

*This novel, fast-paced and slow-moving, humorous and sorrowful, simply does not require any further introduction.*

## The Ideal City

The train slowly came to a halt. Yet again a brand new place.

Going somewhere is different from buying something—in that ‘brand new’ is never a good thing. Though every place in China has its particularities, the train stations are always chaotic in exactly the same way. In front of the train station there is always a slum, and through the green glass of the train windows, it looks as if time has gone backwards. An airplane flew over my head, the enormous emblem of Air China flashing before my eyes. No Air China flight has ever crashed. I was thinking: that really is a safety guarantee. But that’s not true, actually; because a crash is a sure thing sooner or later. The future has arranged for it; it just hasn’t gotten around to it yet. So every batch of Air China passengers just brings the final moment of this indefinite period a little closer.

The first thing was for me to find my friend. I had to get to a public phone, so I walked all around the outside of the train station, but discovered that the telephone booths had all been totalled. Even the best one was just a booth; the phone was gone. They would have done better to paint the glass black and turn it into a public toilet. Since I was in a hurry, I resorted to phoning from a street-side store. Next to the phone, it said:

Discount phone cards, long-distance thirty cents a minute.

I went up and said, “I’m not calling long-distance. I want to call a number in the city.”

The kiosk guy whipped out a mobile phone, and said, “Use this; it’s got the best reception.”

I asked, “Will it work?”

He said, “No problem. As long as you stand there and don’t move, the reception is awesome.”

I stood still and dialled the number.

I waited forever. Nothing.

The kiosk guy said, “You’re not facing the right way. Look, the transmission tower’s over there. Face that tower.”

I said, “It’s not like the reception is in my face, right? The antenna will still be facing the same way.”

“Not necessarily; nope.”

And so I turned to face the highest structure I could see off in the distance. The kiosk guy came over and pressed my head down. He said, “Lower, lower. The antenna has to face that way.”

This time I finally got through, and so I asked, “Hey, Uncle. Where are you?”

On the other end, he said, “Look out from the train station. You see the highest building?”

I said, “I see it. I’m facing that way right now.”

On the other end, he said, “OK. You see a tall building to the left of the tower? That’s the best hotel in the city. It’s called The World Trade New Earth International Plaza Royale Garden Hotel.”

I turned my head to look for it, and suddenly I lost the connection.

I said, “Hey, it broke off again.”

The kiosk guy said, “You don’t standing still, turning left and right, all over the place. And then you’re surprised when the reception’s no good.”

I asked, “How much do I owe you?”

He said, “Forty bucks.”

I had taken out two one-dollar bills from my wallet, but now I put them back right away and said, “That’s impossible. It’s only thirty cents a minute long-distance, and this was a local call. Besides, I didn’t talk longer than a minute.”

He said, “That’s right. Thirty cents—but that’s for long-distance. If you use a cell, it’s ten bucks a call, including if you don’t get through. Overhead is high, and besides I have to keep the phone charged, too.”

I said, “What a scam.”

The guy pointed to his right, and said, “Can’t you see this is the train station? Pay up already.”

At this point, two more guys came out of from the room behind, and shouted, “Hey, dad! What’s going on?”

I thought, well, I’ve got no choice; I’d better take out the money. The family has probably been in this racket for generations. This guy must have decided way back when that this was the business he wanted to get into, and so he spawned a couple of thugs to help him out.

I paid the guy and hailed a taxi van. We headed for the most prosperous hotel in town. From the multitude of taxis, I picked out one that had been made over pretty nicely. Before coming here, I had a job dealing used cars. So when I looked at the even line of vans standing before me, I had a pretty clear sense of their age. I knew that the one I had chosen, its paint flaking off as I watched, was probably in no better shape than the others that hadn’t been worked on at all. Still, I didn’t hesitate at all to choose the one that looked best. Men, ah, men! Aren’t we all that way? In any case, what did it matter, as long as it took me where I wanted to go? Before I got in, I agreed with the driver that the fare would be ten bucks. We rattled all the way there, and then I handed the money to the driver as I got out.

The driver said, “Hey, you only gave me ten.”

I asked, “Well, how much do you want?”

The driver said, “For a ride like that, it’s got to be at least thirty.”

I said, “Didn’t we agree on the fare?”

The driver said, “That was just so you would get in, obviously. I’m scamming you, understand?”

This stunned me for a second. It occurred to me that I had never, in all my life, encountered such a direct and frank person. I said, “I give up. What happens if I don’t pay?”

The driver said, “I’ll chop you into little pieces.”

As soon as I heard that he was speaking with a Northeastern<sup>1</sup> accent, I got out thirty bucks right away, and said, “You win, you win.”

I started looking all around. Goddamn, where the hell was I? I sighed. The architecture all around was so China, so off-hand; the high-rises were high, the low-rises low, the old ones old, each building just doing its own thing. I stood there and all of a sudden felt endlessly sad.

Of all the things in life, the two things I hate most are going to strange places and eating

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<sup>1</sup> Northeasterns, i.e. people from the three provinces of Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang, have a reputation for being strong, frank and aggressive.

strange food. That sort of thing makes me feel like a callow young intellectual playing at being a drifter. Of these two things, I hate going to strange places more, because that's what makes you eat strange things in the first place.

I went into the hotel lobby, and dialled a number from the public phone there. "Hey, uncle. What room are you in?" The voice on the other end bit my head off for hanging up on him before he said, "You think we're here on vacation? As if we had money to stay there. I'm at the Yangtze Hotel next door."

I said, "What number are you in?"

He said, "You'll see when you get there. There's only two rooms."

I left the lobby, and saw the Yangtze Hotel he was talking about. It was obvious at a glance that it used to be somebody's house; and a pretty old one, too. Now it was surrounded by garish nightclubs. This house was clearly an attempt to sabotage the construction projects of the entire county.

I walked in and saw a middle-aged woman at the reception. What surprised me most was that there was a world clock hanging above the unbelievably shabby counter. The clock was even bigger than the one in the hotel just now, and there were more place-names indicated, too. Four cities just for China: Lhasa, Chongqing, Beijing and Taipei. Further afield, there was even Mauritius time.

I said, jokingly, "That's some fancy clock you got."

The old woman said, "The people next door want to knock down my house, but I won't let them. I even opened this hotel to compete with them and siphon off business. Just look at my clock; it's a whole lot fancier than theirs."

An extremely vivid image emerged in my mind's eye. I saw how Uncle had gripped one of the guys during the gang beating and pounded him for all he was worth.

I indicated to the old woman that I was going straight up. Uncle had already opened the door and was waiting for me. On the door were the impressive gold-plated letters: "No. 1".

I went in and said, "Hey, you're not doing too shabby; staying at Yangtze No. 1."

Uncle laughed bitterly, and said, "What can we do? It's cheap. Everything happens real slow in this dive; the reception, the phone, cleaning, taking payments—she does it all by herself."

I asked, "How much a night?"

Uncle said, "Twenty."

I said, "As long as it's cheap, who cares? At least it's pretty central. We can take a walk around at night as long as we want, and then come back to sleep when we're too tired."

Uncle said, "Forget it. She closes the door at nine, and cuts off the power at ten to save electricity.

I said, "Well, twenty bucks is a little steep to live in dorm."

That reminded me of my innocent and squalid days in college dorm, and I accidentally ended up making myself nostalgic. And then I thought of the lyrics from a song: and now it's like the clocks all rust, 'cause life is dust<sup>2</sup>, and so on and so on like that.

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<sup>2</sup> A Karen Mok song, "Suddenly".

I remember that Uncle and I hadn't seen each other in half a month. During that time, we had concealed our identities, gone underground, lived the hard life, and finally managed to meet up again. We decided to go rustle up something to eat.

We left the Yangtze Hotel, and walked towards the downtown. They had just opened a Japanese restaurant by the fancy hotel. Maybe a change would do us some good. I said, "It's just like we went back to Shanghai. I've noticed that Shanghaiers love to eat Japanese these days."

Uncle said, "Well, then we'll live it up a little, too."

We took a few steps forward, and then Uncle stopped, saying, "No—we can't. Look, they've just opened."

I said, "All the better; they'll have a discount, and it won't be filthy yet, either."

Uncle said, "No—we can't. The heat's on for us now; we can't go to a place with so many cadres."

I said, "You've got to be kidding. They're all munching away in private dining rooms wherever it is they go; they don't come check out the new places. Anyways, I think the heat is probably off already. We don't have to be so nervous. If we get caught, then that's fate. After all, no one can be sure what really happened, anyway."

Uncle said, "No—we can't go. Otherwise we might as well just turn ourselves in and eat our meals in jail. If we're going to be fugitives, we've got to have fugitive style."

I said, "You have to put your trust in our government. First, you have to trust that our government will clear our names; and secondly, you have to trust that no one in government would ever eat a meal that wasn't served in a private dining room. Let's go!"

Uncle was getting panicky, but I dragged him into the Japanese restaurant and picked out seats near the door and against the brown-tinted floor-length windows. In an attempt at style, the restaurant was playing listless Japanese kabuki music. As soon as it started playing you knew it was a composition for inconsolable, dejected Japanese women to pluck and chant under the cherry trees after their men were done with their overseas invasions. Very depressing music.

At this point, a man sitting next to me, proud to be Chinese, showed himself unwilling to be depressed. He slammed down his chopsticks and shouted with a Northeastern accent, "Damn it, play some pop music."

This frightened the waitress behind the counter enough that she started to look through everything for some CDs.

The Northeasterner was mumbling, "Damn it, I can't stand that kind of snobby music."

In less than a minute, the JVC stereo began playing the song "Say Yes", by the has-been Japanese duo Chage and Aska. Apparently, the restaurant owner was a through-and-through Jap-loving traitor. The music played for about thirty seconds before the Northeasterner again could not stand it any longer. He shouted, "Hey, do you have anything that isn't in Cantonese? Hurry up and put on some pop music. If you don't have any, go out and buy some."

Now several waitresses started looking, and finally found a CD by Danny Chan<sup>3</sup>. Danny Chan opened his mouth and sang about one line before the Northeasterner jabbed at the hostess with his finger, and yelled, "So I'm only good enough for some dead guy's songs? Go buy some

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<sup>3</sup> Danny Chan Bak-keung (Cantonese), Chen Baiqiang (pinyin) was a Cantopop star of the 1980s and early 90s who died, apparently by his own hand, in 1992.

Xuecun<sup>4</sup>.”

The hostess said, “I’m sorry, sir, but the restaurant won’t provide the money to buy music.”

The Northeasterner said, “Then hurry up and find something else.”

After looking for a while, the hostess found a CD that was just about an antique. She put it on; it was “May the World Be Full of Love”<sup>5</sup>.

The Northeasterner said, “What, are you doing this on purpose? Didn’t I say pop music? I could floor you without giving it a second thought, you know.”

He had just finished talking when two even bigger guys emerged out of nowhere and roughed him up. They knocked him out and then carried him out by the shoulders and feet. The hostess shouted, “Throw him a little further off, out by the Yangtze hotel. His bill comes to ninety-two.”

One of the big guys put the Northeasterner down, and fished around in his pocket. He took out one-hundred bucks, and said, “That’s eight bucks change”. Then one of them opened the door, and the other one dragged the Northeasterner out. The three men disappeared outside.

In a moment’s time, the world fell silent. After a few seconds, “May the World Be Filled with Love” slowly started in again. Uncle, across from me, was suffering so badly he covered his face in pain. I lit his cigarette, and said, “You miss your girlfriend, right?”

Uncle looked out at the window. No reaction.

I said, “Why don’t you give her a call, get in touch?”

Uncle said, “The police will have got to her.”

I said, “Don’t be so pessimistic about everything. Sure, our police are some pretty tough guys, but it only matters under certain circumstances, like if you bump off one of their own, or if you show up on the radar of the Ministry of Public Security, or the Party Central Committee. But not our case—it’s nothing to be worried about.”

Uncle said, “Who knows—maybe we’ve already attracted the attention of the Central Committee?”

I said, “Look—the two of us didn’t really break the law; and put together we only have about two hundred bucks. The only think that could possibly upset the Central Committee is how totally broke we are. Phone your girlfriend, or she’ll worry.”

Uncle fell back into rumination. And I remembered how this had all begun.

It had happened half a month earlier.

I had just left school. My job search had been going on for two months, with no success. The pretty girls who graduated at the same time all found work very quickly. There was even one who had already switched jobs three times. Naturally, I was anxious.

Me and Uncle went way back. He was only a year older than me, and finished school a year earlier. He had been looking for work for a year and two months, with as little success. My friendship with him rested on him fixing my computer for free. We had a computer in our dorm room, which we took turns using to surf porn sites. Of course it had lots of viruses, but somehow the system never broke down. I think it was probably because there were so many viruses that it provoked intense internecine fighting, virus against virus. Unfortunately, in the end there was a

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<sup>4</sup> Xuecun (“Snow Village”) is a singer from Jilin Province whose folksy style brought him popularity in the mid-1990s. His songs (like “Northeasterners Are All Like Lei Feng”) epitomise the image of the region.

<sup>5</sup> Written and popularized by the “Concert of a Hundred Stars” in 1986, this song is a feel-good, kitschy mainstay of Mainland collections.

Virus Lord left over. We had called the viruses that used to make the computer freeze “syphilis”. Since this virus wouldn’t even let us start up the computer, we gave it the evocative name “HIV”.

The computer breakdown worried us a lot, because our essays were all in it.

We took the computer to a repair centre, and the guys there told us that it needed a new hard drive and motherboard. It would cost two thousand bucks. One of our roommates, a virgin, shouted in alarm, “Well, fuck. At that price we could go to the whores.”

But then a clearer mind put it like this: “Actually we’ve been going to the whores for free all this time. Now we’re sick and we need to pay some medical fees, because we have to get a few new organs.”

But no matter what, two thousand was way too expensive for us—the computer only cost eighteen hundred in the first place. Uncle was famous in our school for his skill in fixing computers. He was a year above us, and looked much older than he was, so everyone called him Uncle. When he was in middle school, students who didn’t know him would always bow to him and say “Good morning, teacher”. Uncle was used to this, and so he simply responded, very naturally, “Good morning, children”. Since he had matured early, we all figured that he must have surfed the porn sites before everyone else, too—and so of course the computer viruses would have got to him earlier, too. We all suspected that there was no anti-virus software on the market when the viruses assailed him, so he had been an autodidact.

With a great deal of effort, we managed to take the computer back to our dorm. Uncle was already waiting for us there. We felt like he was the only hope for this computer; also, we were excited to see Uncle in action.

Uncle’s first words were: “Hurry up and turn on the computer so I can install the anti-virus software.”

We said, “It won’t start up.”

Uncle fiddled with it for a long while and then mumbled, “It won’t start. What a destructive virus—it even fried the motherboard. Well, then I’ll just have to take your hard drive out.”

We all looked up at him in hope.

The next day, Uncle came again. Before we could say anything he started apologizing, “Sorry, sorry. I took the memory out yesterday, not the hard drive. But I took a look. Your memory’s pretty fun.”

As we were staring open-mouthed, one of our roommates started talking. He was the one among us who attracted the most female attention; and he had already been recommended for a job at some well-known international software design company; *and* he was student council chairman. He said, “Hey, be careful when you’re fixing this thing. All my essays and presentations are saved there.”

Before long, Uncle had fixed the computer. Everybody gradually became familiar with Uncle, and so some time later we decided to open a computer repair company. Altogether, four of us chipped in, and we opened a little store in a corner of the university district. Business was never good. But then we thought of a solution: we would surf all the porn sites we could with our resurrected computer; collect all the viruses, save them on disks and spread them around.

Although we all felt that it was a pretty low trick, it was the only thing we could do to earn the rent. Only one of us was against it, this one guy who had always thought he was better than everyone else. But then one day he found that his girlfriend— pretty, working class family— was

being picked up every weekend by a Mercedes. After that, he put heart and soul into our plan, working at it morning, noon, and late into the night. Everywhere from the dorm rooms to the library he left the traces of his assiduous search for viruses, and no clothed person ever appeared on his browsing history, except when he happened to have visited uniform fetish sites. They say heaven does not disappoint the diligent; and so he was the one who found the most destructive of all viruses—so destructive you couldn't even put it on a disk, because it would freeze the disk drive.

For finding such a destructive virus, according to our contract, he had earned the right to the largest share of the earnings—forty percent.

The virus was disseminated very successfully. In no time at all, there wasn't a single working disk drive in the whole university district. We had been far-sighted enough to obtain the relevant anti-virus software in advance, and earned more than three thousand dollars on the affair. Of that, the guy who had found the virus got fifteen hundred. When he got this money, he totally lost it and started blubbering about how he had finally earned some money through his own hard work. Then he went to right away the most upscale cosmetics store in the university district and bought the most expensive line for his girlfriend.

The result was that his girlfriend said, "I don't use Maybelline. Don't you know that my skin is best suited to Lancôme and Estée Lauder?" Her answer depressed him, and he went around asking everyone "What are Lancôme and Estée Lauder?". to which everyone responded, "I don't know", and told to him ask that guy one room over, because he read the most magazines. But he didn't know either, and said he would ask his girlfriend. But his girlfriend was a nerd, so *she* didn't know either and passed the question on to her professor. Except a mutation had occurred as the question was being passed from the person to person. The professor called the guy to his office, and explained to him all about Lincoln and *summa cum laude*.

After a month, the guy finally figured out that what Lancôme means is one tube of lipstick for the price of a whole line of Maybelline skin products, even though they're actually the same company. From then on, while his girlfriend washed her face with Lancôme, he washed his with tears. He said nothing and ate nothing. We were all astounded that he would do that to himself on account of that kind of girlfriend. Of course, a lot of people are sad just so they can show other people how sad they are. But you have to show the right people; like it's OK to mope around all day for the benefit of your girlfriend, but that doesn't seem like a very effective strategy around us guys. Besides, we were busy with our own lives, and didn't have time to help him publicise his sadness.

He didn't say a single word for a whole week. We each had our own ideas about what his first word would be, and made bets on it. It turned out that his first words really were very dramatic. He went to the school administration and told them about how we had made big money off spreading viruses, and even voluntarily returned thirteen hundred dollars and a pile of cosmetics.

Of course, we were disciplined and not allowed to graduate. The worst part was that from that day on whenever anybody's computer broke, we were always the primary suspects and got told to fix it.

That affair taught me a lesson: do not collaborate with the lovelorn. Also I understood that on

this earth it is actually impossible to understand the sadness of another human being. I couldn't understand why he would be so sad about a female, and he couldn't understand our sadness at not being allowed to graduate.

Because we had no diploma, Uncle and I were never able to find work. At one point, Uncle found a girlfriend, and they started talking about marriage almost right away. The problem was that he had no source of income, and neither did she. A marriage of two unemployed people is a social disaster waiting to happen. Uncle worried about his job search so much that his hair started falling out, which made him look even older, and gave the impression at job interviews that he was just angling for an easy pension. I didn't have much initiative when it came to the job search; somehow, I always felt like something unexpected was bound to happen anyway. Uncle and I spent our time playing chess, and began to look like the wretched old men you see on the pavements, setting their paper chessboard up on a wooden plank and moving the pieces around. When the wind was too strong, we had to go pick up stones from the side of the road to weigh the paper board down. Over the course of a month, we got better and better at chess, and then we decided to put our new skills to use: we signed up for an amateur chess tournament, with the objective of winning the big prize.

Before the competition started, our idea was to each ruthlessly make our way through to the final. Unexpectedly, we were drawn against each other in the first round. We fought hard for three games, finally ending in a draw that pleased us both immensely. Unfortunately, only winners of the first round qualified to go on, so Uncle and I were both eliminated. From then on, all the fun went out of life and our existence became colourless.

Some time later, we met an old classmate of mine from primary school. He was doing alright for himself; he took lots of odd jobs here and there; you could tell just by looking at his business card: car smuggling, pressure tactics, grudge payback, private investigation, knock-out drugs, aphrodisiacs, debt-collecting, etc. He used to be a very unimaginative guy: he believed that his work relied on informing people of his services by SMS, and so he would send them out one by one, and for each message he input the text separately. In a few months, he became China's fastest SMS-sending small-time thug. Then Uncle sent mass SMSes out for him through his computer, which earned him this guy's undying gratitude. He said that when he had some business for us he would tell us for sure. And then he was actually back the next day with an offer—one thousand bucks per person. Would we do it?

I asked, "What is it?"

He said it was some private grudge; someone was spending ten thousand for ten guys. A gang beating.

I said, "We don't do fighting."

He said, "It's not really fighting. As long as there's ten guys just standing there, it'll freak this guy out. I guarantee you won't have to fight. You're just there to make up the number."

So, without any idea of what we were getting ourselves into, we went. The thing was, we were late. We took one look at the scene and found out that it was true when he said we wouldn't have to fight—because there were ten of us, but there were thirty of them. We started moving towards our group, and then someone over there yelled, "Hell, your reinforcements are here."

I guess they wanted to make sure to eliminate us before we had taken our places; because then three guys came rushing at us. Our heads went totally blank, and we just stuck out our knives in self-defence. Then came the explosive noise of the police sirens. I saw dimly that one of their guys went down. I looked around and realised that we were the only guys with knives. I guess the other eight guys were also just primary school classmates who had been suckered into the whole thing. But they had come with the idea of coming to see a show, and only me and Uncle had come with the idea of performing. Because the police were about to come, I didn't have time to think anything over, and I just made a break for it. We ran a couple hundred metres. Then I looked back and saw a policeman standing in front of the guy on the ground. The policeman was shaking his head. I thought, "Shit. Shit. He's dead."

The two of us reached the street very quickly. I said, "We're screwed. One of them's dead."

Uncle was stamping his feet.

I asked, "Who killed him?"

Uncle said, "The whole thing was a mess. There's no way of telling."

I said, "They're going to be looking for us two, because we're the only ones with knives."

Uncle said, "So who stabbed him?"

I said, "How do I know?"

Uncle said, "Well, then it's like we did it together."

I said, "Soon they'll seal off all the piers, bus stations, train stations, airports, roads."

Uncle said, "We'll split up, hide and get back in contact when we get a chance. If I'm caught, I'll say I did it."

My eyes filled with hot tears, and I said, "Don't worry, they won't catch us. And if they give us 'justifiable self-defence', maybe it'll only be a few years in the slammer."

Uncle said, "It was a gang beating—they'll never give us self-defence. Besides, only the two of us had knives, so it's clearly murder. That usually gets you 'Immediate execution with lifelong deprivation of political rights.'"

This scared the hell out of me, and I said "We'll have to leave the city and go into hiding. We can't go home; the police will be there right away."

Uncle said, "I want to call my girlfriend."

I said, "No—you can't. She'll tell you to turn yourself in for sure."

And so we split up to leave the city.

On the way, I was worried the whole time that I would get caught and be made into a TV special report. This unimaginable event had occurred, and now my whole life was going to end just like that. My only hope was not to get caught now, wait twenty years for the statute of limitations to expire, and then come home. The thing was, I was sure that I didn't stab the guy, but then again I couldn't say either that Uncle did. Or maybe we were both a little hotheaded, and the post-mortem would show that he had been stabbed twice—once by me and once by Uncle—that would really be the end. Then I thought of our draw in chess and my brain went numb.

I changed buses a few times and reached the checkpoint to exit the city. Just as I had expected, there were a whole bunch of armed police with submachine guns checking the cars one by one. I thought, that guy must really be dead. Very calmly, I decided to turn myself in. I thought, given how unclear the situation was, if I turned myself in they might let me off easy and just give

me life.

I walked resolutely forward, and said to the police officer in front, “Hello...”

Before I could continue, I was pushed to the side. The officer said, “I’m sorry, but we can’t take interview requests.”

I said, “I don’t want an interview, I’m...”

The officer continued, “We have our responsibilities to attend to. Please don’t impede the execution of our duties.”

Having failed to turn myself in, there was nothing to do but pass dejectedly through the checkpoint and take a long-distance bus to some place I knew nothing about.

And that’s how it had all happened.

Now me and Uncle both had nothing to say, and just watched through the window as three fire engines went past. There must be a blaze somewhere. I could see that the furthest spot on the horizon was flame-red. I said, “Maybe the refinery I saw from the train is on fire!”

Uncle said, “Idiot, that’s the sunset.”

It was almost November.

It was almost November when I saw a big fire with my own eyes. It happened at a chemical company. Me and Uncle paid the dinner bill and ran out. Actually, I’ve never been the kind who likes to go watch the fun when there’s an accident; I never wanted to add my own ordinary head to the masses of ordinary heads stretching for a better look. Then, I discovered that’s not at all how that sort of thing happens. Once, when I was riding my bike to school, I saw that there was a group of people crowded around something. Among them, I could see the heads of the class teacher, the politics teacher and a history teacher I had always respected. And so I stuck out my head, too, and saw that there was a pool of blood. Just as I was beginning to wonder how people could find a pool of blood so entertaining, I discovered that the pressure on me from the back just kept on increasing, and that there was no longer any way of extracting my head—there were suddenly a dozen heads on top of me. I was leaning on my bike, and I had to lean so hard on it I almost coughed blood. I was thinking, could it be that this pool of blood was coughed up by the people who came to look in the first place?

But today was quite different, because it was a “severe safety incident”. I’ve never understood why China always describes industrial disasters as ‘safety incidents’. As far as I understand it, safety incidents are things like when you’re driving in reverse and your car scrapes an electricity pole.

But where had the accident happened? In the distance, the sky had already changed colour: the dusky sky was frighteningly lit up, and a terrifying green was rising up into the sky. In a moment, everything became the colour of environmental protection posters. The people became extremely excited, and the women, having finished doing their groceries, started rushing exultantly towards the accident. The fire trucks we had seen going by were now followed by a great crush of all kinds of vehicles, and many people opened their car windows and honked their horns to show their excitement. The roof of the bus was crowded with people who had climbed on top. All the residential buildings around had their windows open, too, and there were whole families pointing outside. If someone had just woken up and opened the window, he would have thought that China had been awarded the 2012 Olympics, too.

Me and Uncle had no way of getting around, and by this time there wasn't a cab in sight. Suddenly, a filthy man emerged pushing a bike with each hand, and said, "How about it? Twenty bucks."

I said, "Too expensive."

This worried him. "Ten bucks a bike is too expensive?"

Uncle got out twenty bucks, and said, "We'll take them." And so we rushed towards the accident. By this time, the sky had already turned purple, and the great black shadow of a heavy industrial area on fire showed us the way forward.

We rode for about twenty minutes, and by the time the sky was gradually turning blue, we really had no energy to go on. The pitch-black smokestacks still seemed very far away. Around us it had gotten entirely dark, but the fire had excited a great passion in the city. Usually, this would have been the time for people to sit down with a bowl of rice and watch the news—just a lazy city getting drowsy. But now, there were no less than two hundred bikes behind me rushing desperately forward. I suddenly felt like I was Lance Armstrong. I said to Uncle, "Faster."

Before long we passed by the gates of the University of Technology. I saw a swarm of bikes suddenly emerge from it and jockey fiercely for position around the first curve. I looked back, feeling fortunate at least not to be in with them. Panting, I said, "They're nuts, they're nuts, these people are all nuts."

Half a metre in front of me, Uncle was riding along with great concentration, lifting his butt off the seat as he pedalled. Although I wasn't certain myself what I was going to do once we had reached the fire, I was sure that the hundreds of people behind me were bonkers. For that moment, it was a magnificent sight; one that defies description. For though it might be quite normal to see a few hundred people just riding their bikes along, a few hundred people riding their bikes *towards a fire* is something you'll see only once in your life. Or to put it a little more abstractly, it is quite an experience to see hundreds of Phoenixes<sup>6</sup> riding in formation.

Suddenly, we heard the sound of a huge explosion, and a puny little mushroom cloud was thrown up. Behind us, there were calls of "It's blown! It's blown!" Great jubilation among the people; like the Chinese people hadn't been so elated since the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. As the leaders of the pack, Uncle and I suddenly felt a huge push; the people behind us had picked up the pace substantially. I felt like these hundreds of people were just like machines, or maybe more like wild animals. Everybody's goal was to get as close as possible without actually being in the explosion; but of course it was quite likely that a lot of college kids with poor judgment skills would ride to their deaths in the explosion, or that people like students and bureaucrats who aren't accustomed to considering or analysing anything to do with reality would ride straight into the heart of the inferno. I got a little frightened and slowed down; instantly, I was passed by dozens of bikes. My mind was a blank. I felt like I was an ear of corn that's been ravaged by a plague of locusts, and all that's left is the dry cob.

Luckily, in the crucial moment, our government made the best decision for the situation,

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<sup>6</sup> A brand of bicycle.

which also happened to be the decision they are most adept at carrying out: they blocked the road. Huge disappointment. When I had regained my presence of mind, I found another dry corn cob—Uncle. I said, “We can’t get through here.”

Uncle said, “We’ll go around.”

I said, “Easier said than done. How do we know which road will get us there?”

Uncle said, “Look, there’s a river there. The factory has to be on the river.”

That sounded right to me. We decided to go along the river.

Me and Uncle pushed our bikes to the river and were about to lock them and go when we discovered that the locks had been pried open. That proved the bikes were stolen. I said, “Shit. Criminals riding stolen bikes—that makes the crime that much more serious.”

Uncle said, “Who cares about us now? They even ignored you when you wanted to turn yourself in. With an accident like this, a whole bunch of police squads will all be there; practically the whole force will be there to keep order.”

I said, “In that case, our bikes will be stolen for sure.”

Uncle shook his head and said, “Not necessarily. Everybody’s going to see the fire. And everybody’s riding their own bikes.”

We walked a while along the canal, and saw a girl on the embankment.

Me and Uncle walked up to her and asked, “What’s up with you?”

The girl didn’t even lift her head.

I said to Uncle: “Do you think maybe she’s been fighting with her boyfriend and wants to kill herself?”

Uncle said, “No way. It’s such a romantic moment, with all the fireworks up ahead. Even if you’re going to break up, you don’t do it now.”

I said, “Is she depressed?”

Uncle said, “At a time like this, even depressed people feel awesome.”

I said, “Well, then let’s go.”

We walked along the canal for a kilometre, and then it was hard to get any further. The black building appeared before us. It was really too bad that we had walked up to the side of the factory, because the fire was in the front. But still, there was a fire truck here which was continuously spraying something onto the building. With the huge flames affording contrast, the factory in front of me seemed even gloomier.

I suddenly wondered why humans, who are so imaginative, didn’t take a horrible building like this and make it all cute and cartoonish.

There were two layers of wire fencing in front of us. The fencing was covered in vines. Me and Uncle stopped where we were standing and stared blankly at the fire for half an hour. I thought, we have to stop staring, because the fire didn’t seem to be going down at all. If we just kept stubbornly staring, then probably the only two victims of the disaster would be me and Uncle, dead of starvation.

I said, “Let’s go back to the Yangtze, Uncle.”

Uncle was stunned for a moment and said, “What do you mean, the Yangtze?”

I said, “The Yangtze Hotel.”

Uncle slowly figured it out, and said, “Oh, I thought you thought you were a sturgeon. Let’s

go.”

We walked back the same way. I said, “I bet the fire will burn quite a few days.”

Uncle said, “Yeah, unless it rains.”

As soon as he said that, a drizzle started.

I said, “You and your big mouth. Couldn’t you wait until we were back in the hotel before you said that?”

Uncle said, “I’m a good guy. I’m praying for rain.”

I said, “A little rain like this is no use anyway.”

Uncle said, “No, it would take a storm to put that fire out.”

When he had said that, there was a roll of thunder, and the rain started pouring down.

I ran as fast as I could. There was a flash of lightning in the sky. For a few moments, the world all around was as bright as day. Human might must really be puny; a huge fire was immolating the chemical materials that so many people had worked so hard to produce, but *it* had only been able to light up a little chunk of the sky.

Uncle and me ran silently forward, and almost trampled the girl on the embankment to death. I bent down and said, “It’s pouring. You should go.”

Still no reaction from the girl.

I ignored her and kept on running forward. Uncle and I talked, but it was hard for us to understand each other in the rain.

I said, “That girl’s got something wrong with her head for sure.”

Uncle said, “She’s pretty good-looking. Maybe she’s just read too much Chiung Yao.<sup>7</sup>”

I asked, “How do you know?”

Uncle said, “Girls who read too much Chiung Yao like to run outside whenever it rains.”

I said, “Maybe she wants to kill herself!”

Uncle said, “Let’s mind our own business.”

I said, “She looks like she’s clinically depressed.”

Uncle said, “Don’t worry, no one dies from depression. Look how depressed Leslie Cheung<sup>8</sup> is, and he’s OK.”

I said, “It’s not the same. Girls like to commit suicide suddenly.”

Uncle said, “But we can’t stop her, either. It’ll happen sooner or later.”

I said, “Maybe we should go back and talk to her?”

Uncle said, “Why didn’t you say so before? We’ve gone a few hundred metres past her by now.”

Then we stopped and turned around, and found out that the girl was right behind us. Both me and Uncle were so surprised we almost fell in the river.

I couldn’t say anything for about a minute. It was the girl who said: “Hurry up and run. I’ve never seen rain this bad.”

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<sup>7</sup> Chiung Yao (or Qiong Yao in *pinyin*) is the pseudonym of a very successful Taiwanese writer of sentimental popular fiction, primarily for a female audience. Several of her novels have been turned into wildly popular TV series and movies.

<sup>8</sup> In April 2003, roughly eighteen months after this novel is set, movie star and pop singer Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing leapt to his death from a hotel balcony in Hong Kong.

We ran for another minute, and finally reached the place where we had left the bikes. The girl went off by herself. Me and Uncle didn't dare say anything to her. But our bikes were already gone. All of a sudden, a huge figure came out of the mist, and me and Uncle got goosebumps all over.

Then, when the figure got closer I realised that it was just a man pushing two bikes. He walked up to us and said, "Fifty bucks for both of them."

Uncle said, "I don't have any money on me. We'll just have to rob you."

The guy heard this and got so scared he yelled out loud, dropped the two bikes and ran. With a bike for each of us, soon we were just flying along. The strange thing is, even though there was only one road, we didn't see the depressed girl again. The atmosphere all around was very peculiar. When we reached the place where the town meets the outlying areas, I decided to lighten things up and crack a joke. And so I said to Uncle, "Uncle, don't you feel like you're pedalling really hard?"

Uncle said, "Yeah. I guess we're biking against the wind."

I said, "No, it's because you're carrying someone on your bike."

All I heard was Uncle screech, "Ah....." and then both man and bike fell into the ditch on the side of the road.

That was how Uncle broke his leg.

One day a month later, I was pushing Uncle around the track at the University of Technology. Uncle liked sports, and when he was very small he had dreamt of becoming a basketball player. Then, on account of his height, he had readjusted his ambitions and set his sights on becoming a soccer player. But then because of his build, he had decided to become a foosball player instead. But in the end, like everyone else, he hadn't become a real player, only an amateur.

Uncle was laid up in bed for a month. The doctor said I could push him around on walks. But he had a peculiar injury—besides his broken leg, he had also injured his neck. So, for a long time, Uncle couldn't go out in the wheelchair. If you really wanted to take him out, the best means of conveyance was the bed. But if you took the bed out onto the street, you can bet the police would stop you before you got very far. First, you haven't paid the road maintenance fees and secondly, it looks bizarre. Everyone will think you're pushing a corpse around on the street—of course, you would need to apply for permission for that.

Uncle was depressed, and nothing could cheer him up; he had been lying in bed for almost a month. In that month, he had been bored out of his skull. I felt really bad, because if I hadn't scared him, he would still have been the same old lively guy. Uncle didn't say he blamed me. In fifteen days, he hadn't uttered a single sentence about my bearing responsibility for his accident. His high moral standards earned my deepest admiration. Until the sixteenth day, on which Uncle said, "Everything would have been OK if you hadn't scared me."

After that first time, Uncle couldn't stop himself, and said the same thing non-stop for two days.

That day at the track, there was a crowd of people moving about, provoking Uncle's deepest envy. They were playing soccer on the field, which was pretty much all dust. One guy hit a corner kick ridiculously high, so that by the time it was near the goal it was about three stories high, and

it kept that altitude as it went out of bounds. Uncle shouted at the forwards standing around the penalty area, “Go for the header!”

Instantly, everybody including myself turned to look at Uncle. Easy for him to say.

I said, “Uncle, they couldn’t reach it if they were thirty feet tall.”

Uncle looked very serious and said, “Sure they could, if they jumped hard enough.”

I said, “Maybe you think that because from that angle you can’t see as well as normal people.”

Uncle said, “There’s nothing different about it; actually, sitting lends you greater authority. Like when you watch the games on TV, the referee is sitting too, right?”

I said, “I think the guy who’s sitting is the coach.”

Uncle said, “Oh.”

And then we watched the game in silence.

At the same time, the university PR system was playing “Years of Glory” by BEYOND<sup>9</sup>. The way I understand it, the message of the song is actually to say no to racism. But when they started singing “Greet the years of glory”, Uncle couldn’t stop himself from cocking his head at a 45-degree angle to look up at the sky with tear-filled eyes.

Uncle kept up this posture for about ten minutes. A gust of autumn wind blew, and the first leaves, signifying the end of summer, fluttered onto Uncle’s legs. If I were a girl, it would have been a very Chiung Yao moment. Without thinking about it, I put my hand in my pockets, took three steps forward and stared into the distance. Behind me, Uncle breathed a sigh, and choking on his sobs, sang, “Life is actually...”

I suddenly felt a blast of cold air go past, accompanied by a whizzing sound and followed quickly by a bang; then the sound of Uncle going “Ah”. No one in or around the field could bear to open their eyes. The mouth of the guy who hit the ball was grimacing and agape; his eyes were half-open and his neck retracting like a turtle’s. Then a crash broke the silence.

I turned to see Uncle’s wheelchair lying on its side.

It was a miserable affair, but I still couldn’t stop myself from laughing. I ran up to lift the wheelchair. Uncle shook and finished the sentence, “...always changing.”

The guy who had kicked the ball sprinted over, feigning deep concern. “Are you all right?”

Uncle said, “My arm, my arm, my arm.”

Only then did I realise that Uncle’s wheelchair had fallen on his arm. The swelling was very bad already where the wheelchair was crushing it.

All the people surrounded us, everybody asking if Uncle was OK. When he saw how bad the swelling was, the captain of their team gave his instructions: “Wang Chao, take him to the hospital.”

The crowd slowly dispersed. Occasionally, someone mumbled, “What the hell kind of kick was that? Hitting a cripple.”

On the way to the hospital, I asked, “I guess you’re on the nationals, then?”

Wang Chao said, “Har-di-har-har. I’m on the school team.”

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<sup>9</sup> One of Hong Kong’s great rock bands, popular in the eighties and nineties, but touched by tragedy in 1993 when the lead singer Wong Ka Kui died during a concert in Japan. The song is one of their biggest hits.

I said, “You’ve got a good foot. Look at this wheelchair—stable frame, low centre of gravity, and you knocked it over with a single kick.”

Wang Chao laughed and said nothing. Then he took out his wallet and started counting the money. Uncle said, his lips white from the pain, “You don’t have to give me money, just pay for the medical fees.”

Wang Chao said, “Sure; I was just counting how much money I have.”

Uncle said, “It won’t cost very much; have them take a couple of X-rays and I’ll be fine. It’s just I can’t put any pressure on my arm.

I consoled him, saying “It’s nothing, nothing. It’s just dislocated.”

The hospital examination showed that Uncle’s left arm was broken.

After a week, Uncle and his cast returned to the Yangtze Hotel. Ever since his last accident, the Yangtze Hotel woman hadn’t asked us for any payments. She said she wasn’t in it for the money—all she wanted was to defy the Garden Hotel next door and diminish their business. She said that the only thing she regretted was that she used to have two rooms to compete with, and now she only had one. I said, “I’m really sorry, we’re a drag on your competitiveness.”

She said, “Never mind. It’s only right to heal the injured and rescue the dying.”

Not only that, but she had even lent us the money for Uncle’s medicine. We were moved to tears of gratitude. Uncle said, “When we’ve got some money, we’ll give it back to you, with interest.”

She said, “Never mind. With young people today, it’s too much to expect them to earn money. If they don’t get up to trouble that’s good enough.”

I was thinking how sad it would make her if the police ever broke down the door to arrest us.

Wang Chao lent us five thousand bucks. Later, he became our first buddy in this place. Unfortunately, Uncle’s two friends—me and Wang Chao—had between us broken his leg and his arm.

Time passed very slowly. For us, all that time represented was a way to measure how Uncle’s arm and leg were healing. I had absolutely nothing to do, and so I felt how time dragged. The strange thing was that time came slowly but went really fast. If I thought back to the day before, I could never remember what I had done, although the biggest reason for that might be because I had done nothing the day before.

Uncle was a little better off than me, because for him time had a reference point. For example, the day before yesterday he could only lift his foot ten centimetres, but today he could lift it twenty. For him, time and space were perfectly integrated.

Wang Chao was just one of the millions of Chinese college kids who drift along day by day. His family name, Wang, was completely mundane, and his given name, Chao, was just as ordinary<sup>10</sup>. His life was about the same as his name.

Wang Chao had drifted through three years of college. Sometimes he would fake a sigh, and

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<sup>10</sup> Wang is the second most common family name in the PRC, while Chao (meaning ‘superlative’ or ‘transcendent’) is among the most common given names, especially for men.

moan that these three years had passed in the blink of an eye. Before he had gone to college, he had been full of aspirations; actually, he was still full of them now. Except there was a difference. When he was in high school, he had wanted to become an airplane pilot, but in the national examinations he had placed into the University of Technology's department for geological prospecting. When this news got around to his high school classmates, they all thought he was going to go dig coal. The difference between dream and cold reality could hardly have been any more drastic. Now, after three years in university, he had a lot more aspirations than he had had before: the girl who headed the propaganda team, the stunner in the arts group, the drop-dead gorgeous modelling squad girl, the star of the softball team, the trainee in the newly opened fast-food place, the girl in the school gift shop...he was after them all.

I asked him, "Who's best?"

He said, "For body, the model has a bit of an edge; but the propaganda girl is a good painter and the arts girl has a nice voice. The softball player's got a really solid figure, the fast-food girl is cute and innocent, and the gift shop girl has a good service attitude. So it's hard to choose."

I asked, "So which one do you want?"

He said, "Which ever one wants me first."

I was filled with admiration for his approach to romance. He said, "But there's a problem with all of them right now."

I asked, "What is it?"

He said, "They all have boyfriends."

I said, "Oh. That really is a problem."

He said, "But girls today are easy so long as their boyfriend's not around."

I asked, "So who are their boyfriends?"

He said, "The model's boyfriend is on the male modelling squad. So dull. The two dummies walk around together thinking everybody is eating their hearts out. Dummies. Without an agency they'll only get thirty bucks for a show. It's a very pragmatic society—in less than a year she'll dump him. So what if he's tall? Just because they're both tall doesn't mean their kid'll be Yao Ming. It's not like you can make a living from being tall..."

Uncle was still convalescing, and he said, lying on his side, "I don't think you should talk like that."

Wang Chao said, "We live in a very pragmatic society."

Uncle moved around a little and lay down on his side with his butt facing Wang Chao. He said, "So tell me, who's the simple gift shop girl's boyfriend?"

Wang Chao said, "She has no ambition, either. Her boyfriend works at the fruit stand across the way."

Uncle said sensibly, "That's pretty good, isn't it? Comes from the countryside and gets a steady job here—not too shabby."

Wang Chao said, "This city is so polluted—even the chickens never survive longer than a year. It's got nothing on where you come from. I really don't know what you guys came here for. I would have gone to Shanghai."

I said, "But we came here from Shanghai."

Wang Chao said, "I know. I still haven't figured out what you guys came here for."

Uncle said, "Shanghai's too big. You feel so insignificant there."

Wang Chao said, very seriously, "Yeah, you're right. The feeling men fear most."

I said, "So tell us about the girl in the arts group."

Wang Chao said, "Fuck, she's a bitch, too. She's going out with this guy whose dad owns the biggest karaoke joint in town. They have four Mercedes, but his son drives a Lexus. He drives on campus every day and the guard always lets him in.<sup>11</sup> My father drives a Santana<sup>12</sup>, and when he comes to bring me new bedsheets, they won't let him in, no matter what."

Uncle said, "Why doesn't he drive a Mercedes if they have so many of them? That's so tasteless to drive a Japanese car."

Wang Chao said, "You'll find out in a second. The girl's dumb as all hell—like, it's not like he's going to marry you, right?; at most he's going to take you out to eat a couple times, and you won't get to choose what to eat anyway—it'll probably only be what he wants to eat, but what the hell, you have to eat something—but I really don't know what she thinks is going to happen! Riding around in a Lexus? She's nuts—the car isn't even hers, and the bitch rides around imagining how everybody's dying of envy; I mean, fuck, at least the real whores ask for money—and she pretends to be so decent. She'll end up riding public buses the rest of her life, with air-conditioning if she's lucky."

Uncle said, "Don't be so hard on her. If that's the way she likes it, then let her be. If she's satisfied to ride around in a Lexus, that's her business, right? She rides in her Lexus, you ride your Eternity<sup>13</sup>. The world has a clear division of labour."

"What about the softball player?," I inquired.

Wang Chao said with bitter hatred, "The animal!"

Uncle said, in surprise, "She might be a little more robust than the other girls, but that doesn't make her an animal!"

Wang Chao said, "Not her, Lexus boy. He won't leave anyone alone, not even the athletes."

Uncle said, "Oh, the softball player is a fan of the Lexus, too?"

Wang Chao said, "He picks her up in the Mercedes instead—that way he won't be found out as easily. It's nice to have money—two girlfriends in one building and they don't even catch on."

Uncle said, "You could fool around with two, too. No one notices that you ride the same Eternity every day."

Wang Chao said, "Actually, I have a Phoenix too, but it got stolen a few months back. A couple days ago, I saw some bastard riding it around on the street, so I grabbed him and got my bike back. Now I have two bikes; one for sunny days, one for rainy days."

I asked, "What about the propaganda girl?"

Wang Chao said, "She's got a boyfriend. They've been together since first year. I can only wait."

Uncle asked, "Wait for what?"

Wang Chao said, "Her seven-year itch."

I laughed. Uncle rolled over and pined for his girlfriend.

Wang Chao said, "You're really weird. Why don't you give her a call? Whatever—think of it this way. A girlfriend is just a lump of flesh, a few blood vessels plus some tripe. Is that such a rarity? Everyone has that much."

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<sup>11</sup> A Chinese university campus is typically a no-vehicle zone.

<sup>12</sup> A car manufactured by the Shanghai Volkswagen Co. As the novel indicates, it ranks low in the Chinese automotive hierarchy.

<sup>13</sup> A brand of bicycle.

We had reached the middle of autumn. Uncle and I hadn't been back home in a long time. I took Uncle out for a walk on the street. Wang Chao would ride over a couple of times a week, but as the weather got colder, he came less and less. We made one turn and reached the big hotel parking lot. I felt like in the time since Uncle was hurt, there had been a whole new batch of people getting suddenly rich. Uncle was dejected; there were no coal mines near here—so where did all these rich people come from?

I pushed him along the track for blind people on the sidewalk, and we slowly moved out of the affluent area.

I pushed him until we reached a store where it said "discount phone calls". Suddenly, Uncle said, "Stop."

That scared me. I stopped the chair.

Uncle asked, "Where's the train station?"

I said, "Very far away. What, you want to leave?"

Uncle breathed a sigh of relief, and said, "Good. Then we can call. I want to call my girlfriend."

I said, "Good. You should have called a long time ago."

Uncle said, hesitantly, "Aren't you worried we'll get caught?"

I said, "What's there to worry? I don't think I broke any law, and we can't hide out forever."

Uncle said, "I saw in a movie that when your call is under a minute long, they can't trace where exactly the call was placed from."

I said, "Was it an American movie?"

Uncle said, "Yeah."

I said, "Well then in China it'll take about three minutes. Just call, OK?"

Uncle had me push him forward, but then he suddenly turned his head to say, "But I'm calling her cell phone—the number will show up. If the area code shows up, we're screwed!"

I said, "Don't worry so much; the heat is off. You think our police really care that much about solving a case like this? Most cases get solved by accident, like when they catch a pickpocket and then the investigation turns up that he killed someone. Generally speaking, that's how murder cases get solved."

Uncle said, "That's not true."

I walked up to him and said, "Call. It'll be fine."

Uncle picked up the receiver and put it down again.

I asked, "What now?"

Uncle said, "What will I say?"

I said, "How do I know?"

Uncle said, "How about first I ask her how she's doing. No—I bet she'll start crying as soon as she picks up the phone. We have to think this through."

I said, "She'll ask you where you are."

Uncle said, "Then I'll say, never mind about that. I'm fine, don't worry."

I said, "She'll say 'I miss you real bad.'"

Uncle said, "Then I miss you real bad too."

I said, "When are you coming back?"

Uncle said, "I can't come back right now."

I said, "I believe in you, you're innocent. I bet that guy on the run with you did it."

Uncle said, "No, they'll clear it all up. He's like my brother; don't say things like that."

I said, "Be careful. Your baby is due before New Year's."

Uncle stared at me and said, "OK, don't worry, I'll come back to see you. Take care of yourself, too."

I said, "OK, don't worry, I won't tell anyone you called. It's been almost three minutes. Goodbye."

Uncle said, "OK OK OK, that's fine. It'll be something like that, I guess. I'll call her now."

Uncle lifted the receiver, his hand trembling slightly, so agitated that he kept slobbering. When he had dialled up to the last digit, he was so nervous that his cheek started to quiver. He solemnly punched in the last digit, and cleared his throat. At the same time, the store's dilapidated stereo system took this opportunity to start playing Qi Qin's "Likely in Winter"<sup>14</sup>. But Uncle had no time to attend to sentiment, and gestured at the shopkeeper to turn down the volume.

I started holding my breath as Uncle had started to dial, and by now I had almost suffocated. But now, at the critical moment, I bent down to Uncle.

He had changed colour.

I said, "What is it?"

Uncle said, "The number's out of service."

I said, "How can that be?"

Uncle said, "I'll phone again. Maybe I dialled wrong."

This time, Uncle pressed the eleven buttons in less than a second.

The number was still out of service.

I said, "Maybe you haven't called for so long that you've forgotten the number?"

Uncle said, "No way, no way. If I can't even remember the number, there's no reason to call her in the first place."

I said, "Try it one more time."

Uncle tried it again. Failure.

Uncle looked vacant for a moment and then said, "Back to the room."

I pushed Uncle back to Yangtze No. 1. Qi Qin's voice got quieter and quieter as we walked further away. Uncle had disappointment written all over his face. Disappointment is a very abstract concept. It's not like happiness—with happiness, you crack a smile and everyone knows you're happy. But to be so disappointed that your whole face discloses the piece of information that you are disappointed—that's really enormous disappointment. Whenever something abstract becomes concrete it means it is expressed very strongly. Uncle said nothing on the way back.

In an open space downtown, more than ten-thousand people were buying scratch-and-win raffle tickets. We passed through the herd and reached Yangtze No. 1. Uncle suddenly said, "We should probably rent an apartment somewhere."

Then we both fell into silence.

Talking about an apartment reminded me of a girlfriend I had once had. She wasn't from

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<sup>14</sup> A ballad in which a young man tells his beloved that he cannot come home in summer, or autumn; but 'likely in winter' he will return. Qi Qin is a veteran pop star from Taiwan.

Shanghai and she was three years older than me. She was constantly in crisis, and had resolved to marry within the year. Her urgency and the strict time limit made you feel like women who reached the age of twenty-five without marrying were liable to explode. Looking back, it was hard to imagine later how I had begun to date a girl like that. I couldn't comprehend the way she felt about apartments. She had rented a place near where she usually hung out, which she decorated with excruciating meticulousness. It made you feel like it would never be worth buying an apartment just because you would have to move all those things. But she loathed the place. If it weren't for her consideration for the handsome man next door, it felt like she might set fire to the place at any moment, and all because she didn't own it. Her parents had no doubt always instilled in her that she had to find and marry a Shanghai guy with an apartment and no debts. Strangely enough, we started dating. She said she was sure that in the future we would drive a Mercedes and live in a house. Although I couldn't even buy a Hyundai Atos or a cheap apartment yet, I was gratified that she believed so firmly in my potential. In the end, I figured out that a fortune-teller had told her that she could find her benefactor for life on such and such a date at such and such a time in such and such a place. He even told her that the man in question might not have any money yet, but that he was set for a meteoric rise in the next ten years.

Unfortunately, on such and such a date at such a such a time it was me who happened to be in that stupid, unlucky place.

In the few months we spent together, I was deeply aware of her sense of insecurity. Actually, I can understand why she wanted her own apartment so badly. But one day, I suddenly said to her, "Even if I had some money, I still won't use it to buy an apartment. Having an apartment would be really dull."

She swooshed out and, as of the date of this book's publication, I haven't seen her again.

Lots and lots of people in the world have feelings of insecurity; probably people are pretty much all like that. What I don't understand is why people feel safe when they have things like an apartment or a savings account. The world dangles undependably in the universe; earthquakes, wars, economic collapse, etc. could take all those things away from us at any moment. So I don't understand how things that we might lose anytime can make people feel safe.

But I have never been able to understand what kind of thing could actually provide a feeling of safety. I have consulted a lot of my friends about this question, and their answers are basically all the same—what can make us feel safe? You idiot; safe sex, of course.

And now that I think of it, that's probably the right answer. We're always looking for the answer to a question, but any question actually has many solutions. But people seem just to want one of them; which is to say, what we want isn't really this or that answer but rather the *outcome* of a question.

That last question had no outcome.

I feel like inner peace is the only way you can get a sense of security. You only have property rights to an apartment for fifty years<sup>15</sup>. The only good thing is that if you work out the numbers it's still cheaper to 'buy' an apartment than stay in a hotel all that time. But having an apartment actually just means residing in a hotel room for fifty years. For that matter, Communist China has only been around fifty years.

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<sup>15</sup> In China, you can not buy land or living space, but since 1988 you can obtain long-term 'land use' leases, which range from forty to seventy years and duration and have to be paid for up front. In practice this is much like buying; in theory the land belongs to the state. Further reforms are expected.

You can say what you like, but the root of all problems is the lack of money. If I had money, I would stay every night in a 5-star hotel. I'd even take two rooms—one to stay in, and one to keep empty. The point of the empty one would be that during the holidays I would see all the people at reception getting all worked up because there wouldn't be any rooms. That would make me happy.

The nice woman at the Yangtze had already let us stay for free quite some time. Because it was a sabotage operation, the hotel would often have 'accidental' power outages or water stoppages. She said whenever power use reached its highest point and they had to limit electricity, hers was always the first place to get cut off. She often mumbled about how the party leaders had announced that there was an electricity shortage; so industry, hotel and recreation units would all have to take turns without power. But no matter whether it was the turn of the factories or of the recreation units, her Yangtze Hotel was always the first one without electricity. There was one classic phrase that summed it up; Uncle and I remembered it for a long time—

"I know we need to conserve electricity; but after all we only use one kilowatt a day here."

Of course, the most important thing was that we couldn't stay there for free any longer—our conscience wouldn't allow it. Besides, we had been living in the same place for a couple of months. What kind of behaviour was that for wanted criminals? We ought to be slyly switching hiding places.

Uncle said, "How does paying for an apartment work?"

I said, "Three months down and one month deposit, I guess."

Uncle said, "So then we need at least a thousand. Plus the money we owe the Yangtze woman makes at least five thousand."

I said, "More or less. Where are we going to get it?"

Uncle said, "Stealing is probably the only thing we can do. Maybe once they catch us they won't make any further investigations. Then we'll be in jail—that would be safest."

I said, "We come from who knows where, and wander around without work; plus you're hurt. I bet people have been suspicious of us for a while."

Uncle said, "So let's move out. We'll start a new life. I want a girlfriend."

I said, "What about the money?"

Uncle fished out two bucks and said, "Go outside and buy a ticket for the scratch-and-win raffle. Maybe we'll get money that way."

Deciding to go along with this retarded idea, I took the two bucks and left. They had put up a new stage in the raffle place and at the very top was a brand-new Santana which was the grand prize. Below the stage was a line of people selling tickets, in the middle of which was a stereo system with a red ribbon around it, another one of the prizes. By the time I had pushed my way to the middle, I was sweating hard. I bought a ticket and scratched it: a picture of a pineapple. I asked the raffle guy, "What does the pineapple mean?" He said, "Go over there and ask at the prize redemption."

I put the pineapple in my pocket, and pushed my way back through the crowd. People were mumbling, "Cherry, strawberry, watermelon..." and there was a man carrying a pile of washcloths and a hundred bucks in his hands rushing towards the raffle sales stands. I stopped and watched the man as he bought another fifty tickets, which won him three apples. He shook his head and

walked to the prize redemption. I walked behind him and observed him as he despondently accepted three washcloths. Counting those already in his hand, he now had a dozen or so. As soon as he turned around, he was stopped by a young man who was red in the face and streaming with sweat. He took out some money, saying, "Awesome! Now I can finally buy a washcloth!"

I passed the pineapple to the raffle employee, and before I knew what was happening he had draped a red sash with a big cloth flower over me and was dragging me towards the prize redemption counter. Hubbub all around. All I heard was the MC say, "Congratulations to this young man, who has one the fifty-thousand yuan grand cash prize."

I almost burst with joy.

All of a sudden, some raffle guy went up and spoke a few words with the MC. The MC said, hurriedly, "An employee has made a mistake. Fifty thousand is for the big pineapple, but this young man picked a small pineapple."

I got five-thousand dollars and went back to Yangtze No. 1, sighing about the changeability of human life. All the times when I had bad luck and nothing was going right, I had never sighed like that, because I felt like that was the normal state of affairs. But to get such a windfall at the eleventh hour—I sighed again. When I gave Uncle the money, he sighed too. And I discovered that no matter how lofty your ideals are, you're always much happier to get money you don't deserve than money you earn through hard work.

Apartment-hunting was put on the schedule. During the long haul of apartment-hunting Uncle would no doubt be a burden, so I had originally planned for him to stay in the hotel and wait for our good news. I wasn't at all familiar with this city, so I would have to go with Wang Chao. Recently, he had been really eager to go out, because he had finally finished driving school and earned his license, so he didn't pass up any chance to go out on the road. People who have just got their license always seem so willing to help people, and if you give them a compliment like "you really can't tell you're a new driver" this gives them enough motivation for about five hundred kilometres. Because of Wang Chao's Santana station wagon, Uncle also got to come along, and we could even put his wheelchair in the back.

We went to a real estate agency, and were taken care of by a pretty girl who was just out of college. Of course, beauty is relative. For example, you often feel like this waitress or that textiles worker is very pretty, but you rarely feel like the pretty flight attendants are pretty. This proves that the world is wonderful when you lower your standards.

The pretty girl said, "You want to rent where, for how much, how big?"

Wang Chao said, "About three hundred. Two bedrooms and a den."

The girl said immediately, "Nothing like that."

Wang Chao said, "Four hundred."

The girl thumbed through the catalogue on her desk and said, "There is one."

Wang Chao said, "Fine. That's the one."

Me and Uncle had no time to contribute any comments at all.

Uncle said, "Wang Chao, what's your rush with everything?"

Wang Chao said, "You only budgeted four hundred, and this is the only apartment that fits your requirements."

Me and Uncle had no choice but to agree.

The girl picked up the phone and called the landlord. He arrived a minute later, which relieved me and Uncle of our concerns about the location—clearly, the place couldn't be too far away. When the landlord saw that we were driving, he was very pleased because he told us that you really needed a car for the place, and that he himself had moved because of the distance. It was empty now and he had put it up for rent, but he hadn't thought anyone would really want it.

We drove about ten kilometres to the edge of the city. At least it was a pretty clean area, and there were a few stores around. But it was a little desolate, especially now, at dusk.

The landlord said, "The government has set this place aside for a new residential zone; it'll be trendy in a few years."

The apartment was in a forlorn, strange-looking low-rise. It was a very ordinary housing project, and didn't seem very old; but there was no other housing around. It was as if the financing had been only enough for the one apartment building, and in a location you wouldn't find in the real estate catalogues to boot. The surprising thing was that the building even featured a code lock on the door, although it was broken from long years of neglect, and you had to force the door open. The landlord instructed us: "Don't ever press any numbers, because then the door will lock. If it locks, then you have to yank it back and forth fifty times before you can open it again."

We went up with the landlord. The apartment was pretty well fixed up. There was a row of windows in the master bedroom and the den to let the light in. The whole room seemed very bright, and if you looked out you could see a few sparse trees and a stream. The sounds of nature came in with the autumn wind.

After we finished looking at the apartment, we went down. Wang Chao said he couldn't believe there was a code lock as weird as all that and so he punched in some numbers on our way out. Then we heard the clang of the door locking. Wang Chao yanked it a few times, and it really couldn't be opened. Clicking his tongue in surprise, he got in the car.

The landlord said, "It's a nice area, you can swing behind and take a look."

Wang Chao drove the car behind the building. I was pleased to see that our apartment had a long balcony; long enough, in fact, to reach all the way from the bedroom to the den. That's important because I love the sound of wind in the trees—it makes me feel calm, like I was lying in a picture from some wall calendar: horse-riders, shepherds, a great mountain in the background, dense forest all around, and just in front of the house, a little pond. I have never had this feeling myself, but that girlfriend who left me without saying goodbye once showed me a wall calendar and told me all that about the shepherds and the pond. At the time, I had said, "You idiot; a house like that has no electricity, no running water, no gas, no telephone line. You would freak out at night."

But whenever I hear rustling in the trees, I always have to think back to that picture. Although I can be totally sure that I don't like that girl, I'm also sure that every girl leaves something in the heart of others.

Wang Chao drove away. I took a last look at the balcony that had pleased me so much, and I discovered that the windows in the bedroom were open. I remember that they had been closed when we had been in the apartment, and when I had looked up just now, I hadn't noticed them open either. There was a gust of wind; and so I thought, it must have blown them open.

When we drove past the front door, we all noticed simultaneously that a middle-aged man

was yanking the door with all his might.

We ate in the evening. When we were finished, Wang Chao wanted to go driving, and so he took us into every corner of the city. This was how we learned where to find some very improbable organisations. For instance, there was a research institute for some kind of extinct animal; a company that conducted accurate, on-the-spot measurements of room dimensions to calculate that the bed you just bought is most definitely smaller than your bedroom; a company that specially produced the fluorescent strips on bike petals; the company next door that made some kind of fixed-size dust cover for microscopes; and a government office of nearly thirty people to monitor the census process for accuracy and to conduct a second census itself. When we had finished wandering around, we had nothing to do and so we had another late night snack.

At midnight, Uncle didn't want to go back to the hotel yet, and it seemed like Wang Chao wasn't sick of driving around yet. I didn't care either way, and so we parked the car on some secluded street.

I told them the weird thing about how I saw that the window open when we were leaving the apartment in the afternoon.

Uncle got scared and said we couldn't live there. Wang Chao said, "That's nonsense. When I went to see it, the windows were already open for sure. I even threw a cigarette butt out."

I said that when I was looking up from below I was sure they were all shut. I was worried that it might rain, so I had paid special attention, and only when I gave it a last look did I see that they were open.

Uncle was easily frightened, although that might have been because, if something awful really did happen, Uncle could neither fight nor run and would only be able to sit there like a good little boy and wait to die. Wang Chao said, "I don't believe in ghosts or anything."

In fact, I have never believed in ghosts. On the other hand, ever since I was a kid, I have stubbornly clung to the idea that space is fixed and time is abstract. What I mean is that in a fixed space, various different periods of time are divided between us and various objects. We can't see them most of the time. We also can't share a period of time with things that are in the future, so they're in a different time; and those things are always in a separate time from the things that happened in the past.

And time is actually static. The problem is that we've misunderstood the meaning of time, and keep forcing it forward. Fixed space and static time are two completely different kinds of states of quiescence. For example, let's say that, in my time, I see something that occurred in the past; this happens, in my opinion, because that thing has left such an intense spiritual force that it is caught in some intersection between space and time. Sometimes we get scared when we see something that happened in the past; but for the things that are in its own time, the event is actually in the process of occurring. This can happen with a war or a murder or a traffic accident, when one spirit or many spirits are released in the space of an instant, which is to say, they die; and since they die in an abnormal way, the signal is strong.

These signals are sometimes extraordinarily intense, but they have no power to do anything. Which is to say, they can only draw on the limitless time and the limitless matter they appear in to try and accomplish some of the goals through their own strength. This depends on whether the

signal has sufficient strength to control another living being who exists in the same space but at a different time.

That would provide a good explanation for a lot of scary things. Things that happen not at the same time, but appear in the same place. Since the operation of time and space is so complicated, you have to allow for errors in this complex balance; these errors are the objects from another time that you can see in your own.

When I had finished explaining this idea, Wang Chao and Uncle were already sleeping, and who knows at what time or in what space. My account drew no feedback from them except for one comment from Wang Chao: “Go to hell.”

I looked out the window. The city was already at rest, but police cars were constantly going past us. It occurred to me that maybe today was the “Fight Prostitution Day” that they had been announcing for so long. When I arrived in this city, the very first ad I saw was for “Fight Prostitution Day”. On this day, not only were they going to conduct propaganda activities in every neighbourhood about AIDS and STD prevention, but they were also going to carry out a large-scale prostitution-fighting operation. The Ministry of Public Security had no doubt undertaken many preparations. But of course, so had the karaoke joints, saunas, not to mention the johns.

I don’t know when I fell asleep under the flashing lights of the police cars. The three of us just spent the night in the car. When we woke up, the city administration had pasted a new edition of newspapers in the display windows. Stinking from every pore, I took a look at the newspapers, and discovered to my surprise that the headline was “Fight Prostitution Day Huge Success”. I thought that was strange, because the newspapers here were generally very slow—usually the dearly departed was already cremated by the time the newspaper printed the obituary announcing the memorial service. And every time I went out, I just had to take one look at the paper to know what the chairman of the Central Military Commission was doing two days ago.

In the paper it said that the city’s spirit and appearance had undergone an enormous change, and that its inhabitants now spent their leisure time in the libraries reading or visiting the museum. Once-rampant prostitution had been practically eliminated as a result of improved social trends. For yesterday’s “Fight Prostitution Day”, the Public Security Bureau had assembled a police force of over one thousand officers, which had carried out raids on over a hundred entertainment locales, with the result that they found not a single instance of sexual services on offer. In order to commemorate this joyful day, the municipal party committee and the municipal government had decided to make this date every year “Fight Prostitution Day”, and undertake a series of propaganda activities to ensure that every “Fight Prostitution Day” had no prostitution to fight; this accomplishment could then be presented to the nation as a birthday present<sup>16</sup>.

It was a forward-looking report, given that the library and museum had not yet been built. Of course you could interpret it to mean that the citizens, besides themselves with anticipation, were heading in droves, clutching their own books, to go read at the construction site where the library would go up, or that they went to see what historical artefacts might come to light at the site where the museum was being constructed.

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<sup>16</sup> The PRC was founded on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949, making the national day October 1<sup>st</sup> of every year.

But one thing was for certain. After that day, there would be one more holiday on the calendar, namely “Prostitutes’ Day”, when all of the hookers get the day off to rest their fannies.

Another victory for the Labor Law<sup>17</sup>.

Wang Chao lazily got out of the car. It was obvious that he ached all over. He told me that hadn’t meant to go to sleep so early, since he had been meaning to take advantage of the empty late-night streets to go racing around. He hadn’t counted on my talking him to sleep, as if by hypnosis. Wang Chao rubbed his eyes and looked at the paper. When he saw that yesterday had been “Fight Prostitution Day”, he perked right up and ran out to the public phone. After three minutes he was back. I asked him, “Who did you have to call so urgently?”

He said, “I called my dad, to ask if he got caught.”

I said, “Didn’t you read the paper?—It says the result was satisfactory; no one got caught.”

Wang Chao said, regretfully, “Why didn’t you say so? As soon as I saw ‘result satisfactory’ I thought they must have caught thousands of people. Although when I think about it, a guy as smart as my dad wouldn’t have gotten caught, anyway.”

At the same time, Uncle started shouting, “Take me home, take me back, I need to go to the bathroom.”

And so we rushed stinkily back.

That autumn, Uncle and I were pretty much cut off from the world. Uncle couldn’t reach his girlfriend anymore, and said she would probably be married by the time we got back. That’s the kind of thinking which proves that a man is really mature. A boy will usually keep smugly bragging that the girl they have lost touch with will still be blindly pining for him wherever it is she was left behind. If you run into someone like that a few years later, he’ll tell you the reason you happen to find him single is because he has again been disappointed in love several times and he still hasn’t found the right one.

Time passed slowly, and Uncle accepted reality equally slowly. But if it’s a reality, what is there to do but accept it? Still, Uncle had a guilty conscience about it. It had been his first relationship, and Uncle felt that if he wasn’t heart-broken to the point of suicide or at least to the point of faking it, then it was like he hadn’t lived up to the relationship. He said he used to feel that if he lost his girlfriend, life would lose its meaning. But now he felt that life was meaningless anyways, even though he was still alive, and it didn’t seem to be on account of the girl. So apparently the meaninglessness of life isn’t sufficient reason for suicide, because in the long run everyone leads meaningless lives.

A propos suicide; I once had a friend who was a law student, and he said that the only point to suicide was that it was the only way you could kill someone and not get the death penalty for it. But someone like Uncle—even if he wanted to kill himself, he would probably botch it. Besides, even with his broken bones, he was always going through a series of unsightly exercises that the doctor had proscribed to prevent muscular atrophy—so clearly he still had a very strong will to live.

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<sup>17</sup> A specific law, promulgated in 1994. In its own words, it means to “protect the legitimate rights and interests of labourers, readjust labour relationships, establish and safeguard a labour system suited to the socialist market economy, and promote economic development and social progress.”

But Uncle was very depressed, because he felt that his hopes had all been so easily dashed. I told him that it was totally normal, and that hopes are shaped by thoughts that belong to the past. So if they are rooted in the past, then there's no point to worrying about them. In the same way, poor people feel they would be content for their whole life if only they had a Santana, but if they suddenly got rich, they wouldn't think that anymore.

Uncle felt like there are some people whose ideas never have to change from the moment they're born to the moment they die. Too bad he wasn't one of them.

The move into the apartment went without a hitch. Before we left the Yangtze Hotel we had dinner with the woman there. She said the reason she had treated us so well was because Uncle looked like her son. When he had broken an arm and a leg so soon after arriving—of course she loved him. We wished her a flourishing business. She said, "Flourish? Not likely. I'm not in it for the money—if I really wanted to earn money, I would have opened a little place by the university a long time ago. I've heard that the customers aren't very demanding about how big the room is or the direction it faces, and they don't care if there's a TV, as long as there's a bed."

Wang Chao interrupted, "No bed will do, too, as long as there's a door."

Now that it was cold, we could finally move into the desolate Great Honour Apartments. We even knew where the name came from. About a kilometre away from Great Honour Apartments there had been a Great Honour liquefied natural gas depot. The Apartments had been built for their executives and employees. As soon as the building was completed, the depot blew up; and it blew up so violently that it couldn't be rebuilt and all that was left was the apartments. Another public safety incident. When the station blew up, most of the people all came running over to look at the wreckage, and when they went back they found that many homes and businesses had been looted. Everyone was astounded; who had that much willpower?! Someone had resisted the temptation to go watch a great explosion like that, and with nothing else to do, had gone around looting everything—and a lot of it, too.

Our room had no decoration of any kind. That was mostly because there was no female involvement. Girls always like to take things and make them look different from how they used to. Wang Chao moved in, too. We were happy to have him, because since his family was well off, he offered to pay two hundred a month. Because he was paying more than us, we gave him the biggest room—the den. For us, the set-up—two bedrooms, one den, one bathroom—was irrelevant. We just thought of it as three rooms and a john. If someone else had been willing to pay fifty bucks, I would have gladly given him the kitchen. In that case, Uncle and I would have been paying one-fifty for the two bedrooms and the other two would be paying two-fifty<sup>18</sup> for the kitchen and the den.

Soon we had three twenty-one inch screen TVs. We had bought them for two hundred bucks each in a market in the Northside Market. Jap technology, made in China. We said we needed a fridge, too, and we would pay three hundred for it, but the shop owner said a fridge would be too big and not easy to move and so he wouldn't sell us one. After that, we were sure that the TVs were stolen. But we have to buy stolen goods because our lives are so hard.

The three TV sets were almost totally new, and the remote controls and manuals had even

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<sup>18</sup> A "two-fifty" is slang for idiot or chump.

been stolen right along with them. Just as we were going to carry them out of the store, the shop owner said they had free delivery. Overjoyed, we gave him the address. Before long the TVs were sent over to our apartment. On the way back, we drew lots to see who would get which set.

When we had set up the TVs, washed our faces and gargled, we started our new lives as TV watchers. I discovered that a mood can be contagious, because even Wang Chao was ecstatic to be watching. I said, "What's wrong with you? Don't you watch TV at home every day anyway?" He roared with laughter and said, "It's not the same, it's not the same, it looks different when you've bought it yourself." We watched the TV with great interest for three hours. Before we went to bed, Uncle, who could move around a little now, went to the kitchen and poured three glasses of beer. He brought them out and said, "Here. Cheers."

Wang Chao stroked the TV and said, "Just imagine now, science is so advanced, it's really amazing how an antenna and electricity can transmit a TV program to this set. That's really something. Really something."

Then he drained his cup.

Uncle poured another and said, "Here. Soon we'll have to find jobs—settle down and work."

We lifted our cups and chimed in, full of emotion, "Settle down and work."

Before we had finished talking, there was a huge crash. Our three-hundred-dollar door went flying and thirty-plus policemen rushed in. We were flabbergasted. Through my fear, I heard someone shouting into a walkie-talkie, "We got all three, all three". We stood rooted to the spot as the policemen surrounded us—there were still more and more of them pouring in—and those who were late said reproachfully, "Stop pushing—can't you see the room is already full?"

When it quieted down, the room was packed to the brim with policemen. The squad leader commanded them, "The criminals are under control. Team One to Room One; Team Two to Room Two; Team Three to Room Three."

Immediately another fifteen men came through the door, five men to a team, and went into the separate rooms.

After a second, the walkie-talkie transmitted the operation code name, "Report, sir. The Ferocious Tigers have been captured."

Uncle and I bowed our heads dejectedly. Wang Chao, on the other hand, just looked bewildered and asked Uncle what it was all about. Uncle shook his head. A policeman shouted, "No talking!"

Our hands were put behind our back. We looked silently around. It seemed like there would be no escape this time. The guy we stabbed must have died, or else there wouldn't be this many policemen. I sighed to myself—there were so many of them; so many you couldn't see the walls, so many that when we were escorted out, you couldn't even turn without bumping into one or the other of them. We were taken downstairs, and found that in the walkway below there were more than a few police cars. Once we walked down the stairs from the walkway there were another two command cars, two public security cars, an emergency police car, an undercover police car and three armoured vans. Apparently, we had attracted the attention of the Ministry of Public Security.

We got in a police car, and I discovered that below our window there were another three police cars, apparently to prevent us from jumping out. I thought, now we're really in for it—we must have attracted the attention of the State Council.

And on the way to the Public Security Bureau, we discovered that two riot police cars had joined the group. I thought, now we're really in for it—we must have attracted the attention of one

of the national leaders.

In chaos and confusion, we reached the Public Security Bureau. They booked us and then interrogated us individually.

The police officer standing before me had a serious demeanour, was tall and powerful, and radiated with the power of righteousness. The guy taking notes looked like he might be the head of the bureau. A sonorous voice said, "How about you confess."

I said, instinctively, "I have no clue. What's up?"

Mr. Sonorous said, "I'm sure you know exactly why you're here."

I thought, I'll hold out a little longer, and then I'll confess.

I said, "Sir, I really don't know."

Silence for twenty seconds.

Then he said, "Well then, explain to me where your TV sets came from."

I felt light-headed.

I said, "I bought it."

The officer asked, "Where?"

I said, "At Northside Market."

The officer asked, "Which stall?"

I said, "I forget."

The officer said, "Think about it."

I thought about it and said, "Third stall on the right."

The officer wrote that down in his notebook.

The officer asked, "Did you know that those TVs were stolen goods?"

I said, "No, I didn't know that."

The officer said, "How is that possible? What was the price?"

I said, "Two hundred."

The officer said, "How big was the screen?"

I said, "Twenty-one inches."

The officer said, "What brands?"

I said, "Sony, Hitachi and Toshiba."

The officer said, "I'll give you six hundred bucks, and you go buy three TV sets like that and bring them to me."

I said, "OK. I'll get them at that stall."

The officer said, "You can, can you? The stall is already under police control, and we've brought the people in, too. You bought stolen goods—and although it's not a serious crime, it's a crime nevertheless. If everyone in the world resolved not to buy stolen goods, then the people who steal and rob would have no one to sell to; and if they had no way of selling anything, then they wouldn't rob or steal, and all of society would be stable, and ordinary people would enjoy greater safety."

I said, "You're right, officer. But I really didn't know they were stolen."

The officer said, "Anyone with the least bit of life experience would know that they had to be stolen at that price."

I said, "We're all college students—just graduated and broke."

The officer pondered for a moment, and then mumbled "Oh. Just graduated—then it's natural

for you to be idiots.”

I said, “Officer, we’ll give them back.”

The officer raised his voice and said, “Do you think the Ministry of Public Security is a shop? You’ll return them? You don’t understand things. Two hundred for a TV set—you bought it, and it was stolen.”

I said, “Officer, we really didn’t know. If he had sold it to us for the original price, we wouldn’t have known, either. Really, all we wanted was to buy a couple of TV sets.”

The officer said, “That’s gangster logic—that’s their specialty— they sell stolen goods at low prices. According to our investigations, they generally sell at fifty percent of the market price to eliminate the evidence as soon as possible and obtain cash. People who want to cut corners and get ahead will go buy it, even if they know that it’s stolen. You bought stolen goods—and although it’s not a serious crime, it’s a crime nevertheless. If everyone in the world resolved not to buy stolen goods, then the people who steal and rob would have no one to sell to; and if they had no way of selling anything, then they wouldn’t rob or steal, and all of society would be stable, and ordinary people would enjoy greater safety.”

I said, “Now what happens?”

The officer said, “Either detention or a fine.”

I said, “What about the TVs?”

The officer said, “You still want the TVs? We didn’t take them.”

I said, “You left all three of them there?”

The officer said, “Watch your attitude, or you might get both the detention and the fine.”

I said, “Sorry, sorry. Of course they should be returned to their former owners.”

The officer said, “Obviously. We’ll see to that.”

I asked, “So which one is it, detention or a fine?”

The officer said, “That depends on you.”

I asked, “Can you explain to me a little what the difference is?”

The officer said, “Well, detention means penal custody for about fifteen days.”

I mumbled, “Oh, fifteen days. And the fine?”

The officer said, “According to regulations, five thousand yuan.”

Shocked, I said, “Five thousand. You could buy two thirty-four inch TVs for that money.”

The officer said, “Yes. Although, since you’re cooperative, we could give you a suitable discount.”

I asked, “How do you mean?”

The officer said, “We can give you twenty percent off plus a thousand yuan coupon. You can use the coupon if you come again next time, but it isn’t exchangeable for cash.”

I said, “Well, that’s not a discount that can be widely used. In that case, I might consider choosing detention.”

The officer said anxiously, “Fine, detention. But detention’s not free either; you have to pay a lot of fees during your detention period: room and board, administrative fees, tuition.”

I said, “Well, how much money would that be?”

The officer said, “You’re cooperating, so you’ll probably only have to be detained fifteen days. Room and board are two hundred a day, so that’s three thousand, then the administrative fee is two hundred and education fees are a thousand, so it’ll be about four thousand two hundred.”

Surprised, I said, “That’s really expensive—that’s more expensive than the fine!”

The officer said, "That's just the way it is—those are the rules."

I said, "Well, can I get a reduction on my detention fees?"

The officer said, "I'll have to phone my superior officer."

The officer exchanged a few words with someone over the phone and then hung up. Then he told me, "It's not a very extensive discount—we can give you a twenty percent discount as compared to the advertised price on room and board, and we can waive the administrative fee. But we can't give you a discount on the education fees."

I asked, "Why not?"

The officer said impatiently, "Have you ever heard of a discount on education fees?"

I said, "No. But then the education fees are really far too expensive."

The officer said, "Nonsense. Have you ever heard of a cheap education? If you think that's expensive, think about how much you would pay if you got sick while in jail—medical costs are a lot more than that."

I said, "But not *that* expensive. Besides, don't we have free education in China?"

The officer said, "That's just for the first nine years of schooling—this isn't included. The reason the tuition is expensive here is because instruction is all one-on-one, and the instructors are all of the highest quality. There's even foreign instructors."

I said, "After giving it some consideration, I think I'd prefer the fine. I'll borrow the money from my friend, he has a couple thousand bucks."

The officer said, "Well, then how will he pay?"

I said, "You mean we're all going to be fined individually? You didn't mean the price for all of us put together?"

The officer said, "Of course not."

I said, "We'll never scrape together that kind of money."

The officer said, "Well then there's only detention."

I said, "But detention costs money too. Can we be detained without paying?"

The officer said, "Of course not. That would be a loophole."

I said, "So what do we do if we don't have any money?"

The officer said, "In that case, we have to deport you."

I said, "Deport us back to where you found us?"

The officer said, "Of course not—that would be letting you off too easy; also a loophole. We would send you back to your hometown."

I said, "Who pays for the ticket?"

The officer said, "Before your deportation you would have to go work in the coal mines—after a month, you'll have earned the money for the ticket."

I said, "No way. A ticket to Shanghai is just a little more than a hundred bucks. How could that take a month of work?"

The officer said, "What, you think digging coal is so lucrative? It's the mine operator who gets the money. If you can earn that much in a month it's not too bad."

I said, "Well, how about if *I* paid for the ticket for you to deport me to Shanghai?"

The officer said, definitely, "No way."

I asked, "Why? Isn't that a contradiction?"

The officer said, "If the rules say no, then it's no. Labour is a kind of test, a revelation. When you see the enormous masses labouring for the greater strength and prosperity of the nation,

you—you, the dregs of society, the destabilising element—you will undergo a real education.”

The word ‘education’ disconcerted me and I asked, “Do I have to pay education fees?”

The officer said, “The education fees are taken off. You actually get five hundred bucks, but you have to pay your pension, insurance and education fees, so there’s only enough money for the train ticket.”

I said, “Officer, if I’m just working for a month, why do I still have to pay the pension fee?”

The officer said, “There’s no way around that, it’s regulation. Besides, the pension fee isn’t necessarily to pay for your retirement; it might well be paying for someone else’s. Nothing you can do about it.”

I said, “Well, then I’ll just take the fine—never mind about the deportation.”

The officer said, “That’s right. Our deportation regulations are to send you off directly from the coal mines, but most people want to come back again. It wastes time and money.”

I asked, “But why would they want to come back again?”

The officer said, “Don’t be stupid. What about your luggage? You have to come back to pack your things, right? You see, it destabilises society, it’s burdensome for the transportation authority, lowers transport efficiency and decreases transport volume.”

I kept nodding and said, “You’re right. Also, I have other reasons for not going back to Shanghai.”

The officer said, “That’s right. So that’s why I said that a fine would be the best thing.”

I said, “Well, can I go to the bank to withdraw some money, or do you have an ATM?”

The officer said, “Don’t worry, you can use your bank card here.”

He took a card reader out of the drawer and said, “What bank is your card?”

I said, “Bank of China”.

The officer said, “That’s no problem. Give it to me.”

I passed him the card.

The officer put the card through and told me to punch in my password.

I punched in my password.

The officer said, “That comes to four thousand, but I typed in four thousand forty because there’s a one percent procedure fee on credit cards, and since we’re non-profit, you have to pay the fee yourself. Have a look; and if there’s no problem, then go ahead and sign.”

I signed.

The officer took a look and smiled. Then, his expression changed suddenly and he said, “You’re a wanted criminal, so the law gives me the right to execute you on the spot, and it is my duty to exercise this right.” And he pulled out a gun.

A bang, and I woke up. Covered in sweat, I looked around and discovered that Wang Chao and Uncle were both still sleeping. Uncle even held the television in his embrace, a smile on his face. Wang Chao, for his part, was hugging a bottle, but he was smiling too. I wondered what it was that made the two of them so happy.

Outside the window, the sun looked enormous. Autumn did not want to leave. I stood on the equally enormous balcony and looked at the busy scene outside. I kept remembering the dream I had just had. I didn’t want to forget it, and so I couldn’t tell Uncle or Wang Chao about it.

Wang Chao was already awake. He walked onto the balcony, slapped me on the shoulder and said, “What’s up?”

I said, “The apartment’s really not too bad—a balcony this long.”

Wang Chao said, “What’s so great about that? Didn’t you see that we’re not the only ones?—All the apartments have balconies this long.”

I said, “Yeah, but it’s just nice to have one myself.”

Wang Chao breathed into his hands and smelled it. Casually, he said, “That’s not how I think about things. What would make me happy is if I had a huge balcony, and everybody else had none at all.”