“看来你是真没福气。”我仍闭着眼养神。

“你说我怎么那么倒霉？约谁谁不来。”

我闭着眼，没吱声，接着，头枕着胳膊偏脸看他：“你确实没救了。”“不过，我昨天倒自己认识了一个姑娘。”关山平得意地说。“毛主席保证。你这种自我安慰特没劲。”

“真的真的，不骗你。我在那儿等人，她也在那儿等人，我们都没等着，后来生搭上了。”

“肯定是猪八戒的近亲。”

“还可以，挺漂亮的”，关山平兴奋地说，“一点不蒙你。我跟她聊了半天，特有戏。”

“你怎么说的？”“就按你教我的那套路数，云山雾罩，我觉还真灵。”

“是你喜欢的那类型么？”“是我喜欢的，但还不完全是我喜欢的那个。”

“这就行了，挺一般的人就别那么高的要求了。”

“你觉得我真没希望遇到一个十全十美的姑娘？”

“没希望，谁也没希望，就没有十全十美的人！挂历上美人漂亮吧？那是经过技术处理的，光给你看拿的出来的那部分。拿不出手的呢？谁知道她有没有暗疾？就算有个十全十美的完全吻合的，涮羊肉爱吃吧？老让你吃你也受不了也得烦。”“你觉得我不该错过这机会？”

“坚决冲上去。”周围人哗地一声笑了，不知头儿念了什么把他们逗乐了。我也抬起头继续跟关山平说话。

“你爱钱是吧？你爱钱和你有钱是两回事，还得钱爱你，两厢情愿。老实说，真有个十全十美的姑娘站在你面前，你也就是看看，解解眼馋。”

“是是，这道理我懂。”

“是个好坏子就行了。乔装打扮嘛。”

“对对，多好的房子不装修一下内部住着也不舒坦。那我就不犹豫了。”“千万别再犹豫了。你的问题不是找谁而是有没有人找你。”“不过，这姑娘好像有主儿了。”

“咳！还管那些！”我抬起头看看四周，压低声音说，“还管那些？这事没顺序，谁积极谁主动谁就捷足先登。挤过公共汽车吧？拿出点那劲儿来，趁热打铁见缝下针。你不是觉得她有戏么，那就是说她和那男的不是牢不可破。人生能得几回搏？机不可失，时不再来。”

“具体步骤呢？”“敌进你退，敌退你进，敌驻你扰，敌疲你打。”

前排坐着的一个女同事扑哧一笑，回过头横我一眼：“什么乱七八糟的？”“这不是我说我的，《诱妞大全》上就这么写了。”我继续跟关山平说，“你还得机智灵活，英勇顽强，屡战屡败，屡败屡战。先胖不算胖，后胖压塌炕，笑到最后才是笑得最好看的。”“你这都是原则。”关山平抱怨说，“我需要的是立即能奏效，譬如开那把锁的那把钥匙。”

“没法再细了。”我说“情场就是战场，战术通用，关键看你是不是用兵如神了。”

昨天晚上在街上我可看见你了。”

银行营业大厅内，赵蕾和周瑾对坐着，一边书写、传递着各种票据一边聊天，大厅内人群川流，人声嘈杂。

“在哪儿？”“你别管在哪儿了，有没有吧？……和个男的。”

“没有。”周瑾笑着不承认。

“还不承认呢。”赵蕾笑盯着周瑾。“够快的，人不知鬼不觉。”“你说什么呢？我一点也听不明白。”

“别装傻了。他怎么样？挺有意思是不是？”“不懂，你肯定看错人了。”“你

说你瞒我干嘛？我这眼睛可是照妖镜。”

“是么，周瑾？”同桌的另一个女同事笑着问，“够风流的。”

“没有，”周瑾笑着辩解，“你听赵蕾瞎说。”

“我瞎说？”赵蕾笑吟吟来，“好，算我瞎说。”

“下一位。”周瑾把手伸到柜台上，接过一张存款条，看了一眼，脸立刻红了，手把存款条迅速握成一团。

她抬眼看柜台外，关山平微笑着站在外面。

“你怎么来了？”她红着脸说，“你到门口去我马上出来。”

她回过头看，同事们都抿着嘴看着她笑。

“这回你还说什么？”赵蕾俯过身来低声笑道。

“别告诉我们那位。”周瑾央告说：“其实我们真没什么，就到一起聊聊。”周瑾起身，从柜台出口出去，到门外找关山平。透过宽大玻璃窗可以看见关山平满脸堆笑，周瑾连连摇头。

桌上的电话铃响了，赵蕾懒懒地用两个手指夹起话筒，放在耳边，娇滴滴地拉长声音说：“喂——”

“麻烦您给找一下周瑾。”我在电话的另一端说。

“你是方言吧？”赵蕾蓦地坐直身子，把话筒贴紧耳朵，娇笑着说，“我是赵蕾。”“周瑾不在？”赵蕾看了眼门外仍在跟关山平说话的周瑾，说：“她走了提前下班走了。”“噢……”“你有事吗？”“没事。”我准备挂电话。“不打算出来玩玩？”“不打算。”我说，“回家睡觉。”

我挂了电话，赵蕾慢慢将话筒放回机座，扭脸长时间地凝视窗外的周瑾。银行大厅内响起下班的电铃声。柜台内的职员们立刻忙碌起来，飞快地结束手头的工作，站起来收拾桌面准备下班。柜台外的顾客们也结束了排队，纷纷散去。

赵蕾浓妆艳抹，穿戴整齐，挎着小包，高跟鞋咔咔地走出银行大门。“还没完呢？”她冲那两人说，“都下会班了。”

“是么？”周瑾急慌慌地冲回银行大厅。

“你找了半天就找上她了？”赵蕾对关山平说，“人家可是有丈夫的。”“我找她是别的事，”关山平说。

“你还能有什么事？”赵蕾笑一下，娉婷而去。

周瑾挎着小包急急走出来，关山平迎上去。

“真的不行，我得回家。”周瑾说：“我爱人在家等我呢。”

“那改天，明天怎么样？”

“明天也不行，明天我们做账，得加班。”

“你是不愿意跟我出去？”

“不是，真的是没时间。”

“那算了，不求你了。”

“真对不生，你别生气。”

“我没有气。”关山平转身就走，走了几步又回过头说：“你要不去，那张票就让它作废，别再给别人。”“不会的。”周瑾充满歉意地说。

关山平挥了挥手，头也不回地走了。

周瑾站在人群中看着窗外，手把扶杆身子随着车身的运动轻轻摇晃。窗外是一片车流和人群。一对对情侣手拉手在便道的树荫下走，飞跑着过马路，忽然对视着笑起来……

她回到家里，各间居室内悄无人息。她脱了鞋，把包丢在沙发上，换了睡衣穿着拖鞋在屋里四处走动。

她在厨房里切肉切菜五彩绚丽地堆满一只只盘子。锅里的水开了，咕咕冒着热气掀动着锅盖。

电动排风扇飞速的旋转，嗡嗡作响。

炒勺里的油热了，冒出股股青烟，蓦得火苗窜起，油锅着了火，连忙将炒勺端下，关了炉火。

她拿着一袋挂面往滚开的锅里下，用筷子搅迅速变软变曲泛出白沫的雪白细长的面条。

那一盘盘搭配得十分悦目的肉菜原封未动，鲜灵的色泽黯淡下来。她端着一碗面条坐到电视前，边吃边看，电视机里正在播送新闻：会议、水灾和农田长势。

她吃着吃着，突然不动了，侧耳谛听，直到楼道内的脚步声过去，才继续吃。夜里，我回到家里，见电视仍开着，节目已经播完，屏幕沙沙闪着雪花，她躺在沙发上是睡着了。

我经手轻脚过去关了电视，刚要走开，她骨碌从沙发上坐起来，睡眼惺松地问：“几点了？”“第二天了。”我说。她噌地站起来，登登走进卧室，往床上一倒，拉过毛巾被盖在身上，扭身向里闭眼睡觉。

“生气了？”我讪笑着跟进卧室说。

她不吭声。我到卫生间又洗又涮，弄得浑身水淋淋的，拿了条毛巾回到卧室，浑身上下边擦着边笑说：

“不是去找‘情儿’么？怎么没去？”

“你就等着瞧吧”。她噙声噙气地说。

“别这样，”我上床去板她。“别不理人呀。”

“别碰我！”她使劲拧回身子。“我要睡觉了。”

我下了床，把毛巾扔到一边：“我是为了让你心理平衡才玩这么晚的。”“你少来这套！”她翻身坐起气冲冲地嚷，“我怎么啦我怎么啦？不就是晚回来了一天，用得著你这么颠过来倒过去的说？你要这样我就天天晚回来。”

“我来哪套了？我又怎么啦”我申辩，“我不也就晚回来一天。”“你是晚回地一天么？哪天你按点回来过？”

“那我也没别的呀，就是和一帮朋友打打麻将还是赢多输少。”“谁知道你天天干嘛去了。”

“你说我干嘛去了，你要这么说就没劲了。”“我不知道你干嘛去了，你干嘛去了自己知道。”

“你怎么不讲理阿？行，我不说了，你说我干嘛去了我干嘛去了。怎么着吧？”“你现在是越来越狂了。”

“什么话！我狂？我哪有你狂呵？你多狂呵，说灭我就灭我，我一个挺大男人每天还得看你脸色。”

“你要是不愿跟我过了，烦我了，你可以走。”

“就会来这套，你们女的是不是都这德性？”

“没新鲜的，图新鲜你找别人去。”

“你要老这么没完，我可真烦你了。”

“烦就烦，烦就离婚。”周瑾用被蒙头倒下。“你威胁谁呀？谁怕你呀？”“没错，现在世界上谁也不怕谁。要离真离，别光说——

你要有志气，别到时哭天洒地好骂我是陈世美。”

周瑾真的哭了，蒙着毛巾被的身子一抽一抽。

我打开台灯，拿张报纸躺到床上看起来：“你哭什么呀？有本事别挺横的人？”周瑾的哭声更大了。我不理她，点上一支烟，继续看报纸：“你小点声呵，人家邻居可都睡了。”周瑾一骨碌爬起来，到卫生间又擦泪又揩鼻涕。片刻，眼睛红红的回来，照着镜子端详自己，不住的泣噎，恶狠狠地对我说：“你别以为我不敢离就觉得自己怪不起了。”

“你什么不敢呀？中国人里数你有骨气了。”

我一个猛子从床上跳下来，一把没抓周瑾，她冲出门，旋风般地消逝了。“你回来！”我在楼梯口大声喊，转回屋换鞋穿衣服，咬牙切齿地骂：“这个该死的，二百五、没头脑、神经病——说跑就跑。”我一溜烟下了楼，在楼区花园四处寻找，每棵树后，每辆车里都找了个遍，无人迹。夜风很凉，吹得我汗一阵阵下去又一阵阵上来。我顺着马路来到大街。街口有一个瓜摊，看瓜的老头没睡，正坐在小椅子上摇扇乘凉。我问大爷看见一个穿睡衣的女的没有，大爷说沿着大马路走了。我沿着灯光通明空无一人的大街追了一程，到了一个十字路口仍没发现周瑾，便折了回来。我回到楼前，见屋里亮着灯，便飞速冲了上来，进了屋摔上门就喊：“有本事你别回来。”

屋里亮堂堂的毫无动静，我各屋看了看没有人，回到卧室躺下。我气坏了，躺半天倒也睡着了。

“周瑾！”我一声大喝。

正和赵蕾笑盈盈地从一家商店出门的周瑾吓了一跳，原地呆住。我疾步走上去，牢牢攥住她的手腕，满脸堆笑，柔声说：“跟我回家去。”“我不！”周瑾一脸凛然用手掰着我的手。“放开我，我不回家。”赵蕾在一旁微笑地看。

“有话咱们回家去说。”我死死攥住她，低声下气来说，“回家怎么说不成？”“我就不回家，不回去了，这不是正中你意么。”

我和周瑾在街上扭来扭去，引得一些行人观望。

“咱别在街上拉拉扯扯，让人笑话。”

“嗨，你还怕难看？我还以为你什么都不在乎呢。”

“别给脸不要脸呵。”我手暗暗加劲儿。

“你才不要脸呢，放开我！你干嘛？”周瑾嚷。

“你干嘛？”两个联防队员过来，指着我手。“放开放开。”

我手触电般地松开，周瑾拔腿就走，我忙把她拉住。对气汹汹的联防队员们说：“我们是两口子，两口子吵架。”

“你们是两口子么？”联防队员问周瑾。

周瑾不吭声。赵蕾忙说：“他们是两口子，我可以作证。”

“两口子吵架也别在街上吵呵。”

围观的群众笑，联防队员走开。

“你就跟他回去吧。”赵蕾劝周瑾，“别闹了。”

“我下午还得上班呢。”周瑾说。

“我帮你请假。”赵蕾笑着把我们俩往车站推。

我一进家门，把门一关，指着周瑾就嚷：“你什么东西？有这样的吗？差点让人把我当流氓逮了。”

周瑾不吭声，神态得意地往沙发一坐，伸手去开电视，电视刚出现一个画面，就被我啪地关上。

“你还挺得意，你占什么便宜了？我要让人当流氓逮了，你就是流氓家属。”周瑾不看我，给自己倒了杯水架起二郎腿悠闲地喝。

“给我倒杯水，我也渴了。”我命令道，在她身边坐下。见她没反应，就夺过她的杯子喝。

“你害怕了？”她望着我说。

我差点没让水呛着。咽下一口水说：“我害什么怕？你还以为……我是为你担心，大晚上一个人跑出去，你不知道白天街上都有坏人？”“你不就盼着我被坏人捉了去，你好清静……再找。”

“别这样，你别这样，周瑾，我是那种人么？”

“你是什么人？”“你是真惹我生气，昨晚你气我一夜还不够？”

“你气？我还气呢。”“我气上还加着担心，心都快碎了。”

“你得了吧，气你还能睡得着觉？”

“我睡了么？那也是气着气着迷糊了，你昨晚回来了？”

周瑾抹泪：“你根本就不关心我，甭管我出什么事，你该睡照睡，亏你睡得着。”“好啦好啦。”我和解地说，“咱们别闹了，老这么闹日子就没法过了。”“你压根就不想好好过。”

“你这么说不愧么？我还怎么好好过？我都快给你当孙子了。长这么大我跟谁服过软？跟你我连自尊心都不要了，你还要我怎么样？人总得讲理吧？昨晚我招你了么？”

“对，你没招我，你总有理，我老胡搅蛮缠。”“好好，算我无理，我不对，全是我的错。”

“什么叫算你无理？”“好好，我真无理，真混蛋，不该惹你生气。”

“你要早这样，不就没事了。”

“我一直没敢别的样儿呵。”

“你瞧你，又不认错了。”

“好好好，不说了不说了。我一错到底一坏到底。”

“你现在就是坏，一点不哄我，看着我哭。其实好多时候我本来没事的，就是想闹点脾气，我不跟你闹跟谁闹？你哄哄我就好了——可你就是不哄！”

“闹吧闹吧，下回你有脾气就跟我闹，我当受气包……算我没说算我没说。我当受气包应该、光荣，别人想当还不行呢。”周瑾先是瞪眼后是破涕面笑。

“闹什么呀？”我也笑，接着语重心长地说，“你说有什么可闹的？咱们是多好的一对，郎才女貌，旗鼓相当，我种田你织布，多少人羡慕？咱们自个儿真应该珍惜。”

“一点都不好。”周瑾断言。

“怎么不好？”我忙说，“你可千万不能这么说，我觉得很好了。好得不能再好

了，我就是当皇上，也选你当粉头——

六宫粉黛的头。”“你少拐着弯骂人。”周瑾振振有词地说，“好什么呀？人家年轻夫妇天天去出去玩，逛公园看演出下馆子。咱们呢？打结婚你就再也不带我下馆子了，一场电影也没看过。”

“我说你这个同志呵，怎么一脑袋资产阶级思想？讲吃讲穿那是咱小市民的本色吗？”

“本来嘛，讲吃讲穿怎么啦？人家还没老呢。市民就不能享受了。”“你见哪个小市民像你所说的那样？不全是吃饱了混天黑闷蜜蓄窝子炕上整点俗人乐？”

“叫你说的那么恶心，就是有人嘛。那街上一对对的都是哪儿蹦出来的？”“那不都是没结婚的？你跟他们比？”

周瑾盯着我半天没说话，脸一扭，叹气说：“结婚真没劲。”

我打了个长长的呵欠，眼睛汪汪地解释：“我困了，昨晚没睡好。”“那你去睡好了。”周瑾冷冷地说。

“你还气么？你要气我就不睡。”

“我不气了，你去睡吧。”周瑾不耐烦地说。

我把手塔在她手上，堆着满脸笑：“咱们一起睡。”

“行了，”周瑾抽开手说，“你就敞开去睡吧，免了这套。”

我睡了整整一下午，睡得死去活来，在梦里又是打仗又是逃跑，直到黄昏，才大汗淋漓疲惫不堪地起床，迷迷糊糊摇摇晃晃地出了卧室。周瑾正笑眯眯地坐在错暗的室内看电视。电视里播的是一部动画片：四只小老鼠排着队趾高气扬地从一只睡觉的小花猫身边走过，边走边齐声叫嚷：“老鼠怕猫，这是谣传。一只小猫，有啥可怕？壮起鼠胆，把它打翻。千古偏见，定要推翻。”猫和鼠都稚气十足，憨态可掬。“走吧。”我边穿衣服边对一动不动盯着电视看的周瑾说。

“去哪儿？”她回头看我一眼说。

“下馆子。”我套好汗衫说，“我也豁出去了。”

周瑾望着我，脸上露出微笑。

“乐啦？”她不好意思地笑，噌地站起奔进卧室手忙脚乱的梳妆打扮。“咱别进太贵的馆子。”

“当然，我这点理智还是有的。”

我们选了一家中档餐馆大摇大摆走进去。尽管中档，但也是冷气炊座什么的，在我看来就很好了。

“标准就是低档宴会的标准呵。”我翻看着菜单对周瑾说。

“你就点吧。”周瑾兴致勃勃。

我把服务员叫过来，点了几个猪肉做的菜。

“这几个菜够吃么？”我点完菜，服务员不走，说：“我们这儿菜的量都小。”“够吃。”我说，“我们是吃过饭来的。”

“再要个虾吧。”职务员指菜单说，“我们这儿虾不错。”

“你什么意思？”我在椅子上转过身，面对着服务员说，“嫌宰得不过瘾？”服务员拿起菜单飞快地走了。

我对周瑾说：“我就说过，落到这帮人手里，没好儿。”

周瑾干笑：“她也是好意。”

“好意？”我瞟着冷柜前抱肘叉腰站着的一排服务员。“瞧她们那架式，一个个都跟杀手似的。”

周瑾笑，低头摆弄光秃的碗筷。

我们百无聊赖地等着菜，服务员穿梭不停地往各桌上菜，就是没我们的。我几次叫住给我们开票的服务员问，她都不耐烦地回答：“正炒呢。”当她又一次如此回答时，我耐心消逝了，怒吼起来：“怎么着？瞧不起人是不是？你还不耐烦了，我们都等多长时间了？”“你吵什么？马上就给你上。”

“马上给我上？我还不吃了！”我一拍桌子，“退钱！”

满堂宾客受了一惊，纷纷掉头来看。一个领班模样的中年男人忙跑过来：“怎么啦怎么啦？”

“怎么拉？蹲着拉？”我指着那个服务员吼。“你问她，我们等多长时间了。你们这是什么馆？我要有低血糖还等不到你们上菜了——饭馆饿死人了！”我站起来大声喊。

“算啦算啦。”周瑾劝我。

“没你的事。”我冲她嚷，“谁也别拦着我，我把它牌子摘了。”“怎么回事？”领班问服务员。

“我说马上给他上的……”

要不是周瑾拉着我，我手指能杵这服务员和鼻子上：“我要不说你也不马上给我上。怎么着？我这钱不是人民币？比我晚到的都吃完了，依挤兑谁呢？”

“马上上，马上给您上。”领班劝抚我，问服务员：“他都要的什么菜？”“他说不吃了，要退钱。”“对，不吃了，气都气饱了。”

“另吵了。”周瑾往回拉我。

“你别觉得丢面子，咱没什么不好意思的。来这儿吃饭就是让她们伺候的，咱花了钱不能买气生。”我对领班说，“我说你们这饭馆真该好好整顿整顿了，不像话，看人下菜碟，不就是没要你们的大虾么？你要不扣她的奖金，我这服务费反正是不会给了。”“我们一定注意改进工作，您消消气，您要的菜马上给您上。”领班赔了无数好话，把我劝回座位，招呼其他服务员迅速上菜。“你看我干嘛？不服是不是？”我不依不饶地冲那个服务员说。“想干不想干？不想干直说，我还不信治不了你。”

领班忙把那个服务员拉走，制止她的申辩。

菜很快上齐了，我们也没了胃口。

我冷笑着看着一桌菜对周瑾说：“这就是享受了？”

周瑾不吭声，低头一口一口吃菜，没吃几口放下筷子说：“咱们走吧。”“全他妈糟践了。”我站起来看着一桌子几乎未动的饭菜，冲一边靠墙站着的服务员们喊：“你们家里人晚上可有的吃了。”女服务员们不是低下头就是把脸扭向一边。

“呵，月光如水多么美丽令我陶醉，心儿颤抖我的心为什么颤抖，只因为有了你佛罗伦萨的丽茨费尔德……”

台上一个营养不良的中国人披着块麻袋片斗篷底下露出一双肮脏落满尘土的人造革凉鞋，粗糙的大脚趾头上一层皮已经剥落——他捂着心窝在抒情。

“你觉得好吗？”坐在我旁边的一个小伙子突然转过头问我。我楞楞地，回答：“不是都说好……”

小伙子严肃地望着我说：“就是‘四人帮’回来，掐着我脖子问我，我也不能说好。”

小伙子说罢起身扬长而去。

我转过脸看周瑾，她看着我：“咱们也别受罪了。”

晚上，我向周瑾求欢，她顺从地任我罢弄。正当我兴致勃勃鼓捣个没完时，发现她正看着我笑。

“你笑什么？”“你就别白费劲了。”她平淡地说。

“你感到失望？”室内游泳池内，赵蕾和周瑾一圈一圈地游着，不时避开迎面或横向游来的人。她的腿在碧蓝清澈的水中显得十分白嫩，分开、蜷起、有力地蹬出。她们都没戴游泳帽，头发黑油油湿淋淋地披散着。她们先后改为仰泳，曲线毕露地破浪而行。

“不，谈不上失望，”周瑾说，“也无从失望。想通了，就是这么回事，结婚以后都一样，必然的一切都会平淡。”

“谁变了？”“都变了又都没变，必然的规律。大概也算不上坏事，平淡了才能持久。方言也算不上个坏丈夫，平心而论，也许比多数男子要好些。”“你老实说，这就是你希望的——我是说你婚前想像的梦想的那种……生活？”“不，”周瑾承认。“当然不一样。我也没那么说，我只是说我想通了。”“不认为有那种生活存在了？”

“不认为。”一个男人游过掀起浪打在赵蕾脸上，她停止划动下去，又浮上来，紧游几下，又仰过来并肩和周瑾同游。

她瞟着周瑾，问：“后悔么？”

“不。”周瑾于水中苦笑时“我想芯不可能碰到比方言更合适的人，我又不是公主。”

“万一呢？”“什么万一？”“万一这时突现出现一个……”

“不会的。”周瑾笑着打断赵蕾。“那也一样，当时我就觉得方言是我心目中的那个人。”

“现在还是么？”“应该还是，他还是他。”

“可不你觉得他是他就这不是了。”

“咱们别谈这个了好么？”

“干嘛不谈？正谈得带劲儿。那种感觉来自何处？无非是他们相处时发生的一个个瞬间，意外的激动人心的令人欣喜的一个个瞬间。现在这种瞬间消逝了，他存在了，难作得一见了。人有什么特别的？方言有什么装置的？凡人而已，就像无神论者眼里的神。”她们触到池边，踩及竖身转过去紧紧抓着池槽抹去脸上的水。“有个人

给你打过好几次电话就在昨天。”赵蕾颇有含意地笑着我周瑾说，“你不想见见他么？”

周瑾摇头。“就靠回忆过日子么？”赵蕾也笑着摇头：“等你老了再这样不行吗？”“可我们有过……时至今日，我觉得我的感情仍在他身边。”周瑾认真地说，水从她成绺的头发上滴落。

“别错过机会，成要为你的就抓住这法机会——这也许是你最后一次机会了。你没有什么丢失的，因为你已经一贫如洗。从前是这样，如今不是这样了。”赵蕾热切地说，“别朔潮流而动。”舞厅里，赵蕾带着周瑾人群款款地跳，进进退退，原地踏着拍子。“你踩我脚了。”“我不太会跳。”周瑾抱歉地说。

“看来我是教不会你了，得换个人教。”

两个男人走过来，拉开她们，一个把赵蕾带走，一个接住周瑾继续带她跳。“你为什么不愿见我？”

周瑾垂着眼睛睡，任人带领，不吭声。

“是讨厌我吗？”周瑾抡起眼，盯着男的说：“我会丈夫了。”“那又怎么样？”男的带着周瑾绕开一对飞快旋转面过的男女，那女的一脸痴迷的笑。”那又怎么样？你这等于花儿对雨说，我已经浇过水了。”

“这一好……”“什么？你大点声。”“我说这不行！”周瑾大声说，严肃地目光的灼灼盯着对方。“不不，你刚才说的不是这句，你再说一遍。”

“我没权利再跟你接触了。”

“你是说使你心有顾虑裹足不前的是因为你已经结了婚，道德习俗不允许？”
“不完全，但也有个因素。”

“主要因素？”“我不想回答。”“你爱你丈夫？”音乐骤然疯狂起来。舞厅内的灯暗下来，鳞板球和追灯旋转起来。激光束从四面八方群射来。正在双双起舞的人们松开对方，痉挛般地扭起来。

“你爱你丈夫？”“是的。”“他爱你么？”“我想是的。”“他对你说么？”
“……”“我可以对你说：我爱你！”关山平面鄯抽搐摇肩扭胯像只巨大蝙蝠张开四肢大声嚷嚷。

“晚上你爸妈回来，在这儿吃的饭。”我闭着眼躺在床上，惬意地吹着电风扇。
“你不在，两人就抓着我上课，嫌咱不会过日子，屋里乱。钱到手就花，不会在人民的银行存点。”

“你怎么说？”“我怎么说？一味逢迎呗。”

周瑾上了床，躺在身边。接着，她的手伸了过来，人也糗了过来。“别闹，天多热呵，拣个凉快天，天下雨时。”

她手停了下来，搭在我脸上，我用手把她的手捂于我腮帮子上。这样躺了半天，我都快睡着了，她突然问：

“你爱我吗？”我睁开眼，她正凝视着我，我又闭上眼：“怎么想起问这个？”“我想要你说。”“多俗呵，咱都老夫老妻了，还弄这俗景干嘛？”

“结婚后你就没说过。”

“那还用说？咱中国人实诚全在心里，就不地个花言巧语。”周瑾在言声了，我翻个身朝里：“明儿星期天，魏大冬叫咱们去打牌，你也一起去吧。”

夜里下起大雨，早晨仍雨声如注。我在窗口看了眼外面的雨，走到床边催促仍躺在床上的周瑾。“起来吧，咱该走了。”

“下雨还去？”“去，风雨无阻，下雨天打牌多瘾呵。”

她坐起来，凝视着我，脸上没有一丝表情。

“怎么啦？”我说。“我不去了。”她说，“我不想去了。”

“去玩玩嘛，何必闷在家里？”我过去拉她。

她抽回手，平静地说：“今天我们行卖债券，对得去加班。”

“你们银行怎么老加班？够没劲的——那我一个人去了？”

“去吧。”她说，“玩个痛快。”

我拍拍她脸蛋，笑着离屋而去。

雨中的公园，十分寂寥，亭台楼榭笼罩在烟雨中，坡上的树林枝叶飒飒，坡下的湖泊水声啁啾，蓝白二色的游船系分一湾。一顶花伞从山间的甬路移来，伞下边迈动着四条腿，两条穿着长裤，两条裙裾露着光滑笔直的月腿。

“知道我为什么这么纠缠你吗？我从来不这样，合则留不合则去，无意勉强任何人，偏偏对你……”

“……你说过。”“开始我没以为有什么特别。但回到家里，躺下一想，无数次否认，终于不得不承认：的确有什么发生了。”

“……” “对我来说，现在一切都明白无误了，剩下闲问题就是你，你怎么想？” “不知道。” 伞停住。周瑾抢眼看关山平，垂下眼：“真的不知道。”

伞继续移动。“我们会都有这种担心，怕被某种错觉欺骗，那就让我们来看看是不是正确的感觉。”

“……” “不讨厌我对吗？” 她低着头点头。“愿意听我说话？” 她点头。“想见我又怕见我？” “是的。” “想我吗——一个人没事时？”

“……” “想过吗？” “……想过。” “是否有内疚感？” “有。” “甚至是罪恶感。” “别说了。” “我想我们不必再怀疑了吧？”

“那又怎么样呢？” “什么怎么样？当然是跟着感觉走。”

“你想过后果吗？你有充分的思想准备吗？你有那份勇气吗——我不是指现在。” “听着，周瑾，我们到现在越来越像两个阴谋家了，在策划一桩有利可图的生意。你来到一个风景名胜，譬如说一座险峻秀丽的山，你难道是全面了解此山的构造路水质气候是否危险有无野兽强人设计进山路线无虞才放胆而行吗？”

“我们是在游山而是临渊，我当然要了解你的水性；贸然下水，只会顷刻灭顶，那时也许只顾逃生了。”

“你我意思是要我作出某种承诺？”

“不，我不想要你作什么，谁又能什么证得了自己？我确实有点……喜欢你，这点我不想对你隐瞒，但这是不是你说的那东西，我不知道。我愿意和你作好朋友是真的，愿意和你在一起，我像现在这样。至于别的更多，目前我不能答应你，老实说，我不愿意。”

“……” “打击了你对吗？你难过了？”

“我就料到会这样。” “别对我期望太高要求太急迫，多给我一些时间，让我慢慢来，慢慢适应。这种事我真第一次碰到，一点底都没有。不瞒你，我现在心里真是乱得很，不知怎么办才好，容我多想想。我不愿意看你不高兴，不想失去你，但完全照你说的办……不！不！别这样……”

伞一下被风卷走了，他紧搂着她，堵着她嘴吻她。周瑾拼命挣扎，两手用力往后摊他。在一个长长的令人透不过气的吻后她一把推开了他。“别强迫我。” 于是她瞪着眼睛冲他嚷。一阵密集的雨点斜飞而来，立刻湿了她的头发衣裙。

她转身飞快地跑去，迎着雨。

“创造一种诗意是对的，充满诗关系……” 我笑了一下。“——那的确是人人向往的，但你盘带过多？”

我和关山平站在单位办公楼顶的平台上边抽烟边谈，楼顶风很大，一阵阵横扫而过，所以尽管烈日当空，我们并没有感到多少酷热。“你开了一个无可挑剔的头，发展的也很顺畅，但你不能适可而止。你过分沉湎于诗意之中，过于重视所谓完美感受，这种诗意和完美感受被张到极限，你便失去了弹性和向纵深发展的势头而陷于滞。同时，过于浓郁的诗意必导致纯洁意识的增强。就是说你为自己设置了屏障，把你的意图和关系的范围限制的在了精神追求的圈子里。这样，当你试图冲破她时便会引起她极大的震惊、失望和反感，继而是愤怒的拒绝对坚决的抵抗——是你把她推到了超凡脱俗的境界与尘世欢乐绝了缘。”“我懂了。”关山平沮丧地说，“我给自己铺了条通向天国的路，走在种路上想上床当然是亵渎。你为我现在还是希望过渡回来吗？”“智取已经失败只有强攻了。”

“这，行吗？”“实际上，这也是必不可少的一步。就算你没犯错，一切按预想出现在最佳状况，最后你还得有这一下子。打比方吧，好比苏联十月革命，群众也发动了，士兵也争取了，临时政治也孤立了，最后还得打了下冬宫。正如毛主席所说，扫帚不到，灰尘不会自己忘记掉，另外，她犹豫、畏缩，除了她本人的心理障碍还因为有个旧秩序束缚着她拉扯着她，不烧了草料场林冲也不会上梁山。”

“明白。”我们从楼顶下来时，在楼门口遇见盛妆而来的赵蕾。

“如此花枝招展，这是要会谁呀？”我笑着问。

“不是找你。”赵蕾笑着指关山平。“找他。”

三日后，我出差去了东北，在一个海滨城市参加一个大型货会。会议开完，又接受一家供货单位邀请绕道去长白山玩了一些日子，这样，加上往返路程，我回京已是一月之后。

我一下火车就发现北京已凉了下來。尽管是晴天，但已没了前些日子那种令人难耐的暑闷热，街上刮过风很凉爽，据说我刚起，北京就开始下雨，连续不断，一连下了半个月，晚上睡觉都要盖棉被了。周瑾没来车站接我。到家后，我发现她黑了也瘦了，人有些憔悴。我怀疑她这段时间生病。她说没有，胃疼过几次但都很快了。她对我很好很温存，对我给她买的一些衣服也很满意，当场就一件件试穿以最后就穿那件最偏爱的连衣裙不脱了。

她为我做了很多菜，多的吃不了。饭间我们还喝了酒喝得十分兴奋，话特别多，坐在饭桌上你一言我一语也聊到很晚。夜里，我们行房事，一切得心应手，恰到好处。但我发觉她轻微的抗拒，如果不属于厌恶的话——和我的一些习惯动作。很难说她的兴奋是假的但持续时间很短，事后她也不要求爱抚而且很快穿睡衣，似乎对在我面前暴露身体感到不自然。我没有多想，旅途劳累，很快便睡了。

第二天我去上班，天气宜人且多日不见，同事们都显得很愉快，大声地和我打招呼，热情地拉住我聊天，特别是关山平。这个我特别注意了一下，简直可说是容光焕发。

一见我就把我拉到一边，小声诡密地说：“哥们儿成功了。”“是吗？那你得请客。”我敷衍着离开他跟圣门的头到打招呼：“主任我什么时候得跟您汇报一下工作。”

“我着急不着，刚回来先休息两天。”头儿大关心地呵呵笑着跟姑娘们聊天。“我什么时候得让你见见她。”关山平兴犹未尽地又拉住我说，“你还没见过她呢？你给我估估，看够多少分，值不值。”

“就不一定非我估了，你看着值那就是金不换。”

“不不，你一定得看看，我信你，你眼光准。”

“那就找个日子吧。”我说。离开办公室去厕所。

我蹲的厕所茅坑上拉屎时，突然感到一种郁闷和莫名的烦躁，可能是因为厕所太脏也可能是因为人到烂熟的环境和人群中产生的不快，就像一个刚出狱的囚犯没出去几日，又被抓了回去一样……或许，还有些别的什么。“今天晚上我可能晚回来一会。”周瑾一边穿鞋一边低头说。“我回来你几乎每天都晚回来。”

“四季度了，行里老加班。”

“不是和人约会吧？”我笑着走过去说。

“你怎么这么说话？”“走吧走吧”，我笑着推她。“该迟到了。”

她不走，问我：“你希望我和别人约会？”

“我哪管得了你呵；”我还开玩笑，看到周瑾的脸色忙改口：“说着玩呢。”我拨开一个须大的香水瓶子的盖，按住钮瞄准几步外正坐在沙发上看书的周瑾劈脸喷过去。

“你干吗？”她吓了一跳，面有愠色。

“凉快凉快。”我说，又往自己身上喷了几下。“刚就我一招，喷香水消汗。”我放下香水瓶继续看我的电视，电视里正在放一出连续剧，有外遇的妻子刚刚回家，不满丈夫严厉地询问她。她一言不发，神态冷淡坚毅，眼里流露出毫不掩饰的轻蔑如同江姐面对中美合作所的刽子手，坐在四十多排的观众都能看清楚。我忍俊不禁，吃地笑了声：“是这样吗？”我扭头问周瑾。

“什么？”她警惕地抬起眼。

“这个。”我用下巴指指电视，“妻子偷情回来是这个姿态么？”

周瑾掉头看电视。“完全不对嘛。”我评论道，“这副嘴脸等于把一切都供认了吗？”“依你应该是怎么样呢？”

“要么坚决否认，要么假装委屈，实在不行就以攻为守——你属于那种？”我满脸堆笑问。

“我是三者兼而有之。”

我笑，继续看电视，电视里丈夫挥手打了妻子一个耳光。“又不对了嘛，怎么能打？这一打岂不把她打成了受害者？应该把痛苦和悲愤深深埋在心底，加倍体贴，使对方永远对能平静心安理得。”“如果我有外遇，”周瑾问我。“你是不是就打算如此？”

“我当然是要做得更好一些，送个信呵放个哨呵什么的，你也尽可以放心交给我去办。”

“无耻。”“我只有一个请求卑微的请求：千万别找胡同串子，那对我是双倍的侮辱。工资一定要超过三百，相貌一定要英俊，不能低于一米八，那样我会为你骄傲的。”

“你真像这书里写的那个无耻之徒，”周瑾举着书说，“活脱是你。”“什么书？没准就是我写的。”我伸手夺书。周瑾闪开。

“如果我有外遇了，你是不是也能礼尚往来？保持一种令人钦佩的风度。”
“不！”周瑾坚定地说，“肯定打你个稀巴烂，闹你个人仰马翻。”“那太遗憾了！俗话说：投之以桃，报之以李。”

“……”“干嘛这么看我？”我笑着看周瑾。

“我一直想问你一个问题，过去我总认为我是知道答案的，从没怀疑过，但现在的越来越觉得有必要听你再回答一次——你爱我吗？”“这么说吧……”“请你直截了当地回答。”

“这么说吧，比山高，比海深。”

“你就是不肯说那个字对吗？”

“如果你非要让我当然可以说，我这方面不是问题。”

“我不是非要你说，你可以不说。”

“说也无所谓。”“行了，你别跟我罗嗦了！”她粗暴地打断我，撂下书从沙发上一跃而起，端起放在茶几上已经凉的茶水喝，瞟着我。

“你是想问问我是爱你吗？”

“对此，我从不怀疑。”

“从不怀疑？”她冷笑着。“干嘛从不怀疑？应该怀疑。知道我现在对你什么感觉？”

“我一说你就讨厌。”“对！”周瑾往茶几上一顿茶杯，尖叫，“你一张嘴我就恶心，浑身起鸡皮疙瘩……”

“可我说什么呀？”“你少假装天真！”周瑾瞪着眼睛冲我嚷。“少装傻！我还不了解你？你精得都能安上缝纫机上砸线了。”“我的确不太聪明，你用不着这么夸我。”

“你是没安好心！”“我一点也不明白你说什么。”

“好吧，你要非装傻不明白，那我就告诉你。”周瑾瞪着的点头，在我对面坐下：“我的确跟别人好了，你怎么办呢？”

“祝贺你。”我微笑着去端她喝剩放在茶几上的水杯。

“这是真的！”周瑾叫，挥手把茶杯扫到地上。茶杯顷刻洒在地毯上，流出去洇湿了一块。“这是真的，我不开玩笑。”

我弯腰去拿茶杯，放回茶几，直起腰看着周瑾：“我不信。”

“你必须信！”周瑾去夺茶杯准备再次摔到地上。

我牢牢攥住茶杯：“这不可能，如果是，你会否认到最后一秒。而且你不会，你不是那种人，再说咱们关系没有逼你走到那条路。”我站起，拿起香水瓶身上喷，分别抬起左右臂。

“你是想气我。”我抬腿要走，一下被周瑾立起拉住，她哭了，哽咽禁地流着泪，紧紧拽着我的胳膊：“我爱你。”

我回身扶住她：“干嘛哭？怎么啦？”

她就势偎入我怀中，死死搂着我的腰，脸贴在我胸前哭得更厉害了：“我不想失去你。”

“怎么会呢？不会的。”我安慰她。“我们是牢不可破的一对。”有一刹那，我的心软了。

“不，我不见你那个什么朋友……也想见你。”“为什么？出了什么事？”电话

传来急促声音。

“不为什么，我觉得结束了，你以后也别再给我打电话了。”“到底为什么？总得有个原因……”

周瑾不作回答，挂断电话，走向自己的办公座位。

坐在她旁边的赵雷正埋头填写着分叠票据。

关山平推开我办公室的门，示意叫出去。

“干吗？”我原地呆着没动，问。

“赵蕾来了，叫你过去。”

“她找我干吗？”我说，“你去告诉她我不在。”

“你就去一下吧，有事。”关山平走近说，“我已说你在了。”

“这赵雷怎么那么烦，老往这儿跑干嘛呀？”我不情愿地站起来，随他出了门。“你们处的人都哪去了？”关山平办公室里没其他人，只有赵蕾笑吟吟地坐在关山平的办公室桌前。

“都出去了。”关山平说，拉出把椅子坐下，他似乎情绪高。“我和关山平说好了，明天到我家去玩，他把他的那个小朋友也带上。”赵蕾看着说，“你也来吧。”

“我去干嘛？”我也拉开一把椅子坐下。“你们玩我就别去了。”“你不是一直说要见见他那个小朋友？关山平说找个餐厅，我说就别费那个事了，我那儿什么都现成，想吃什么都有，吃完饭咱们四个还能凑一桌麻将。”“现在不玩麻将了。”“那玩别的也行，反正咱们四个人，打扑克、跳舞都够了。”赵蕾盯着我说“去吧，别扫大家的兴。”

“我明天还有别的事。”

“你有什么事？”赵蕾死死地盯着我，“别的事先放放。”

我避开她目光：“改天不行吗？”

“改天我就不行了。”赵蕾冷冷地说，“就明天正好，好容易凑齐。”“去吧，”关山平说，“一块乐乐，热闹热闹，我特希望你去，你会制造气氛。”“明天要不去就去不成了。”赵蕾说，“你也说不定就就看着他那个小朋友了。”“她和我闹别扭了。”关山平苦笑，“也不知我怎么啦，她突然不愿再见我了。”“内疚了，”赵蕾冷笑说，“突然觉得对不起自个丈夫了，可能是她丈夫，可能是她丈夫对她太好了，旧情复发了，你这黑高参快替他再出点主意。”

“明天几点？”我问。“下午四点。”赵蕾说，“他们二点半到，你四点来，千万别早到，留出时间来先让人家好好叙叙。”

“那好，我四点到。”我起身离去。

“你要不到，我可上门去请。”赵蕾在我身后说。

“你说周瑾会去么？”“放心，我肯定给你找来就是了。”赵蕾对关山平说“该干的事都干了，现在想往回缩也晚了——来了就是你的了。”

她看着我背影。那天晚上我没回家，在魏大冬家打了一宿麻将，预报的一场大暴雨，夜里始终没下来。空气又潮又闷，我们身上都汗津津粘乎乎，手摸牌直说腻，使劲吹电扇也无济于事。我的手气时好时坏，烟抽得嗓子冒火，咳嗽不断，一瓶接一瓶地喝瓶酒。到早晨，人都绿了，头发蓬竖，双眼无神，人像捂着件大皮袄，恨不得揭层被下去。

我给单位打了电话。请一天假，骑车回家。

街上都是阴着脸骑车上班的人。路过树荫下一些昨夜露宿的赤膊汉子仍睡在席子或钢丝床上酣睡。

我回到家，周瑾已经上班走了。室内一片凌乱，毛巾被皱巴巴散在床上，匆忙脱下的睡衣扔在外屋的沙发上。

她昨晚也是一夜未睡，频繁地到窗前，阳台上眺望，最后就站在阳台上看着大街通往区的主要路口，直到天亮。

我们结婚后，我还是头一次不打招呼就彻夜不归。

我想她一到单位就先给我们单位打了个电话得知我请了假，就又把电话打到了我们楼上一家有电话的邻居那里。

我刚躺上，楼上抱着孩子的少妇敲门叫我去接电话。电话里周瑾的声音很平静，我告诉她我昨晚是在魏大冬那儿打麻将，她没说什么就放了电话。

周瑾听说关山平也去便立即拒绝了赵蕾的邀请，赵蕾再三对她说，“你就是不愿意再跟他来往了也要去跟他讲清，否则他老纠缠你，纠缠没完，甚至会出别的什么事，谁知道他急了会干什么？”“无论如何你也得见他一次，把一切了结一下。”

她的话终于使周瑾动摇了。

我一直到下午，在家不断咳嗽。我还梦见了下雨，倾盆大雨冲刷、浇湿了一切。我醒来外面果然下着倾盆大雨。夹杂着电闪雷鸣，天黑得如同黄昏，阵阵凉风带雨腥

从敞开窗户吹进来，靠窗的床上和家具已经被雨点湿了一片。

楼上的少妇又来叫我接电话，电话是赵蕾打来的，她提醒我该出来了。“别因为下雨就不想出窝了。”

密集的雨点打得我睁不开眼，尽管穿着雨衣，但里边衣服还是湿了。小腿和脚更是如同水洗。

我顶着风雨骑车，速度很慢，马路上积聚着滔滔雨水，成排的树在风中剧烈摇摆，断枝残叶飘浮水中，几只湿透羽毛的麻雀坠落般从雨中斜飞而过，落在路边树上。

一个迅雷炸响滚过，阴霾的天空攸地划过一道耀眼明亮的闪电，天上蓦地亮了一下，顷刻间又昏暗下来。

阵阵凉风着雨腥从敞开的窗口吹进来，室内昏暗得如同天暮。周瑾一跨进屋内就对关山平郑重声明：“我今天只是来和你谈谈我。”关山平把房门一关，插上插销，就上来拉扯周瑾。“别，你别这样。”周瑾抵挡着——拨开拉开他伸进来的手，“不，今天我不！”关山平的手一次次被拨开，又一次次伸上来，如同千手观音从四面八方各种角度无休止伸到周瑾身上。周瑾奋力反抗但身上的内外衣服仍被一个个解开，系上再次被解开，很快便衣不蔽体了。周瑾的挣扎变为苦苦的哀求和诚挚的央告，这只使对方的动作更粗暴更急迫，最后，她闭上了嘴也闭上了眼……

“舒服了吧？”关山平嘻嘻地问。

周瑾一把将关山平推下床，一跃而起，擦干净自己，飞快地穿上衣服。“你不是要跟我谈么？谈吧。”

“没什么好说的了。”周瑾拉开插销要往外走。

关山平扑过来拉住她，把她往回拖。

“放开我！”周瑾用力掰关山平的手，拉开房门冲了出去，几乎就在同时，她呆住了。

我浑身湿透地从外屋的沙发上站起来，目不转睛地看着她，脸色惨白。赵蕾坐在一边大腿压二腿低着头磕瓜子。

雨过天晴，碧空如洗，天空出现一弯巨大的色泽动人的彩虹。那年秋天没再下一场雨，日日晴朗，是我记忆里最宜人的秋天之一，街上十分美丽，树叶变得五色斑斓，晚菊在路边的花坛里成丛地怒放，到处挤满购物的人群，个个衣鲜发亮神态安适优哉游哉。整个季节里的都住在父母家，上班下班吃饭睡觉，有时打打麻将，有时独自去看场电影。周瑾给我打过几个电话我都没接。上班时偶遇关山平，他几次想同我谈谈都被我拒绝了。一天傍晚，我实在百无聊赖便去附近的一个湖，游今年头一场也

许是最后一次泳。

傍晚天已经很凉了，偌大的湖面没有几个游泳者，只有几个游船在夕阳中徜徉。我把衣服卷成团夹在自行车后座上，趟下水慢慢游起来，湖水很凉很有质感，每划动一下都感到沉甸甸既有分量又有弹性。水波在我身后分开跳跃着向两边愈推愈远，形成了一个不断扩大延伸的人字。夕阳几乎垂直于水平，晚霞晕染了天际和湖畔的建筑，树木以及绸缎般抖动的水面。

我看到周瑾独自划着一只船从晚霞灿烂夺目的光晕中镶金淋彩驶过，桨儿一起一落，桨声欹乃。

事实上我继续向前游去，与她交错而过。我游过一孔桥，游入另一处湖面。这儿更是寂寥，几乎无人湖堤茂盛的荒草浸于水中，一排弯柳低拂湖面，成群的蚊子贴着水面嗡嗡飞行，我的腿不时碰到绵密柔长的丛生水草。

身后传来搅动及水的“呼喇”声，一只尖尖的船头紧紧贴着出现在我的头侧，船身一点点增大然后无声与我并行。

我们就这样前行了一段距离，不远不近，不前不后，没有对视也没有交谈，就像两个陌路人在同一条路上各走各的。

我突然感到很累，便停了下来。船也停了，接着偏向朝我划来。我伸手抓住船帮，水淋淋地翻身爬了上去。

周瑾坐于船上，平静地注视着我，她未加修饰但惊人的美丽，如同一粒珍珠于暮色里闪闪发亮。

“去哪儿？”她嘴唇不启地说。

“回家。”半天，我说。

家里一切依旧，那种熟悉的凌乱和随意就像我今早才离去，所有衣物用品都在老地方，使我感到一种松弛和舒适。

我们冲澡、更衣，一起做了顿便饭，敞开胃口吃，冰箱里甚至还有一瓶冰啤酒我们分着喝了，那气氛真有些令人忘乎所以。我不再回避她的视线，还和她说些家常琐事，接着，我想我对她笑一下，这一笑使她的脸孔立刻扭曲了、歪斜了，似笑非笑，似哭非哭。“你想折磨我吗？”她噙着泪说，“我不能装作什么也没有发生过。”我叹口气，直视着她，双手把着桌沿把椅子往后挪开，起身离去。她一把拉住我的手：“你别走。”

我看了一眼她，又低头看了眼她抓着我的手。

她把手松开，缩回：“你别走……”

“我去拿烟。”我说，走进卧室。

我从卧室拿着半包烟出来，点上一支抽着问：“你想对我解释吗？”

她摇头，坐到沙发上把腿收上去抱着，怕似地缩成一团，请求说：“给我一支烟。”我递一支烟给她，又把打火机递给她。

她按了几下没打着火，我要过打火机，帮她点上烟。

她抽了一口，甩甩头发喷出烟雾，镇静地说：“你是不会原谅我了，对吗？”
“你希望我原谅你么？”

她黯然神伤地低下头：“我知道你不会原谅我的。”

我沉默地吸烟，抽完一支又点上一支。

“事到如今也没什么好说的了！你说，怎么办呢？”

“什么怎么办？”“怎么惩罚我？”“……”“离婚？”“……你同意吗？”她的眼中立刻充满泪水，伤心地说：“我还能说什么？你早下决心了。”“你觉得这日子还能过吗？”

她不言声，只是一滴滴掉泪，手里的烟灰一截掉在地毯上。“你不想离？”“要是我保证改呢？”她掉着泪说，“再也不了。”

“你想保证咱们都把这事彻底忘了吗？就当从来没发生过？”“我不想离。”她揩揩眼泪，鼻子堵塞地说，“我不离。”“你不离？不想离？那你为什么？”

“我错了。人都有一时糊涂的时候。”

“你这属于一时糊涂吗？”

“嗯。”她自我肯定地点点头。

“你少狡辩。”我被气笑了随即恼怒起来。“那你为什么？我告诉你周瑾，别以为我对你狠不起来。过去我对你狠不起来，但这次……”“你对我要狠了。”她仰起脸轻轻地说，“对我要狠了吗？”

“你为什么？”我避开她的目光，掉过脸说，“为什么要干这种事？你不知道这会毁了这个家吗。”

“……”“是我不能满足吗？”“有时候……有时候我是这么觉的。”

我不想假装无动于衷，这句话的确刺痛了我，使我一下眼中涌满了泪，我感受到了莫大的伤害甚至超过事情本身对我的伤害。“对不起……”“别碰我，”我厉声喝道，“别碰我！”

我起身起开，无力地站到窗前一言不发地继续流泪。

“你就那么讨厌我？”她哀怨地，跟了过来，再次把手搭在我身上。“是的！”我无情地将她推开，愤怒得透不过气来，无法找到能准确表示我的感受的词汇。“……你少腐蚀干部。”

次晨，天上出现鱼肚白，她对我说她同意离婚。

屋里烟雾腾腾，就像有一屋子干部开了一夜会。我的感觉已趋于麻木的听了她这句话，我既不感到兴奋也不感到轻松，倒是有种辛酸。“我不想这事大肆张扬，”她说，“不需要调解也需要诉讼，咱们俩协议悄悄离了就行了。”

我点点头：“我也不会把你的事说出去。”

“那咱们离婚原因说什么呢？”她以一种可爱的认真态度。“人家肯定要问的。”我说“感情不和”。她坚决反对，说“这不是事实。”我又说“性格不和”她也不同意，非要找出一个涉及我们双方关系的第三个原因。我费了很大劲说服她这是不可能的既然是两人离婚那必须是出于二人的原因，天塌地陷都与此无关。她说那肯定承认是她这一方不忠。我表示坚决反对，“伤害是不是为了我面子，我不允许你名誉和人格受到他人任何哪怕最微小的中伤和诽谤——我们俩的事是我们俩的事。”

最后，我们同意“感情不和”作为我们离婚的理由。

接下来，我们就财产问题心平气和地进行讨论。

“房子家具都给你。”她说，“你还得再结婚，再找人。”

“那你呢？”我问，“你们打算结婚吗？”

“不知道。”我说，“我不想再结婚了。”

“总得再结个婚，不管和谁，儿子还得再过下去。”

“不考虑那么多。”她眼中闪着泪说。

“房子家具还是留给你吧，我拿一部分存款行了，关山平也是个没本事的，你一个女人就更没办法了——我怎么都好。”“你就是留给我，我也得把这些东西全卖了。”

我们不约而同看了眼室内一切，家具陈设静静地待在各自的位置，就像一群无言

温顺的奴隶。

“你打我一顿得了。”“我打你干嘛？”我冷冷地说，“我不是跟你算帐来的，我是想问问你今后打算怎么办？”

“我可以保证今后不再跟她见面。”

“你得对她负责，我们已经开始办理离婚了。”

“可是，她不愿见我。”

“她不是现在才愿意见你吧？拦住你了吗？”

“……”“她对你还是有感情的，这是她亲口对我说的。继续显示你魅力和力气吧，现在更为容易了，不需要再内疚了，你们一些以公开相爱了。”“……”“你，不是仅仅想玩弄她吧？”

“不，不，决不是……决不是。”

“多少，起码……还是有点感情的？”

“是……”“你一定也清楚，正是基于这点我才如此行事。是妻子与人相爱还是妻子被人诱奸——姑且不称之为强奸吧——这二者的性质完全不同，我的反应也绝不一样。如果是后者……也许不至于杀人吧，但我肯定是不计后果地干些什么——不是鱼死就是网破！我的生活本来没多少可留恋的。”

“我发誓，我——起码我是出于爱……”“那再好也没有了。老实说，我一直怀疑，这种怀疑也要一直延续到我看到证明你确实有爱情的事实才能结束。”

“你说她真的对我也有同样的……她一直都是对我说……所以……”“就是在昨天晚上，她亲口对我承认的，”说：“想来想去，恐怕是真的有点爱他。我过去的存在一直妨碍表达她事情实感，这你还不明白么？”“我明天就去找她。”岁末，西伯利亚的第一场寒流袭来时，漫长折磨人的离婚程序终于一步步完成，结束了。房子和主要家具留给了周瑾，我只拿走了一部分现款。周瑾坚持按家具等分值折款付给我，她说亲兄弟明算帐何况已宿鸟分飞，她不想去一个路人情。也确实需要钱就没多争就接受了。

当我们众街道办事处——我们曾经登记结婚的那间屋——办完最后的离婚手续执一张离婚证出来时，她说请我吃顿饭。“我们结婚后就没一起下过馆子，唯一一次还闹得不欢而散，以后也没机会了。”我点点头，答应了。我们在路边随便找了个好一点的餐厅进去。

不是吃饭时间餐厅里以很少同时很冷，寒流提前到来，尚未到法定室内取暖时间，餐厅的暖器摸上去都是冰凉的。

我们捂着羽绒衣，蜷缩着坐在桌子的两边，瑟瑟抖抖从袖子里伸出筷子夹菜，喝着冰凉冻牙的啤酒。

热腾腾的炒菜送上桌没多一会油就表面凝结成冻儿。

我注意到周瑾一直泪涔涔地眼睛此刻一点泪水也没有，完全干涸。她显得又老又憔悴，头发也没很好梳理，凌散乱，人干瘪了分圈，鼻子愈发地尖，眼睛愈发的大。

她发现我正在看她，抬眼冲我一笑，眼角立刻出现细密了易察觉皱纹。她笑着说：“今后再见我就该装和我不认识了吧？”

“怎么装得出来？”我也笑着说，“不会。”

“还再见吗？”“谁知道，也许，都在一个城市里，没准哪天就遇到了。”

“是呵，我去找关山平也许能碰工你。真逗，我过去找你怎么就没遇到过他？”“他刚结束不久。”“我过去怎么就没想到他们兰达公司和你们设备局是一个单位。”“我们经销部门对外商叫兰达公司，其实是一回事。”

“要是想到了不就没这事了？”她笑着望着我。

“那就会出现另一个陈山平，邓山平。”

“你真认为我就这么坏？这种事不可避免？”

“很多遇到机会，改变了自己的生活，很多人没遇到机会，什么样儿，死什么样儿，一辈子没变化其实人都是一样的无所谓好坏，有无机会而已。”

“如果你遇到机会呢？”

“……”我笑笑，没说话。

“说出来也许你不信，但我还是想告诫你，”分手时，我们站在餐馆门口，都戴上兜帽扣严护脖。周瑾嘴藏在羽绒衣领后露出眼睛和大半部脸说：

“我一直爱你，包括那些时刻，直到现在。”

我没说话。她的眼睛湿润了，瓮声瓮气地说：“别光想着我对不起你事，也想想我对你好的地方。”

“她转身就走。”“等等。”我叫她。“有句话你问我好几次都没有回答，现在我可以告诉你……我也——爱过你。”

我掉头匆匆而走，迎面吹来凛冽的，夹着细小坚硬的雪粒。直到我消逝，她仍一动不动地伫立在寒风中。

“我们准备年内就举行婚礼，周瑾让我告诉你。”关山平没精打采地说。他样子很郁闷、冷漠。

我正在把办公桌各抽屉里私人物品分别挑出来，一一放进我的手提包。“还没结婚就后悔了？”我看他一眼问。

“没有。”他否认。我爱了一下，整理一空的办公桌抽屉全部关好，最后扫视了一下桌面，见无遗漏，便拉起手提包拉锁，拎起胀鼓鼓的手提包往外走。“给你一句忠告吧，千万别大意，别急于剥去伪装，就这样带着壳过一辈子，宁肯让她觉得你虚伪别暴露真面目，没人喜欢毫不掩饰的东西——要是你想一团和气安安稳稳太平平的话。”“你这是去哪儿？”他纳闷地问。

“我辞职了，不干了，颠了。”我一身轻松地说，“下半辈子光为自个活了。”我禁不住的露出微笑脚步轻穿过走廊。我停下对呆在那里的关山平说：“记住，咱们就当这辈子没见过面，谁也不认识谁，再见着你也别跟我打招呼，打招呼我也理也不理你们。”

“他们打算结婚了？”我上了公共汽车，哼小曲挤进人群中站定，待车开动后，才发现赵蕾紧挨着站在我对面。

“他们打算结婚了？”她再次问。

“是的。”我眨眨眼。“年内就举行婚礼。”

“那你没理由不再见我了？”

“我正要去找你。”“算了吧，我不找你，你永远不会来找来，我不了解你？咱们呢？”“什么咱们？”“别装傻，他们准备结婚了，咱们呢？”

“咱们也结，和他们同时。”我笑嘻嘻地说。

赵蕾死死盯着我，半天警告我说：“你可千万别跟我要花招儿，千万别！我可不是周瑾，让你当傻瓜捉弄。被人卖了都不知道到哪儿使钱去。”

“怎么会呢？我吃饱了撑的为要招儿而要花招儿，难道这一切不都是为了你——我的意中人结合才干的么？”我亲热地搂住赵蕾肩膀。她轻轻挣开我，不太有把握地问：“我真的是你意中人么？”“这你还看不出来？”“似乎挺像，可我不能十分肯定，你这人太会演了。”

“的确是心口如一，若有半个假字，天打五雷轰。”我诅咒誓。“你这一套骗得了周瑾骗不了我。”赵蕾说，“不管怎么说，不管你是不是真拿我当意中人，反正我

是看上你了，由此也就缠上你了，不管今后会发生什么，你是休想甩掉我。恩断情绝好，另有新欢也好，你有千条计的反正一条道走到黑，坚决不跟你离婚，耗也耗你一辈子。”

“不要说的那么可怕嘛，咱们在一起那将是享不尽的恩爱，过不完的幸福……”
“我才不信你呢。”赵蕾一笑，“你会变，我也会变，早晚有一天我们会变得互相讨厌，告诉你，在这点上我跟周瑾不同，我不抱幻想，所以我也只认准一条，那就是今生今世牢牢抓住，你——今天起，你我住到我那去。”

“我也正这么想。”“别跟我甜言蜜语，你说什么我都不信，只看你是怎么做的——你现在就回你父母家收拾东西，一会儿我叫辆车去接你——咱们先在你父母那儿把关系挑明了，我当暗娼也当够了。”“你现在去哪儿？”“你以为跟你合伙干了这件缺德事在单位还能见人？周瑾恨死了我，全行上下所有的人都拿白眼瞧我——我去联系调动工作。”“那我在这站下车了？”

“去吧，记住，我一小时后准时去找你。”

我挤出人群，下了车，朝车上的赵蕾招招手，转身向另一个车站走去。待载有赵蕾的那辆公共汽车街角拐弯消逝后，我又慢慢踱回那汽车站，挤上一辆刚进站公共汽车继续按原路线前行。

我在火车站广场下了公共汽车，径直来到车站售票的窗口，求人代买了一张站台票，通过闸门进了候车大厅，我站在长长的自动扶梯上缓缓升上二楼大厅，下了扶梯在我遇到的第一个检口检了票随着人流下了站台。

我随着人流来到站台，一股股铁道停着一列列油油绿色火车。我从一个乘务员疏于把守的车厢入口混上车，找了一个座位坐下。列车开动了，渐渐驶离繁华庞杂的城市，旷野的风从窗口猛烈地吹进来。我站起来。提着包挤过一节节挤满旅客的车厢，来到车长办公席，掏出钱说：“补票。”“到哪儿？”年轻的女车长抬头问。

“终点。”我说，“你们这趟车的终点是哪儿？”

一年后在一个秋天的傍晚，周瑾抱着新出生的女婴逗她玩，屋里充满母亲的笑声的孩子的呀呀儿语。关山平在一边微笑地看着她们。“你瞧你瞧，她笑了她笑了——你快来看呀。”周瑾向关山平笑着叫。关山平笑着走过来，拨弄着孩子娇嫩的脸蛋。

“笑得真好。”周瑾幸福地说，“不是我偏心，咱们的孩子真比别人孩子都好看。”“没错。”关山平笑着把眼睛转向周瑾，注视她说，“你呢？”

“什么？”“你觉得好吗？”关山平用眼睛扫了一下四周，把室内的一切人、物、情全都包括了进来。

周瑾明白了他的意思，微笑起来，然后由衷地点点头，用力点了点。她显得丰满、漂亮、容光焕发。

“你说世界上的事情有多巧。”周瑾抱着孩子上下摇着，偏过头对关山平说，“如果那天没碰巧和赵蕾一起出来吃饭还走了那么远，还是去那家饭馆，如果，那天傍晚咱们没碰巧正在同一个车站等人又都没等到，那我们也不会认识，也就不会有这个孩子。”“你认为这些都是巧合吗？”

“是巧合，也是缘分。”周瑾笑着说，“有缘千里来相会。”

“你从没想过可能是精心策划的人为的安排？”关山平笑眯眯地问。“我怎么没想到？”周瑾摇着孩子笑着说，“我早知道赵蕾对方言有意，她特别嫉妒我。表面上和我是好朋友，暗地里恨不得把我们拆散。这人太阴，也怪我太傻，让她得逞了。其实她就是把我们拆了，方言也不会找她。方言说过最烦她。”“你是太傻，也不能说傻。山里的孩子心儿善，你净把人安往好处想了，你知道那天是谁把我约到那个公共汽车站等人的吗？”“不知道，谁呀？”周瑾转脸逗孩子。“再笑一个。”

“你当时的丈夫，方言。”

周瑾的动作蓦地停住，困惑地转过脸。

“他把你约到车站，又把我约到车站说给我介绍个姑娘，其实他打算介绍给我的正是你。”

“可要是咱俩不搭话呢？等不着人就走了呢？”

“那他还会再找机会，再制造机会，直到咱俩认识，他是用了心的。”“为什么？”“你说他为什么？”周瑾腑着下巴，抱着孩子一动不动。

“他想摆脱你，又不想被你察觉，所以才费尽心机，这大概也算是一种体贴吧。”“他想和赵蕾结婚！他对我说的一切都是假的，演出来的。”“说他说的一切都是假的、演出来的没错，但他不想和赵蕾结婚，据我所知，赵蕾至今还是独身一人。方言从单位辞职的那天起就失踪了，赵蕾疯了似地在全城找了他很多天，直到现在还不断打听，她发誓要把他找着。但音信全无，她波他涮了，被他利用了。有一次我在街上碰见她，她老得我都快认不出来了。”“想干嘛，这个方言？”“往好处说，大概和我都是一样，幻想某种奇遇，生活一下完美无缺了。”“可能吗？你说他能得到吗？”

“这世界到处都一样，他无处可去，我相信他只不过是换了个环境和一些人，但肯定还过着和这儿同样的生活。”

“你说有吗？那种完美无缺、理想的、人所期冀的……”

“我说方言，一般地幸福感受我想是有的，鄙如我们……现在……”关山平微笑着向周瑾伸开双臂，将她母女二人一起搂入怀中。周瑾依偎关山平怀里侧脸看着孩子，眼泪扑扑簌簌往下掉。“他们想害咱们，没想到却成全了咱们。”

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