A Silent Brook

by

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Translated from the Chinese by

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Introduction

He Jia’s short story, *A Silent Brook*, chronicles a day in the life of Zhang Yan, a Chinese psychologist in America. This work of modern Chinese fiction draws upon a third-person narrative interspersed with humorous dialogue to weave the tale of a woman faced with a tedious career, a family falling apart and cultural conflict. The unique style and structure, which makes this a great story in Chinese, poses specific challenges for translation into English. The author’s use of idiomatic language, metaphor, gesture and humor warrant careful consideration on the part of the translator. Title translation is also significant, since it sets the tone for the story that follows. If the goal of translation is to produce a smooth, readable target text, how much intervention is allowed on the part of the translator? What strategies must be implemented to resolve the faithful vs. free rendering dilemma?

The chief translation difficulties found in *A Silent Brook* include whether or not to preserve the source language structure in the target language and how to transmit culturally specific information. Although no agreement exists on the level of intervention permitted to the translator (Holman & Boase-Beier 1998, p. 10), a target-oriented approach must be used to confront many of these problems. Though the source text serves as the primary model in literary translation, emphasis on a target-oriented approach is often necessary in order to successfully transmit the information into the target language. Dent-Young (1995) points out that “the translator’s problem can be described as a single, essentially stylistic one: how to create a text which works for the English reader, and which parallels at least some important qualities of the original” (p. 250). Dent-Young’s statement is problematic because for a translation to be a translation, rather than a paraphrasing exercise, it must reflect all elements of the original. More accurately, a
translation must convey the meaning and style of the source text by conforming to target language norms. Before this process can begin, however, the translator must identify the important qualities of the source text to understand how they should function in the target language.

**Title Translation**

Titles provide a starting point, a small contextual fulcrum upon which the subject or plot gains purchase. Just as in English, Chinese titles tend to be short and pithy, often following the four-character format commonly used in idioms. The source language title of the work discussed here is “流水无声,” which literally means, “flowing water makes no noise.” To read a little more into the title, the first two characters, “流水,” refer to jotting down the trivial comings and goings of daily life in a journal known in Chinese as a “流水账.” The last two characters “无声” mean “no noise,” implying that whatever is being recorded is tedious or boring. Taken as a whole, the source language title hints at a contradiction—how could flowing water be silent? Because this is a considerable amount of information to convey in a few words, the target title had to be limited to only a few of the concepts alluded to in the source language. The decision to translate the title as *A Silent Brook* was intended to pique the curiosity of readers since one typically thinks of a babbling brook, not a silent one. This translation preserved the contradiction implied in the original.

**Structure**

The minimal use of transition between paragraphs constitutes one of the most notable traits of
A Silent Brook. It is difficult to say for sure which instances reflect He’s style and which merely typify the Chinese, a language which does not emphasize such a convention. Nevertheless, if the translation does not make adjustments to fit English structural norms, target readers may feel that the text lacks cohesion. On the other hand, if the translator becomes overzealous in ensuring that each paragraph flows smoothly to the next, the translator risks creating a bookish, overworked translation. Nida and Taber (1974) note that “rather than force the formal structure of one language upon another, the effective translator is quite prepared to make any and all formal changes necessary to produce the message in the distinctive structural forms of the receptor language” (p. 4). The best approach for solving structural problems in A Silent Brook involved combining sequential paragraphs of relevant content rather than adding transitional sentences not extant in the source text. Note the example below:

Example 1

Source (p. 102, line 1)

清晨两点，张燕还在床上翻来覆去，除了琐琐碎碎，竟然
有工夫在一些无关紧要的事上费了不少神，包括在大洋那边曾经
任意挥霍了的时光。

张燕不常失眠，因此并不必为这些无关紧要的事费太多脑筋。

Target A (literal translation)

At two in the morning Zhang Yan was still tossing and turning in bed. Aside from the usual little things that often keep one awake, she felt strangely compelled to dwell on things that now had no bearing on her life, including all the time she had wasted on the other side of the Pacific.

She so rarely lost sleep over anything that it seemed strange for her to be bothered by such trivialities now.
At two in the morning Zhang Yan was still tossing and turning in bed. Aside from the usual little things that often keep one awake, she felt strangely compelled to dwell on things that now had no bearing on her life, including all the time she had wasted on the other side of the Pacific. She so rarely lost sleep over anything that it seemed strange for her to be bothered by such trivialities now.

Since these paragraphs occur at the very beginning of the story, it is important that they demonstrate proper cohesion. Adhering too closely to the structure of the source text might make target readers feel that they were jumping to a new meaning unit when in actuality, the next paragraph contains information pertinent to the first. Álvarez and Vidal (as cited in Holman, M. & Boase-Beier, J. 1998) note, “a translator, therefore, is a rewriter who determines the implied meanings of the TL text, and who also, in the act of rewriting, re-determines the meaning of the original” (p. 14). In this case, the process of rewriting means paying special attention to structure in order to effectively transmit the intended meaning.

Character dialogue in *A Silent Brook* also presented certain problems. Besides using indentation and quotation marks, which are obligatory in Chinese, the author does not often explicitly note who is saying what. English writers often identify the person speaking either before or after the quotation marks. Dialogue markers can become cumbersome, however, in cases where the content of the dialogue already identifies the character speaking, or if the text intentionally omits dialogue markers to reflect a more rapid tempo. Since dialogue features so prominently in *A Silent Brook*, it became necessary at times to clearly show who was speaking. This also provided an additional opportunity to interpolate information to demonstrate the implicit emphasis of the source text. Note Example 2 on the next page:
Example 2

Source (p. 102, line 22)

“活着是多么悲哀啊!”

Target (page 1)

“But life is so sad!” Mr. Stanley said sorrowfully.

The underlined portion of the source text in Example 2 denotes a sentence final exclamatory particle common in Chinese but difficult to render into English. In the target text, the underlined portion could not be translated explicitly. Instead, the dialogue marker (in bold font) containing the adverb, “sorrowfully,” reflects the emotionality of the exclamatory particle found in the source text. This clarifies who is speaking, but also stresses Mr. Stanley’s overwrought personality, an important aspect of his character.

In cases where the author used dialogue markers in the source text, literal translation often proved ineffective and misleading. Example 3 illustrates a situation where translating the source too literally can result in unclear meaning.

Example 3

Source (p. 103, line 7)

“噢，是他？”张燕拖长了声调。

Target A (literal translation)
“Oh, it was him?” Zhang Yan dragged out the sound of her voice.

Target B (p. 2)

“Really? Him?” Zhang Yan said, trying to sound interested.

Though the source author used dialogue markers to show which character is speaking, the literal rendering in Target A sounds too wordy in English. In addition, the Chinese phrase “dragging out the sound of her voice” does not effectively express in English what the character is doing and why. In this example, Zhang Yan is responding to Mr. Stanley’s emotional ranting. She is bored with the conversation, but as his psychologist she must at least pretend to listen attentively. Target B better expresses the intent behind Zhang Yan’s reply, emphasizing not just what she said, but how she said it.

The addition or interpolation of material into the target text must be undertaken with great care and a sense of moderation. Landers (2001) says “whatever the source language whatever the specialized topic, the principle applies: provide only as much information as can be conveyed without resort to artificiality” (p. 80). Thus, in several places, dialogue flows smoothly without speakers being marked explicitly in either the source or target languages. Example 4 contains the passage where Zhang Yan argues with Jerry, a man who has just rear-ended her car:

Example 4

Source (p. 103, line 7)

“指示灯不是还在闪吗？我看你该去看看眼科医生了。”
“笑话，我自己就是干这行的，还用你来教育我？”
“那你该不是喝醉了吧？什么不好撞的，非要来撞我的车？”
“反正我没看见指示灯，谁知道你什么时候打的，恐怕是被我撞了之后吧？”
“你……”张燕气得一时语塞。

Target (p. 37)

“(Can’t you see that) the turn signal is still blinking? You should have your eyes checked.”
“Nonsense. I’m an optometrist, why would I need you to tell me I need my eyes checked?”
“What are you, drunk? There was nothing else good to crash into so you had to hit me, right?”
“Who knows when you turned on your signal, probably after I hit you I bet!”
“You…” Zhang Yan found herself momentarily speechless.

In this example, a dialogue marker is used only once at the very end of the verbal exchange. The structure, or lack thereof, serves as an extralinguistic cue to the cadence of the dialogue. In this case, any interpolation would affect the rhythm, and thus, the aim of the original.

Cultural Specificity

Chinese differs from English not only in structure, but also in its usage of idiomatic language, metaphor, gesture and humor. When translating between languages that are fundamentally dissimilar, “difficulties arise not only in the form of vocabulary but also from cultural artifacts not found in the target culture. The greater the cultural distance between the source culture and the target culture, the more the translator will have to work to bridge that gap” (Landers, 2001, p. 93). Bridging the culture gap remains challenging because translating for a target audience often means removing the culturally defining traits from the source text. This can result in a mode of expression that no longer exhibits the essential qualities of the source culture.
When translating with culture in mind, the translator must weigh the cultural value of the text, assess each meaning unit viewed as culturally problematic in the target culture and then make decisions that best serve the audience. As a work of modern fiction, the cultural value of *A Silent Brook* is not limited by its linguistic identity as a Chinese language document. Since He Jia writes about a universal theme, *A Silent Brook* is not stifled by a “Chineseness” that prevails in works of Chinese history and religion. Instead, the main problems primarily surround the word-level translation of culturally specific idioms, metaphors, gestures and humor.

**Idioms**

The Chinese language abounds with idioms, a category that is not limited to the ubiquitous four character sayings found in all types of documents, but applies to any phrase that has a meaning not easily deducible from the face value of the words. The concept of what constitutes proper idiomatic usage varies greatly between English and Chinese. Good English writing emphasizes fresh descriptive language over stale clichés. The Chinese maintain the opposite convention; as a culture that values its long history and rich linguistic tradition, adages from the days of Confucius (551 BCE-479 BCE) regularly appear in the modern language, as is the case with Example 5 below.

**Example 5**

*Source (p. 102, line 25)*

中国的名言是四十不惑，而美国人快到知天命的年龄了，
依旧在考虑那些不三不四不明不白的问题。
The Chinese say that doubt shouldn’t trouble you when you reach forty. Americans, on the other hand, seem inexplicably drawn to ponder the gray areas of life at just the age when they should feel secure about themselves.

The two underlined portions of the source text allude to Book II of the Confucian Analects. The first phrase, “四十不惑” means, “at forty (a man) is free from doubt.” The next, “知天命” is a little more obscure. It literally means, “to know the command of heaven” but can be interpreted as “to feel secure or comfortable with one’s fate.” An educated Chinese reader would understand the source text immediately and think no more of it. A literal translation, or a rendering with background information included, would confuse target readers because the idiom’s function is not culturally driven, but rather, meaning driven. That is to say, the author chose this idiom to efficiently communicate information to source readers, not to discuss Confucian values. In this case, a target-oriented translation for meaning proved most fitting.

Some idioms do not require background knowledge to be understood, but since an equivalent phraseology does not exist in the target language, and word for word translation will not work in most cases, a good solution is a translation that favors meaning over cultural expression. The following are three examples of such instances.

**Example 6**

*Source (p. 106, line 33)*

“帮帮忙好吧？好马不吃回头草。要是沈建国当年有赵思清的一半能力我可能就咬咬牙不离了。对不起，来电话了，下次
再聊。”

Target (p. 13)

“You’re a big help. That’s all in the past now. If Shen Jianguo had been half as capable as Zhao Siqing I could have gritted my teeth and stayed with him. Oh… sorry, I’ve got another call coming in. Talk to you later.”

The underlined portion of the source text in Example 6 literally means, “a good horse does not eat the grass behind it.” Given that no English reader would understand what that means, “that’s all in the past now” serves as a compromise. Though not nearly as imaginative as the source language, in this instance a functional equivalent is the only suitable choice. On the other hand, in Example 7 there was the option of utilizing a dynamic equivalent.

Example 7

Source (p. 106 line 63)

大都是些练身狂或减肥狂，青睐于那些肌肉发达的粗汉对 小白脸没什么兴趣。

Target (p. 14)

Almost all of them were workout junkies or weight loss nuts that worshipped muscular tough guys; they had no interest in a nerdy guy like Shen Jianguo.

“小白脸” means, “little white face” and refers to a handsome man who is not particularly strong or manly. Although “pretty boy” would be a close equivalent, the author is contrasting here the intellectual character, Shen Jianguo, with the muscular men preferred by the customers at the
bike shop. In this instance, the dynamic equivalent “nerdy guy” works better with regard to the context of the paragraph.

The next example differs slightly from the previous idioms. Though it corresponds closely with several English equivalents, the equivalents could not be used because they are contextually inappropriate or they have connotations that may mislead target readers. Note Example 8 below:

Example 8

*Source (p. 107, line 73)*

有一次她遇到了一个据说是在情场上身经百战的老大学生。

*Target (p. 17)*

Zhang Yan had once known a college graduate with a fair share of dating experience…

“身经百战” literally means, “been through many battles” or a “seasoned fighter.” In general, terminology related to the military can be used much more broadly in Chinese than in English. A literal English translation of this phrase would sound strange or, as in the case of the above examples which are themselves idioms, could mislead the reader. Perhaps target readers would think this person had had a multitude of negative dating experiences, and this is not implied in the source text. The functional equivalent, “fair share of dating experience” transmits the message without resorting to ambiguous “translationese.” Nida and Taber (1974) say it most succinctly, “the best translation does not sound like a translation” (p. 13).
Example 9 contains terminology that is not difficult to understand, but the historical context to which it refers may not be familiar to most readers. This phrase can be traced to the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Most Chinese readers would immediately understand the connotation implied by the idiom, just as American readers would understand that the “sixties” can refer to much more than just the decade. Note Example 9 below:

Example 9

*Source (p.106, line 39)*

许云笛夫妇是张燕的大学同学，学外语的，容易沾染上当时所称的小资情调。

*Target (p. 13)*

Xu Yundi and her former husband were Zhang Yan’s classmates at college. He majored in foreign languages so it was natural for him to be taken with what was then called the “petty bourgeois affectation”.

In this case, word for word translation of the idiom functioned well as most target readers would have some familiarity with socialist terminology. The quotation marks added in the target language help the reader understand how the term functions here; i.e. that it was once a pejorative term, but now no longer has its previous impact. The text later goes on to describe the rebellious behavior of Xu Yundi and her former husband, which further clarifies the significance of the term. Whether or not to choose a more literal approach when facing problems associated with idiomatic usage depends upon how the idiom functions in the sentence, paragraph and overall product; in all cases context should serve as the guide.
Metaphors

Metaphors, much like idioms, often contain culturally embedded information that presents problems in translation. As metaphors play an important role in language and in a greater sense “structure the way we perceive reality and behave in our community” (Fung, 1995, p. 658), the translator must evaluate how the information imbedded in them is presented in the source language and how that information can be effectively expressed into the target language.

The translation of metaphors comprises more than a word-level exercise where word choice serves as the panacea for all ills. Fung (1995) notes, “attribution of conflicting values to an object by the two cultures concerned” (p. 668) constitutes one of the more difficult aspects of metaphor translation. In situations where metaphors contain conflicting values, or non-equivalent values, the translator’s goal entails decoding the meaning enshrouded by the source culture’s values and then encoding that meaning into a culturally equivalent metaphor in the target language. In literary translation, the translator may decide to preserve the source language metaphor because it can effectively express the meaning, even though it may not be a conventional metaphor in the target language. This approach turns out to be acceptable when working into a language like English, which, for the most part, welcomes fresh descriptive language. The translator’s dilemma becomes “whether to play safe and preserve the status quo by domesticating the foreign, or whether to be adventurous agents of innovation by opening up to the alien and acting as the channel for the new” (Holman & Boase-Beier 1998, p. 11). Note Example 10 below:

Example 10

Source (p.107, line 76)
Zhang Yan had once known a college graduate with a fair share of dating experience who explained that it was best to find men who studied science and engineering. They’re not only intelligent, they’re also free from that stale, musty air of books that often afflicts the liberal arts types. Her rankings were as follows: scientists were at the top, engineers next, doctors came in third and liberal arts majors finished last. Zhang Yan admired her frank discussion of personal experiences and because of this decided to marry Zhao Siqing. Upon reaching middle age however, Zhang Yan looked back with some regret. She realized that her classmate was as narrow-minded as a frog at the bottom of a well that can only see a tiny piece of the sky above. Now and then Zhang Yan missed the so-called “stale, musty air” because it at least affected the senses, which was better than nothing at all.

The metaphor in the first paragraph (marked in bold text) proved very difficult to translate because of the problem of finding an effective equivalent in English. The Chinese, which literally means, “the smell of sour cabbage”, refers to poor scholars who presumably live on a simple diet of pickled cabbage. Like many metaphors, it has probably lost some of its literal connotation, functioning more as a play on the word, “气” meaning both “smell” or “odor” and “manner of behavior.” This metaphor surfaces again at the end of the second paragraph where the author essentially says, “though pickled cabbage smells sour, sour is still a flavor and that is better than nothing.” A literal rendering does not work well because the imagery of sour cabbage does not evoke a negative stereotype of intellectuals in English speaking cultures. Furthermore, the search for an equivalent was complicated by the fact that whatever English metaphor was
chosen, it needed to be compatible with the idea of being tasted or smelled. In this example, the most successful strategy was to generalize the metaphor by removing the “sour cabbage” element and replacing it with an English description typically associated with bookish people, such as the smell of the library and old books. When the metaphor resurfaces in paragraph two, the taste/smell concept was softened to “affected the senses.” This way, the source language metaphor functions effectively without requiring major changes in wording, or omission.

The next metaphor, “井底之蛙” (underlined portion of the second paragraph) was translated more literally, with fewer changes in wording. This common Chinese idiom compares a frog in a well looking up at the sky to narrow-mindedness. Though not a conventional English metaphor, its vivid imagery allows target readers to understand the general meaning. Fung (1995) asserts that the, “receptor’s response is a significant criterion in evaluating the effectiveness of a metaphor, (but) it is difficult to anticipate and largely beyond the translator’s control” (p. 669). It remains true to a certain extent that the translator cannot predict or control the response of the target audience. However, the translator does have the flexibility to dictate the force of the metaphor within the bounds of the context as a whole.

**Gestures**

The body movements that accompany speech convey as much information as speech itself, if not more. Chinese fiction in particular, “pays great attention to the outer manifestations of emotions” (Pollard, 1995, p. 70). In translating gestures, the translator should be sensitive to how and to what degree the gesture conveys the tone of the speech it complements. Note Example 11 on the next page:
Example 11

*Source (p. 107, line 26)*

倒是儿子让她挂心。阳阳自从尽了那所学费昂贵的私立学校，似乎变得自命不凡起来，听到父母带中国口音的英文，就不以为然地皱皱眉头。

*Target (p. 16)*

She did, however, worry about her son. Yangyang had developed a streak of self-importance since starting at an expensive private school. He would *roll his eyes* whenever his mother or father spoke to him in their heavily accented English.

The gesture in Example 11, “皱皱眉头” means, “to furrow the eyebrows” and conveys annoyance in Chinese. In English, this gesture typically shows deep thought or concentration, certainly not the author’s intent here. The search for an appropriate equivalent included finding a gesture congruent to the source text, that is, one that corresponds to the bodily location of the original gesture. For example, “he would tap his foot in annoyance” could also be considered a functional equivalent, but this usually refers to the annoyance that accompanies prolonged waiting. Since the face serves as the focal point for this gesture, selecting a gesture from another body location would diminish the immediacy and directness that is apparent in this example. The dynamic English equivalent, “to roll the eyes” served as the most effective translation in this case.
Humor

Humor, in the form of satire, features prominently in *A Silent Brook*. The satire serves a dual purpose; to highlight the differences between Chinese and American values and to emphasize the main character’s feelings of cultural isolation. Though functional translation can illustrate the general significance of satire, this almost always destroys the humorous impact of the original. Kao (1995) makes the point that humor translation requires a thorough understanding of the source and target languages, but also “calls for a special talent, a kind of knack, for inducing mirth in the reader with a certain felicitous arrangement of words” (p. 393). Kao’s description does not refer to some mysterious ability, but rather to the translator’s sensitivity to the timing and rhythm of humor in the target language. Note Example 12 below:

Example 12

*Source (p. 104, line 72)*

随手打开收音机，听了一段所谓国际新闻，美国南方正经受暴雨袭击，暴雨是从墨西哥湾吹到美国来的；总统竞选人在美国北方某大城市发表了一番演说，其中提倡购买国货；国会正为要不要禁止公民私买军火争论不休，密州游击队坚决反对政府的这类干涉，公民哪能没有枪？岂可剥夺武装起义的自由；南美非法移民半夜偷越国境，已被逮获三卡车……

一切都是美国，美国就是整个世界。
Target (p. 8)

She flipped on the radio and listened to part of a so-called “international” news broadcast: a hurricane that had blown in from the Gulf of Mexico and slammed into the southern United States; a presidential candidate was giving a speech in some big city up north to encourage people to “buy American,” Congress debated whether or not to allow private citizens to buy firearms, of course the Michigan militia adamantly opposed this possible government infringement. “Citizens without their guns? Outrageous! How can the government deprive citizens of their right to rebel?!” Some illegal immigrants from South America had tried to sneak across the border; they were caught in three trucks…

Everything is America. America is the whole world.

The satire in Example 12 needed few changes to remain effective in the target language. The structure follows a format very similar to the telling of a joke, where a long-winded setup is followed by the delivery of a short, pithy punchline. Culturally speaking, target readers can easily identify with the issues mentioned in the example, as the issues are frequently debated in the native media. The only significant change in wording occurs in the set up paragraph (underlined) where the narrative voice comes from the point of view of the Michigan Militia. The addition of quotation marks and the exclamation, “outrageous” helped show the sarcasm implied by the source language rhetorical words (marked in bold), “能” and “岂可.”

Example 13, however, required a different approach to successfully express the humorous aspects.

Example 13

Source (p. 122, line 21)

“等议会嘛，茶还没喝完呢。我叫基尔，你呢？”

“燕，”没办法，出于礼貌，只能来这套，这么个小城镇，
又都是吃看病这碗饭的，谁知道哪天抬头不见低头见的。

“什么什么？烟？盐？”
“随便是什么都可以。”
“烟，名字很好听。”

Target (p. 60)

“Hold on a second, you haven’t even finished your tea. My name is Jerry, what’s yours?”
“Yan.” She had no choice but to be polite and tell him her name. Her patients were her livelihood and she lived in a small city. Who knows when she might run into him again?
“Yam? Yawn? What did you say your name was?”
“Either one is fine.” Zhang Yan replied.
“Hmm, Yam, that’s a nice name,” Jerry said.

As a language rich in homophones, Chinese humor often involves puns and other plays on words. In this example, Jerry’s mispronunciation of Zhang Yan’s name forms the punchline for the humorous exchange. The “yan” (燕) in Zhang Yan, means, “swallow”, a type of bird, which is a very pleasant sounding woman’s name. When Zhang Yan tells Jerry her name, he seems unable to hear her clearly and he repeats the words, “烟” and “盐” meaning, “smoke” and “salt” respectively. In this context, these two words do not have any particular negative connotation; they just sound silly as they are rarely used in Chinese names. Even after Zhang Yan corrects Jerry, he still calls her, “smoke”, thus displaying his ignorance and, perhaps, the inability of the average American to pronounce Chinese names correctly.

Since the punchline relies on rhyme, the most challenging aspect of translating this portion of the text was finding a funny sounding word in the target language that rhymed with “yan.” Where Chinese has dozens of homophones for “yan”, possibly hundreds if one counts near-homophones
with different tones, English has a very limited bank from which to choose a humorous equivalent. In the target rendering, the words, “yawn” and “yam” were chosen because they sounded silly, but most importantly they had the same initial consonant, similar vowel sound and nasal ending as the Chinese word, “yan.”

Conclusion
The style and structure of *A Silent Brook* posed many challenges for translation into English. The process for selecting suitable English equivalents included evaluating how each idiom, metaphor, gesture and expression of humor functioned with regard to the theme of the text. Although *A Silent Brook* is a piece of Chinese fiction, it remains relatively free from the obscure cultural specificity that pervades other Chinese works. However, the fundamental linguistic disparity between Chinese and English required an approach that focused on expressing the meaning, intent and essential qualities of the original while paying careful attention to target language conventions.

As for the goal of translation, Dent-Young (1995) states, “each sentence (in translation) should be motivated from the point of view of the text: that is to say, it must connect meaningfully with what went before and what follows” (p. 257). As a model for translating Chinese fiction, this statement could be improved by saying instead: each sentence in the target text should be motivated by the intent of the source text and each sentence must correspond with the context of the document as a whole. In some cases, the translator must adjust the phrasing of the source text to fit target language norms. Although no consensus exists as to how much intervention should
be allowed on the part of the translator, generally speaking, the needs of the target reader outweigh the perceived necessity for rigid adherence to the source text.

Translation

At two in the morning Zhang Yan was still tossing and turning in bed. Aside from the usual little things that often keep one awake, she felt strangely compelled to dwell on things that now had no bearing on her life, including all the time she had wasted on the other side of the Pacific. She so rarely lost sleep over anything that it seemed strange for her to be bothered now.

Zhang Yan lived by herself on a quiet, secluded street where cars seldom passed. Her house was silent, much like the street in front of it. Her only son, Yangyang, lived away at school while her husband, Zhao Siqing, chose to “live at work.”

The jarring ring of the telephone brought her back from the haze of her thoughts. It was Mr. Stanley, one of her patients, who often threatened suicide in the middle of the night.

“I’m 49 years old and I still haven’t figured out who I really am. What does life really mean?”

It wasn’t clear if Mr. Stanley had ever been an actor or otherwise involved in the performing arts. Either way, he certainly had a penchant for drama, turning the slightest malady into the greatest tragedy.
“Now, now, don’t start thinking about suicide. Since you don’t have things figured out yet you’ve got to keep analyzing your life and trying to understand yourself. You can’t just quit halfway.”

“But life is so sad!” Mr. Stanley said sorrowfully.

“Sadness is a necessary part of life.” Zhang Yan responded perfunctorily while sneaking a yawn. The Chinese say that doubt shouldn’t trouble you when you reach forty. Americans, on the other hand, seem inexplicably drawn to ponder the gray areas of life at just the age when they should accept things as they are.

All drama aside, Mr. Stanley was a fairly likeable patient. He spoke candidly about life and death, quite confident of their causality. Perhaps that’s a cultural trait of the West; ambiguities must be tirelessly analyzed before peace of mind can be attained.

Mr. Stanley said, “The mask I have to wear everyday makes me miserable. It’s all just to fit in with the people around me. But beneath that calm exterior lies a brooding volcano, boiling with magma and ready to burst at any moment.”

Unmoved, Zhang Yan murmured, “hmm.”

Mr. Stanley started again, “At the gym this morning I saw this amazing woman. She was easily as beautiful as Cindy Crawford. She came up to me and started chatting. I could tell she liked me, my intuition never fails. Maybe if she were talking to some shallow guy instead of me…hmph,” Mr. Stanley did not want to waste his breath talking about guys like that. “Do you know who I saw just then?”

“Your wife?” Zhang Yan asked.

“My wife?! No. She never goes to the gym. Have you forgotten about the guy I told you about before? You know, the one who broke my heart.”
“Really? Him?” Zhang Yan said, trying to sound interested.

“He” had been the topic of conversation countless times before. Though he had no name, Zhang Yan had heard about his skin color, hair color, eye color, height, build, age, facial expressions, and fashion sense so many times she could no longer stand it.

“Oh God, was he ever charming today. He had that same pensive look on his face. His blue eyes shone like the unfathomable depths of the sea. It makes me crazy every time I look into his eyes. Do you know what he did today?”

“Did he talk to you?” asked Zhang Yan.

“No, he looked at me. He took a long look, watching me carefully for at least five seconds. Suddenly I felt as if my heart were burning. I clenched my fists and tightened my muscles to keep control of myself. I didn’t try to talk to him though.” Mr. Stanley seemed to grit his teeth as he spoke.

“Talking to him won’t solve your problems. You made a good decision not to.”

“Yes…but those eyes of his are still with me. When I open or close my eyes I see only his. If he didn’t have any feelings for me, then why did he look at me like that? With that look, I knew we were soul mates.”

“We’ve analyzed these issues many times before, but you’ve never had the courage to face reality. You must liberate yourself; you can’t worry yourself sick because your actions and feelings aren’t purely homosexual or heterosexual. American society is very open these days about homosexuality and bisexuality, especially in California. There are all kinds of groups and clubs. Obviously this lifestyle is becoming more and more acceptable, why not just face the facts and admit that you’re bisexual?”

“No. I’ve just got to figure out who I am once and for all.”
“Well…your determination is certainly admirable,” Zhang Yan said, haphazardly applying the theory of humanistic psychology. You can encourage and criticize in such an ambiguous way with this theory that if you had to go to court, you couldn’t be held liable for anything. Zhang Yan continued, “Humanistic psychology has always held that after fulfilling the basic needs of existence and procreation, the highest goal is to completely realize the self. You’ve expended more effort in your exploration of heterosexuality and homosexuality than the average person. This shows that your needs of self-perception, self-expression, self-expansion, self-extension and self-guidance are very strong. The next step is admission of the self and the realization of the true self. You should think about all the other people in the world who are also trying to find themselves. You really can’t quit halfway.” Zhang Yan had given this boilerplate speech countless times. She recited it fluently without missing a beat.

“Naturally,” Mr. Stanley sounded a little better, “look at the people around me, aren’t most people satisfied with the mere idea of living? Take my wife for example, she’s happy just to go shopping, buy a few houses, own a name brand car and make a little on the stock market. She’s got no time to think about deep questions like, ‘who am I?’ ‘who was I in a past life?’ ‘where am I now?’ and ‘who will I be in the future?’.”

“You have a point. But to solve the problem in question you’ve got to be completely honest and ask yourself if you’re more attracted to men or women.”

“It’s precisely because I can’t decide that I’m so unhappy. If I knew I only liked men, I would get a divorce in a second. I won’t live a sham life,” Mr. Stanley said, swearing an oath he had given many times before. His social standing and reputation gave him very few options. Born into a poor family, he was lucky to be good looking enough to win over a woman from a rich family. His wife’s family owned stock in a local TV station and a newspaper. This “who am
I” problem was insignificant compared to his position as a station manager and general manager of a newspaper, not to mention the millions of dollars that went with it.

Mr. Stanley’s life really wasn’t all that bad. At least his wife left him alone; otherwise, how could he keep making calls like this in the middle of the night?

Zhang Yan kept trying to cover her mouth when she yawned so the sound wouldn’t carry over the phone. Too bad they weren’t in China where patients don’t get offended by anything a doctor does. She wished she could say to him, “Don’t you have anything better to do than talk my ear off?”

With skill and patience, Zhang Yan put to rest Mr. Stanley’s middle-of-the-night suicide threat. She hung up the phone and stretched, glancing at her watch; forty-five minutes with Mr. Stanley this time. She was going to add this to the bill she planned to send him at the end of the month.

Frantic calls in the middle of the night from patients like Mr. Stanley weren’t terribly frequent; otherwise she would never get any sleep. Being awakened for such laughable, nonsensical “dramas” annoyed Zhang Yan, but a doctor’s responsibility is to heal the sick and save the dying. A little lost sleep is no reason to tell a patient to go ahead and jump off a building or drink poison. Simply put, if it weren’t for her wealthy clients like Mr. Stanley she would have a tough time making ends meet. The big house she lived in was mortgaged and the bank had to be paid back. Then there was the phone bill, water bill and fire insurance (what would she do if the house burned down?). She couldn’t afford to miss a single payment.

Zhang Yan went back to bed and closed her eyes but she didn’t feel like sleeping. When she opened her eyes she saw the silvery light of the full moon shine through the curtains onto the
ceiling. Her husband’s pillow lay smooth beside her. He so rarely slept there. Is this what was missing from her life?

Years ago Zhang Yan cared about her husband’s moods and she nagged him all the time. But now those feelings had all but disappeared. When did she stop caring about everything in her life? Was this just a fact of middle age?

A lot of the student couples from China get divorced and marry other people when they come to the United States. This is especially true if both sides are particularly ambitious and capable. That a couple like Zhang Yan and Zhao Siqing, each with doctorate degrees, managed to stay together for so long was rare indeed. Marriages normally turn cold after awhile but that was no reason to make a big fuss. What good was divorce anyway?

Most of the divorcees she knew ended up worse off than before, either searching anxiously for that next marriage or already working on a second or third divorce. All kinds of couples, from the naïve to the experienced, find themselves in here-today-gone-tomorrow relationships. This makes everyone involved depressed. It is like a soap opera that never ends; when it looks like it may finally wrapup, the story starts over again. The protagonists may change but it is always the same old story. There is passion, coldness, laughter, tears, honesty and deceit. Sprinkle in the usual joys and sorrows of life and it’s done. Thus it is easy for women to have illusions about what love means. The smooth pillow beside Zhang Yan made her toss and turn in bed.

When she lifted her head again she could see the faint haze of the morning sun creeping up in the east. Pulling back the covers, she got out of bed and put on a light blue dress suit. She wore a long, matching necklace and dabbed on a little makeup, looking herself up and down in the mirror as she finished. The years had been kind to the slender, elegant woman in the mirror,
or at least it seemed that way on the surface. She drank a glass of cold milk and ate a banana. A woman her age has to watch her weight.

Stuck in a man’s world, women can’t enjoy the same rights as men. While American women complain constantly about being overweight, the fattest of men can keep eating and drinking without a care in the world. Men can sag their trousers and stretch their belts below their potbellies, since sloppiness supposedly represents an easy-going personality. Aging is easier for men too, for wrinkles are dignified and weight gain is mark of maturity. Zhang Yan wasn’t bitter about men having the better end of the deal. She had had an epiphany upon reaching middle age: there’s little to worry about when society holds such low expectations for women. Being a woman isn’t so bad.

When she stepped out of her house the moon was sinking into the west, round and pale. The silvery light of the morning sun mingled with the pale blue of the moon. The low hills in the distance loomed in shadow.

Zhang Yan got in her car and started the engine. While backing out of the driveway she noticed that the gardener had trimmed the pines into neat geometric shapes. Roses were planted in the empty spaces between the trees. She always left the house in the faint light of early morning and returned at dusk. Was she in any way connected to the garden or the house?

She flipped on the radio and listened to part of a so-called “international” news broadcast: a hurricane that had blown in from the Gulf of Mexico and slammed into the southern United States; a presidential candidate was giving a speech in some big city up north to encourage people to “buy American,” Congress debated whether or not to allow private citizens to buy firearms, of course the Michigan militia adamantly opposed this possible government infringement. “Citizens without their guns? Outrageous! How can the government deprive
citizens of their right to an armed uprising?!” Some illegal immigrants from South America had tried to sneak across the border; they were caught in three trucks…

   Everything is America. America is the whole world.

   Zhang Yan stuck a tape in. An old song played softly. It was about a rainy evening and a man who was flooded by old memories of past loves. The man reminisced about his old lover and how he used to rush to call her on the phone, only to hear the ring echo on the line as raindrops pitter-pattered gently on the phone booth.

   Movies and novels always put break-up scenes on rainy days, but heartbreak can happen on a sunny day. It rarely rains in California, yet sure enough, Yang Xing had left anyway. There was no hazy background, just a sporty little car speeding arrogantly away under the glaring sunlight in a wisp of black smoke.

   Zhang Yan looked at the moon, which seemed cut from paper. It sank to the horizon, thin and dull. It appeared round and full; perhaps the Mid-Autumn Festival had already passed?

   The days flew by in a blur. So too did the sometimes confusing Chinese holidays. Zhang Yan hadn’t yet gotten the American ones straight or even figured out how many there were altogether. First, there is Presidents’ Day, then Columbus day, Labor Day, Veterans’ Day, Mother’s Day and on and on. These holidays had nothing to do with Zhang Yan and she felt nothing as they came and went.

   The details of her last fifteen years in America were all but lost to her memory, yet one impression remained distinct; she kept busy every day to the point where her life whirled by in an unceasing, tiresome spin. She felt like the toy tops nicknamed “miserable wretches” by the boys in Shanghai. The tops have to be constantly whipped to keep spinning. She was disoriented, but it was better than living in fantasy. She didn’t have time for that.
Zhao Siqing made $100,000 dollars a year. His salary as an engineer had rocketed upward with the computer industry boom. Things were simpler when he was a poor student living paycheck to paycheck. Now that they had more than enough money things were complicated. The bank interest was too low, buying bonds meant dealing with a fixed rate of return and playing the stock market meant taking a loss if the market dipped.

Zhao Siqing tried his hand at the stock market, but with little luck. He would buy a stock and the price would inevitably go down. Then Zhang Yan decided to give it a try. Her uncanny good luck in financial matters allowed her to earn nice returns on whatever she invested. She would often say, not without a little pride of course, “Haven’t you heard? ‘Little wealth comes from hard work while great wealth depends on luck’. Investing is a gamble. You win some you lose some, it’s all up to chance.”

Zhao Siqing then made a smart move: he immediately put Zhang Yan in charge of all their investments.

Though luck was part of it, Zhang Yan had some faith in the teachings of Confucius that “one should take action by not taking action.” When she wanted to buy stocks, she simply picked up the phone and called Xu Yundi.

Zhang Yan and Xu Yundi used to be schoolmates. Xu Yundi had long since left academia to go into business, of which she had only a vague grasp. She got her degree from some lackluster private business school, but with the diploma she was able to enter the business world. As a stockbroker her wages came from commissions. With the market doing well the last few years she had a very nice income. Moreover, she was incredibly attractive, according to some of her male clients.
Xu Yundi said over the phone, “Sorry, I’m with a client. I’ll call you right back.”

Zhang Yan replied, “I’m on the road.”

That was Xu Yundi all right. Who else could Zhang Yan call before eight in the morning? Well-mannered Americans emphasize the common courtesy of not pestering people by phone before nine in the morning or after nine at night, except in an emergency. With Xu Yundi the exception lay not in that they were old friends, but rather the time difference between the East and West coasts. When the New York Stock Exchange opened everyday it was still early morning in California. Xu Yundi had to wake up at three or four in the morning to be at her office when the market opened in New York.

Zhang Yan and Zhao Siqing argued back and fourth about phone manners. Zhao Siqing claimed that she was too Americanized and fastidious for abiding by the rule. He paid no attention to it and made loud, jabbering calls at 3:00am if he liked. They had made it into mainstream American society by being skilled in their respective fields, but Zhang Yan always felt she was somehow different from her husband. He dealt with computers all day, so having Chinese manners didn’t matter much. Zhang Yan, on the other hand, made her living from her American patients and had to try extra hard to fit in.

The phone rang.

Zhang Yan answered, immediately steering the conversation to business. “I want to get rid of 500 shares of that food company stock I’ve got. I heard they also do business in tobacco and Congress is discussing various measures to penalize the tobacco companies, what do you think? Or should I sell the insurance stock instead?”
“Hold on just one second…my computer lists the stock at forty-one point five. The highest this year was forty-three and five-eighths, you can get rid of it. I’ll go ahead and handle for you.”

“Can you give me some advice on what to buy?” Zhang Yan asked.

“Well, there’s this medium size computer company in Silicon Valley. Web users have supposedly taken a liking to their software. You could buy a few shares; at around twenty bucks per share it’s fairly cheap. Experts say it could go up thirty percent by the end of the year.”

“Ok, I’ll let you take care of it for me,” Zhang Yan said.

“No problem,” Xu Yundi said while tapping at her keyboard, which Zhang Yan could hear over the phone. “Don’t hang up, I’m almost done… OK. So, how have you been lately? What’s it been, two weeks since we talked last?”

“What news could I possibly have? You know how it is with Zhao Siqing. He works overtime everyday and doesn’t come home much. What about you? Meet any nice guys lately?”

“Absolutely none. I’ve been looking around a lot but I haven’t had much luck. I heard that for divorced women over forty, fewer than 10% get married again. The stock market has been crazy all month, shooting up and then plummeting. I’m so swamped I haven’t had time to date. Actually, whether or not you’re in the market for a husband, the problem’s pretty obvious: there aren’t any normal single guys over thirty. They’re either worthless, or gay.”

“Don’t be so cynical, there must be some good divorced men out there.”

“The problem is I’m running out of options. I would even consider Shen Jianguo a catch nowadays. I’ve lowered my standards to the point where if I check out a guy and nothing puts me off at first glance then I’ll date him. Unfortunately, this doesn’t happen very often.”

“Oh, come on now. Is it really that bad?”
“Americans are just so shallow.”

Zhang Yan understood. Xu Yundi’s had just used a common American expression often uttered in reference to dating. A “shallow guy” was a man who only wanted to get a woman in bed.

Xu Yundi continued, “I ran into a couple of Chinese guys and all they did was talk to me about stocks. Why in the world should I give them free advice?”

“Were they worse than Shen Jianguo? Though he’s not especially to blame,” Zhang Yan said.

“There you go again. Are you blaming me for our sudden break-up? There were times when I even thought getting a divorce was going too far. Anyway, we’ve got to keep looking ahead.”

“Of course, but I heard that Shen Jianguo is making a comeback and still lives alone. Perhaps there’s something about you he just can’t forget.”

“You’re a big help. That’s all in the past now. If Shen Jianguo had been half as capable as Zhao Sijing I could have gritted my teeth and stayed with him. Oh… sorry, I’ve got another call coming in. Talk to you later.”

Zhang Yan hung up the phone and wondered to herself if they had set their expectations for a happy life too high.

Xu Yundi and her former husband were college classmates. He majored in foreign languages so it was natural for him to be taken with what was then called the “petty bourgeois affectation”. While most students were struggling through Xu Guozhang’s College English, Shen Jianguo memorized by heart the poetry of Shelley and Byron. At the weekend dances most students managed a modest quick three step, slow four step or foxtrot, but when Shen Jianguo
and Xu Yundi hit the dance floor the ballroom came alive. Having mastered the Rumba, Samba and Tango, they would glide across the floor with chins up and backs straight. Of course, their flamboyance drew the ire of many. They talked from dusk to dawn, growing more and more distracted by their budding courtship. This so infuriated a local political leader that they were almost criticized within their respective departments. For a time Zhang Yan even thought Xu Yundi was a bit crazy. Their road to love was not always smooth, yet Xu Yundi and Shen Jianguo ended up getting married.

After graduation, Shen Jianguo found work in a hotel that catered to foreign guests. He spent his workday surrounded by young, attractive female coworkers and this made Xu Yundi anxious.

Who would have thought that once in America Shen Jianguo’s slick dance moves would get him nowhere? He could barely get by with his heavily accented English. He stubbornly believed that Byron’s poetry could be useful, so he continued to study English literature. Unlike Xu Yundi, who changed her major to economics, for a time Shen Jianguo had to settle for working at a bike rental shop that catered to tourists. Many of the customers were women who rode bikes to stay in shape even while on vacation. Almost all of them were workout junkies or weight loss nuts that worshipped muscular tough guys; they had no interest in a nerdy guy like Shen Jianguo. Some of the customers were friendly enough, but it was difficult for him to tell the men from the women. Once someone kissed him twice on the cheek. Startled by the incident, Shen Jianguo went straight home and washed his face ten times, thinking he would get AIDS.

Xu Yundi couldn’t put up with him. Life had put so much pressure on their love that it wilted. In what seemed a drastic move, Xu Yundi divorced him, much to the surprise of all her friends. Shen Jianguo was heartbroken from the start, his self-respect completely shattered.
Zhang Yan treated him for a few sessions free of charge. His spirits finally rose and he found the strength to carry on. He changed careers and got involved in the import/export business specializing in bicycles. Someone saw him recently at a three star restaurant in Wuxi, China decked out in an Italian suit with a cell phone clipped to his pants. He was shaking hands with some red-faced, slightly tipsy agribusiness men who were also wearing nice suits and carrying cell phones. Cigarettes were tossed back and forth and they were all patting themselves on the back.

Zhang Yan once mentioned this to Zhao Siqing, “Shen Jianguo got rich.”

“Who?”

“Xu Yundi’s ex husband”

Zhao Siqing managed a perfunctory “hmm” and turned back to his computer. He was utterly glued to that computer. He had been programming day and night ever since coming to America. It had started years ago in the computer lab at college and now he stared at a monitor all day at his computer company. Just recently, Zhao Siqing hadn’t come home for a week and didn’t even bother to call. Last weekend he sent Zhang Yan and Yangyang a short and very terse email: “Been programming day and night. The market outlook for the product should be good.”

He could be so reasonable when he didn’t come home.

Yangyang, their son, came home on the weekends. When he wasn’t nodding his head to the rhythm that played in the earphones that seemed permanently stuck in his ears, he was slumped in front of the computer, mouse in hand, staring at the screen. If it happened that Zhao Siqing came home on the same weekend to “play Dad,” he and Yangyang would both be in front of their computers surfing the web.
Last weekend Yangyang came home, and as usual, headed straight for the computer. “Your father sent you an email. When you’re done reading it be sure to send one back. After that delete his email, I don’t want too much stuff cluttering up the computer.”

“Uh huh.” Yangyang mumbled.

Yesterday she saw that the email wasn’t deleted. Did Yangyang forget to deleted it? Did he even bother to read it in the first place?

Zhang Yan didn’t really worry about her husband not coming home for a week. He was, after all, very predictable. She did, however, worry about her son. Yangyang had developed a streak of self-importance since starting at an expensive private school. He would roll his eyes whenever his mother or father spoke to him in their heavily accented English. Zhang Yan discussed the problem with her husband, concerned that sending him to a private school wasn’t the best decision. Their intention was to send Yangyang to a good school to ensure a good future. Zhang Yan and Zhao Siqing had started from scratch and it was no easy task for them to make it in mainstream America. Their son would be able to have a smoother path than they had.

Yangyang turning into a snob was not part of that plan.

“This is just a problem with your profession,” Zhao Siqing said, “you can’t rest until you’ve analyzed every single detail of a problem and slapped a name on it. Yangyang’s fluent in English; he’s speaks as well as any American. When Chinese people come here they have to ‘fit in’.” Though speaking in Chinese, he said the words “fit in” in English.

Zhang Yan rarely criticized her son. Deep down she felt remorseful, but she never mentioned this to Yangyang. Chinese parents do not explain things like that to their children. It had been the same with her own parents, who had put all their energy into the revolution. Without a word of explanation they sent her off to a boarding nursery at age three.
In the forties and fifties behaviorism became the field du jour in American psychology. A great proponent of behaviorism, B.F. Skinner, wrote a novel called *Walden II* wherein he described child-rearing in a utopian society. Zhang Yan had felt smug after reading it. Professor Skinner’s concept of an ideal world for raising children had nearly been realized in China in the fifties and sixties. Wasn’t she a living example of it?

Put into a boarding nursery at a young age, Zhang Yan got used to living independently. This made her confident and enthusiastic about living so far from her native land. Years later she read other theories proclaiming that when young children grow up without affection from their parents, they sooner or later develop relationship problems. This made Zhang Yan worry about her own son.

When Yangyang was four months old, Zhang Yan discarded the hope that he would go abroad and follow his dreams. Several years later when Yangyang was almost three, Zhao Siqing went abroad. Since Yangyang spent nearly all his time with his grandparents, he referred to Zhao Siqing as “uncle.” When they saw their son again he was a walking, talking, jumping, video-game-playing elementary school student.

God knows why people like them even become parents.

Yet some things are stranger still, like how she came to marry Zhao Siqing for instance.

At the time Zhang Yan started dating, freedom to choose was advocated, yet certain conditions applied. When she was young, she never really thought about what love actually meant. She always busied herself with one ideal or another, starting with the Chinese Revolution and then on to the world revolution, etc. Later she became bent on being promoted back to the city. The way Zhang Yan saw it, finding the right man was a matter of applying the yardstick;
tall enough was good enough. At five-feet seven, Zhao Siqing wasn’t second rate. He majored in theoretical mathematics, which was the most cutting-edge discipline in the field.

Zhang Yan had once known a college graduate with a fair share of dating experience who explained that it was best to find men who studied science and engineering. They’re not only intelligent, they’re also free from that stale, musty air that often afflicts the liberal arts types. Her rankings were as follows: scientists were at the top, engineers next, doctors came in third and liberal arts majors finished last. Zhang Yan admired her frank discussion of personal experiences and because of this decided to marry Zhao Siqing. Upon reaching middle age however, Zhang Yan looked back with some regret. She realized that her classmate was as narrow-minded as a frog at the bottom of a well that can only see a tiny piece of the sky above. Now and then Zhang Yan missed the so-called “stale, musty air” because it at least affected the senses, which was better than nothing at all.

Zhang Yan stopped at a red light. She glanced in the rearview mirror to see a face staring back at her with weary, darkened eyes. She hadn’t slept well the night before and she couldn’t help looking old. Women over forty can’t handle losing sleep.

It’s true, she shouldn’t lose sleep. Marriage has its problems but she was a woman with everything.

* * *

To get to her office Zhang Yan passed by a little mom and pop store. It was the only convenience store in the area that sold Chinese newspapers. The owner called himself Bill and his wife, well, she didn’t seem to have a name. She simply answered to Bill’s “hey you.” They were immigrants from Canton, China. They were laid-back and wore dark, simple clothing. The store was open every day of the year, so Bill and his wife started each day at the crack of dawn.
and closed only in the middle of the night. They busied themselves like ants on the move, bustling back and forth. Their twin sons, both slightly chubby, attended school with Yangyang. The twins were always neatly dressed and spoke English as fluently as any native-born American. When the school held student achievement assemblies the brothers often played duets on their violins. “What talent!” the well-dressed parents in attendance boasted to themselves, champagne glasses in hand. “Private schools are simply the best!”

Bill’s English was hard to understand and he could only mumble a few halting words in Mandarin, which was what Zhang Yan spoke. Since it was hard to communicate with him, Zhang Yan would usually just say hello, buy a Chinese newspaper and leave. On this day however, Bill’s wife pointed to the red boxes of moon cakes stacked on the counter, each adorned with images of Chang E, the Chinese moon goddess. She then motioned towards the Chinese calendar hanging on the wall that featured pictures of attractive women.

“Is today the Mid-Autumn Festival?” Zhang Yan asked, wanting to know for sure.

Bill’s wife nodded enthusiastically.

Zhang Yan bought a box of moon cakes and a day-old newspaper. The store was far enough away from the city that the newspapers contained mostly old news. The only reason she bought the paper is that she liked to read the boxy Chinese characters.

She glanced at the moon cakes. The Mid-Autumn Festival had come again. “Shoul dn’t we celebrate this year?” she thought to herself. Looking at her watch, she saw that it was still early. She considered giving her son a call but he went running in the morning and she probably would not reach him. Zhao Siqing had probably pulled another all-nighter so she thought it best to let him sleep in.
In Zhang Yan’s sixteen or so years of marriage she could not remember if they had ever celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival as a family. Of course, there was that one time when she was with Yang Xing, a time she would cherish with all her heart. Too bad it was only that one time and could only ever be that one time.

She thought about what Yang Xing had said once: “Is there anyone else like us? We shackle ourselves before making a first move.” He smiled wryly after saying this, a smile that became etched in Zhang Yan’s memory.

When Zhang Yan got married, she never thought of herself as being tied down. It was all so simple in her mind: a man finds a woman to marry when he is old enough and a woman gets married off to some man. Zhang Yan’s marriage to Zhao Siqing was logical and they were both willing.

Zhang Yan and Zhao Siqing met as classmates. Their parents had been sent to work in the countryside as was common at the time. Their mothers, who were in cadre school together, planned their marriage while dredging mud from a river with large, reed baskets. A strong feeling of camaraderie developed between them as they labored. As a result, they decided that their respective son and daughter should marry and live happily together as a continuation of their friendship. Meanwhile, Zhao Siqing worked at a factory in a remote village and Zhang Yan labored in a production team in Northeast China. It wasn’t until Zhang Yan and Zhao Siqing returned home, and after their fathers were politically rehabilitated, that they were deemed a suitable match. Everyone around them said they were a “perfect match.”

Wasn’t it obvious? Zhang Yan and Zhao Siqing ended up emigrating to America and getting their PhDs; anyone would consider that a good match.
Shortly after they were married Zhang Yan became as thin as a rail. Even while pregnant with Yangyang, she ran back and forth getting people to write her letters of recommendation, inquiring about the TOEFL exam and writing schools abroad about admissions and scholarships. Though not knowing how she was going to do it, she decided to go abroad right after graduation.

Meanwhile, Zhao Siqing was putting his heart and soul into graduate school. He worked tirelessly in hopes of becoming China’s next mathematical mastermind, another Chen Jingguo.

It was in the most untimely manner that Yangyang came onto the scene. It had to be at that crucial moment of course, just to make things difficult. Zhang Yan had decided to terminate the pregnancy. She called Zhao Siqing and he rushed home from school to see her. When he came home they searched the cupboards for something to eat. They found nothing but a bottle of soy sauce, the last few drops of which had congealed into a syrupy goop at the bottom of the bottle. Dirty dishes overflowed in the sink and the bed lay unmade. Cotton shoes and sandals sat neatly arranged on the floor around the bed but they were blanketed with a thick layer of dust.

Zhao Siqing checked his wallet. It was nearing the end of the month and he had only two dollars. He set Zhang Yan on the back of his bicycle and pedaled away to a little noodle restaurant.

“So you don’t want to have a kid, right?” Zhang Yan said, blowing on a bowl of steaming noodles.

Zhao Siqing didn’t answer. “If you leave, how long will it be before you come back?”

“Hard to say. If I go for a master’s that’ll be two years, a doctorate will take at least four,” Zhang Yan replied.

“You’ll be over thirty then, right? Haven’t you heard that women over thirty who get pregnant are at higher risk for having children with birth defects?”
“So you want me to keep the baby then?”

“That’s up to you. But if we both want the baby you should have it before going abroad. Our parents can help us out.”

Zhang Yan sat silent for a long time. After finishing her noodles she asked, “Do you really want a kid?”

He avoided her eyes and said nothing either way.

Then she said, “Haven’t you heard the saying that kids are like eyebrows? People without them look strange but eyebrows are essentially useless.”

“And not necessarily, eyebrows help keep dust out of the eyes,” Zhao Siqing said as he finished his soy sauce soup.

When they were leaving the noodle restaurant he placed his hands on Zhang Yan’s stomach for the first time. The moon that evening shone round and full, glowing gently. Because of the wholeness of the moon she didn’t go to the hospital the next day. She did not regret her decision for she had become a complete woman after all.

There was a cartoon that joked that if your husband was no good you could return him, but your son was something that couldn’t be taken back to the shop. Zhang Yan’s son was her lifelong responsibility. Wasn’t her breakup with Yang Xing for Yangyang’s benefit? A woman’s duty is to make sacrifices for men, be they her husband, her lover or her son.

* * *

Zhang Yan’s clinic was in a one hundred year old Victorian building that had been converted into several smaller offices. She moved to the unique building after experiencing some initial success in her practice. She wanted the office to mimic the aesthetic qualities appreciated by the middle and upper classes to attract more patients.
Most office buildings nowadays are boxy, unnaturally bright and tasteless, but this one inspired one to reminisce about a bygone era. The stained glass door, hand carved window frames and white painted banisters brought to mind fine ladies with flowers in their hats strolling through fragrant gardens. One thought of long gowns gliding over green grass while delicate, gloved hands carried long-handled parasols.

The office was usually empty at this time of the morning and Zhang Yan could hum tunes from her old village. How distant, drowsy and romantic she could be! She thought back to when she was the leader of a Mao Zedong thought propaganda team singing quotations from Chairman Mao and dancing in the shape of the Chinese character for loyalty. One time, a group of boys clad in old, oversized army fatigues saw her and came by. They argued with her in their husky voices about the Third Communist International or some such thing. Zhao Siqing was among them, dressed in some raggedy field officer’s uniform that he got from who knows where. How did that period of time still have the power of enchantment? Zhang Yan continued humming along but as she came to the second floor she saw that Melissa, the doctor from across the hall, had arrived early. The lights in Melissa’s office were on and Zhang Yan fell silent.

Zhang Yan shared the spacious Victorian building with three other psychologists. Her office was on the second floor across the hall from Melissa’s. Melissa had a sturdy build, a raspy voice and a head of hair that resembled the curly fur of a large dog. Though very outgoing, her business was not going well.

Americans are always rallying against one prejudice or another, but they’re biased when it comes to what their therapists look like. Some women specifically brought their husbands to see Melissa to “cure” their wandering eyes since there was little chance that they would fall for
her. There are stories about women falling in love with their male therapists and vice versa but Melissa enjoyed a squeaky clean record in this area.

Zhang Yan always kept other psychologists at arms length. She was sparing with her charm and kindness, saving it only for her patients because she didn’t want to be cold towards her source of income. Her office had been right across the hall from Melissa’s for so long that she seldom said more than a polite hello. Zhang Yan saw that the door that was usually closed was now wide open. New age music echoed softly from inside the room. She saw Melissa sitting motionless in the dark facing the window. Perhaps Melissa had fallen into that new eastern meditation religion.

Zhang Yan slyly reached for her keys, hoping to slide into her office unnoticed but in her flustered state she dropped the keys to the floor. She bent over quickly to grab the keys and slid the keys into the lock with one smooth motion. With a turn of her hand and the flick of her wrist she placed one foot inside her office…

“You’re here early,” Melissa said from behind.

Zhang Yan had to say something. “You’re here early too,” she said while turning to look behind.

Melissa looked almost like a panda bear because of the circles under her eyes. Her green eyes sparkled as she flashed Zhang Yan a rare smile, “Aren’t autumn mornings beautiful with all the leaves falling in the street?”

Zhang Yan played along and asked perfunctorily, “Do you like getting up early to watch the falling leaves?”
“I just discovered them today,” Melissa answered. “Usually I’m still in bed at this time, but, …” Melissa sighed as her voice trailed off. Her words and facial expressions revealed a deep disquietude.

“If there’s anything I can do to help just let me know,” Zhang Yan said. This is an American pet platitude. It’s meant to sound friendly.

Melissa sighed deeply once again. She lowered her eyes for a moment but lifted her head suddenly and said, “You know that I’m a novelist, right?”

A novelist? That was another American mannerism: giving yourself a sensational job title.

“Well…it’s quite an honor to be right across the hall from a novelist,” Zhang Yan replied.

Melissa continued. “Recently I’ve been writing a novel that will fill a niche in the American literary canon,” she said, a little proud of herself. “But because of this novel, I’ve been up day and night. I hear the sound of my mother walking upstairs whenever I write, her soft-heeled shoes clump softly on the hard wood floor. I feel that she’s watching my every move through some dark passageway. It’s like having a slimy snail creep down your spine, do you know what I mean?”

Melissa had hardly said a thousand words to her before and now she was talking about her mother. Zhang Yan couldn’t help feeling flattered.

“You live with your mother? That’s kind of rare in America.”

“No, my mother is dead,” Melissa said flatly.

“Is it her soul then?”

Melissa’s green eyes stared long at Zhang Yan. From her large, thick lips came the question, “Are you busy tonight?”

“What do you have in mind?” Zhang Yan asked
“I want you to meet some friends of mine,” Melissa said. “If you say yes, I’ll meet you at the Bohemia Café at seven o’clock.” Melissa closed her door before Zhang Yan could refuse.

* * *

Zhang Yan turned and stepped inside her office. The word novelist had piqued her interest because she had originally wanted to come to the US to study English and American literature. This was at the start of the 1980s when just about every liberated instructor at her college would give lectures on the subject, which Zhang Yan much admired.

Zhao Siqing showed tremendous foresight at the time by encouraging Zhang Yan to change majors. He believed literature was just a diversion for the leisure class and the fast pace of modern society left no time for such things. The vast majority, Marx once said, live by selling their labor power with little hope of ever making it into the leisure class. They worked their fingers to the bone just for bread and butter, or if you’re Chinese, make that fuel, rice, cooking oil and salt. Who wants to read a book after working all day to support the family?

The more practical fields of computer science, sales and marketing looked promising but Zhang Yan could only read a little English and she wasn’t good at much else. She carefully weighed her options and finally settled on clinical psychology. Zhao Siqing beamed when he heard about her decision. “It’s easy for people to go crazy with the fast-paced lives they lead, especially here in America. You’ll never have trouble finding patients, that’s for sure!”

Yet in the depths of her soul lurked the shadow of doubt. Does anyone control his or her destiny? Do people really have the power to choose the career they love? Since she no longer struggled to get by, the dreams she dreamt so long ago now filled every corner of her heart. Was this what humanistic psychology referred to as a “peak experience?”
After going into practice, Zhang Yan often used Freudian terminology to analyze a patient’s condition and she gradually came to the conclusion that hers was a fine profession. She listened to her patients recall their childhood tribulations and helped them explore their sad memories. The stories repeated themselves and each contained sadness and regret. It was nice to help people solve their problems but it was annoying having to listen to people prattle on and on like the plot of cheap novel.

As the years went by Zhang Yan’s work became easier since her pool of patients stayed the same. They were all middle-aged men with good careers and bank accounts to match; otherwise they wouldn’t have been able to spend all that money just to talk. They sought out Zhang Yan for the sense of security she provided. She didn’t get out much so their secrets were safe with her.

Successful middle-aged American men all suffer from the same affliction; they complain that life no longer challenges or stimulates them and they grow impatient. Young men revel in the belief that they will be strong forever. They’re easygoing, charming and there is nothing they can’t do. Middle-aged men on the other hand, suddenly find themselves ignored by attractive women and they become bitter and sullen. They realize they haven’t become millionaires or celebrities and they feel empty inside.

Zhang Yan heard the same story over and over again; the names changed but the plot didn’t. She made her living by seeing patients but she couldn’t help feeling bored sometimes. An inescapable, stifling boredom would wrap around her delicately at first, slyly entrapping her like a spider’s web. Then it bound her up tight.

* * *
Her first patient of the day was Andy. He reclined on the sofa and started to recall his early family life. “My family was rather cold to me. My father left for work every morning and never cared what we did during the day. I knew then that my father wasn’t interested in me.”

The psychologist’s duty is to come up with technical terms for inconsequential problems and sell them to the patient. The patient can then analyze his or her own problems with the terms utilized by the doctor, like this: “Your feelings of abandonment during childhood must have led to your low self-esteem later in life.”

“Yeah, yeah, exactly,” Andy said. “I remember now how my father only cared about my mother’s cooking and cleaning. He believed that as the breadwinner he was entitled to come home to a clean house and a hot meal. As a result, my mother spent all day at home folding clothes. She would go from dresser to dresser folding each article of clothing and then carefully place it back inside the drawer. I would scream and throw things to get her to yell at me, or just to get her attention but she never looked up. She just kept folding, folding, folding. I hated it. I hated it so much I’d rip up the clothes and toss them everywhere.”

“This is an early experience with the feeling of failure. Lack of affection from your parents is the external factor behind this feeling of failure.”

“Doctor Zhang, I recognize the problem comes from the lack of closeness in my family,” Andy said earnestly. “After I got married, I didn’t want to sacrifice the love that my wife and I share for the sake of a clean house like my parents had done. I told my wife not to worry too much about housework but she completely misunderstood what I meant. Now our house is an absolute mess. There’s stuff piled all over the floor, the table, and the chairs and when I open the closet junk tumbles out. You can’t find anything.”

“Communication problems,” Zhang Yan said.
Andy continued, “The house is packed with stuff but my wife keeps buying more and more of it. She’ll go out shopping all day and bring home clothes by the truckload. Sometimes she doesn’t come home until ten o’clock. She’d probably stay out all night if the stores didn’t close at ten. We’ve got over twenty credit cards and she’s run up a huge debt on each one. She doesn’t realize that credit card debt is a bad thing. I don’t think she can help herself.”

“Perhaps she’s obsessive compulsive.” Zhang Yan said.

“That’s not the worst part of it, all women like to shop after all. If it weren’t for women, department stores would all go broke. I’m a sales manager myself and I pay close attention to the spending habits of our female customers. The problem isn’t shopping, it’s that my wife loves the stores more than she loves me. She hardly pays any attention to me. It’s been three or four years and she hasn’t once made dinner for me. We men come home hungry hoping to see dinner on the table and a clean house. We work hard all day and just want to come home and relax a bit.”

It was clear Andy wanted a life just like his father’s, but he had gone too far in pursuing what he thought was the ideal husband-wife relationship. That’s just how the world is—the more you do the more complicated things become.

Andy continued, “When I come home every day and see the house like that it really gets me down. Then I have to take my wife out to eat. We go out every night and it’s really taking a toll on my stomach. The portions at restaurants are way too big; my wife is up to two hundred pounds now and she waddles like a duck! Frankly, she’s become very unattractive. I have very little interest in her but I try my best to do my duty as a husband. Every day I make sure to kiss her before leaving for work but she always criticizes me saying my kisses don’t have the same spark they once did. We fight so much we don’t even want to go out to dinner anymore. I end up grabbing a sandwich someplace…”
Listening to Andy’s usual whining made Zhang Yan’s mind wander. When was the last time she went out to dinner with her family? A month ago?

With money and credit cards in her pocket, Zhang Yan was much better off now than in those “noodle and sauce” years. She cared about the atmosphere of where she ate and hated places like McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken because of the junk food they served. Plus, they seemed to cater mostly to the typical overweight American. She didn’t go to French restaurants much either because you had to get all dressed up and dealing with the snobby waiters wasn’t much fun. Everything on the menu was too oily, too creamy or terribly fancy and it was all basically junk food. Chinese restaurants had better food and lower prices but they were always crowded and noisy. The waiters and waitresses were loud and when they weren’t tossing your plates on the table with a clank and an attitude they were gleefully chatting away with the customers. They were crass, nosey and had no respect for the privacy of others. Thai food was better. It tasted a lot like Chinese food and the waitresses were much more polite. To see their delicate figures in traditional gowns weaving here and there through the dim light made for an exotic atmosphere.

The last time the three of them ate together they went to The Coconut Hut.

They had gone out as a family but Yangyang, as usual, had his headphones stuck in ears and Zhao Siqing ate with his head down as if he were starving. They ate in silence. After awhile Zhang Yan became upset. She put down her chopsticks and scolded to her son, “Yangyang, don’t listen to music at dinner, it’s rude.”

“Yeah, come on,” Zhao Siqing added, “It’s been a waste sending you to that private school. You aren’t at all like those other nice boys and girls.”
Yangyang seemed not to hear them and Zhao Siqing had to nudge him before he reluctantly removed his headphones.

“What classes do you like at school?” Zhang Yan said, trying to think of something to talk about.

“They’re all OK.”

“How are you and your roommate Mark getting along?” Zhang Yan probed.

“Fine.”

“Did you go to fencing practice? Your coach said you did great last time and that your footwork and countering are really fast. Are you getting any better?”

“I dunno.”

She suddenly heard Andy ask, “Don’t you think my wife is selfish? Why do I always give and she just takes?”

Zhang Yan regained her train of thought, and feeling energized she said, “The dirty house, the clutter, your wife never cooking dinner and always going shopping, these are all superficial problems. Marriage problems are always caused by something much deeper in the psyche. You should try getting to the source of the problem by jotting down your dreams and feelings. If you like, you can bring your wife and we can discuss the deeper issues together.”

Andy nodded that he would get his wife involved.

“Sorry Andy, time’s up. Today we talked about some of the reasons why you and your wife don’t get along. A person’s psychological development has a profound effect on their adult life,” Zhang Yan said while flipping through the appointment book that sat on her desk. “Same time next week good for you?”
Andy still wore a worried look on his face as he left. Zhang Yan felt guilty all of a sudden; what was all that nonsense about “superficial” and “deeper” problems? She sounded like a charlatan.

An American cliché states that marital spats are all rooted in poor communication. By that rationale, when did her communication breakdown with Zhao Siqing occur?

After they got married things got too hectic for romance, with Zhang Yan trying to go abroad and Zhao Siqing busy doing research. Their marriage was basically an equitable business transaction. The success or failure of a transaction depends not upon the emotions of each side, but rather on the sincerity of their actions. Of course if business continues long enough each side becomes amiable and doing business becomes much more pleasant, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Yet Americans seem inclined to see marriage as a gamble—you can play the game called “true love” or the one called “gold digger.” Many people play the former in hopes that the payoff of young love will last forever. Others try their hand with latter in hopes of hitting the real jackpot.

No matter how you look at it, as either a business or a gamble, it’s a situation where everyone wins or everyone loses.

* * *

Billy Joe called. He was a warden at the local prison and had once been a patient of Zhang Yan’s. His treatment had ended the month before.

Her heart sank when his call came in. Was this a relapse?

Billy Joe asked, “Do you have time to come down today? We got a prisoner here from the Texas Mental Institution sent up the day before yesterday. They sent this lady who isn’t even in our jurisdiction over to us. Those shit-for-brains sonsabitches really screwed up.”
Definitely a relapse. Billy Joe’s use of foul language and his habit of cursing out colleagues, subordinates, and prisoners bothered everyone around him. One after another the lawsuits claiming he had violated someone’s rights or humiliated someone piled up. Yet surprisingly, under Billy Joe’s strict management, the prison was neat and orderly and there were never any riots. Billy Joe’s boss acknowledged that his management was excellent, but he had to make a show of “ordering” Billy Joe to undergo behavioral modification therapy to diffuse the anger of his coworkers.

Melissa, Zhang Yan’s neighbor across the hall, was the first to treat Billy Joe. He spewed a stream of obscenities as soon as he stepped into her office. Diligently spouting a set of Freudian terms, Melissa said that when Billy Joe was in the anal stage of psychosexual development his psychological growth became stunted and that hindered him from having healthy sexual development. This was quite a blow for Billy Joe. Here he was, faced with someone who had the nerve to say a six-foot tall grown man had psychological problems way back when he was just learning about his bodily functions. He stormed out in a huff, but just as he walked out the door, he remembered that his boss said this was mandatory. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, he saw Zhang Yan’s office across the hall and walked inside.

Zhang Yan saw immediately how different this prison warden was from her other patients, who were always well-dressed and extremely polite. Billy Joe was aggressive, blunt and was known to become angry without provocation. When he did so, he would smack the table with the palm of his hand, swear up a storm or worse. His stories and the crude language he used made people feel as if they were in a strange world, a world where it wasn’t easy for people to disguise themselves and every crime was brought out in the open. All ugliness would be exposed
to the light of day. It wasn’t just that Billy Joe came to her for help: he had become her glimmer of hope for breaking the monotony of her day.

Zhang Yan listened patiently as he cursed and swore. Having learned of what happened with Melissa from across the hall, she was careful not to resort to any psychobabble. Instead, she used the behavioral modification theories of behaviorism and showed no outward interest towards Billy Joe’s tirades. When his invective failed to produce the emotional response he expected, he lost steam fairly quickly. He eventually grew tired of his own bluster and the foul language appeared much less frequently. Having been deemed stuck in the anal stage of psychosexual development by someone else, he naturally preferred seeing Zhang Yan and even considered her a friend. She seemed so different from your typical self-conscious American woman. Zhang Yan’s silence and patience intrigued him. He thought that her silence was some form of quiet admiration for him, why else wouldn’t she say anything? He tried harder, searching deep within himself to dig up any tidbit that he could embellish. When he said something he thought to be clever, he couldn’t help but wink and make faces at her, to show that he was being friendly. Zhang Yan just smiled warmly and listened quietly.

Billy Joe eventually became very confident that Zhang Yan was a highly skilled and amiable doctor. He made an effort to mention her name around the prison system and often asked her to treat patients at the prison.

There were always inmates at the prison who were described as being somewhat psychologically abnormal and this had a bearing on their prison sentences in that they might not have been responsible for their crimes. The more cunning inmates were eager to fake one form of mental illness or another.
For a time after receiving treatment, Billy Joe managed to utter not one word of profanity. Zhang Yan had proved to him that he could change his undesirable behavior. When they said their goodbyes he gave her a great big bear hug and kissed her clumsily on the forehead. He let it slip that he didn’t want to say goodbye.

“Does this inmate have a history of mental illness?” Zhang Yan asked.

“Who the hell knows? The ones they let loose do have mental problems but they don’t pose any immediate threat. But this old lady just sobs all day and night and it’s making everyone uncomfortable and bugging the hell out of me. If she happens to harm herself or slit her wrists it’ll be my ass because I’m the warden. I already sent a report to those shithheads so they’ll take her back to the mental institution. Why the hell did they let her out? Who are they gonna pin this on if she croaks?”

“If they’re going to send her back, why do you need me?”

“Who knows when the goddamned mental hospital people will get their shit together and pick her up? You never know, since they’re busy as it is with all the inmates seeing shrinks. Plus you got those fucking lawyers that are as bad as the criminals the way I see it. They’re always crying and moaning that some criminal is insane. That’s bullshit, how in the world could there be so many people with mental problems?”

“Do you still want to send the woman back to the institution then? After all, she might not have any mental problems.”

“I don’t think she’s completely with it. She was convicted of somethin’ minor but she sobs all the damn time. Hell, we got murderers in here waitin’ for the electric chair and they just laugh it off. So, what do you say, can you come take a look this afternoon? I don’t want anything to happen to her while she’s here.”
A little embarrassed, Zhang Yan replied, “Sorry, I’ve got some other things planned. Can’t you find someone else?”

“That’s no good, it’s gotta be you. The old lady is Chinese so you won’t have any problems talking to her. If you could just come and take a look and say she ain’t sick I’d feel a lot better.”

She was Chinese? Zhang Yan was quite surprised. She was elderly too, what crime could she have committed? “Can you tell me a little bit about her situation?” Zhang Yan asked.

“NYPD arrested her. She was selling tobacco and booze to minors. She hasn’t been sentenced yet. You know how complex the federal prison system is, it’s goddamned impossible to know which section screwed up and how she ended up here in California.”

Zhang Yan agreed to come. She wondered why Billy Joe had started swearing up a storm again. He was calling on her again to help him with a patient and she wasn’t looking forward to driving all the way out there again. She had seen plenty of those sniveling inmates who claimed to be victims of oppression and abuse. When they weren’t blaming their parents, they swore that they were victims to some conspiracy. It was always the same old story.

Zhang Yan glanced at her planner and saw that she had a lot of patients scheduled for that afternoon. One guy’s wife made him see Zhang Yan in hopes that she could help them put the spark back in their marriage. He scheduled ten appointments but had rescheduled or skipped numerous times. He only actually made it to one and a half appointments and he grimaced and squirmed the whole time. One time he came into the office and left after five minutes. He got straight to the point and decided that he wanted a divorce because the problems with his wife were too complicated for counseling to solve. Coming to counseling had been a façade. If he could show in court that he had tried his best in the marriage, even received counseling, then his
wife’s attorney wouldn’t be able to screw him over. Zhang Yan tried her best, but she knew there was nothing she could do. She called the man’s work number to cancel the appointment. The secretary became suddenly polite once she heard it was a psychologist. She said, “I am sorry, but Jack was just about to have me call you and tell you that he didn’t have any openings on his schedule until the end of the next month.”

Fine. Zhang Yan could go to the prison without canceling any appointments. But before leaving she had to go to the bank and roll over a fixed deposit. Having money could be so bothersome.

* * * *

The bank was only three or four blocks from her office, but like many Americans do, Zhang Yan drove everywhere. At the first intersection she had to turn left so she flipped on the turn signal. Just as she was slowing down a car rear-ended her. She stopped the car and got out. The person who hit her from behind got out of his car too. He looked like a nice middle-aged man, but before she could say anything, the man started yelling at her, “What were you thinking stopping your car in the middle of the road? Can’t you drive?” As he continued yelling his language became more and more colorful.

Zhang Yan shouted angrily, “Didn’t you even see me? Isn’t that an intersection up ahead? I had my signal on, how am I supposed to turn if I don’t slow down? Why were you following so close? What did you run into me for?” She scolded him while scribbling down his license plate number.

The man was astounded. He would never have thought that such a well-dressed Asian woman could go head to head him in fluent English. He offered a lame excuse, “If your signal was on why didn’t I see it?”
“Can’t you see that it’s still blinking? You should have your eyes checked.”

“Nonsense. I’m an optometrist, why would I need you to tell me I need my eyes checked?”

“What are you, drunk? There was nothing else good to crash into so you had to hit me, right?”

“Who knows when you turned on your signal, probably after I hit you I bet!”

“You…” Zhang Yan found herself momentarily speechless.

Self satisfied, the man cast a sidelong glance at her and said, “If you can’t drive stay off the road. Honestly, who drives around and just stops in the middle of the street? Look, I’ve got a million things to do and now I have to stand around and argue with you. Let’s be frank, this wasn’t my fault at all. Don’t worry about compensating me for the damage and we’ll just forget about how you’ve wasted my time. Let’s just keep it at that, shall we?” he said as he turned to get back in his car.

Zhang Yan calmed herself and called out to him, “Not so fast! In an accident the person who hits someone from behind is always at fault. Who let you drive without knowing how to keep your distance? We’re not done here,” she waved the piece of paper she held in her hand with a gleeful relish. “I have your license plate number right here, you’re not going anywhere. If I tell the police you ran from the scene of an accident you’ll be in worse trouble than just being at fault. You think I’m wasting your time, huh? You’re wasting my time!” She walked to the rear of her car to have a look. Aside from a few small scratches on the bumper there wasn’t any serious damage to her car. The man’s car had a small dent on the bumper. Had someone more civil run into her she would have just forgotten about it, but this guy was a real jerk. She wasn’t finished with him. “Mess with me and I’ll mess with you” was the code of conduct of her generation.
When the man realized that Zhang Yan was more of a handful than he had bargained for he started to whine, “Your car is hardly even scratched, why bring the cops into this? Isn’t that a little much? Look, I bet those little scratches were there before this happened, why do you have to use this as an excuse to take it out on me?”

“Who says that scratch was already there? Before you ran into me that bumper was shiny as could be. Just wait a second and the cops will be here to sort this out. What’s your insurance policy number? What company are you with?”

“It wasn’t my fault, why should I give you my policy number?”

“No insurance? That’s even better! California law requires all drivers to have insurance. That’s fine, you can tell the cops all about it when they get here.”

“Come on, let’s just take care of this ourselves, it’s only a few scratches. Why don’t you go to the repair shop just up the way and get an estimate? I’ll give you whatever it costs to fix it. This way we won’t have to get the insurance companies involved and we’ll save time and trouble.”

Zhang Yan knew that when she went to collect from his insurance company that his premiums would go up, but she wasn’t about to let this big-talking bully off the hook. She reached for her car phone. “Nope, I’m calling the cops.”

“Hmph, go ahead and call the cops. It’s still your fault,” the man said rashly.

It had been a while since Zhang Yan had last argued with anyone. Every day she put on a smiling face while the tension built silently inside her. Now someone had stumbled into her sights—how could she pass up such an opportunity? She said forcefully, “Fine then, we’ll let the cops decide. And it will, of course, still be your fault.”
And thus, a well-dressed man and woman stood in the middle of the road. Cars zoomed past them in the other lanes, none slowing down. Some people leaned on their horns and glared at them they drove past, frustrated that they had to change lanes with the cars blocking the way. No one stopped to see if they were okay. Zhang Yan and the man stood in silence, making every effort to ignore one another.

They waited and waited. The man’s face was somber. He shifted his weight impatiently as he leaned against his car. Zhang Yan felt that she had changed. In her younger days she had never been so arrogant, so brash. She had always been too shy to even look another man in the eye, yet here she was arguing with one in the middle of the street. Middle age was grand. She felt so liberated having had the chance to vent a little. True, she had become somewhat unrefined, but life is never purely rational, heroic or romantic. Life is a collection of trivial bits and pieces, if you lost your sense of humor you might dwell too much on them, just like she was doing now.

The police squad car finally arrived. The officer seemed pleasant. “Are you the two involved the accident?” he asked them.

“Yes, we were waiting for you to come and write a report,” Zhang Yan said.

The man gave his side of the story first, “It’s all her fault. I was driving along just fine and I hit her when she stopped in the middle of the road.”

“No, that’s not what happened. I had just slowed down to turn when he hit me from behind,” Zhang Yan said, distilling the accident down to the core details.

The policeman continued to take notes. Without lifting his head he said to the man, “It’s obviously your fault. You’ve got to keep your distance from other cars and be ready for anything because you can never predict what’s going to happen. You have to give yourself enough time to stop. By the way, the speed limit here is twenty five, how fast were you going?”
“I was going exactly twenty five.”

Zhang Yan glared. “What a liar!” she thought to herself.

“Ok, just give me your policy numbers, phone numbers, license numbers and sign here and here. Tomorrow you can come down to the station to pick up the report. After signing this, please be on your way. We can’t have you blocking traffic any longer.”

The man answered a few more of the policeman’s questions while Zhang Yan took notes.

“I’ll just contact your insurance company directly,” she turned and said to the man.

“Didn’t we decide to deal with this ourselves?” The man’s tone had softened since the policeman said he was at fault. “I feel bad about what just happened, hitting your car and all, I couldn’t help being a little upset. I’m not usually so tactless around women. I’m really sorry. Can we talk this over a little bit? Are you busy at around five-thirty? We could head over to the Sunshine Tea Shop up the way to talk for a bit.”

Zhang Yan stared at the man. He was serious. She couldn’t keep herself from laughing a little as she waved her hand dismissively and said, “Just forget it. You don’t owe me anything. Next time don’t be so rude. You can go ahead and leave.”

The man’s face lit up as he jumped into his car without even saying thank you. His car roared as he pulled away, leaving behind an acrid cloud of smoke.

Zhang Yan was filled with regret. She knew people didn’t know how to be gracious—but why was she so trusting? All someone has to do is say a few worthless words of apology and she would gladly wipe the slate clean. Who said being trusting was the most forgivable error? The reason was stupidity. Stupid people are most likely to be trusting.

The man slowed down and stuck his head out the window, “Don’t forget, five-thirty!”
She looked at her watch. It was twelve-fifteen. Her son was at lunch already and the dorms would be empty.

She should probably eat too.

There was a little shop down the street that sold sandwiches. Every day the owner put the white plastic tables and chairs outdoors and placed a bright green parasol at each table. Zhang Yan ordered a sandwich and opened the Chinese newspaper she had bought that morning.

Though it was all news from the night before, something on the page grabbed her attention. Was that him? She looked at the picture more carefully. It was him! Was that his wife standing beside him? Was that his son holding the award? Zhang Yan’s heart ached. The caption beside the picture said: Local high school science prize winner, Yangyang, stands with father, Dr. Yang Xing and mother, Guo Qing. So that was his wife’s name.

The sun was dazzlingly bright. She put on her sunglasses and the world was blotted out by the soothing darkness of the lenses. She calmed herself.

She and Yang Xing— who could be blamed? It all just sort of happened that way.

It seems to have started when they were talking about their sons; it sounded like they had the same name. It was a pleasant conversation and things just moved from there.

Zhang Yan traveled to America before Zhao Siqing to get things ready. During the first two years each day was an uphill battle. She awoke to the screeching alarm at six every morning to spend the next seventeen or eighteen hours running back and forth between offices, classrooms and the library. It was always past 11:00pm when she arrived home from her job at the restaurant. It’s hard to say what kept her going—maybe it was her determination to get her master’s degree early. She signed up for a doctorate program just before finishing her Master’s. She was focused, if not completely exhausted. Her boss at the restaurant shot her dirty looks all
the time and flaky customers grinned and leered at her. She couldn’t stand it. Her Chinese temper told her to give them all a good dressing down, but for the sake of school, she didn’t. She buried her anger deep inside.

She would come home after a long day to her cold and crummy apartment. Loneliness seeped into her pores like poison. It made her long for the days back in Shanghai. The most mundane occurrences from back then were now treasured, bittersweet memories. All that she held inside would pour forth in a torrent of tears.

Could this be the so-called “culture shock” she blandly diagnosed her patients with? People could be so resilient but so forgetful!

Reading the letters that Zhao Siqing sent from China was the most emotionally taxing for her during those years. When his letters didn’t come she waited for them longingly but when they arrived she was disappointed to find them full of empty ambition. He was attending a well-known Chinese graduate school on a government scholarship. Since the grandparents took care of Yangyang, Zhao Siqing didn’t have to worry about him. Zhang Yan’s problem was that Zhao Siqing was so far away. She always wanted to pour her heart out to him on paper, to express her discontent like a spoiled child. She would start writing but she never finished. Would he even understand? And if he did—what could he do to help?

Yang Xing was gentle and sensitive. “It’s tough for you to be all by yourself. If you ever need any help don’t be shy, just give me a call.”

One time when she missed the bus she called him for a ride to work. He found out that she asked her coworkers for rides home everyday. He told her, “I’ll come pick you up from now on.”
“No, no, no that’s too much trouble for you,” Zhang Yan protested. “I’ll just ask a coworker, it’s no problem.”

It so happened that on that particular day none of her coworkers could give her a ride. She was stuck. She walked outside and saw Yang Xing waiting in his car.

After that, come rain or shine, she found him waiting outside to give her a ride. He made sure to ask her, “How was your day?” And he meant it. She would pour her heart out to him and he was calm and receptive as the sea. He never tried to be witty or clever, he just gave her a ride home and gently said to her, “Take it easy. See you tomorrow.”

Later on when they stayed together, Yang Xing never mentioned Zhao Siqing and Zhang Yan never mentioned Guo Qing. They were a man and a woman brought together by chance but he taught her about true love; an unconditional love that seeks nothing in return. They were utterly lost in each other. Zhang Yan could not stand being away from him for even a moment so she would sneak away to see him at his work. When he came home he would throw his arms around her and many nights she slept in his embrace. Their time together was much too short.

Zhang Yan and Yang Xing smoothed the way for Zhao Siqing’s arrival in America. Zhao Siqing had gotten his doctorate in computer science on a full scholarship, for which they had to rush to get everything in order. Zhang Yan scraped together a few thousand dollars in savings and furnished their tiny apartment with what she could find in the dumpster. Zhao Siqing was lucky. He hadn’t lifted a finger for the bounty before him and he said quite proudly, “Hey, who says studying abroad is difficult? Those other folks just don’t have any skills. They’re always fooling people with their hard luck stories. It’s so misleading.”
Sometimes she wanted to vent her feelings to her husband but she kept silent. Life had changed her and made her arrogant because she knew what she was capable of. But life could also be humbling and she never felt extraordinary again.

Yang Xing, ah, Yang Xing!

Zhao Siqing quickly got used to the idea of having an “iron wife” who could do almost anything. He didn’t have to worry about doing any household chores. She took care of it all just as she had with his scholarship and their living expenses. Managing their real estate, taking care of their investments and setting up their son’s private education etc., she did it all. Why did women become such show-offs? But of course, when she was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and later when she left China, whom had she relied on but herself? Self-reliance was the trademark for this generation of Chinese women.

Zhang Yan looked closely at the small, black and white picture of Yang Xing in the newspaper. She couldn’t tell if he looked any older, but his face revealed a thin, satisfied smile. Was it for his son?

Zhao Siqing. How could you even compare Zhao Siqing to Yang Xing? She and Yang Xing had gone through so much together. He was the only man she truly loved. Zhang Yan closed her tear-filled eyes.

When Zhang Yan opened her eyes again she stared critically at Guo Qing’s in the picture. Guo Qing had a round face with nice eyes, a small, elegant mouth but her nose was too prominent. She had finally found something to pick on and that made her feel better—but how did that help?

She glanced again at Yang Xing’s son and discovered that he looked very much like his father with his crew cut and lively eyes. She had conceived a child with him, but they… Had she
kept the child it would have been the younger brother of both her son Yangyang and the boy in
the picture. That child lost the right to be born because Zhao Siqing and Guo Qing were soon to
be on their way to America. Zhang Yan wept on the way to the hospital. Yang Xing drove with
one hand on the wheel, the other on her shoulder. They said nothing. She saw tears rolling down
his face.

The weather on the day they parted was sunny, just like today. He hopped into his sporty
little car without hesitation. They smiled as they said their goodbyes. He had hugged her tightly,
and said, “You have given me so much, too much in the last two years, and I’ll never forget
you.”

He forced a smile—probably because he saw Zhang Yan’s awkward expression. As he
pulled away he stuck his hand out the open window and waved.

He was gone and Zhang Yan did not know where.

That was in the past now, everything slips away with the march of time.

Zhang Yan looked at her watch. She needed to start heading for the prison or she’d be
late.

* * *

The prison was located in the rocky, barren mountains just outside of town. Her car
labored to climb the winding road. She stopped alongside the large concrete building. Tall guard
towers stood on each of the four sides of the building. Barbed wire formed a twisted line along
the edges. She passed many guards and through security points to get inside. The doors were
locked behind her as she passed through the succeeding checkpoints. She entered a visiting room
that had no windows and off-white walls. The fluorescent lights were blindingly harsh.
The door opened. A small, frail-looking woman shuffled into the room. Her thin white hair hung close to her slender pale cheeks. The bluish gray prison uniform drooped loosely from her bony shoulders as if it were a cloth sack. She stopped in front of the table, not knowing exactly what to do. The old woman seemed surprised to see Zhang Yan standing before her. Her lips quivered, but no sound came out.

“Have a seat,” Zhang Yan said.

The old woman sat down but before she said anything tears streamed down her face.

“It’s okay, you can talk to me. Don’t cry,” Zhang Yan comforted her softly.

The old woman seemed not to hear, for a long time passed before she wiped away the tears. She finally raised her head, revealing the anger and resentment in her eyes. She spoke indignantly, “What good will talking do? You’ve sent me from a prison to a mental institution and from a mental institution back to a prison. I am not mentally ill and I have committed no crime. What do you want from me? I live in New York, send me home!”

Zhang Yan noticed the old woman was speaking Shanghainese. It was strange to be meeting someone from her hometown under such peculiar circumstances. “I’m sorry. I’m a doctor but I don’t have the authority to release you,” Zhang Yan said in Shanghainese. “If there’s anything else you need just let me know. I can talk to the warden for you.”

The old woman’s eyes seemed to glimmer softly, but they quickly faded. She sighed faintly and said, “Talking is useless. When I was arrested I told the policemen that I wasn’t guilty—but did they listen? When the judge sent me to the mental institution I told him I wasn’t ill—did that do any good? What could you do to help me? I’ve been terribly wronged.”

This fragile, miserable looking woman was alone, behind bars and far from home. She could not speak the language and there was no one around to help her. No matter how hard
Zhang Yan tried to remain neutral, she still felt sympathy for the woman and angry for what had happened. Billy Joe had told her that all the woman had done was sell a few cigarettes and a couple cans of beer to some minors. Was that any reason to blow things out of proportion and lock her up with arsonists and murderers? No wonder the woman wanted to kill herself.

Zhang Yan knew that as a psychologist she had to do more than just urge her not to commit suicide, she had to get to the root of the matter. “What crime did you commit exactly?” Zhang Yan asked.

“I’ve had a hard life,” the woman said slowly. “I’ve always been very honest, but then I came to America and get sent to prison. Doctor, we’re both from Shanghai, you knew from the minute you saw me that I was innocent. Two or three years ago my daughter opened a little shop in Brooklyn. It was kind of in a bad area of town. It seemed like everyone in the neighborhood was unemployed but it was the only place my daughter could afford. She dropped all of the money she had been saving for years into that place. She wasn’t only broke but she also lost a lot of weight,” the woman said with a sigh.

The old woman seemed genuinely happy to talk. Zhang Yan didn’t want to interrupt so she let her continue.

“I was surprised that just a few months later my daughter told me she wanted to sell the store because business was bad. It reminded me of an old saying: ‘you can’t do business if you’re impatient.’ I told her not to sell but she wouldn’t listen. My daughter thinks she knows everything but she’s really just willful. Speaking of my daughter, we’ve both had it tough. I was six months pregnant with her when her dad died. He was a good man, a factory worker. All of a sudden he got so terribly thin and it turned out to be liver cancer. He died less than two months
later. After his death I had nowhere to turn. The neighborhood committee saw that I was struggling and found me a job. Life was so hard then!”

Zhang Yan nodded sympathetically.

“Luckily, my daughter was smart and hardworking; she was always the best in her class. She went on to college and I was so happy when she went to teach at a middle school. We were living a simple but good life in Shanghai, but then all of a sudden she wanted to go abroad. She came home and worked late into the night studying English. She lost a lot of weight and I told her she should be satisfied with what she had now. She told me that everyone else was going abroad now and she wasn’t any dumber than they were— why shouldn’t she go too? No matter what I said she wouldn’t budge, she was so stubborn. At first I just couldn’t deal with the thought of her leaving me but later on I realized that she deserved to go. Her life had never been easy and now she had a chance to succeed. As a mother, I couldn’t bring myself to hold her back and I finally let her go. That was in 1987. Every day and night I worried about how she was doing. I never thought that only two years later she would send me a letter saying she had taken care of all the paperwork so I could immigrate to America. I didn’t want to go at first. I couldn’t speak a word of English. What kind of work would I do? My daughter is very caring. She became concerned that I was lonely in Shanghai all by myself. She wanted me to move in with her so we could take care of each other. So, I went ahead and sold or gave away all my possessions, gave up my apartment and came to America. Ai… I really regret coming over now. I can’t go back either because I sold everything. I don’t even have a place to live there anymore. I used to be close with all my neighbors and I had a lot of friends at work—but now? I really shouldn’t have come here.” Two tears rolled down the old woman’s thin, pale face. “Sometimes I just don’t feel I have anything to live for.”
“How can you even think that? Wouldn’t your daughter be sad if you died?” Zhang Yan decided to play the daughter card.

“Doctor, am I talking too much? No one can understand me here, least of all my lawyer. The court assigned him to me and he was terribly overworked. From the time I was first brought in I think I’ve only seen him twice. I’m not sure if he knows what my situation is and I don’t know what he has said to the judge. The judge just said that I look weak and cry all the time so I must have mental problems. Without even hearing my case he sent me to a mental institution. I tried to explain over and over that it’s normal for someone in prison to cry because it’s so emotionally draining. They didn’t listen. Doctor, do you think I’m crazy?”

“If you keep wanting to kill yourself it shows that you have emotional problems that need to be dealt with. That can make people think there’s something wrong with you,” Zhang Yan added quickly, “you should not have thoughts about killing yourself.”

“But when will my case be straightened out?” the woman asked.

“Is your case complicated?”

“Listen, it’s all because of the store my daughter opened. There was a man named Mr. Liu who was a scholar in China. He came to America but never found a job that he liked. When he heard that my daughter wanted to sell out, he wanted to buy but he didn’t have enough money. He wanted me to invest twenty percent and become his partner. My daughter thought this was a good idea. I had been working in a garment factory since coming to America because I didn’t want to be a burden on my daughter. I worked all day for extra spending money. The problem was that at my age my back would start to hurt from working such long hours. The lighting was dim and I wasn’t very fast. I only made fifteen or so dollars a day. If I messed up a stitch, needless to say I wouldn’t get paid. I’d lose a couple days’ wages paying for a mistake. My
daughter felt bad for me and said it would be better if I opened a store. At least that way no one would be breathing down my neck and I could be my own boss.

“Unfortunately, the store lost money month after month. I just didn’t understand how the retail business worked. Luckily, Mr. Liu was very capable. He said that the people in the neighborhood spent all their money on alcohol and business would improve if we got a liquor license. At over ten thousand dollars, a liquor license was terribly expensive. We had to run around to borrow money for it. When we finally got it business improved but then we ran into problems with the police. They said we couldn’t sell alcohol to people under 21 and selling cigarettes to people under 18 was even worse. How was I supposed to know if our customers were old enough? The customers were huge—they were two heads taller than I am. They had beards and looked like old men to me. I told the police that I couldn’t read English so it was no use for me to try and find out how old they really were. The police wouldn’t listen and the fines they gave us were incredible, sometimes four or five hundred dollars for a can of beer. Mr. Liu wasn’t happy about this. He told me to check ID’s for anyone buying alcohol or tobacco. The thing was, I couldn’t read English so it didn’t really matter if I checked them or not. Plus, Americans aren’t very patient. When I asked them for their ID’s they got upset. If we didn’t sell to them they’d find ways to get even. I don’t know how many times they smashed our windows.

“Ai, doing business is so hard! I was always an honest person and I regretted getting mixed up with the police and all these bad youngsters. The people we owed money to, however, were even worse. We went into debt to get the liquor license but with business so bad we had no money to pay them back. They came around all the time and were cruel to me. My heart would race as soon as I saw them at the door. At around this time there was a guy from Fujian Province named A Ming who delivered soda to our store. He saw that we were struggling and helped us
drum up some business. It involved letting people buy alcohol with food stamps. Doctor, you seem rich. Do you know what food stamps are? They’re stamps given to poor people by the government so they can buy food. The government gives people stamps instead of money so they won’t buy alcohol—just food and other necessities. At the end of the month our store can exchange the food stamps we’ve received and collect a reimbursement from the government. I didn’t know you weren’t allowed to buy alcohol with those stamps, if I had known it was illegal I would never have done it.”

“So you violated government food stamp regulations?” Zhang Yan asked.

The old woman nodded, looking more dismal. She sighed heavily and continued speaking, “The police came at night. There were two of them pounding on my door. My neighbors were petrified when they looked outside and saw the policemen standing there. I lived in Chinatown and many of my neighbors didn’t speak English and some were illegal immigrants. When they heard the police had come they hid in their kitchens or ran out the back door. I didn’t have to be afraid because I was a legal immigrant and I’d never done anything wrong. They asked me my name and told me they were going to arrest me. When they said this I got so scared that I started to cry. I told them I wasn’t a criminal and I pleaded with them not to arrest me. The police told me that if I had something to say I could talk to a lawyer, they were just the arresting officers.”

When Zhang Yan first traveled to study in America, she lived in a town that was too small to have a Chinatown and thus she hadn’t seen one. Many of the Chinese workers at Chinese restaurants were illegal immigrants, or, like her, were working illegally. One time, a man wearing a uniform walked in to the restaurant where Zhang Yan worked. He could have been a policeman, a postman, a plumber or an electrician; they weren’t exactly sure. But when he came in they all became anxious and hid anywhere they could in the kitchen. Since going into
legitimate business for herself, Zhang Yan tried not to dwell on disturbing thoughts like that. The old woman’s story stirred some memories. Why were people so forgetful? She had once memorized a quote from Lenin: “Forgetting the past means betrayal.” What had Zhang Yan betrayed?

The old woman continued, “I was first taken to a prison in New York. I shared a cell with a burly foreign woman. She was dirty, covered with hair and always had a miserable look on her face. I usually can’t get far enough away from people like that, but I had to sleep on the same bunk with her. She slept on the lower bunk and I could hear her cursing and muttering under her breath. I have no idea what offended her. I thought about what evil I must have done in a past life to deserve the horrible situation I was in. All I could do was cry. My cellmate called over one of the guards and started yelling and gestured wildly at me. The guard then turned and yelled at me, I’m not sure what he was yelling about. I was worried and anxious for days and then a lawyer came to ask me a bunch of questions about alcohol and tobacco. I had him go talk to Mr. Liu because there’s a lot I don’t understand outside of just making a living. The lawyer didn’t seem very healthy. He kept yawning all the time, smoking cigarette after cigarette and drinking cup after cup of coffee. I wanted him to help me get away from my miserable cellmate, otherwise I’d never get any sleep—she scared me to death. The lawyer said that he would help me but I was left in the same cell with that woman. For two more weeks I slept on the same bunk while she cursed and swore under her breath. I thought it was hopeless and I wanted to die.

“Well, I didn’t die and the lawyer came to take me to court. The lawyer babbled away with the judge. I had never been to court before and I started thinking about how terrible my life had become. I was so afraid that the judge wouldn’t let me go that I started to cry again. The judge pointed to all the other criminals in the room and said, ‘Look at those people, they’ve
committed far worse crimes than you have. Why are you crying all the time? You must have a mental problem.’ The other criminals in the courtroom didn’t even care. They just laughed and made faces. They had probably been there a dozen times before; the courtroom was like their home away from home. The judge ordered me to have a psychiatric evaluation. Doctor, could you explain this to me? Don’t I even have the freedom to cry? How can someone in prison be expected to be cheerful? What’s there to be cheerful about?” she said, grief lining her face.

“Does your daughter know about this?” Zhang Yan asked.

“No. How could I even begin to explain this? After my daughter bought the store she couldn’t find a good job, her hopes were too high. After a while a friend of hers invited her to go to Toronto Chinatown and open another shop. The market was a lot better there and it was a nicer area. She had been there over a year and didn’t come back to visit me. A few times I planned to sell my part of the store so I could go live with her in Canada. I wanted to pay my own way; I didn’t want to use a cent of my daughter’s money. I just wanted to have enough money to get by and be with her every day. That would have been enough. I never could get enough money to do that though, because business was always so bad. I just didn’t want to part with the money I had invested. Had I been just a little more decisive, I would have sold my part of the store, and then I wouldn’t be in the mess I’m in today.”

“You could always contact your daughter,” Zhang Yan reminded her.

“She’s so busy, I don’t want to bother her. After she went to Canada she would call sometimes just to say that everything was okay. After I was taken to prison, my lawyer asked me if there was anything I wanted. I told him I wanted to call my daughter. Tears streamed down my face when my daughter asked me, ‘Mom, how are you.’ How could I talk to her about the trouble I was in? I lied to her. I said that the store was fine and that I was out and about all the time so
that’s why I wasn’t home if she called. She thought it was strange that I would be gone so often and I told her that I was delivering things.”

“How could you lie to your daughter about such a huge thing?” For a moment Zhang Yan had forgotten that she was a psychiatrist working with patient.

“You don’t understand. My daughter had put so much time and effort into opening that store. It’s not easy starting a business. Even if she had come to help me it probably wouldn’t have done much good since it was so expensive. She said she wanted to come and see me a few times but I told her not to come. If she came now, how could she find me? I am completely homeless. I don’t even have that place in Chinatown anymore. After they arrested me the store closed down and my apartment was rented out to someone else at the end of the month. I’m not even sure what they did with the rest of my belongings. Do you think I would let my daughter see me like this? She would be devastated. My daughter has always been proud, she would feel terribly ashamed to see me locked up like a common criminal. She wouldn’t be able to look people in the eye again. I’ve thought it over many times, there has only been one person in my whole life who I couldn’t look in the eye…my daughter.”

Zhang Yan was disturbed to hear this and urged the old woman, “You shouldn’t think of it that way. You’ve got a daughter who can help you. Getting things straightened out soon is always better than living with an injustice.”

The old woman shook her head stubbornly, “No, I can’t tell her. I’m begging you doctor, ask the people at the New York jail to have someone bring me back. Why did they send me to California? My lawyer is in New York. I can’t speak the language here and I don’t understand the people. No one can help me now; I am completely and utterly alone. I’m afraid they’re going to forget about me and keep moving me from one mental institution to another or from prison to
prison across the country. If this keeps up I’ll never get out.” The old woman couldn’t hold back her tears. Her sobs were filled with a cold hopelessness.

“Things can always be cleared up. The warden here knows that your offense wasn’t serious. They’ll send you back to New York sooner or later to stand trial,” Zhang Yan said, trying to comfort her, yet she herself felt that her words carried little weight. No one knew when the bureaucrats would discover their mistake.

The old woman sighed sorrowfully. “I’ve been so busy most of my life, rarely having a moment to myself to think. Now I have nothing to do all day but think about my life. I worked my whole life for my daughter but now she’s thousands of miles away. I’m not sure when I’ll see her again. I regret ever coming here. My old neighbors in Shanghai cared for me and respected me. They always said that it’s remarkable that a single mother could raise a child. But here I am stuck in a foreign prison. I’m like a deaf-mute, I can’t communicate at all. If I talk too much people think I’m too emotional, that I’m mentally ill. If I don’t say anything they think I’m depressed. That lawyer of mine hasn’t showed up at all and he doesn’t even understand what I say. Doctor, we’re both from Shanghai, be honest with me. Do you think I have any hope of getting out of here?”

“Yes, of course.”

Zhang Yan had to sign a pledge before working with the prison system that stated her sole responsibility, as a psychologist, was to treat the patient and to never step outside those bounds. She could not go outside those bounds or help a patient with a case. She was not a detective or an attorney and definitely not a judge. There were many wronged souls in prison, but Zhang Yan always maintained a strong sense of propriety and levelheaded neutrality. She tried to maintain the perspective of someone outside the system. Yet this case angered her deeply. An
old woman with no record, who had done nothing more than commit a non-violent white-collar crime, was being shuffled from one dark cell to the next. Most people in this situation would have been released on bail. Zhang Yan felt that she must do everything in her power to help this old woman. She thought about the prison regulations; if anyone found out, her professional reputation would be ruined along with her career.

The best approach was to work within the acceptable boundaries of a psychologist and encourage the woman to keep her chin up and stop her from wanting to commit suicide. Zhang Yan took great care in speaking with the old woman. With her graying, messy hair and withered, pallid face, the old women stood up to leave the visitation room looking much as she had before. But in the depths of her dull eyes there gleamed a faint twinkle of light. Weak as it was, it was the desire, the spark, to keep on living.

“Remember,” Zhang Yan urged again, “keep thinking about your daughter and under no circumstances do I want you to think about killing yourself.”

“Thank you doctor. You must help me get out of here as soon as possible,” the old woman implored softly.

Zhang Yan’s heart softened and she abruptly grabbed woman’s sleeve before she left and said, “What’s your daughter’s phone number?”

Probably out of habit, the old woman blurted out the number, but just as she walked away she seemed to remember something. She turned quickly to Zhang Yan and said, “Whatever you do, please don’t call my daughter. This would worry her terribly.”

* * *

Billy Joe was overjoyed to see Zhang Yan. “So you came to pay me a special visit after seeing your patient, eh?”
Zhang Yan exchanged pleasantries with him and then changed the subject to the old woman. She was just about to mention calling the New York Police Department when Billy Joe cut her off, “No, we can’t do that. We just take care of the prisoners that get sent to us. How’s it our business to ask when her hearing is?”

“But what’s the old woman going to do? If no one comes to take her back to New York, will they just leave her here forever? How is she supposed to keep on living if she’s lost all hope?”

Billy Joe wasn’t moved and said, “When dealing with these bastards you got to be impartial. If you try to help someone, someone else will sue you for discrimination saying that you’re not protecting his or her rights. Then those son of a bitch lawyers will sue you for interfering with the legal process. I’ll be frank with you; we do everything by the book around here because, hey, who the hell doesn’t want to sue us? And by the way, how could you be so trusting? How do you know everything the old woman said was true? Some of these old criminals have been at it a long time, they’ll come to you cryin’ with some sob story but it’s really a load of bull. I’ve been a warden here a long time and there’s just one truth to this whole mess: You can’t trust a goddamned soul but yourself.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Yan said. “It’s because I trust my judgment that I think the old woman is telling the truth. That’s even without knowing what she did. After all, she didn’t do anything as bad as arson or murder. If she wasn’t so poor and helpless she’d been out on bail.”

“These are two damn different things. To maintain your professional integrity you can’t get involved. Of course, what you’re saying is true; if she wasn’t poor she probably wouldn’t be in here. But the fact is most of the people in jail are criminals; it’s just the less capable ones that get stuck in here. The brighter ones get good lawyers, real good lawyers. The type of lawyers
that tell you a dead man is alive and you’ll believe them. The kind that’ll file appeal after appeal and even put up some of the bail money. If you hire someone like that do you think you’ll see the inside of a prison? If you don’t believe me, answer this: name one murderer on death row who comes from a good family?”

Billy Joe’s logic was both straightforward and rational and Zhang Yan relented. In this case, the biggest difference of all between China and America was that Americans relied on reason and never on emotion. For something to sound “sensible” wasn’t enough. A cold reliance on the law permeates American culture, where justice is clear-cut and nothing is sloppy. It was just like how each of her patients was known by such and such account number, such and such data and such and such treatment. Prisoners are nothing more than such and such inmate number, such and such case number. Being ethical means ignoring the goodwill between people and blindly following reason.

Remaining ethical was the most important part of Zhang Yan’s being a psychologist. She had seen every song and dance by the inmates but she knew there was nothing wrong with them. She played along and feigned interest as best she could. The old woman desperately needed her help, but being a certified American psychologist meant, in the name of ethics, she had to forsake those who needed help.

Zhang Yan got in her car and turned on to the mountain road. She gazed back at the deathly stillness of the prison as she drove away. Her heart sank. The old woman’s sadness, depression, anger, hopelessness, emptiness and grief seemed to follow Zhang Yan as the prison disappeared behind her.

Asking Billy-Joe to help had slightly delayed her. The streetlights came on as she drove into the city. People hurried home in the frenzy of rush hour traffic. Cars passed quickly, one
after another. The restlessness of dusk would not last long and the shops would soon close. The little city was going to sleep. The streets slowly emptied, leaving only the dim glow of restaurants to light the way.

It was already after five-thirty. Zhang Yan hadn’t planned to have tea with that jerk who rear-ended her car earlier that day, but because of the old woman at the prison she felt empty. Turning, she started towards the Sunshine Teashop. It’s hard to say why she decided to go. Was she curious, perhaps?

At this time the teashop was still filled with trendy youths and aging hipsters. Incense burned on the counter by the door. The waitress, wearing not quite a kimono and not quite a nightgown came over to Zhang Yan and said, “Sit wherever!” The waitress’ robe was sewn together from pieces of cloth with large Chinese characters on them. It’s too bad the tailor of the strange garment couldn’t read Chinese, because the material was cut wrong and the characters were upside down. Zhang Yan looked around at the customers and searched for the man that had hit her car. She was just about to leave when a voice called to her from the corner, “Hello! I actually waited for you. Are you always so incredulous?”

He had waited for her, how strange!

“Sorry about being late,” Zhang Yan said. “I had to see a patient this afternoon and I didn’t have your number so there was no way for me to contact you.”

“Do you want some herbal tea?” the man asked. This was one of the trendiest beverages in America besides the usual black tea and green tea. In China it’s called “medicinal soup” but the American kind is less complicated, containing only orange peel, lemon peel, mint and vanilla, etc.
“Herbal is fine,” Zhang Yan replied wearily, “About the cars, just get yours fixed and forget about mine. All I ask is that you be a little nicer next time.”

“I’m really sorry,” the man said. “I was having a bad morning. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

Zhang Yan nodded, essentially accepting his apology.

“You just mentioned seeing a patient. Are you a doctor?” The man asked.

“Psychologist.”

“That’s great!” the man exclaimed. “I need a good psychologist.”

Zhang Yan shot him a cold glance. Was this guy for real? She said nothing. Not wanting to give the man the wrong idea, she pushed back her chair and said, “Well, since we’ve got the car thing figured out I’ve got to go.”

“Hold on a second. You haven’t even finished your tea. My name is Jerry. What’s yours?”

“Yan.” She had no choice but to be polite and tell him her name. Her patients were her livelihood and she lived in a small city. Who knows when she might run into him again?

“Yam? Yawn? What did you say your name was?”

“Either one is fine.” Zhang Yan replied.

“Hmm, Yam, that’s a nice name,” Jerry said. “Well, I just wanted to explain myself. Recently I’ve been in a bad mood. I can’t seem to control myself when I run into even the smallest problems. Have you ever seen those bumper stickers people put on their cars that say: ‘Life’s a bitch,’ they’re right, aren’t they?”

Zhang Yan often heard similar sentiments from her patients. She said nothing and shot Jerry another look.
“Are you taking new patients? How about seeing me? Do you have a business card?” the man asked as he handed over his business card.

Could she turn away new business? She smiled slightly. Just as she was about to hand him her business card, the man spoke again, “I have a question for you. Maybe too personal but…why did you get so upset this morning?”

Zhang Yan uncharacteristically gave him a straight answer, “I hadn’t argued with anyone for awhile. You gave me the opportunity and I fought back.”

The man gave a hearty laugh and said, “You get right to the point don’t you? Well then you’re just like me. There must be something bothering you, am I right? How can you treat patients if you’ve got problems yourself?”

“What about you?” Zhang Yan shot back. “I put my turn signal on and you, the eye doctor, didn’t even see it?”

“Ouch, that one hurt. Come on, we all have times like that when we’re not paying attention and we make mistakes. Doesn’t being a psychologist wear you out? You’ve got to be careful and cautious all the time. You can never make a mistake. Of course, you see patients with psychiatric problems so you’ve probably got a little more wiggle room. It’s not so easy for optometrists. If we don’t do an examination properly someone’s glasses won’t be correct. If I diagnose the wrong eye problem it’s even worse. Some of the medications I prescribe can cause blindness if used improperly…” The man seemed to love the sound of his own voice.

“Then you should be more careful,” Zhang Yan chided. “Like while driving, for example. Make sure you give yourself enough distance to stop.”

“Okay, okay, take it easy,” The man said. “Do you know why I asked you to come here? For years I’ve had to force myself to be nice to my patients and society expects me to be solemn
and serious all the time. Even when I go home I have to act genial to my wife. Every day of my life I put on an act and I’m tired of it. Earlier today I appeared apologetic just to get myself out of trouble. I didn’t think you’d take the bait and I was surprised you did. Then I made a bet with myself to see if you’d meet me someplace. I figured you wouldn’t show up but you did. I guess I’ve got you all wrong then.”

Zhang Yan laughed and said, “So, you folks with vision problems can see clearly after all?”

The man laughed too. “You’re so much fun to talk to. I think we could get along pretty well.” The man seemed pleased as he looked at Zhang Yan.

“Maybe you’re a little overconfident.”

“Don’t we have something in common though?”

“How can you be sure I’m not playing the role of a doctor right now?” Zhang Yan said.

The man laughed again. “You’re very interesting.”

Zhang Yan cast him a sideways glance, took out her business card and tossed it on the table. “My office number is on the card. You can call me if you want and set up an appointment to talk, but I don’t work for free.”

* * *

She left the teashop.

It was mid-Autumn, but this was mid-Autumn in America. Americans don’t look at the moon and see Chang E or the Jade Hare; they don’t get wrapped up in the moment and feel compelled to recite poetry to it. Only American dogs and cats pay any attention to the moon, acting restless when it becomes full. They howl grotesque songs and run through the streets as if in a fit of drunken revelry.
Zhang Yan arrived at the Bohemia Café but she didn’t see Melissa. The waitress saw her looking around for someone, greeted her and pointed her in the right direction. The original coffee house once had a secret room in the rear. One had to walk through a dimly lit hallway past two restrooms with doors carved like flowers to reach the dark little room. The very name “secret room” had a connotation that dark, illicit deeds transpired therein—maybe drugs, gambling or smuggling. But now it was just a little room at the back of the café. She tried to get her creative juices flowing since she was going to be talking with a bunch of novelists. She wanted to be able to identify with them.

Sure enough, the room was dimly lit. Imitation antique gas lamps hung from the ceiling, casting a weak glow throughout the room. Several barrels of coffee lay open along the wall. Old pictures pasted on the walls had yellowed, revealing torn, tooth-like edges. A man in overalls held a cup of steaming coffee in his hands. A dozen or so people sat scattered carelessly around several small tables. Zhang Yan collected herself and continued searching for Melissa when someone pulled on her arm and said, “Over here, come here.” The person had a shaved head and was wearing black, skintight nylons. Zhang Yan could see from the shape of the body that it was a woman. She was very sexy, having an hourglass figure that certain types of men would draw in the air with their hands. She wore a pair of ugly, beat up combat boots, and although it was very dark, a pair of sunglasses.

“Is Melissa here? I’m a friend of hers,” Zhang Yan said in a whisper.

The woman with the shaved head turned to the others in the room. “Melissa’s guest is here.”

A few people nodded at Zhang Yan. She weaved around several small tables to sit with them on a long bench. The woman with the shaved kept pushing her firm thighs into Zhang
Yan’s, sometimes squeezing her. She laughed at Zhang Yan and said, “My name’s Lulu, what’s yours?” She had a small silver ring through her tongue.

“Lulu?”

“That’s right!”

“How unique! My name’s Zhang Yan.”

“What was that?” Lulu said. Her lips seemed to stumble over Zhang Yan’s name, probably because of her pierced tongue.

A man whom Zhang Yan could not see interjected, “That’s a weird name. I’ve never heard of an artist with such a strange, unpronounceable name. How will the masses remember it?”

Zhang Yan promptly explained that she was not an artist and that she wasn’t quite sure why she was here.

Placing her hand on Zhang Yan’s leg, Lulu said gently, “Don’t worry dear, you’ll see in a moment. Let’s just listen to Lynx for now.”

Lynx? She looked towards the man with long hair covering half of his face. He continued speaking, “Writing is pain. For days I can’t sit still and I can’t have anything but coffee and cigarettes. The more I write the more it tears at me inside and I can’t stand to read what I’ve written. I just cover my eyes with one hand and write with the other. When I finish writing it feels like I’ve barely pulled through a deadly illness.”

Someone by the door interrupted him, “To write truly deep, astounding works you must feel punished.” Zhang Yan saw that Melissa had arrived. Her appearance was slovenly as usual, hair tangled and clothes messy like she had just crawled out of bed. She continued, “There are many things in life that cause pain. Sometimes there’s not much you can do about it. If you write
about it it’s like a trip to hell. When I write I pull out my hair and yell. When I’ve finished a piece I’m usually missing some hair and my voice hurts.”

Upon hearing this Zhang Yan thought to herself, “No wonder her voice is always so raspy. Luckily with that mop of hair, you hardly notice if she pulls it out.”

A weird-looking man said in a low voice, “Totally. The pain inside is so bad when I write that I get depressed. What’s the point of living? I should just end it all.”

“Eric, darling,” Lulu said as she rushed forward to kiss him on the cheek. She cradled his head in her ample bosom. “It’s so pitiful. Life is undoubtedly hell but it’s a dance and we’re all on stage. It isn’t a dress rehearsal.”

The man who wanted to kill himself buried his head in Lulu’s breasts for what seemed a long time. He lifted his head and pushed away from Lulu. After glancing coldly around the room, he fixed his gaze on Zhang Yan. Zhang Yan turned her head to look at Melissa, trying anything to get away from the man’s gaze. She swore at herself for taking Melissa up on the invitation to come here. As luck would have it, the crazy guy asked Zhang Yan point blank, “What’s your story?”

All eyes fell on Zhang Yan. She laughed awkwardly, “I’m a friend of Melissa’s. Just like her, I help my patients deal with psychological problems and help them change their behavior. I came here just for fun, I wasn’t really planning on doing any writing.”

Several people looked at Zhang Yan with pity in their eyes. Lynx laughed at her with disdain. “People who don’t write have it so easy. Did you hear what she said? She’s just here to have fun. Life exists in the dark depths of humanity, not on the surface. You’ve got to use the pen to pierce through bark, rock, mist and into the human soul. Writing is the only reason I’m alive.”
Zhang Yan thought to herself, “Now I’ve finally met some truly crazy people.” She tried to think of a way to casually sneak out but it was impossible with Melissa blocking the door. With everyone watching, her only choice was to act as crazy as they were. She wondered if Melissa came here just to scrounge around for future patients. Was she actually trying to profit from these people?

Zhang Yan squinted indifferently at Lynx when suddenly the weird-looking guy confronted her again, “Be straight with us. You think were all crazy, don’t you?”

Zhang Yan was shocked. She turned to look at Melissa but a taunting sneer showed on her face. Three or four people nearby seemed bewildered. Zhang Yan thought for a moment. “No, I can’t just leave. This is America, I can’t leave without putting up a fight.” She smiled coldly and said, “That depends on how you look at it. In psychology, for example, our job is to understand insanity, just as it is with you writers. Starting from the basis of normalcy one can search for the shadows of insanity and from there we discover the true nature, the essential character of an individual. If you look at it that way, writers and psychologists are one and the same.”

As the group of crazies listened, their expressions lightened. They took it as a compliment. “Yeah, that’s right! How can you produce great work without being a little crazy?”

Lulu put her arm around Zhang Yan. “Think about it dear, doesn’t everyone live a lie? Writers can escape this falseness. For example, how do you feel when it’s drizzling outside? Is it bittersweet?”

All eyes fell on Zhang Yan and she spoke deliberately, “Isn’t rain the worst? When the rain mixes with the dirt on my car it makes spots that look like a dirty face. I can’t stand it so I wipe them off.” Zhang Yan hoped that by giving such a practical reply the artists would become
disappointed so she could escape the secret room once and for all. She had enough patients and
money to live on. She didn’t feel like drumming up more business.

“What do you guys think?” Melissa suddenly chimed in happily. “Wasn’t I right?
Doesn’t Zhang Yan have incredible comprehension? She’s not like other people who wax poetic
about the springtime in lush meadows or the emerald green of a rain-soaked forest. Instead, when
she thinks of rain she comes up with dirt.”

Several people nodded in agreement. Zhang Yan was discouraged and felt she had been
there long enough. Then Melissa made a suggestion. “All right everyone, let’s get out our pencils
and paper and write for five minutes. Just go where it takes you and don’t worry about style at all.
Let’s show our true feelings and emotions, don’t hold anything back. Even though, to be honest
with you, the more I come here and discover the truth about things, the harder it becomes to
write about it.”

Lulu and the six or seven other people with unkempt hair, ponytails or bald heads strove
to be the first to get their emotions on paper. When everyone had gotten out their pens and paper,
Lynx said to them, “Today’s topic will be cemeteries. How does everyone feel about that?”

Zhang Yan thought again about making a graceful exit, but Melissa sat right beside her
and said. “Why don’t you write with us?” Zhang Yan had no choice but to comply.

After five minutes, Lulu took the lead and read her piece aloud, “Green grass, green
leaves. Green mountains, green rivers. Green sky, green birds. Green raindrops, green graves.”

“That’s very nice,” Zhang Yan said.


“Let’s see how much feeling yours has then,” Lulu replied sharply.
A man as tall and skinny as a telephone pole read his piece aloud. “Blood, blood red blood seeps from the mud. The mud becomes dark red. Is it the dirty, foul blood of the aged? Is it that of the pure pubescent virgin girl? The flames of hell rage beneath the fiery red mud. The blood runs dry and the heart stops beating. I bury my head in the oozing, blood red earth. It is quiet and I drink in the tears of the sun…”

Lulu interrupted. “Since when does the sun have tears? How fake.”

Melissa’s was rather bland: “I hear the edge of her skirt from behind the gravestone, brushing gently against the casket. The deep sockets of her skull gaze at the daughter she hates. A clapping hand echoes through the deathly stillness of the cemetery.” She was talking about her dead mother, nothing new there. Each person turned to look at Zhang Yan when they finished reading. “We haven’t heard from you yet,” someone said.

Zhang Yan held up her blank piece of paper.

“What does that mean?” They asked.

“Isn’t this like a cemetery?” quipped Zhang Yan. “For the dead there is only nothingness, everything is blank and white.”

“Wow!” Lulu shouted. “You’re deep. You should join our literary club.” Lynx, Melissa and everyone else agreed. Zhang Yan looked at them showing no expression on her face. She thought to herself, “They have it so easy. They have it so easy they don’t have to struggle for anything. They are too comfortable and they have way too much time on their hands so they indulge in fantasy. Their lives are about as bland as chewing on a ball of wax.

“Now that you’re a member of our club,” Lynx said, “will you talk a bit about your creative plans?”
But before Zhang Yan could open her mouth, Melissa chimed in with her own good news. “Everyone, everyone, I want to tell you all a big secret. You all know that I’m in the midst of writing a novel that will fill a void in American literature, make that world literature! I just have to brag a bit… It’s almost done! It’s about a professor who is a lesbian and she’s in love with a waitress. But the waitress is addicted to drugs and only likes men. The professor’s unrequited love cuts her deeply but there’s another problem: a student is threatening to sue her for sexual harassment. The remarkable thing is, this student is a woman. What do you think?” Melissa glanced hopefully around the room.

“That’s great!” a man with messy hair said. “Who in the world could think of a better plot? Yet, I think it’s still a little mundane.”

“Mundane?” Melissa said indignantly.

A number of voices debated all at once. “True art doesn’t need to pander to the public or use cheap sensationalism. Art makes people uncomfortable, makes them embarrassed or worried…”

Zhang Yan felt alone. She could never feel a connection with any of these people. After all, they were walking very different roads in life. She escaped quietly, leaving behind the dim light that shined on the restless people and the smoke that wafted gently above.

* * *

The moon hung in the sky pouring down light in all directions. Zhang Yan came home and opened the door to find the floor bleached white by the moonlight. The room was bight, as if the lights had been left on. She stood for a moment in the moonlight. It was the mid-Autumn festival, a time for reunions and celebration, but her house was empty and cold. When she was in China she would always get together with her friends and family. A moon cake would be halved,
quartered, perhaps cut into sixteen pieces for everyone to enjoy. There would be laughter and joy while the moon shone brightly above.

Though it was the same moon as always, it didn’t seem like the one she had seen before.

Zhang Yan turned on the light and sat on the sofa, kicking off her leather shoes as she sat down. The troubles from her day flickered before her like scenes from a movie. The poor woman at the prison was probably anxiously awaiting a call from her daughter. When Zhang Yan thought of this she impulsively pulled the number out of her pocket that was scribbled on a piece of paper. Without hesitation she picked up the phone, but the mid-Autumn moon was round and full so for the time being she was going to let herself be purely Chinese. She hung up the phone.

She looked at the moon in silence. She was no longer purely Chinese. Would a real Chinese have spent the mid-Autumn festival talking to strange people from off the street? Would a real Chinese have forgotten to bring his or her son home to celebrate? She looked at the clock on the desk, it was after ten o’clock, Yangyang was probably asleep. She would call him first thing in the morning. No, better yet she would go to his school and bring him some moon cakes. Does he remember eating them with his grandpa and grandma so many years ago?

Zhao Siqing. She wondered what he was up to. Probably working the night away in front of his computer. Sometimes she did not think about him for days, but today was the mid-Autumn festival, a day for reunions and togetherness. She picked up the phone.

Busy signal.

She put the phone down at a loss for what to do. She seemed to have had a full day but what had she actually accomplished?

The phone rang loudly. It was Mr. Stanley talking about killing himself again…
When she got off the phone with Mr. Stanley it was nearly midnight. She picked up the phone again and hit redial. The busy signal hummed blandly again.

Who could he be talking to at such an hour with the moon so bright? She thought of years ago when she had cradled her stomach under the pale light from above. Everything seemed so delicate and soft…

Zhang Yan lay on her comfortable bed beside her husband’s still creaseless, smooth pillow. Could there be another reason why he had not been home in weeks? She felt tired. She yawned and covered herself with a blanket. Even if Zhao Siqing decided to leave her for good, she could wait until morning to sort things out. Today and tomorrow were the same, tedious, hectic and bland. And after tomorrow there would be many more days just like it. She should sleep. Sleep is vital. Middle-aged women like her must take good care of themselves, they can’t afford to toss and turn in bed.
References


