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Writing Sample

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Two stories. "Li Bing" (March 2010) and "Maria Jumped Over the Wall" (August 2010).

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Virginia Suk-yin NG

Two stories

Li Bing

Sophie woke up very early and immediately felt the familiar void. In her heart was a hole, and surrounding the hole were fresh flowers. Still half-asleep beside her, Karl felt her stirring, put out a hand, and gently rubbed her waist and abdomen. When that was over, she stared quietly at him for a while, and somehow the tears came.

They almost had a row last night, but he was the kind who would remember nothing after a night's sleep. Now he gave her a smile on his half-waked face. He seemed to remember that today was Saturday, and that they were going to have something nice at home.

She had asked several Chinese students who were studying German with her to come over. One of them, Li Bing, was having his birthday today, and the others wanted to give him a small celebration. Sophie *laoshi*, just let us use your place and we'll bring the food and do all the washing and cooking.

Sophie had a part-time job in Munich teaching German to foreigners, and had many students from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. The students from China had to cram in a lot of German to barely reach the level to enter the masters and doctoral programmes. Their language skills were particularly poor their first year here; it wasn't easy at all.

Sophie got up, changed, then went out on her bike and brought bread and fruit from the store next door. When she got back, she took a careful look at their door-bell name-tag, making sure the names were clear. This was an old, pre-war building, occupied by only seven or eight households. The tag next to her door-bell said:

Frau Sophie Kohl, Herr Karl Schmidt. It was unlikely the Chinese students would press the wrong door-bell. She looked up and saw the old lady on the fourth floor scrutinizing her from behind the window curtain. The woman kept daily vigilance over this street, determined not to let anyone break its tranquility.

Karl had already gotten up and was in the study, working at his computer, humming the pop songs spilling out of the radio. In the past few days the news broadcast was full of Mikhail Gorbachev's upcoming visit to China, reports that had become a bit tiring to the ear.

Karl, a tropical-fish maniac and a research assistant at the university, had his own aquatic setup at home, as was to be expected. He talked to his fish both mornings and evenings. He also had two cats, a brown one and a white one, which resembled a pair of household guardian gods. Right now they were crouching on two low stools left and right of Karl, glaring at Sophie.

"I'm happy today," Karl broke into an unexpected chuckle.

"So are we going to Berlin or not?" This was what nearly made them start a quarrel last night, and she couldn't help snapping back at him now, although he had never ever shown anger towards her. Sophie's research specialism was ancient Greek, and there happened to be an opening in West Berlin. But Karl disliked the agonizing sophistication of Berlin, preferring instead the comfortable cleanliness of Bavaria and the stability and order of Munich. What's more, his tropical-fish wouldn't be available in West Berlin. Again concentrating on his computer, he apparently didn't hear Sophie speaking.

Sophie arranged the things and got out some bottles of white wine and chilled them. When she was wiping the wine-glasses with cloth the hole in her heart came out again. The hole was black at the centre. She went into the kitchen thinking she would make herself a honey drink but soon forgot and just went to the window and picked a few leaves of her self-grown mint and nibbled at them. Looking down she saw Li Bing with a bagful of things pressing the door-bell to enter. Soon afterwards she heard Karl open the door and introduce himself enthusiastically, not forgetting to present his fish and his cats in the study too.

Li Bing was the centre of attention today and he was in high spirits. He followed Sophie into the kitchen, opened his bag, and out tumbled the things noisily: flour, leafy greens, pork, soy-sauce, leek, chili, garlic and, from the bottom of the bag, a rolling-pin. "Lucky I listened to my wife and brought this along. It's used every time our classmates have a get-together."

Li Bing had come here from Beijing to study for a doctoral degree in materials science. He was doing quite well in Beginner's German and was often smiling. Sophie knew that he'd just had a baby son, born in Beijing a few days ago, and he hadn't seen it yet. He was very happy and thinking that in so many years' time he would get his whole family to come out here.

What time is Wang Dong coming, and the other girls? Sophie rather liked this female student Wang Dong. She was the one who laughed loudest in class. On the first day of term everyone had to do a self-introduction in German. Wang Dong had it all ready and rattled off: "I am called Wang Dong. I am a native of Fujian. I was born on Winter Solstice Day. Dong is Chinese for winter. So I am called Wang Dong."

A few days ago these girls, Wang Dong among them, teamed up with some other students and took a short trip to France; they would be hurrying back around noon. Li Bing said, Laoshi, I'll get started first. I'll make the noodles and wrap the dumplings, then when we're all here we can boil the noodles and steam the dumplings.

Having asked Sophie politely if he could knead the dough on the wooden dining-table in the sitting-room, he brought his things from the kitchen and laid them out and got down to work. Sophie supplied him with cold water, a big stainless-steel sieve and salt and sugar. He sieved the flour gently, shaking it loose and piling it up. Then he made a hole in the middle and dripped water into it slowly, and using both hands combined the flour and the water, gradually forming the whole thing into a ball.

"Laoshi, you don't have to keep me company. This will take a while. I'll tell you when I'm done." He started to roll out the dough, using quite a bit of strength, and the table's legs swayed to his motion. Some time ago the cats had slipped in, and now they had each found a vantage point on a bookshelf nailed high up on the wall and were perching there. Li Bing worked at the dough, grinning as he worked. This morning when he called home, his wife held the crying baby to the phone to let him hear it, and his heart overflowed with happiness. Hey you, keep calm, he told himself, or they'll think you're crazy.

Sophie could tell exactly what Li Bing was thinking. She stood and watched for a while, then seeing her help was not needed went into the kitchen and switched on the dishwasher to clean the cutlery and plates. Then she put the fruit she bought this morning through the juicer and made a big jar of juice. In May the weather was still cool, so the juice could just stand there and wouldn't need to go into the fridge.

She sat down to wait for the dishwasher to finish its cycle. Looking out, she could see Karl in the study working on his computer and putting the swimming patterns of fish through a simulation analysis. On the other side of the sitting-room Li Bing had already stretched the noodles into threads and placed them under a damp cloth and was now chopping up the bok-choy and pork with a sturdy, rhythmic hand. It seemed to her that she could almost feel the pulse-beat of the two men. Karl was deeply immersed in thought and his heart-beat was slow, whereas Li Bing, possessed by the joy of carrying a great responsibility, was admiring the sparkling freshness of the bok-choy and pork mixture which seemed to be saying to him: I'm so yummy, come eat me, c'mon.

Sophie could not remember since when such sensations were lost to her. She also used to wake up in the morning as cheerful as a bird feeling that many exciting things were lined up and she must jump out of bed and get to them at once. Then gradually she felt less of that cheerfulness and more often became perplexed, perplexed about whether or not a year later or a further year later she should be doing the same things, with the same person, and living the same kind of life. Sometimes when Karl was talking to her excitedly about his tropical-fish she would wish he could be briefer and couldn't understand why he was so cheerful. When they were making love she hoped he could be faster. Then the black hole appeared. Whenever she had an idle moment there

would be a hole in her heart, a hole surrounded by flowers. Maybe she could go to Berlin and make new friends, and maybe she could do really well in ancient Greek, but the hole, once there, would always stay in her heart, and stay with her. Without really knowing why, she had let go of that happy world of Karl and Li Bing, and it would be impossible to go back to it now. She was very sure that there was no future.

Laoshi, what floor are you on? It was Wang Dong's voice. She and some other students were calling from the street below. Sophie signaled her from the window to be quiet. Behind the window curtains on the floor beneath the old lady was showing her grumpy face, muttering something.

Wang Dong's voice came before she made her appearance. Laoshi we had such luck this time. We didn't get visas; we just risked it and crossed over to France. The French customs people got on the minute the train crossed the border. We slipped from cart to car, and they didn't catch us. Wow, Li Bing you're terrific, you wrapped the dumplings all by yourself! Here, we got a birthday present for you – see, we were risking danger and we still remembered you! This silk tablecloth is for you, Laoshi. Guten Tag, Herr Karl. Your cats? They're cool!

The two cats were hitherto perched quietly in mid-air, but as they watched the crowd pour in and saw the sitting-room fill up with boisterous, sprawling people they suddenly shot up and hit the ceiling then plunged down and zigzagged across the room like bullets shooting across a battlefield. Sophie moved between the two flying cats and brought the students wine and juice while Wang Dong, Li Bing and others entered and exited the kitchen, boiled water, put in the noodles and steamed the dumplings. Cats and people were all busily occupied.

Karl heard the noisy stir in the sitting-room and came out to take a look. At the sight of Karl the cats calmed down and sulkily retreated into the study.

Wang Dong placed the big wok on the dining-table and started to eat. She didn't have chopsticks, so she stood there and ate with plate, knife and fork. Karl pulled a few wooden chairs from the study and Sophie invited everyone to sit down and offered more wine. But the students preferred to stand, saying it's great, and devoured the noodles and dumplings in big gulps. They didn't take much wine and just kept swilling down the hot soup which was a cloudy soy-based liquid. The air was infused with the aroma of garlic.

Wang Dong described what they had seen in Paris. "Everything on television was about the students in Tiananmen Square and what to do with them when Gorbachev arrives." She paused a bit to think, and said to Li Bing, "I say, Xiao Li,* if something really happened, then none of us would have to go home, and maybe your wife and son can come out here more easily."

If I have a chance, I'd rather go to the States, I want my son to go to school in the States, Li Bing made it clear as he served everyone more noodles. A classmate quickly responded: Yea, Europe is so strange. Look at our German language institute. The principal rides a bicycle, the janitor drives a Mercedes. I ask people, is there a mistake? But they say I don't understand, it's called ecological consciousness: driving a car is pollution, riding a bike is progress. Also, the principal earns a high salary and can afford to live in the city, while the janitor gets paid little and lives far, so the car is a necessity.

In China we've been riding bicycles ever since we were kids, Wang Dong said, so we've all had this consciousness for a long long time. There was a burst of laughter. Someone asked Sophie *laoshi* to say something. Karl gave Sophie a fresh glass of wine. She turned around, saw the big bright kitchen window behind her and thought, if I jumped out of the window now, would it shock the old lady on the fourth floor?

Sophie said, Yes, there may really be trouble at the square. She said there aren't enough glasses I'll get some new ones from the kitchen, and then said the new mint leaves that that sprouted today smell very fresh and cool I'll pick a few for you all to taste. The window's wide-open mouth looked ever so tempting. A voice, it sounded like Li Bing's, was calling, Don't jump.

March 2010

*

Maria Jumped Over the Wall

Maria lived in our neighborhood. Her pa's herbal-tea shop faced my pa's funeral-wreathes shop. Maria's surname was Lee and her family was Chiuchow by descent. Her pa did nothing much in the shop except study the horse-racing tips, watch Redifusion and sometimes eat a tofu-skin stuffed roll, sharing it with his little son. Her mom stayed at the back of the shop and worked with the three daughters when they came home from school, brewing a herbal-tea called "twenty-four-flavors," steaming small bowls of blackish "tortoise-and-fuling jelly" for the customers, and also doing the cooking, the washing and the ironing.

If I were a girl I would have been sent to Maria's secondary school long ago, but my pa wanted me to work in the shop and be his apprentice. I had no problem with that. With a little instruction I easily learnt how to make all styles of wreaths and baskets. I knew all the species of flowers. I even knew how to make wedding bouquets for brides. But when it came to writing captions for the wreaths, my brush-and-ink calligraphy wasn't that presentable. The name of the deceased and how he was related to those sending the wreaths – that kind of personal addresses must never go wrong. And then, I really hated delivering wreathes to the funeral parlors – ghosts scared me. Pa made me practice calligraphy every day. He said the hardest test for calligraphy was when it was hung up. One day if my calligraphy was hung up and still looked okay he would let me write the long strips of captions for the wreaths. I really looked forward to that day coming. Better still if I could finish my apprenticeship before Maria graduated from secondary school.

Today I was hanging around at the herbal-tea shop as usual. Maria was standing in front of their little burner sautéing slices of turnip-pudding for the customers. Her younger sister was squeezing sugarcane through a big juicer to make juice. Her pa was seated in a booth-seat, quietly enjoying a stuffed roll. I slotted a dollar-coin into the shiny jukebox and picked the Bee Gees' *First of May*. My heart followed the song as I watched Maria from a distance. No wonder my younger sister told me they called Maria Holy Madonna in school. She looked exactly like the white porcelain Guanyin statuettes in Chinese emporium stores. Amid the oily vapors produced by the cooking her eyes and brows were gentle and calm, simply comfortable to look at.

I hadn't spoken to Madonna today yet, so I went up and said, "We just got a big delivery of Easter lilies. Want some?" She was transferring some freshly sautéed turnip-pudding onto a plate and was just about to look my way and answer when her pa suddenly bolted up, quickly walked towards us and jumped up and down before the burner. A customer said, "Lee Loban is choking." They scrambled over and quickly pulled him up from the floor. A man called the ambulance. A woman ran off to the wet-market and told Maria's mom to hurry back.

He stopped breathing before the ambulance arrived, choked by the stuffed roll, the kind with tiny bits of dried shrimp-roe inside.

Because we were old neighbors, my pa helped Mrs. Lee with a lot of decisions, like how to choose a coffin, how to bargain with the boss of the funeral-parlor, how to fix up the ceremony for chanting prayers and incinerating paper offerings, and where to find a good yet inexpensive burial-plot. The Lees were Chiuchow people, and the males on that side were unusually fastidious. Maria's pa had two elder brothers whom she called "uncle," and who interfered with everything to the point of almost taking over the herbal-tea shop. My pa told Mrs. Lee on the side: Don't pay attention to them, the important thing is get the funeral done properly.

I forgot how I spent the next few days — perhaps I didn't dare go to their shop. They closed for three days. Then on the fourth day pa gave me a good errand.

"Go and find a team that can do funeral ceremonies Chiuchow-style. Get the best. It'll be on me, my condolences to Lee's family."

Surprising even myself, I quickly found this Taoist temple far out in Tsuen Wan. It was actually inside an old building with several floors without fixed partitioning in the units. In the sitting area, a mahjong-game was going on, the players at the table being the team-captain and three other oldish men, one of whom was wrapped in a Taoist robe. I sat down and, before they finished one game, fixed the time and the price and which prayers to chant. I took the cross-harbor ferry to go home. Sitting on the lower-class deck with coils of rope running all over the floor and hot vapors blowing into the passengers' faces, I felt in my heart that I was truly beginning to miss Maria.

I got home and gave pa the good news and he told me to tell Mrs Lee about it, and also to ask her what kind of things she wanted for the incineration ceremony so we could give her the whole set for free.

The herbal-shop had opened again for business, as I could see, but Maria was not back from school yet and her mom was now in charge of the cash register. The little son was sitting in a booth-seat, his eyes on the television just like his old pa, who was now dead and gone. His school work was laid open on the table, some flies were making circles over his head, and the electric-fan was whirling left and right, flapping the pages of his work-book. The Big Uncle was in the shop too, sitting there like a lord and not doing anything in particular. I was disgusted with this Big Uncle, so I ignored him and went round the other side and whispered to Mrs Lee about the ceremony arrangements. Then I strutted over to the jukebox and right in front of Big Uncle got to play three very loud Beatles songs in a row to make sure the noise would blast the soul out of him.

But after that I had to go home for dinner and in the evening I had to go to the airport to pick up a delivery of flowers from Holland, so I did not see Madonna.

After I had taken the tulips home and got them refrigerated it was already past eleven. We were lowering the shop's metal grille for the night when out there I saw Maria, walking back and forth in front of the herbal-tea shop. Their grille was already rolled down and she couldn't open it.

Pa also saw her and he said maybe that Big Uncle had changed the lock and wouldn't let anyone in after roll-down time. That man even slept in the shop, to keep a strict eye on the family.

I was in my shorts and slippers but went straight out to offer help.

She was carrying lots of things and documents. I said well what'll you do now? Maybe come to our flower-shop and stay the night? She said no there's no need, but could I go to the back-alley with her and give her some help. She would climb over the wall and get in.

The wall was actually a wire mesh fence, about the height of two people. I found a kerosene tank by the roadside and brought it over. I carried her things for her and she stepped on to the tank, swung over, and got in. I climbed in after her, put the things down safely, then climbed out again. It only took a few minutes. A brown dog passing by gave a few barks, to show that he was doing his job too.

After I'd climbed out again I felt I should say something, so I asked her through the wire mesh, my pa wants to know, the boiled pig's head that goes on the altar table — would this be big enough? and showed her the size with my hands. Madonna smiled and said yes, and gathered up her things and went in. I was plain stupid. Plenty of fresh tulips and instead of bringing some over I just talked about a pig's head.

On the day of the wake I arrived at the funeral hall at noon. I put the prayer-chanters from Tsuen Wan where they belonged and fixed up the altar. At two o'clock sharp the chanting started, the men alternating in groups of two. They chanted in Chiuchow dialect and I couldn't understand a word, but it turned out that their murmuring was very soothing and their vocal skills were no worse than any pop group's. When evening fell I assisted pa and helped Maria's family bring out the paper sculptures — a house with garden, a limo, a king-class shop-space and all the rest. Everything was loaded into the big fiery furnace and burned, and everyone watched the rising smoke go up and take everything away. I had thought of using red and white roses to personally make a basket for Maria the bereaved daughter, but pa said we should let the veteran master do it.

It didn't take me too long to realize, having learned the trade, that rich people and government people aside, the funeral hall was usually quite empty if the deceased was an ordinary person. Like Maria's pa tonight — apart from a dozen or more neighbors who came to bow and pay respects, and the Big Uncle and Second Uncle and their wives and

sons who kept coming around to eye the condolence money and the offerings, there weren't that many cousins and relatives, and apparently no friends at all. So my pa truly had great wisdom. He used to say, after I die, as I eventually would, don't bother to do anything, just wrap me up in a hemp mattress and tell the government people to take me away, and that'll be all.

Today Madonna was dressed in a white hemp-cloth mourning outfit. When the chanting was at its noisiest, pa sent me over to ask Maria's mom: In a while, when the soul is due to cross the Bridge of Reluctant Oblivion, who will carry the Soul-Hailing Flag and the Bucket for Bathing the Dead? She said, go ask Big Uncle, and Big Uncle said, go ask Second Uncle, and Second Uncle said, his own son of course, as is the custom. Then, unable to restrain myself, I knelt down beside Maria and asked her in a whisper, Is your Big Uncle forcing your family to give the shop to him? Fumbling for some silver coins to be used for crossing the Bridge of Reluctant Oblivion, she said calmly, I'm not afraid, pa will watch over us. I asked next, Big Uncle said tomorrow you girls can only follow the procession up the hill to the graveyard, but you won't be allowed to step off the coach and profane the burial ground. She heard me, paused a moment in thought, and said, is that so?

It took a long time to reach half-past-ten and the end of the ceremonies and the chanting. The chanting-men put away their musical instruments and cleared the altar. Suddenly Big Uncle and Second Uncle charged forward, puffing with anger, and said they wanted to talk to my pa.

"According to the customs of our village, the offerings used for the wake cannot be used again for the ceremony tomorrow. Tomorrow morning you must replace them with new things." Pa said yes we can talk about that, but there are only seven or eight hours left and it won't be easy to get a new pig's head this late not to say get it boiled in the marinade pot, but the other things like the Big Fortune Cake and the Candy Pagoda are not a problem and can be made in what's left of the night. As he spoke he was already signaling me to call the pastry man. But all of a sudden without indicating any reason that Big Uncle flew into a rage and banged his palm on the altar-table.

"So will you change the things or not?" With that bang the skyward-looking pig's head made a startled jump on the table.

That was the moment when Madonna came out and said, "Change the Candy Pagoda and the cake, don't change the pig's head." After saying that she went in again to arrange her pa's funeral clothes and the embroidered coffin blanket.

The funeral ceremony went very well the next day, ending with the closing of the coffin. The weather was surprisingly good. The entire family went up the hill to the graveyard, all males and females got off the coach, everyone had their feet on the burial-ground and watched the lowering and interment of the coffin. The dead was buried, and the living went down the hill to carry on with their lives.

That year when the school was on summer break Maria and her mom and younger

brother and sisters flew to Toronto to live with their maternal aunt. No kidding, her Big Uncle did get the herbal-tea shop for himself. But it turned out that the shop was just rented property, and Big Uncle was no good at selling herbal-tea and soon lost so much money he had to sell the business. The day the shop closed down, thank heavens, I was handling some champagne roses and shaping them into a gorgeous bridal bouquet. As I looked across the street and saw Big Uncle hand over the keys to the new owner, I couldn't suppress my excitement and exclaimed: Ave Maria!

August 2010

Translated from the Chinese by Diana Yue (余丹)