

YU HUA

Two stories from the collection

Huanghun li de nanhai

(New World Press, Beijing 1999)

Boy in the Twilight

A man named Sun Fu was sitting outside at midday in autumn, looking after a stand that was loaded with fruit. The sunlight shone so brightly that it forced his fifty-year old eyes to squint. His hands rested on his knees, and his body leaned forward. His grizzled hair seemed gray in the sunlight, like the road before him. It was a wide road, extending from the far distance, passing him and then stretching off into the distance again. He had already occupied a place here for three years now, making a living selling fruit in this spot where long distance buses would regularly stop. A car drove by, and the dust stirred up by its passage shrouded him, as though plunging him into evening darkness, and then after a moment he and his fruit re-emerged, as though with the arrival of dawn.

He saw a boy standing in front of the stall. This was after the cloud of dust had passed, and he saw the boy's dark and gleaming eyes fixed on him. As he returned the boy's gaze, the boy, dressed in dirty clothes, put a hand on his fruit. He looked at the boy's hand, and saw fingernails that were black and long. When the nails touched a shiny red apple, he raised his hand to wave him away, the way he would drive away a fly, and he said, "Clear off."

The boy withdrew his grubby hand, swayed a little, then moved off. The boy slowly walked away from him, his arms hanging slack. On his skinny body his head seemed large.

At this time, several people came walking over to the stall, and Sun Fu redirected his gaze and looked no more at the boy. The people came up opposite Sun Fu and from the other side of the fruit asked him, "How much are the apples?.....How much for a pound of bananas?"

Sun Fu rose to his feet, held up the scales, and weighed apples and bananas for them, and collected their money. When he sat down and put his hands back on his knees, he saw the boy once again. The boy had come back. This time the boy wasn't standing directly opposite him, but stood off to one side, his dark and gleaming eyes fixed on Sun Fu's apples and bananas. Sun Fu looked at him at the same time. After staring at the fruit for a while, the boy looked up at Sun Fu and said to him, "I'm hungry."

Sun Fu looked at him and said nothing. The boy repeated, "I'm hungry."

His voice was loud. He looked at the dirty boy, and said with a frown, "Clear off."

The boy's body seemed to give a shiver. Sun Fu said, more loudly, "Clear off."

The boy gave a start. His body swayed irresolutely, and then his legs started to move. Sun Fu took his eyes off the boy and switched his attention to the highway in front of him. He heard a long distance bus stop on the opposite side of the road, and the people

inside stood up. Through the glass of the bus's windows, he could see many shoulders crowded together and moving towards the doors, and a moment later, people flowed out of the two ends of the bus. Just then, Sun Fu turned his head, and he saw the boy running away at top speed. As he watched the boy, he wondered why he was running. He saw the boy's flailing arm, and saw that he was clutching something in the right hand, a very round object. He saw it clearly now--what the boy was clutching was an apple. Sun Fu immediately jumped up and ran in pursuit. Sun Fu shouted, "Stop thief! Stop that thief there...."

It was afternoon now. The boy fled along the highway where the dust was flying. He heard shouting behind him, and looked round to see Sun Fu in hot pursuit. He ran on desperately, gasping for breath. His legs went soft, and he felt that he soon wouldn't be able to run any further. When he looked back a second time and saw Sun Fu still on his tail, waving his hands and shouting, he knew that Sun Fu was about to catch up with him, so he came to a stop, turned around and looked up, panting heavily. Panting, he watched the approaching Sun Fu, and when Sun Fu ran up right next to him, he raised the apple to his mouth and took a big bite out of it.

Sun Fu swung his arm and hit the boy, knocking the apple out of the boy's hand and striking the boy's face, and the boy collapsed on the ground. There he shielded his head in his hands, while his mouth chewed vigorously. Sun Fu heard the sound of his chewing, and he grabbed hold of the boy's collar and hauled him to his feet. With his collar gripped so tightly, the boy could not keep on chewing. His eyes goggled and his cheeks swelled out with the apple inside. Sun Fu seized his collar with one hand, and squeezed his neck with the other. Sun Fu shouted at him, "Spit it out! Spit it out!"

As a crowd of people gathered around, Sun Fu said to them, "He is still trying to eat it! He stole my apple and took a bite out of it, and now he's still trying to eat it!"

Then Sun Fu stretched out a hand and slapped him on the face, crying, "Come on, spit it out!"

The boy clenched his bulging mouth. Sun Fu again squeezed his neck: "Spit it out!"

The boy's mouth opened, and Sun Fu saw the chewed up fragments of the apple in his mouth. He exerted more pressure on the hand that was pressing on the boy's throat. Sun Fu saw that his eyes were staring. Somebody said to Sun Fu, "Sun Fu, look, his eyeballs are practically popping out of his head, you're going to strangle him."

"Serves him right," Sun Fu said. "It serves him right if he's strangled."

Then Sun Fu opened the hand that was gripping the boy's throat, and pointing at the sky said, "If there's one thing I hate, it's a thief....Spit it out!"

The boy began to spit out the apple in his mouth, spitting it out piece by piece. It was a bit like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube, the way he spat the fragments of apple on to his shirt front. After he closed his mouth, Sun Fu levered it open with his hand, then bent down to look inside, then said, "You haven't spit it all out. There's still some left."

So the boy resumed spitting. It was practically all saliva, but with a few crumbs of apple mixed in with it. The boy spat and spat, until in the end there was just a dry noise, no saliva any more. Only then did Sun Fu say, "That's enough."

Sun Fu then looked at the people milling around. He saw many familiar faces among them. He said to them, "In the old days we never locked our doors, did we? There wasn't a household in the whole town that locked its doors, was there?"

He saw people nodding, and continued, "Now, after locking the door once, you have to use an extra lock as well. Why? It's because of thieves like this. If there's one thing I hate, it's a thief."

Sun Fu looked at the boy. The boy was looking up at him with a face covered in dirt, his eyes watching him spellbound, as though fascinated by what he was saying. The boy's expression stirred an excitement in Sun Fu, and he said, "If we followed the old conventions, we ought to break one of his hands, break the hand that did the stealing...."

Sun Fu looked down at the boy and shouted, "Which hand was it?"

The boy shivered and quickly put his right hand behind his back. Sun Fu grabbed the right hand and showed it to everybody, and he said to them, "It was this hand. Otherwise, why would he try to hide it so quickly...."

The boy cried, "It wasn't that hand."

"Then it's this hand." Sun Fu grabbed the boy's left hand.

"No, it's not!"

As he said this, the boy tried to pull his left hand away. Sun Fu gave him a slap on the face that made him teeter. After a second slap, the boy stood still. Sun Fu grabbed him by the hair, jerking his head up, and staring into his face yelled at him, "Which hand was it?"

The boy's eyes widened as he looked at Sun Fu, and after a moment, he stretched out his right hand. Sun Fu took hold of his right wrist, and with his other hand gripped the middle finger of the boy's right hand. Then he said to the bystanders, "If we followed the old practice, we should break this hand. We can't do that any more. Now we emphasize education. How do we educate?"

Sun Fu looked at the boy and said, "This is how we educate."

Sun Fu then applied pressure with both hands, and with a sudden cracking he broke the boy's middle finger. The boy screamed with a cry as sharp as a knife. The boy saw how the finger had been broken, so that now it lay flopping against the back of his hand. He slumped to the ground.

Sun Fu said to the bystanders, "This is what you have to do to a thief. If you don't break one of his arms, you at least need to break one of his fingers."

Saying this, Sun Fu stretched out an arm and pulled the boy to his feet. He noticed that the boy had closed his eyes tightly in reaction to the pain, and he yelled to him, "Open them. Open your eyes."

The boy opened his eyes, but he was still racked with pain, and his mouth was twisted into a strange shape. Sun Fu kicked him in the legs, and said, "Move it."

Sun Fu held on to the boy's collar and, pushing the boy ahead of him, went over in front of his fruit stall. He searched around in a cardboard box for some rope, then tied him up and fastened him to the front of the stall. When he saw that a few people had followed them over, he said to the boy, "Shout. Shout 'I am a thief.'"

The boy looked at Sun Fu. When he did not shout, Sun Fu quickly grabbed hold of his left hand and took a tight grip on the left middle finger. Immediately the boy yelled, "I am a thief."

Sun Fu said, "That's too soft. Louder."

The boy looked at Sun Fu, then thrust his head forward, and yelled with all his might, "I am a thief."

Sun Fu saw how the blood vessels on the boy's neck protruded and he nodded and said, "That's right, that's the way you need to shout."

That afternoon, the autumn sun bathed the boy in light. His two hands were tied behind his back, and the rope was pulled up and around his neck, so that it was impossible for him to lower his head. All he could do was raise his head and look at the highway in front of him. Next to him lay the fruit that he had yearned for, but now he had no chance

to look down at it for even a moment, because his neck was fixed in place. If anyone went past, any passerby at all, Sun Fu insisted that he shout, "I am a thief."

Sun Fu sat behind the fruit stand on a small chair, watching the boy contentedly. He was no longer indignant about the loss of an apple, and had begun to feel pleased with a job well done, because he had captured this boy who stole apples and punished him, and the punishment was still not over. He kept on making him shout: as soon as someone walked by, he would have him yell at the top of his voice. He had come to realize that it was the boy's shouting that attracted a constant flow of people in front of the fruit stand.

Many people looked with curiosity at this boy who was yelling. It seemed strange to them that this boy who was tied up would yell "I'm a thief" so vigorously. So Sun Fu would explain to them, telling people again and again how the boy had stolen one of his apples, how he had caught him, and how he had punished him. Sun Fu would finish by saying, "It's for his own good."

This is how Sun Fu would explain what he meant: "The reason I'm doing this is to make it clear to him that he's never to steal anything again."

Having said this, Sun loudly asked the boy, "Are you going to do any more stealing?"

The boy vigorously shook his head. Because his neck was clamped so tightly, he shook his head only slightly, but very quickly.

"Did you all see that?" Sun Fu triumphantly said to them.

The boy shouted the whole afternoon through. His lips dried and cracked in the sun, and his voice grew hoarse. By dusk, the boy was unable to come out with a full-blown shout, and could only make a scraping noise, but still he went on crying, "I'm a thief."

The passersby could no longer make out what it was he was shouting, so Sun Fu told them, "He's shouting 'I'm a thief.'"

After that, Sun Fu untied the rope. It was almost dark now, and Sun Fu moved all the fruit on to his flatbed cart, and after he'd finished clearing up, he untied the boy. When Sun Fu was placing the coiled rope on the cart, he heard a dull thump behind him, and looked round to find that the boy had collapsed on the ground. He said to the boy, "After this, I bet you won't dare to steal again, will you?"

Saying this, Sun Fu mounted the bicycle at the front of the cart and rode off along the broad highway. The boy lay on the ground. He was gripped by both hunger and thirst, and he felt utterly exhausted, so when Sun Fu untied the rope he had immediately tumbled to the ground. After Sun Fu left, the boy went on lying there, with his eyes slightly open, as though he was looking at the road, or as though he did not see anything at all. After the boy had lain there motionless for a while, he slowly clambered to his feet, stood for a little while, leaning against a tree, and then he started walking along the road, heading west.

The boy headed west, his puny body walking in the twilight, walking out of the town one step at a time, swaying slightly as he walked. A few people saw his departure, and they knew that this boy was the thief that Sun Fu had caught that afternoon, but they didn't know his name or where he had come from, and of course they had even less idea where he was going. They all took note of the boy's right hand. The middle finger now dangled against the back of his hand. They watched him walk into the distant twilight and disappear.

That evening, Sun Fu, as was his custom, went to the little shop next door to buy a pint of rice wine, and he cooked himself a couple of simple dishes, then sat down by the square dining table. At this hour, the sunset's rays shone in through the window, and seemed to warm the room up. Sun Fu sat in the twilight by the window, sipping his wine.

Many years ago, in this room there lived a pretty woman and a five-year old boy. In those days, the room would buzz with noise, as he and his wife and their son chatted away.

He would often sit in a chair inside and watch how his wife lit a fire outside in the coal stove, and watch how their son would tug devotedly on her jacket and with his shrill little voice talk to her about something.

Later, one summer lunchtime, several boys ran in, shouting Sun Fu's name, telling him that his son had fallen into a pond not far away. That summer lunchtime he ran like a man possessed, his wife following behind with piercing wails. It was not long before they knew that they had lost their son forever. In the evening, in the sweltering darkness, they sat opposite each other, moaning and sobbing.

Later on still, they began to regain their composure, carrying on with their lives as they had before, and in this way several years quickly passed. Then, one winter, an itinerant barber stopped outside their house. His wife went out, sat in the chair that the barber had brought with him, closed her eyes in the bright sunlight, and let the barber wash and cut her hair, clean her ears and massage her arms and shoulders. She felt that her body had never been as relaxed as it was that day, so relaxed that it seemed to be melting away. So it was that she gathered up her things, and, under cover of darkness, left Sun Fu and went off to follow the barber.

Sun Fu was alone, his past condensed into the faded black and white photograph that was pinned on the wall. It was a family portrait: he, his wife and his son. His son was in the middle, wearing a cotton cap much bigger than his head. His wife was on the left, her two ponytails falling on her shoulders, smiling blissfully. He was on the right, his youthful face brimming with life.

havelegally **Boy in the Twilight**

A man named Sun Fu was sitting outside at midday in autumn, looking after a stand that was loaded with fruit. The sunlight shone so brightly that it forced his fifty-year old eyes to squint. His hands rested on his knees, and his body leaned forward. His grizzled hair seemed gray in the sunlight, like the road before him. It was a wide road, extending from the far distance, passing him and then stretching off into the distance again. He had already occupied a place here for three years now, making a living selling fruit in this spot where long distance buses would regularly stop. A car drove by, and the dust stirred up by its passage shrouded him, as though plunging him into evening darkness, and then after a moment he and his fruit re-emerged, as though with the arrival of dawn.

He saw a boy standing in front of the stall. This was after the cloud of dust had passed, and he saw the boy's dark and gleaming eyes fixed on him. As he returned the boy's gaze, the boy, dressed in dirty clothes, put a hand on his fruit. He looked at the boy's hand, and saw fingernails that were black and long. When the nails touched a shiny red apple, he raised his hand to wave him away, the way he would drive away a fly, and he said, "Clear off."

The boy withdrew his grubby hand, swayed a little, then moved off. The boy slowly walked away from him, his arms hanging slack. On his skinny body his head seemed large.

At this time, several people came walking over to the stall, and Sun Fu redirected his gaze and looked no more at the boy. The people came up opposite Sun Fu and from the other side of the fruit asked him, "How much are the apples?.....How much for a pound of bananas?"

Sun Fu rose to his feet, held up the scales, and weighed apples and bananas for them, and collected their money. When he sat down and put his hands back on his knees, he saw the boy once again. The boy had come back. This time the boy wasn't standing directly opposite him, but stood off to one side, his dark and gleaming eyes fixed on Sun Fu's apples and bananas. Sun Fu looked at him at the same time. After staring at the fruit for a while, the boy looked up at Sun Fu and said to him, "I'm hungry."

Sun Fu looked at him and said nothing. The boy repeated, "I'm hungry."

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desperately, gasping for breath. His legs went soft, and he felt that he soon wouldn't be able to run any further. When he looked back a second time and saw Sun Fu still on his tail, waving his hands and shouting, he knew that Sun Fu was about to catch up with him, so he came to a stop, turned around and looked up, panting heavily. Panting, he watched the approaching Sun Fu, and when Sun Fu ran up right next to him, he raised the apple to his mouth and took a big bite out of it.

Sun Fu swung his arm and hit the boy, knocking the apple out of the boy's hand and striking the boy's face, and the boy collapsed on the ground. There he shielded his head in his hands, while his mouth chewed vigorously. Sun Fu heard the sound of his chewing, and he grabbed hold of the boy's collar and hauled him to his feet. With his collar gripped so tightly, the boy could not keep on chewing. His eyes goggled and his cheeks swelled out with the apple inside. Sun Fu seized his collar with one hand, and squeezed his neck with the other. Sun Fu shouted at him, "Spit it out! Spit it out!"

As a crowd of people gathered around, Sun Fu said to them, "He is still trying to eat it! He stole my apple and took a bite out of it, and now he's still trying to eat it!"

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Sun Fu then looked at the people milling around. He saw many familiar faces among them. He said to them, "In the old days we never locked our doors, did we? There wasn't a household in the whole town that locked its doors, was there?"

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“No, it’s not!”

As he said this, the boy tried to pull his left hand away. Sun Fu gave him a slap on the face that made him teeter. After a second slap, the boy stood still. Sun Fu grabbed him by the hair, jerking his head up, and staring into his face yelled at him, “Which hand was it?”

The boy’s eyes widened as he looked at Sun Fu, and after a moment, he stretched out his right hand. Sun Fu took hold of his right wrist, and with his other hand gripped the middle finger of the boy’s right hand. Then he said to the bystanders, “If we followed the old practice, we should break this hand. We can’t do that any more. Now we emphasize education. How do we educate?”

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Sun Fu then applied pressure with both hands, and with a sudden cracking he broke the boy’s middle finger. The boy screamed with a cry as sharp as a knife. The boy saw how the finger had been broken, so that now it lay flopping against the back of his hand. He slumped to the ground.

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That afternoon, the autumn sun bathed the boy in light. His two hands were tied behind his back, and the rope was pulled up and around his neck, so that it was impossible for him to lower his head. All he could do was raise his head and look at the highway in front of him. Next to him lay the fruit that he had yearned for, but now he had no chance to look down at it for even a moment, because his neck was fixed in place. If anyone went past, any passerby at all, Sun Fu insisted that he shout, “I am a thief.”

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Saying this, Sun Fu mounted the bicycle at the front of the cart and rode off along the broad highway. The boy lay on the ground. He was gripped by both hunger and thirst, and he felt utterly exhausted, so when Sun Fu untied the rope he had immediately tumbled to the ground. After Sun Fu left, the boy went on lying there, with his eyes slightly open, as though he was looking at the road, or as though he did not see anything at all. After the boy had lain there motionless for a while, he slowly clambered to his feet, stood for a little while, leaning against a tree, and then he started walking along the road, heading west.

The boy headed west, his puny body walking in the twilight, walking out of the town one step at a time, swaying slightly as he walked. A few people saw his departure, and they knew that this boy was the thief that Sun Fu had caught that afternoon, but they didn't know his name or where he had come from, and of course they had even less idea where he was going. They all took note of the boy's right hand. The middle finger now dangled against the back of his hand. They watched him walk into the distant twilight and disappear.

That evening, Sun Fu, as was his custom, went to the little shop next door to buy a pint of rice wine, and he cooked himself a couple of simple dishes, then sat down by the square dining table. At this hour, the sunset's rays shone in through the window, and seemed to warm the room up. Sun Fu sat in the twilight by the window, sipping his wine.

Many years ago, in this room there lived a pretty woman and a five-year old boy. In those days, the room would buzz with noise, as he and his wife and their son chatted away. He would often sit in a chair inside and watch how his wife lit a fire outside in the coal stove, and watch how their son would tug devotedly on her jacket and with his shrill little voice talk to her about something.

Later, one summer lunchtime, several boys ran in, shouting Sun Fu's name, telling him that his son had fallen into a pond not far away. That summer lunchtime he ran like a man possessed, his wife following behind with piercing wails. It was not long before they knew that they had lost their son forever. In the evening, in the sweltering darkness, they sat opposite each other, moaning and sobbing.

Later on still, they began to regain their composure, carrying on with their lives as they had before, and in this way several years quickly passed. Then, one winter, an itinerant barber stopped outside their house. His wife went out, sat in the chair that the barber had

brought with him, closed her eyes in the bright sunlight, and let the barber wash and cut her hair, clean her ears and massage her arms and shoulders. She felt that her body had never been as relaxed as it was that day, so relaxed that it seemed to be melting away. So it was that she gathered up her things, and, under cover of darkness, left Sun Fu and went off to follow the barber.

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Their Son

At five o'clock on Saturday afternoon, over three hundred workers crowded around the main entrance to the machine factory, waiting for the bell to sound that would mark the end of their shift. The metal gate, still tightly shut, clanged as the people in front knocked on it, while a buzz of conversation, punctuated by shouts, rose up from the people behind. As they waited for their release, the workers were like livestock trapped behind bars, idly clustered in the dimming light of dusk, crowded together in the howling winter wind. The rows of large windows in the factory behind them were already shrouded in darkness, and the scene of desolation around the workshops was relieved only by the clouds of dust that swirled about.

Shi Zhikang, fifty-one years old this year, was standing in the very front row, wearing a military overcoat. He was directly facing the crack left when the two sides of the iron gate were closed. The icy wind blew in through the narrow gap and on to his nose, making him feel that his nose was shrinking.

Next to Shi Zhikang stood the old man who was in charge of the main gate, his bald head flushed by the chilly wind. Over a thick padded jacket he wore a faded boiler suit, and in his chest pocket there was a key as big as his hand, part of it poking out. Many people were yelling at him to open the gate, but it was as though he didn't hear them. He would look this way and that; whenever someone directed a comment at him, he would turn his face in the other direction. It was not until the bell rang that the old man finally reached out and took the key from his pocket. People in the front row all took a step backwards in order to give him space. He moved forward, and before putting the key in the hole, he waved his elbows behind him a few times and turned the lock only after making sure that his arms met no resistance.

Shi Zhikang was the first to make it out of the gate. He walked rapidly towards his right, intending to walk to the stop before this one, and catch the trolleybus there. The trolleybus actually stopped right outside the factory gate, and it was in order to avoid waiting with the other factory workers that he chose to walk to the stop before. At least forty workers would try to push and shove their way on to the trolleybus, although it would already be full of passengers by the time it got to the factory.

As he went on his way, Shi Zhikang thought about those forty workers. Without looking back, he could perfectly imagine how they would pack themselves around the bus stop, just as they had crammed in front of the factory gate. There would be a dozen hefty young men, and another dozen would be women, three of whom joined the factory in the same year as he did. All three had medical problems now: one had a rosy heart, and the other two had kidney disease.

As he was thinking about this, the bus stop came into view, and at the same time he saw a trolleybus coming along the boulevard. He took his hands out of his pockets and began to run. He and the bus arrived at the stop almost at the same time. People were already waiting there in three clusters, and as the bus slowed down, the three clusters moved to position themselves in line with the bus's three doors. When the bus stopped, the three clusters of people likewise became stationary. As soon as the doors opened, the passengers squeezed out in a tight stream like toothpaste from a tube, and then, in a dense mass of limbs, the people below piled on.

By the time the trolley approached the entrance to Shi Zhikang's factory, he had already pushed his way into the middle of the bus, and his arms were wedged vertically into the gaps left by bodies pressed up against him. The bus didn't stop outside the factory but drove right on past. He saw that there were now no longer forty workers waiting at the stop, but just five or six, plus seven or eight people he didn't recognize, and he inferred that before this bus at least one or two others must have come by. The three women had evidently been unable to cram aboard, for they were standing right next to the stop, the one with the ropy heart in the middle, the two with kidney disease on either side. They stood very close to each other in their dumpy padded coats, each with a black woolen scarf around their necks. The cold wind blew their hair every which way, and the deepening darkness blurred their features, as though their faces had been charred by fire. As the trolley passed them, Shi Zhikang saw how their heads turned simultaneously to follow it. They watched the bus that he was riding drive away from them.

After going nine stops, Shi Zhikang got off the trolleybus, and walked back thirty yards to another stop, where he would board a public transport bus. By this time the sky was completely dark, and though there were street lamps, they cast only a feeble glow, and it was more the bright lights of the stores on either side of the street that illuminated the sidewalk and the area around the bus stop. A lot of people were already waiting, and those closest to the front were practically standing in the middle of the street. As Shi Zhikang made his way into the crowd, a minibus came along, and when the door opened, a young man with a canvas satchel hanging from his neck poked his head out and yelled: "Two yuan, two yuan...."

Two men and a woman boarded the minibus, as the conductor continued to shout, "Two yuan"

At this moment a public transport bus turned a corner away in the distance and came into view. Seeing it, the guy on the minibus quickly ducked back inside and the minibus drove away from the throng of people waiting, as the bus rumbled towards them.

Shi Zhikang swiftly pushed his way to the very front, and then spread his arms out a little, pressing backwards as the bus approached, shoving the people behind him back on to the sidewalk. As the front door of the bus slipped past him, he calculated that given the speed of the bus he would be perfectly in line for the middle door. But what happened was that the bus came to an abrupt stop, leaving him a yard or two away from the middle door. He'd lost his position in the very front row, and now he was practically on the outer perimeter.

When the door opened, only three people came out. Shi Zhikang took a couple of steps closer to the center of the waiting throng, and thrust his arms into a slight gap left by the people in front. As he pushed his way forward, he made good use of the upper body strength that a fitter like him naturally had at his disposal. He steadily widened the gap, then squeezed into the space created, and continued to force open a gap between people yet further forward.

With the utmost effort, Shi Zhikang knocked a hole between the people ahead of him, and taking advantage of the impetus created by the people pushing him from behind, he thrust himself forward into the space below the door. Just as he placed his feet on the step of the bus, someone behind him suddenly grabbed the collar of his overcoat and dragged him backwards. His bottom landed heavily on the ground and his head collided with someone's leg. The leg in turn gave his head a knock, and when he looked up, he found that the leg belonged to a young woman. She fixed him with a glare and then looked away.

When Shi Zhikang got to his feet, the doors had closed and the bus was beginning to move off. A woman's handbag was trapped in the door, leaving a corner of the bag and part of the strap sticking outside, swaying back and forth with the motion of the bus. He turned around, determined to find out who had pulled him off the bus. Two youths about the same age as his son were watching him with a cold glint in their eyes. He looked at them and at the other people who had failed to squeeze on to the bus. Some were looking at him too, while others were not. He was tempted to let off a swearword or two, but then thought better of it.

Later, two buses arrived at the same time, and Shi Zhikang boarded the second one. Today he did not get off at the stop closest to his home, but got off two stops earlier. There was a man there with a flatbed cart who at three or four in the afternoon would sell beancurd just next to the bus stop, beancurd that tasted better than what you could buy elsewhere. Shi Zhikang's wife, who worked in a textile factory, had asked him to pick up a couple of pounds on his way home from work, because today was Saturday, and their son, a junior in college, was coming home for the weekend.

After buying the beancurd, Shi Zhikang made no further attempts to board buses, but walked the rest of the way home. When he arrived, it was almost seven o'clock, but there was no sign of his wife. This upset him. His wife should have got off work at four thirty, and she did not have such a long commute. Normally by this time his wife would just about have dinner ready, but today he had no choice but to set to work on an empty stomach, washing vegetables and slicing meat in the kitchen.

When his wife Li Xiulan returned, she was carrying a couple of fish. As soon as she came in the door and saw Shi Zhikang slicing meat, she immediately asked him, "Have you washed your hands?"

Shi Zhikang was not in a good mood, so he curtly answered, "Can't you see my hands are wet?"

Li Xiulan said, "Did you use soap? There's flu going around, and pneumonia too. You need to wash your hands with soap as soon as you get home."

Shi Zhikang snorted dismissively and said: "Then shouldn't you come home sooner?"

Li Xiulan dumped the two fish in the sink. She told Shi Zhikang that they cost her only three yuan: "They were the last two. He wanted five yuan, but I wouldn't go higher than three."

Shi Zhikang said: "Does it take so long to buy two dead fish?"

"They haven't been dead long."

She showed him the gills: "See, the cheeks are still red."

"It's you I'm talking about."

He pointed at his watch as he raised his voice: "You don't get home till after seven."

Li Xiulan's tone of voice also went up one register: "So what? What's the big deal about me coming home late? Every day you get back later than I do—do I criticize you?"

Shi Zhikang asked her, "Do I finish work before you do? Is my factory closer to home than yours?"

"I fell down," said Li Xiulan.

She flung the fish down and quickly walked back into the living room. "I fell off the bus," she said, "and it was ages before I could stand up. I just had to sit there on the side of the road for thirty or forty minutes. I practically froze."

Shi Zhikang lay down the cleaver that he was using to slice the meat, and walked over to her: "You fell? So did I—someone tugged my collar."

Shi Zhikang didn't finish the story, for now that Li Xiulan had rolled up her trouser leg, he could see that next to her knee there was a bruise as big as an egg. He bent down to touch it, and asked her, "How did it happen?"

Li Xiulan said, "When I was getting off the bus, there were too many people behind me. They pushed so hard I lost my balance."

Just at this moment their son arrived home. He was wearing a red down jacket, and as soon as he saw the injury to his mother's leg, he bent down just like his father and asked with concern: "Did you trip?"

As he took off his jacket he went on: "You should take a calcium supplement. It's not only babies who need calcium, older people need to have it too. Every day your bones lose significant quantities of calcium, and that's why you're prone to bone fractures....If it was me who was pushed off a bus, there's no way I would end up with such a large bruise."

Their son turned on the television and plumped himself down on the sofa. He also put on the earphones of his walkman, and began to listen to the FM music station.

Shi Zhikang asked: "Are watching TV? Or are listening to the radio?"

His son turned to look at him, but seemed not to have understood what his father had said, and turned away again. Then his mother spoke. She said: "Have you washed your hands?"

He turned, and removed an earphone from one of his ears: "What did you say?"

"Go and wash your hands," Li Xiulan said. "There's flu going around now, and it's easy to pick up germs on the bus. Go wash your hands, and be sure to use soap."

"I don't need to wash my hands." Their son replaced the earphone. "I took a taxi."

That evening, Shi Zhikang couldn't get to sleep. For five months now his wife had just been bringing home a little over a hundred yuan. He was in a better position—four hundred yuan—but still their combined monthly income was less than six hundred. The cost of rice had now risen to one yuan thirty a pound, and pork was twelve yuan a pound—even chili peppers were three yuan a pound. Even so, they still gave their son three hundred yuan a month for living expenses, leaving a bit over two hundred for themselves. But this hadn't stopped their son from taking a taxi when he came home on Saturday.

Li Xiulan had not fallen asleep either. Seeing Shi Zhikang constantly tossing and turning, she asked him: "You can't sleep?"

"No," Shi Zhikang said.

Li Xiulan turned in his direction and asked, "How much did our son pay to take a taxi home?"

"I don't know. I've never taken a taxi." Shi Zhikang went on, "I think it would have cost at least thirty yuan."

"Thirty yuan?" Li Xiulan moaned.

Shi Zhikang sighed. "We sweated blood for this money."

They said nothing more. Before long Shi Zhikang fell asleep, soon followed by Li Xiulan.

The following morning, their son put on his earphones just like the day before, watching TV as he listened to music. Shi Zhikang and Li Xiulan decided to have a good talk with their son, so Li Xiulan sat down next to him, while Shi Zhikang brought a chair over and sat in front of them. Shi Zhikang said to their son: "Your mother and I would like to have a chat with you."

"What about?" Because he was wearing earphones, their son spoke loudly.

Shi Zhikang said, "Family matters."

“Go on.” Their son practically shouted.

Shi Zhikang leaned over and removed his son’s right earphone. He said: “These past few months, we’ve had some problems. We didn’t want to tell you, for fear of distracting you from your studies....”

“What’s happened?” Their son removed the other earphone.

“Nothing much.” Shi Zhikang said, “Beginning this month, there’ll be no more night shift in our factory, and of the three hundred in the workforce half will be laid off. As far I’m concerned, it’s no big deal—I have skills, the factory still needs me.... It’s more what’s happening with your mum. Currently your mum is just bringing home a bit over one hundred yuan a month. It’s four years before she’s due to retire, and if she was now to take early retirement, she could get three hundred yuan a month, and could keep on drawing this pay for three years....”

“You get paid more if you take early retirement?” Their son asked.

They nodded. Their son said, “In that case, why don’t you retire?”

Shi Zhikang said, “Your mother and I are thinking that too.”

“Yeah, retire.” Saying this, their son prepared to put his earphones back on. Shi Zhikang threw Li Xiulan a glance, and she said, “Son, our family finances aren’t what they used to be, and in the future they may be in even poorer shape....”

Their son, one earphone in place, asked, “What did you say?”

Shi Zhikang said, “Your mum was saying that the family finances aren’t what they used to be....”

“Never mind.” Their son waved his hand. “State finances are not what they used to be either.”

Shi Zhikang and Li Xiulan exchanged glances. Shi Zhikang said, “Tell me this: why did you come home in a taxi yesterday?”

Their son looked at them, perplexed. Shi Zhikang said: “Why didn’t you take a bus?”

Their son said, “The bus is too crowded.”

“Too crowded?”

Shi Zhikang pointed at Li Xiulan: “Your mum and I cram ourselves on to buses every day of the week. How can a young guy like you be afraid of crowded buses?”

“It’s not the pushing that’s the problem, it’s the smell.”

With a frown, their son went on, “I really hate smelling other people’s body odor. In buses, everybody’s jostling you, forcing you to smell their body odor. In those conditions, even the smell of perfume stinks. Plus there are people letting off farts as well....” His closing remark was: “I feel like throwing up every time I get on a bus.”

“Throwing up?”

Li Xiulan was shocked. “Son, are you ill?”

“No, of course not.”

Li Xiulan looked at Shi Zhikang. “Could it be stomach trouble?”

Shi Zhikang nodded. He asked their son, “Have you got a belly ache?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.” Their son was getting impatient.

Li Xiulan asked, “How much are you eating these days?”

Their son yelled, “I don’t have any stomach trouble!”

Shi Zhikang asked, “Do you sleep all right?” Turning to Li Xiulan, he said: “If you don’t get enough sleep, it’ll make you feel nauseous.”

Their son stretched out all ten fingers: “I sleep ten hours a day.”

Li Xiulan was still anxious: “Son, you’d better go to the hospital for a check-up.”

“I told you, there’s nothing wrong with me.” Their son jumped to his feet and cried, “This is all about me having taken a taxi for once, isn’t it? Well, I won’t take a taxi again....”

Shi Zhikang said: “Son, we’re not bothered about the taxi fare, we’re thinking about you. You’ll be starting a job soon, and when you make money yourself, you will understand that money doesn’t come easily, and have to budget accordingly....”

“That’s right.” Li Xiulan went on, “We never said you couldn’t take a taxi.”

“In the future I definitely will not be taking taxis.”

Their son sat back down on the sofa, and added, “In the future I will drive my own car.” He then put the earphones over his ears, and said, “Many of my classmates regularly take taxis.”

Li Xiulan repeated to Shi Zhikang, “His classmates regularly take taxis.”

Seeing him nod, she said, “If other people’s sons can take taxis, why shouldn’t ours?”

Shi Zhikang said, “I never said he couldn’t.”

Their son now was perhaps listening to one of his favorite songs, for he was rocking his head back and forth and singing the words. They looked at each other and smiled as they studied his contented air. Maybe the future would bring more and more difficulties, but this did not distress them unduly, for they could see that their son was now a man.

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