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Writing Sample

Jianing Zhou

Two stories. "Let us talk about something else," first published in Pathlight Magazine (Summer 2014), and reproduced here with permission, and "Let It All Go"

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ZHOU Jianing
Two stories

Let us talk about something else

She was woken by Tianchang's phone call. Draped in the darkness of the curtains, she watched the screen of the mobile light up, light up, and go dark, then rolled over, but unable to go back to sleep, lay there with eyes wide open in the whirring of the air conditioning. But there was nothing to think about: for the last two months sleeping pills had ruined not only her daytime, but also her dream world; she had been without dreams, and even the despair that had once weighed so heavily had evanesced.

She knew what he was going to say. Her friends, whom she had not seen for a long time, had probably been talking about nothing else since the day before. Last night Da Shu had won an important award; even someone like her, who had more or less cut all contact with the outside world, had heard the news as soon as it was released, the generous prize money and the fame that came with it being enough, clearly, to break the hearts of resentful colleagues. She'd been Tianchang's friend for years, and his co-writer for much of that time, and she knew what Tianchang wanted to say on the phone. But why did he think it would not break her heart?

"Does it?" she asked herself.

The phone rang urgently twice more. In this short time, the texts he sent had more and more exclamation marks, like a string of thunder bursts overhead, and even these she'd gradually grown used to. Last month, they'd had their last drink at the café at the bottom of the building, but their topics of conversation had gradually diminished to the point that they just sat there, dried up, in silence. Outside the window, passers-by would occasionally turn their heads and look inside, but they were sitting in a well-lit place, with only their own reflection in the glass and the whizzing of time as it flew past their ears.

"You have to find a good story," he said in a loud voice, suddenly waving his hand in the air, startling Lulu, who was reading a newspaper behind the bar. She looked up and glanced over at them.

She didn't utter a sound, she'd been hearing this sentence for ten years. At first, he would often add, if you have a good story, you'll be able to sell tens of thousands of copies of the next book. He would say this with a pride in his heart, and a touching glimmer in his eyes. But he didn't care any more, selling tens of thousands of copies was nothing to him now, he'd become famous before her, the scratches on either side of his BMW had rusted as the years passed. When he said those words now, it was not to motivate her, it was his catchphrase. People had given him good stories, he'd done well from them, made a packet, built up capital which he could flaunt. He went drinking with young writers who were just beginning to emerge, and used those words as his opening remarks. He had learned how to control the rhythm of a conversation, he knew when to pause, when to raise his voice. He thrived on the gaze of his followers, unacquainted as they were with the ways of the world and obsessed with ambition. She had always scoffed down her nose at this, never hidden her feelings in front of him, they had argued endlessly over it, and to this day she felt that neither of them had won.

"But..." She had never been able to finish talking before he interrupted her.

"Every good writer racks his brains looking for a good story. Do you know a good story?" He looked at her. He was getting old, he couldn't take the drink so well, and would soon have had too much, "Tell me a story that you like."

She felt a bit anxious, her right hand unconsciously picking at the skin on her left index finger. He questioned her like this every time, then immediately forgot clean about it. Maybe it was because he always drank too much, as he said himself, an excess of alcohol had ruined his memory. But what was more important, she thought, was that he had no interest in anything at all. He might have been a hunter in the past, but his prey had sapped his determination, wiped out any will he had. These days his enthusiastic interest was a façade.

"A clean well-lighted place," she said quietly.

"Hemingway?" he stared at her wide-eyed, then shook his head, "You can't compare with him, no one can." He was drunk, and starting to talk incoherently. "Those stories you write can only ever touch a small group of people, those women, they're weak like you. Do you know what those great writers are like? Hemingway, he could reach everyone, men, women, people like you."

"People like you? Do you think people like you are the majority in this world?"

"That's not a question for me to think about, you're the writer, but you don't care about other people."

"You shouldn't say hurtful things like that."

"I will. It's because your world is so small, you've never really known compassion."

"Compassion? It's just recycled cooking oil that I don't care about."

"So what do you care about?"

"People, how people are, how their hearts and minds work."

"People. Everyday life. Hmm."

His cold smile infuriated her again. She wanted to carry on talking, but he shook his hand, and hung his head in the shadow. In fact, she'd long since given up arguing with him. In the past she had hit the table when he talked like this, knocked the glass over, had even felt the palm of her hand itching to slap the side of his face. There had been times when she could not help making noises as she sat opposite him, he had been astonished, he had no idea of what despair felt like, and he made an effort to say a few kind words, and because of this she had immediately forgiven him. But the strange thing was, no matter how realistic the illusion might seem - can leopards change their spots - the content of their exchanges was always the same, and because they got angry over the same repeated things, their hearts sickened. All these years, neither of them had been willing to take a step forward or a step back. But she had discovered early on that when she bottled things up, when her competitive mind refused to reveal what was important, she was always fighting against nothing, and this left her without any strategy for success.

The two of them fell into a long period of silence, he stubbed out a cigarette, she lit a new one. A few tables away sat another couple, another man and woman, and they did not speak either. The woman was focusing on eating the bowl of salad in front of her, which had been there so long that it was beginning to go soggy. The man had not ordered any food, he probably had nothing better to do with his time, and showed no signs of impatience, glancing occasionally out of the window, or reading the name of each course on the blackboard.

She moved closer to him and said quietly,

"They've definitely been married a long time."

"What?" He looked up at her. She repeated herself, and he turned to look at them. His movements were big, his chair creaked as he moved, and she was worried they might hear, but they were obviously not remotely interested in anything that was going on around them, including each other.

"People who are in love and people who don't know each other very well are scared of falling silent, and they have to fill the empty spaces with language. They are worried about exposing themselves, afraid that the other person won't know what they are thinking about. Isn't that right?"

"Oh." He didn't respond, but drank down the last drop of whisky that had melted with the ice-cube, and got up to pay the bill. She grabbed her coat as well and followed after him. Under the influence, he stepped out into a dream, but given his age, he still looked pretty good. For years he had exercised restraint, apart from drinking, he'd been careful with everything else. His competitive spirit made him want to conquer even his natural desires. He had once been very strong, although he was thinner and weaker now, you could still imagine the smooth strong line of his shoulders from the fit of his shirt. On so many evenings like this she had stood with him on the street, hailing a cab from the entrance, it was often not easy to call one, and they had to stand together for a while. In her mind there was always a hesitation, perhaps she should invite him up for a cup of tea, or not, her place being only half a street away, and more than once she had swept the room beforehand, and tried to inspect it from his viewpoint. She did not check whether he hesitated in the same way, even if she did

notice a flash of discomfort on his face, and subtle changes in the creases of his shirt. But the pair of them felt their pride in different ways and never really spoke.

Right now, all psychological activity had long since vanished, and it was not entirely because she was heading for accelerated deterioration. She worried that the menopause might come prematurely, sex still bothered her, but time had whittled away any fantasies she may have had about him. And it was precisely because it was like this, that they were still able to sit together in a clean well-lighted place and have a drink.

The previous evening, when she had looked at the file and known she could not continue, she had gone downstairs by herself to the café at the bottom of the building and had a drink. It was late, they were cashing up, there were just a couple of university students going over their homework. Two months earlier, even this place had started to ban smoking, so she took a seat outside by the entrance. On the table were unfolded newspapers left by other customers, and it was as she was casually flicking through the pages that she saw the news about Da Shu.

Her heart beat furiously, it was almost organ failure. She had known this day would come sooner or later, and it was already quite late in the day. In the photograph by the headline, Da Shu was wearing a sky blue shirt, the sleeves rolled back nicely, and in the next shot you could feel his eyes, pencil-straight and penetrating. He was doing his best to look modest, but it is difficult to conceal the expression that normally presents itself when a man returns triumphant. The terrible thing was that although her hands were beginning to tremble as she held the paper, she had to admit that it was only arrogant men that she had ever been attracted to. She loved their self-pride and the cold-heartedness that came with it.

Many years ago, she had met him for the first time at a dinner party that Tianchang had arranged. His eyes had been all over her. Back then she was still passionate about fiction, she envied the vitality of male thinking, and the part that she was unable to describe, and knew was something she would never have: the anima, the radiating energy.

After the dinner, he asked if he could take her home, it was winter, the pair of them were in the freezing car waiting for the engine to warm up, and because they did not know each other it seemed there was nothing to talk about. She could not bear the forced silence, and started to talk.

"Your new novel is brilliantly written. I only read the first chapter, and had to stop. I can't write the stuff you write, and I was starting to get jealous." That's what she had said.

"Really? Why compare yourself with me? There's no point doing that." He was looking straight ahead, grinning, his thoughts wandering.

"Oh." She was a bit taken aback.

"Have you hit thirty yet?" he asked.

"You mean you don't rate over-thirties?" She was nervous and her voice was shrill, like glass.

"Women write better when they're young, when they're past their best years, they lose their sensitivity and other things. It's different for men."

Every cell in his body was bursting with arrogance, he thought he was being flirtatious, and while he was speaking he put his hand on her leg. The hand stayed put, then the heating slowly started to warm up, and the glass misted over. She was thoroughly disappointed, yet could not say for sure if the disappointment stemmed from his words or from her low self-esteem. She had probably never believed she could write anything amazing, had all along been trapped in the depths of self-doubt, and his words made her feel aggrieved and angry.

It was the only time she had ever talked with him about fiction. Over the next year or two they slept together sometimes, because they could not find anything in common to talk about, but she never found making love with him to be a joyous thing, more a tormenting of the soul. She felt stifled by the heaviness she concealed in her chest, unable to breathe it out, and in agony because she had no way of showing him any evidence. Just like now, when she could no longer determine whether it was her lifelong struggle to write fiction that was supporting her spiritual world, or her resistance to

the outside world as represented by Tianchang and Da Shu. Perhaps she had once shown an obvious talent, but who could really care about that.

Now she was sitting alone by the entrance to the café reading the news in detail, but in fact there were no details, only the harsh words that kept leaping from the page into her eyes. "Unrivalled." "For the last ten years." "The best." She should have been bursting with laughter, unable to hold it back, but she didn't have the strength to squeeze out a sarcastic remark. Had Da Shu found his story? How was his story? Clever? Callous? Would it make readers cry? Quite simply, her heart was raging.

"What's the news?" Lulu brought a cup of coffee out for her, pulled up a chair beside her and sat down.

"It's nothing. A friend's won a prize." She folded the newspaper.

"Chen Shu? You know him?" Lulu moved closer. "My boyfriend loves his novels, pretty much buys every book. I wish I'd known before that you knew him."

"Before?"

"Er," Lulu nodded earnestly, and after a while said, "because we've split up now."

"Oh?" She didn't know how to respond, whether she should look pained maybe. She hadn't come looking for conversation, just to sit here by herself for a while. The food was good here, the tables and chairs were a generous size, with plenty of space between them, and everyone looked as though they were trying not to know anyone else. That was why she was willing to come here, it was like the description in Hemingway's story, it was a clean and pleasant café. It was well lighted. The light was very good and also, now, there were shadows of the leaves. She looked down at the ice-cubes that were slowly melting in her glass, but Lulu had stretched her legs out in front of her, picked up the newspaper, and showed no intention of leaving.

"Have you seen my boyfriend, he comes to pick me up from work every day."

"The one who drives the jeep?" It was a wild guess.

"No, we can't afford a car," said Lulu, without altering her voice, then she went quiet for a while, glancing at her occasionally, as though she had a long story she wanted to tell, but was unsure of the listener's patience.

"Oh," she answered, trying to work out how to end this conversation that was neither a pain nor a pleasure. Today had already been a terrible day, and although she knew that if she went back to her computer now it would only add to the pain, she really had nothing else that was worth doing. She certainly couldn't stand the chubby twenty-year old girl in front of her, in her short lotus-leaf skirt that revealed thighs the colour of lotus-root. She couldn't have a conversation with her, what would they talk about. She suddenly realized she was in a vicious circle, she was thoroughly ruining her own life, that was for sure, and she had absolutely no interest whatsoever in this waitress and the ordinary world she represented. Whatever her story, she was not interested. The everyday life of ordinary people was a pool of stagnant water, she had had enough of it already, the things of everyday life always wear down ambition.

"They say you're a writer?" Lulu asked.

"Yes," she did her best to answer, concerned that she would keep asking questions, or say something like "maybe you'd be interested in my story?" But Lulu did not make another sound, she merely folded over the paper she had just opened, and in the shadows started to read the news about Da Shu.

"I never imagined he was so old, how old is he, 50?" Lulu asked as she looked at the photo.

"More or less." Yes, he was fifty already, she thought. She had never imagined the time would pass so fast.

"You shouldn't drink so much. Alcohol can ruin your skin."

"Wait till you're my age, and you won't be so bothered either." She smiled, it was her third drink that evening, it was cheaper here than anywhere else, and besides she liked sitting in the shadow of the light, watching the few people who were out on the street. But she wanted draw the evening to a close now, she took some cash out of her purse, she would go back and sit in front of her computer, there was something more important she had to do.

"Bye bye." As she left, Lulu stood behind her and waved.

Then she did get out of bed. She made a mug of strong boiling tea, and went to sit at her desk again. She never had time to tidy the desk, a few balls of dust-covered hairs were chasing about the table legs in the breeze, the few bayberry stones in the ashtray had gone bad, and they smelt insane. Although she had nothing she was busy with, she was still too busy to make a trip to the large supermarket, and had to make do with the convenience store at the bottom of the building, where she bought toilet paper at great expense, not to mention frozen food. She had lost all interest in taking care of herself. But she kept strict control over her sleep, for which she took a strong dose of sleeping pills, although this was not for health reasons, but because she did not want to waste the morning light, could not allow sleep to ruin her work time. In the evenings she felt despair, things looked better in the morning, she knew the tranquillity was fleeting, that time would slip away without reason, and anxiety would take over. In the mornings she could write a few lines, in the afternoon she could mechanically type the same kind of sentence again and again, but the constant deleting almost brought her to tears, and by evening her hope turned to dust, the talent of the past abandoning her fast. She wasn't busy at all, she was spending all her time experiencing how despair engulfs the very feeling of despair.

Right now, she wanted to carry on with her writing from the previous evening, before the alcohol and sleeping pills took effect at the same time, she had thought up some brilliant passages, sentences stunning beyond compare, but the glowing light had quickly disappeared in the dark pool, she did not have time to reach forward and pull it out before she was dragged into the depth of darkness that she yearned for. Now, there was nothing to show for it, not even a word, only a kind of dull pain somewhere in the back of her head, she began to worry that the sleeping pills were trying to snatch away her memory, but perhaps that honour belonged to time itself.

After the first cup of tea, she wrote two dry lines of characters, which hung lifeless, undecided, on the screen. She lit a cigarette, but did not have the patience to smoke it to the end, she felt inhaling and exhaling was merely consuming time that could not be recovered. Tianchang said that for years he had stressed his expression of her frustration to motivate her to create even better things, but in fact it proved that she did not have the ability to live up to his imagination, the feeling of frustration was just, and only, the feeling of frustration, and she had never benefited from it. She thought it over, stubbed out her cigarette, and with the tiny bit of bravery that came from abandoning her ego, returned Tianchang's call.

"Have you just got up?" he asked.

"Er. I must congratulate Da Shu." She burst in before him, afraid he would repeat himself.

"Da Shu's here on business for a couple of days, he asks if you'll come and eat with us this evening."

"I won't, thanks."

"You should come out for a walk, it'll be good for your depression."

"You don't know what good is."

"I don't want to argue with you. If you'd read Da Shu's novel, you wouldn't be talking like that." She knew what was going to roll out of his mouth next, where other people were concerned, he never skimmed on using words and expressions of admiration, and when he used these words and expressions of admiration he drove her into a corner again.

"Did you read the chapter I gave you last week?" she asked.

"Yes. Hm." He sighed tactlessly.

"Oh." She didn't say any more, at times like this she would hold her breath, waiting for a few words of approval from him. As though struggling against death, she was gradually realizing that she had in fact basically given up writing already, but what she could not give up was the approval that she needed. For this, she had given up everyday life, she had slipped into a vicious circle of despair, and was living in the cracks of language. She thought about it as she held the phone, and could not

help feeling shocked that she had already started to believe that she would never write anything that could touch people, her story just did not exist. But she persuaded herself not to go and face cruel reality, compared with reality, what was time anyway?

"I'll come and pick you up on the way this evening." He was keen to end the conversation.

"I'm a bit busy, I wanted to finish this chapter today."

"We can talk about something else, I'll bring the wine you like." As his tone of voice grew gentler her heart softened too.

After hanging up the phone, she was unable to carry on writing, less than half the day had passed, but it seemed to be drawing to a premature conclusion. She planned to go down to the salon for a blowdry, but as soon as she stepped out on to the street she regretted it. She had completely forgotten it was the weekend. She never went down at weekends, she loathed weekends. Usually, the road here was empty, and the old man who collected the parking fees would sit on his stool, his flask of tea in his hands, and take a nap. But at weekends, it was full to bursting, and the old man would rush between parking spaces on his bicycle. The seats outside the café were filled with young people, who didn't look as though they would be moving along soon, she could see the people were different from before, as soon as the lunch time people had gone, the afternoon people started to meet up. She saw a blonde girl in a black vest, with a small tattoo below her shoulder blade, smoking, her hair in a small plait, her face beautiful in profile. This world was so beautiful, but it had nothing to do with her.

She was shocked to find that as soon as she'd taken a couple of steps outside, she wanted to go back to her room. But a man hurried out of the café calling her.

"Hey, hey." She hesitated, the man's face looked familiar, but as far as she was concerned, he was too young, he was not someone she knew. She stayed where she was because being mistaken for someone else made her feel strangely embarrassed for the other people. But he was definitely heading towards her, tall and healthy, shoulders straight.

For a split second she actually thought he might be a passer-by wanting to strike up a conversation, but she found that notion hilarious. Last year she had been through that ugly break-up, when the bastard had dropped his bombshell, do you think any other man would be interested in you? Instinctively, she ran her hand over her hair, momentarily unable to decide whether to let it fall and cover her dull face, or to pull it back and hide the grey. Before she could make up her mind, he was already in front of her.

He pointed to the café behind, and for a moment, she didn't know what to say. He was evidently very well-mannered and had evidently been sent by someone, he was not there of his own volition. She knew he had something difficult to say, and in those few seconds he was trying to choose the right words, and the right tone of voice.

"The boss asked me to come and have a word with you." As he spoke, he lowered his eyes and his voice, "Yesterday evening when we were closing up, he saw you chatting with Lulu, he says you're probably a friend of hers."

"Oh," she was reluctant to nod, not knowing whether to acknowledge this so-called friend or not.

"Something's happened, she took sleeping pills last night..." he stopped to think, and then simply said, "She's dead".

"What?" She looked at him in disbelief, she didn't feel particularly shocked, let alone sad, it was more that she wanted to explain, that she didn't know the deceased person at all. But he had said what he had come to say, and let out a sigh of relief, pulled his hands out of his trouser pockets and rubbed them up and down his legs, and seeing she was saying nothing, he simply turned round and disappeared through the café door like a wisp of smoke.

She stood rooted to the spot for a while, and the fair-haired girl with the tattoo and her friend walked in front of her, carrying their food shopping, the green vegetables staring out of the plastic carriers, as they chatted freely about tangible practical things. She watched them, simply couldn't take

her eyes off them. It was only when they turned the corner that she realized she was holding her key and purse, and that her entire body was shaking. It wasn't that she was sad, it was that her heart felt like an old pencil-eraser that could only scratch and tear the paper.

She felt some regret at not having stayed longer in her seat outside yesterday evening, for not having spotted it was a good story. But she was shocked by her thoughts. She tried to take a couple of steps forward, and this time she didn't need to strain her ears, she could hear everything, everyday life was crashing down, collapsing around her, if it carried on, there would only be rubble, and nothing left that could touch people's hearts.

She thought about the dinner ten years ago, which was the first time she had met Da Shu. The three of them were sitting in a hotpot restaurant drinking beer, they drank too much, then walked out into the cold air of the street. On Guanghua Avenue, there were no other people. Da Shu walked in front, breathing out white mist, then turned around, his eyes gleaming, and recited a poem.

Let us not talk philosophy, drop it, Jeanne.
 So many words, so much paper, who can stand it.
 I told you the truth about my distancing myself.
 I've stopped worrying about my misshapen life.
 It was no better and no worse than the usual human tragedies.
 For over thirty years we have been waging our dispute
 As we do now, on the island under the skies of the tropics.
 We flee a downpour, in an instant the bright sun again,
 And I grow dumb, dazzled by the emerald essence of the leaves.
 We submerge in foam at the line of the surf,
 We swim far, to where the horizon is a tangle of banana bush,
 With little windmills of palms.
 And I am under accusation: That I am not up to my oeuvre,
 That I do not demand enough from myself
 As I could have learned from Karl Jaspers,
 That my scorn for the opinions of this age grows slack.

The poem is the first section of "A Conversation with Jeanne" by Czesław Miłosz, translated from the Polish by Joanna Trzeciak

Translated from the Chinese by Helen Wang

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Let It All Go

When I woke from my afternoon nap Mama had already left for the beach: "You don't need to join me *la*." Before leaving she had poured me a glass of water, chopped an apple and left me half. The side of fruit exposed to the air was already turning brown.

I could sense that morning's vicious headache now curled up behind a nerve ending. This whole trip jet lag and swinging temperatures had tormented me. In the bathroom I turned on the shower and waited as hot water traveled through the creaking pipes. Up on the rack, the neatly folded hotel towels and washcloths were still clean and stiff while the dingy old towel she had brought dangled from a bar. Every inch was frayed, going *clash clash* against the wall and making it impossible to look away. But that wasn't the end of it. Pulling away the towel I would find a neat film of cellophane coating the bar. It was like a Resident Evil reenactment, where skin rot is spread by touch. I knew she had brought mosquito repellent, alcohol and cotton swabs, but not an actual box of cellophane wrap.

"Don't be such a worry wart," I told her the first night, after finishing in the bathroom.

"I wouldn't be so certain," she said stubbornly. "Don't you know these hotel chain maids wipe the toilets with the towels?"

"You take the newspapers way too seriously. This isn't one of those cheap hotel chains. Look out the window. We have a view of the ocean," as I spoke, I pressed the remote switch next to the bed that opened the curtains. She shifted uncertainly to stand beside the window, but the murky night obscured the view.

"Once when I stayed at a hostel, I wore someone else's slippers and got a fungal infection," she crowed.

"How long ago was that? 20 years?"

"Right after I got married, 20, no, 30 years ago. But what does that have to do with this? "

"The world is changing!"

"Well it's not getting any cleaner!"

"You're way too bleak. You see danger everywhere you look."

"Exactly. Why else would you have been made to suffer like that? I can tell your heart was shattered."

"What!? Where did that come from? You need to stop watching all those TV shows."

"I'm not like you. People my age just want to pass their time away cheerfully. What do you want me to change?"

"Nobody wants you to change," I snapped, getting crabby.

Now, with her out of the room I felt I could relax. I pulled my hotel-shampoo-washed-hair into a bun that persistently dripped water. Opening a window I could see the beach in the distance dotted with people, dogs and seabirds — *que qiaowushengxi* — no clatter *le*, no clamor, just silent serenity. I didn't put on any clothes — perfect. I assumed there would be a strong wind blowing — delusion. But surfers rushed into the ocean with their boards to meet waves that rose abruptly before disappearing into the white foam.

Grabbing my book, I went down to the hotel cafe. Originally, I had planned to read it on the plane, but there had been two women from Wenzhou sitting behind me. They ran a grocery store and gossiped endlessly about shopkeepers opening shops — *ggei ssi zie ssi lei kee ga di cii*, and business in Chinatown — *see yi zii na nang?* The splintered, seesawing pitch of their dialect tugged at my nerves. Beside me, however, Mama slept through the whole flight. Her seat belt was pulled tight and eyebrows knitted and short breaths uneven. Midway, I fell into a hazy sleep, but soon the dehydration and rumbling of the cabin came back to torture me. At least I was acclimatized to sleep deprivation. Just sitting still like that, my bones, nerves, skin and hair felt like fragments of weatherworn porcelain.

In the restaurant adjoining the cafe, I now saw two chunky waitresses in aprons standing hands—on—hips against the fire retardant kitchen door. They shot a cold glance in my direction. There were no other customers, so I walked out onto the terrace that faced the beach where I could smoke. We were near the tropics and there was a shocking gap between morning and evening temperatures. The sun's glare turned everything into a dazzling white mirage, but whenever a dark cloud passed the ocean wind would scream like a migraine. Some of the people on the beach were wearing sweaters. Others were in bikinis and playing beach volleyball with pasty sand plastered to their bodies.

A bum came along pushing a cart and stopped on the other side of the terrace railing from me. He pointed at my cigarette pack to indicate he wanted one. I hesitated for a minute, slid one out and handed it to him. He had his own lighter, but the wind had picked up and the *click clack click clack* went on for ages. Once the cigarette was lit he leaned against the rail and took a deep drag. He wore a small purple hat with a sequined crown. His face was pale and the corner of his mouth split into a long scar.

"Where you from?"

"China," I said.

"Ah, aha. Beijing?"

"No, I am not," I was in no mood to talk.

"I once had a girlfriend from Beijing," he actually started singing. "I once loved a girl, she's from Beijing, from Beijing."

"Wu—"

"Why are you here? On vacation?" He continued.

"Correct."

"And your friends are?"

"I came with my mother. She went to the beach. The sun is too hot."

"Vacationing with your mother. That's can't be easy. Ouch!" He whistled and said, "How old are you, twenty?"

"Yi?" I couldn't help a giggle, "You know how to talk nice."

"Don't you know it," he chuckled, "are you one of those sad, gloomy, depressed types?"

"No way."

"My guitar's broken, or else I'd play a song for you. I only know Elvis. I'm old school."

"Some other time."

"I have to go. It's been an unlucky day," he pointed to the cart behind him, "see, the plastic bin ripped. Paul from the restaurant over there has a new one for me. I'm on my way to get it." He put out the cigarette, pushed his cart forwards a couple of steps and then turned around and said, "FYI, don't eat the fish and chips from Paul's place. His fish isn't fresh!"

Mama returned after a while. The two waitresses were changing the tablecloths and arranging the tableware for dinner. I could see her in her orange hat approaching from far down the beach. She'd bought it just for travel. It was crumpled and aged her a few years. She'd also bought a handbag in the same color scheme. It was canvas, not leather and she wouldn't stop complaining about it. She lurched through the sand. Deep, red sunburn spread from her nose to her cheeks. She was huffing and puffing, but looked overjoyed and content.

"Where did you go?" I asked.

"I went for a walk along the shore."

"For the whole afternoon?"

"Yes. I hiked passed two bays. All the way behind that rock," she pointed energetically. I looked, but couldn't see anything. "You should get out and walk around a little. Stop thinking about him. We're here to relax and forget our troubles. Remember?"

"I wasn't thinking about him at all, but now I am! Now I'm thinking about *him*!"

"Do you still have a headache? What a shame. It's the last day and you didn't get to see the bay."

"Let's just go eat. I'm hungry again. You?"

We walked along the beach with the soft evening sun draped over our shoulders. It wasn't dark yet — of course that meant it wasn't dinnertime either. All the restaurants we looked into were pitch black. There was only a scattering of white people sat on chairs outside drinking beer. I caught a glimpse of a shop with the letters for Paul on the sign and for whatever reason hurried my steps. But I couldn't help looking back. A golden deep-fried fish and a fizzing bottle of coca cola were printed on the placard by the door. Next to it, a guy with a mohawk was making a phone call.

Eventually we found a Japanese restaurant and sat down. The first night she had oversaturated herself with the grody food here: greasy, deep-fried local snacks and pungent Southeast Asian cuisine.

Like all the other tourists, we sat at a table veiled by tree leaves and observed the beachgoers from our repose. At this hour the sunbathers rose in ranks and started shuffling away in a languid laze.

"We should talk," she said. The food was slow and she could no longer stand the silence.

"We talk everyday," I said, as well-humored as I could manage.

"You still haven't told me the truth," she said. "You should have told me earlier."

"I'm not as upset as you think. I've totally accepted it."

"Just like that, you've accepted it?" She looked at me skeptically.

"It's nothing. He fell in love with someone else. Anybody can fall in love with someone else."

"Fool's talk. As if you loved someone else?" She nearly thrust her face into mine, "I've never heard of such a thing. Never!" She spoke loudly, but her voice quivered and fell flat at the end. I thought she was on the verge of crying and couldn't understand why she was getting so upset. All we could do was twist our heads towards the dimming horizon.

When our dishes arrived I kept silent and absorbed myself in the food. She took two self-conscious mouthfuls and pushed her bowl away. I didn't look up at her. A fly whirled around between us.

"Did he beat you?" She asked abruptly.

"What?"

"Did he beat you?" She repeated herself.

Sliding my bowl away, I jammed two trembling hands into my purse, pulled out a wad of bills and slapped it down on the table. She followed me out of the restaurant. We toiled across the sand in single file. Heading back to the hotel we passed by Paul's restaurant again. The neon lights were now glowing and the seductive smell of deep-fried food wafted out of the entrance. Before I had the chance to slip passed, the bum with the sequined hat bowed out of the doorway. Pushing his cart he stumbled towards me enthusiastically.

"Ha, I knew I'd run into you again," He smiled and spread open his arms. A tacky pink plastic box was now fixed to his cart. "Paul gave me a new container and I also got a blues harmonica in C!"

Feeling awkward, I nodded without smiling and stepped off to the side.

"Is that your Mom? She's got your good looks," he turned to her and said, "Hi."

"Who's that man? What's he saying?" She locked her hands together, glared at the strange man, lowered her shoulders, turned to me and shrilled, "Who's that man!?"

"He's a garbage collector," I said.

"What does he want?"

"He says good evening."

"Make him leave."

"It's okay, Mama, he's just saying hello."

"Make him leave. Now," she yanked on my sleeve and shoed him away in a panic.

"We should return to the hotel," I said to him. "You know..."

"For sure, for sure." He continued standing there without saying anything else.

Now she put a fire in her stride. My shoes were filling with sand as I tried to keep up. A group of teenagers rushed towards us from a nearby surfing school. They wore tight wetsuits and carried surfboards that were as tall as a person. One last strip of daylight still glowed on the horizon. The surfers hasted past and the boys in the lead soon charged into to the ocean.

Back at the hotel we decided to go down for a swim in the outdoor pool and changed into our swimsuits. We walked down a long corridor and onto the deck where an oasis of tropical plants thrived in the inky darkness. No warning, and it began to rain. By the time we got to the edge of the pool we realized that temperatures had dropped by at least ten degrees. Ocean winds blew from all directions and I could feel my headache stirring behind the nerve ending. I pulled my jacket tighter.

"Let's go back. It's too cold," I said.

"What a shame. This is the last night," she said.

"We could get a drink at the bar." I said deliberately.

"You *drink*?" She stared at me and turned to the pool that crackled under the shower.

We headed back the way we came and neither spoke for a while.

"I don't hate him and I don't expect you to understand, so you're better off just accepting it." I said.

"I understand. The world is changing. Times are bleak."

"No, that's not it. You *don't* understand."

"In our day people didn't get divorced. Even if you didn't love each other you still lived together. It was normal. We suffered the heartache. These days nobody can suffer it. One day he'll realize that finding someone like you isn't that easy. It doesn't matter who you're with. It's all the same in the end. He'll see that one day."

"That's not the point."

We arrived at the entrance of the bar. She halted, peered inside and immediately took a step back.

"They're all foreigners." She said, staring at me.

"It's too cold. I'm going to get another headache. I need to sit for a while and have a drink and then I'll come up."

"Tomorrow we have to leave for the airport before dawn," she stammered. But all of the arguing was clearly exhausting her as well. She gave up and headed for the elevator. I found a seat by a window overlooking the terrace. Darkness now engulfed the vista, but the ocean was right outside.

The bar was tiny and there was hardly any space between the seats. There weren't many people. A man facing me had a hot sandwich and glass of beer in front of him. It was already his third glass but the sandwich was still intact. He spent most of his time focused on the window. Every so often he would turn his head and smile.

I drained a glass of wine and ordered another. He pulled his chair closer and started talking from across the table.

"Are you from China?" he asked politely.

"Yes."

"There aren't many Chinese restaurants around here. There's the Li Ji next door. They serve hot pot."

"Good choice actually, for this weather."

"It is cool this evening, but tomorrow will be nicer. You could go out to sea. Have you been?"

"No. My mother will get seasick."

"So you're travelling with your mother?"

"You can say that." I said, but mused that wasn't how she saw it.

"I have three kids. Two of my daughters work in the city and my son's divorced. He once brought my granddaughter here on holiday and they spent the whole time out on the boats."

"You live here?"

"I own a rental shop across the street. It's got anything you might need, from skateboards to boats."

"Do you catch fish on the ocean?"

"Sure, I was once good with a line and hook. But I got tired of the sea and don't go out anymore."

"Wu."

"What do you say I invite you out for dinner tomorrow?"

"But..." This was the last night I thought.

"But what? Bring your mother along, or do you have any other family members here? I want to hear about your city. I had a pacemaker implanted this year. I'll never be able to travel again, but I'm tired of this place. " He swallowed another mouthful of beer. I couldn't tell if he was drunk or not.

The man wrote down his phone number. It had a long area code and country number and he insisted I call him the next evening. Picking up my room card I said goodbye and walked onto the terrace to smoke my last cigarette of the night. The rain had stopped and the air was cleared of floral aromas, leaving only the fishy stink of the sea. It was so much colder. I huddled up to light my cigarette and turned around to see the old man sat lonely in a leather chair. His eyes were shut as though he were sleeping.

"Stop holding me so tight. You're pulling my clothes!" He said into the wind.

"What!" I shouted, but it was as though the wind was whisking our words back from where we came.

"You're pulling my clothes!" He turned his head around.

"Slow down. They drive on the left here. You keep hugging the line."

"I'm only going sixty. Stop nagging!"

"But there's too much wind. I'm getting a headache."

"Then why don't you wear a helmet?"

"Wu—"

"You never listen— We need to stop at a pharmacy— Did you put on sunscreen?" he said softly, lowering his voice. He hadn't known that his words were scattered by the wind.

Ten whole years had passed since. We had been driving down an island road with a magnificent Buddha and swarms of irritating bees in the distance. But now everything was fine. I couldn't even remember that island's name. All I could dredge out of my memory were worthless bits and pieces. Anyway at any rate, here and now I inhaled a mouthful of cigarette smoke and easy le, let it all go.

Translated from the Chinese by Nicholas Richards
