

Love Days

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So they were actually from the same town and had gone to the same school, but managed not to meet each other before. After shaking hands rather formally and trading cell phone numbers, they started getting acquainted. Yet within minutes they had already run out of things to talk about, and so broke away from each other again. It was her that was uncomfortable, really. She'd dressed smartly that day—plain, but just right for the occasion. And yet, she felt stifled, somehow. The hotel was just way too luxurious, making it all like some kind of dream from which she was just about to wake up. In reality, she was just a poor girl here to snag a free meal. Or as a friend of hers had put it more accurately: she wasn't actually looking for food; she was looking for opportunity. Looking, looking, looking! Maybe meet a man who knew her worth? Maybe even—who knows?—snag a sugar daddy? Opportunity. Wasn't that what everyone was missing these days? Her friends had all said it before: for girls “their age,” there were two things that were most important: number one, to get out there and show yourself off, and number two, *to get*

out there and show yourself off. After all, opportunity wasn't a long-range missile equipped with GPS, wasn't going to target your head, so it wasn't any good staying holed up like some terrorist.

But it wasn't easy, the looking. It felt no different from stealing. These days everyone came pre-sorted into groups of three to five, or five and six, and nobody paid her any mind. There was no way to break in. Occasionally someone would turn to her in greeting, but always out of mere politeness, and with the same weak smile every time. She would smile back as fast as she could, but it was always half a beat late: the moment she got it, they'd brushed past her. Then her smile would hang in space for whole seconds, immobile. And that didn't feel good. It felt very bad, actually. So there she was, drink in hand, smiling vacantly. In her mind she was saying, “Ah, for fuck's sake!”

But then her cell phone rang. It only had to ring twice before it was up at her ear. Young people who are jobless or otherwise unsettled in life all have something in common: they answer their cell phones

quickly. They live for the ring of their cell phones—and there is, in this, an illusion not easy to observe, which is that each and every phone call contains within some enormous opportunity not to be overlooked; once overlooked, it is lost. “Hello?” She said, to no response at all. She bent forward a bit and spoke again: “Hello?”

Very slowly, leisurely, the cell phone spoke: “It’s me.”

“Who are you?”

The voice on the phone slowed down even more: “...Oh my, ‘how the lofty do forget!’ You don’t even remember me. Look up. Yep, now look left. Okay, over by the restroom doors. Eight or nine meters from you.” She saw; it was him. The guy she’d just met before, the one from the same town and same school. Just at that moment, the guy who was from the same town and the same school leaned against the restroom door, head hanging to one side, one hand holding a drink, one hand holding a cell phone, looking pretty happy, like he was flirting with someone he really liked, and was thoroughly smitten.

“You make me jealous,” he said “Not even a year since graduation and you’ve landed a spot in this company. What is it they call girls like you? ‘Sexy executives?’ That’s you, all right.”

She laughed and looked down demurely, saying to the phone, “You’ve been in the company longer, I need you to take care of me.”

The phone laughed. “I’m just here to snag a free meal. You’re the one who should be looking after me.”

With her phone in one hand, she hugged her other hand against her torso. This was her favorite gesture—or pose, rather. Pushing her little arm up under breasts made her look more filled out, gave her more curves—definitely sexy. She said to the phone, “I’m also just here for the food.”

Neither of them spoke, but at almost the same time they lifted their heads and looked at each other from eight or nine meters apart. Their eyes passed over dozens of other heads—wealthy, high class heads—sizing each other up. They became happy again. They weren’t lonely anymore, and seemed to have regained self-confidence. He looked down at his feet, smiling, relaxed.

“Aren’t these drinks good?”

Her eyes flashed towards the window. “What do I know? I just pick the ones that look nice.”

“Oh dear, that won’t do.” He spoke now in a put-on expert voice, taking time with his words. “You have to try every color. Once you’ve had them all, you should stick to one brand for a while. Let loose! I’m here if you need me.” Suddenly, he added, “Don’t hang up, you hear?”

“Why not?”

“Talk to me awhile.”

“By why not just hang up?”

“What are you, dumb?” he said. “Who’s gonna talk to you if you hang up? Who’s

going to pay any attention to you? It won't be good for your self-esteem. We have to be on the phone next to each other to stay good and conceited, because we are taking care of mountains of business. You know what 'taking care of mountains of business' really means, right? I'll tell you: it means having someone you can be silly with."

She cocked her head to one side, listening. Taking a new drink, she went slowly over to a more out-of-the-way spot. Her face had a quiet, knowing look, with a smile that said she was having a little break from real life. Her smile now had a definite object, one not there in front of her, but a thousand miles away. The party had good light, good music, and even better drinks, but she could hardly drink in peace; neither could she mingle much. Busy, she was. She nodded; nodded again. Occasionally her lips pursed and her whole face lit up in genuine smile. She absolutely knew that her smile was charming. For fuck's sake, indeed.

"Thank you."

"Come on, what are you saying—I should be thanking you!"

"So hey, fellow imposter: you want to get out of here?" She was flush with excitement now.

"Not yet," he said. "Such good drinks, and we don't need to spend money!"

* * *

Three hours later, they came to their senses again. The drinks wore off,

too. They made love, and then slept a while. His blanket and his body both smelled like alcohol mixed with semen. It didn't smell good, exactly, but it didn't smell bad, either. It was the kind of thing one could live with. Obviously he didn't wash much, either himself or his sheets. What really struck her, however, was his body temperature: intensely, vibrantly heat-emitting, almost scaldingly so. Thrown into sharp relief by his body heat, the smell didn't seem half as bad. She hugged him tight. Lying on his back, she took a deep breath.

That was the moment he woke up. Turning over and seeing her, his eyes glazed over for a second. It was only brief, and not easy to observe in the dark, but it didn't escape her notice. "Think I was someone else?" She said with a laugh. He laughed, too, and spoke earnestly. "I did, actually."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Have you ever had one?"

"Of course. You?"

She thought for a moment. "I've been dumped once and I've dumped someone twice. Other than that there have been a few flings. You?"

He sat up, draped his shirt over his shoulders, and took a deep breath. "What's the point? They're all over and done with now."

He turned on the light as they were speaking, which jolted both of them. Suddenly his whole bedroom came into focus. Actually,

“bedroom” wasn’t quite the right word—clothes, boxes, books, dishes, computer were all there. The computer was filthy, even worse than the ashtray. She shut her eyes and calculated crudely that her own “home” was perhaps two or three square meters bigger. When she opened her eyes again, she felt it wasn’t two or three meters, more like four. Ever since she’d taken a course on this in college, her eyes were as accurate as a floor plan.

He was hungry, suddenly. At the cocktail party they had neglected to eat. Throwing on a cotton sweatshirt, he said “Let’s go out. My treat.” She didn’t say yes, but she didn’t say no, either. Instead she clutched tightly at the blanket, which was bunched up under her chin. “How about we stay awhile?” she said. “Want to go again?”

* * *

It was almost midnight, and cold, with very few people or cars out on the road. It seemed particularly deserted. And yet, also spacious, inviting—the lights seemed especially bright. Street lamps on either side of the road gave off powerful beams that seemed to march majestically all the way out to the horizon. The taxis seemed faster than normal, sweeping past with a “whoosh.”

They sat down in a roadside food stall. It had been her suggestion. “I love eating at food stalls,” she’d said. He realized, of course, that she’d just wanted to save him some money. They sat near the stove and

asked for two bowls of fried noodles, two roast fish, and two bowls of tomato-and-egg soup. Even next to the stove they were cold, because the warmth they had shared in the blankets had long since left them. He tugged upward on his collar, pushed his hands into his coat sleeves and stared absently into the fire. The soup came. As she had her soup, he took his first close look at her. The color had drained out of her face because of the chill, leaving it sallow. She had bags under her eyes. She wasn’t that good looking. She was that kind of girl with an extremely ordinary look. But her hips and torso, slim yet strong, had sure turned him on during the sex. How on earth did that little waist of hers get so supple?

A gust of wind blew in. The “wall” of the food stall was no more than a plastic tarp, blown out of shape by the cold wind. It puffed up like one side of a bubble. The light bulb above their heads swayed along with it, causing their shadows to bob up and down on the ground, his on the left and hers on the right—just like on the bed, before, all vigorous and tangled up in each other. He was staring at the shadows, just beginning to think of all the little things that had happened since he’d met her, when suddenly a wave of tenderness swept over him. He wanted to hold her, to wrap her tight in his coat. He regretted that he’d brought her to a place like this—and on such an occasion! Next time...yes, next time for sure he would ask her out to a real restaurant. At the very least

it would have real walls.

She held the bowl up to her mouth with both hands and gulped her soup in a single draft, sighing with satisfaction after she put down the last mouthful. “That was good!” she announced, trying to catch her breath.

He took his arms out of his sleeves and placed one hand gently against her cheek. She met his touch and pushed back ever so gently, completing his caress. “This was a very happy day,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “A very happy day.” He brushed his thumb over the corner of her eye. How fickle, this thing called “happiness”—it could be here one moment and gone the next, or it might appear, fulsome and sudden.

The food stall’s owner-cum-cook seemed to have caught some of the same spirit. He used a smoldering skewer to light a cigarette as he spoke some words into the ear of the girl who worked for him. Maybe it was a joke—it certainly seemed so to judge from the expression on her face. From the looks of it, she was a peasant from the countryside. The flames from the stove leapt up at her wide, flat features. Other than these two “couples,” the food stall was now empty. The night was cold and still. Carried away in the moment, he spoke to the food stall guy. “It’s late and there’s no one around. Why haven’t you closed?”

“What do you mean, no one around,” said the guy. “The second shift of taxis will eat soon. That’s the last batch of business.”

* * *

A fter that so-called “dinner,” they braved the wind, walking along a stretch of dark road, maybe fifty meters or so. Under a street light, he wrapped her in his overcoat. Then, since he was at it, he leant her against a telephone pole. Pressing close, he kissed her. It was a good kiss, filled with the flavors of fried noodles, roast fish, and egg-and-tomato soup. All for free. Releasing his own lips from hers, he said, “That’s tasty.”

She laughed, and suddenly felt embarrassed. She buried her head into his chest, and left it there for a time. Then she grabbed his collar and lifted her head up. “Oh, great. This seems like love.”

Another gust of wind blew. He was forced to squint his eyes. When it had blown past, they sparkled again. “Doesn’t it though?” He said. “It really does seem like love.”

She kissed him back. He gave her a pat on the butt. “You go on back, now, okay? I won’t see you home. I’ve got to get over to work.”

* * *

“Work,” for him, meant the vegetable market on Hubu Lane. Ever since he’d been unable to find regular employment that made use of his degree, he’d been receiving at the market. What they called “receiving” really just meant he moved things from one place to another. Squash,

fruit, greens, fish, meat, poultry, and eggs all had to be taken off the trucks, weighed on a scale, and then sorted and sent to the different food stands. These tasks had formerly been performed by the sellers themselves, but—and outsiders rarely realize this—those filthy food stand owners are actually filthy rich. And since when do people with money do any strenuous labor? Fine, then: their laziness became his opportunity. He'd gone to the owners himself to pitch his idea and have them feel his muscles. Several of them cut a deal on the first meeting. The fee wasn't high, and since they split it between them, it was entirely worth it for them; it was only spare change.

The job didn't actually involve a lot of hard work. If there was something hard about it, it was just the hours: midnight to dawn. It all had to be done between midnight and dawn. For one thing, the big trucks couldn't enter the city during the day. Another thing was that vegetables were frail. It had to be "same day" delivery. If it wasn't "same day," they'd lose their looks. Looks were everything for vegetables. Their list price depended entirely on looks. Brother Hu, one of the owners, had once gone on at length, and with insight, about the looks of vegetables. He called vegetables the "little ladies." The best price went to the twenty-year-olds. The moment they began to shrivel, or wrinkle, or droop... "fuhgetaboutit!"

But say what you liked about the "little ladies." All things considered, when it came

to "receiving," vegetables were his favorite. No muss, no fuss, just "receive," wash up, and he could be in bed by first light. The worst was the damned eggs. It didn't matter if it was chicken eggs, duck eggs or quail eggs, all it took was one slip-up, and splat—then you could forget about picking any of it up again. Yep, one splat could turn a month of sweat into piss. And piss wasn't worth a darn.

Sure, it was tough when he first started. A little emasculating. But he was over that. He liked receiving. He'd never shied away from hard work. And if he could use himself up at night, so much the better. What's all that energy bundled up in there for, anyway? Every time he got out of bed, his cock would tent up in his crotch without rhyme or reason. It looked like it was aiming at something, but there was no target to aim at. But things were better now. His cock seemed to understand. It didn't bother him at all anymore, most mornings.

But to get back to the point, if there was something still bugging him, it was mostly just the lack of stability. In order to make ends meet, he didn't see any problem with working in a market. Temporarily. But it's not like he could spend his whole life "receiving" "little ladies." At twenty-four, a man had to think of marriage and a family, right? These thoughts never failed to make him feel unspeakably lonely, not to mention a little sorry for himself. He hated to look up at the food shelves. There they'd

be, bathed in morning sunlight, filled to the brink with chives and celery and lettuce and bell peppers and cloves of garlic and beef and lamb and chicken wings and duck feet and pork kidneys and round, shiny eggs. And none of it was his. It wasn't that he couldn't afford them, it was just that "grocery shopping," that most mundane of life's duties, wasn't one of his duties. How he longed for there to be a day, maybe a Sunday morning, early, just a really normal day, and after he woke up, he'd hold somebody's hand as they poked around the shelves at Hubu Lane Market. And together, they'd be so picky about everything. This particular tofu, that exact spinach—man, wouldn't that be the life? He'd get there. He promised himself he'd get there.

While he was working "receiving," he never, ever looked at the food shelves. He left at first light, head down, back to his so-called home, where he fell into bed and slept.

* * *

Hubu Lane Market was some distance away from where he lived. He'd wanted to rent an apartment nearby, but because of the location, rents were nearly double the surrounding area. It wasn't easy living in the city. Of course he'd thought of going back to live with his parents, but he just couldn't. There was no going back now, and not just because it would be humiliating. If he hadn't gone to university in the first place, perhaps he could have gotten married,

gotten a job—but now? With no capital and not even an inch of land, how could he hope to get started there? There was only one thing to do: look for work in the city. Better to just stay in the city, anyway, than to make the trip home only to have to come back again. Man, his life had sure gone off track. He just couldn't compete, either in the city or in the country. His classmates from high school were all fathers and mothers now, but here he was, single as ever. He couldn't even afford to go home for the New Year, seeing as how every time he got called "uncle" by somebody it cost him a hundred *kuai*¹. He was still worth money. But how could he really make it? How had he gotten into university in the first place? Surely someone with talent shouldn't ever have to be in this situation!

* * *

Well, he was a red-blooded young male, after all. Not three days after parting from her, his body was making mischief again, "missing" her. He "missed" her skinny little waist, "missed" how firm she was, how supple. But would she still be interested? They'd both been so drunk that night, he had no way to be sure. Just try, man. Go ahead, give it a try. He reached for his cell phone with one hand and stuck his other hand in his pocket to touch himself. No answer. The last thing he heard was the cell phone saying, "I'm sorry, the person you are trying to call does not answer."

He snapped the phone shut in shame and disgust. Scenes like that never came with repeat performances. He stood there in the street, watching the weak winter rays of the setting sun, angry at himself. Deep, inexplicable frustration, with a little sadness thrown in, lay bottled up inside him. So that's he stood, one hand on his phone, one hand on his dick. Both hands gripped; both hands went soft. But in the end, he just couldn't overcome the needs of the flesh. He picked up the phone and called again. This time he got through, which sent a thrill up his spine.

"Who's this?" She asked.

"It's me," he replied.

"Who are you?" Her breathing seemed shallow, and her voice was much huskier than before. As if she was far away from him.

His heart sank—not because her breathing was shallow or her voice had gone hoarse, but because she hadn't recognized his voice. She didn't seem to be pretending, either.

"How the lofty do forget!" He forced his voice into a falsetto that affected total lack of concern. "It's me-e! The guy you went to school with, the guy from your home town, your big bro!" He detected a certain slickness in his own voice. In times like this, sounding slick was the only way he could think to save face—ugh, what face. God, he never should have made this phone call.

No sound came from the phone. Just

a long, long stretch of silence. He was so embarrassed he just wanted to throw the phone away, just throw it all the way out of Nanjing and back to his parents' house. Why, oh why had he made this phone call.

Just then, something unexpected happened. After all the silence, the sound of crying suddenly started coming in from the other end. Of sobbing, in fact. "Big bro," wailed the voice. "Come see me."

* * *

On the way, he kept his cell phone pressed against his ear. It was there as he reached her basement apartment. It was there as he opened her door. When they at last locked eyes, it was still there, now grown burning hot against his ear. But her forehead was even hotter than the phone. She was running a high fever that left her pupils burning with a clear, almost crystalline light, a burning as beautiful as it was alarming.

"Up!" He found himself practically yelling. "We've got to get you to the hospital."

Though she'd been crying up to this point, she seemed to get better the moment he'd arrived. A smile even appeared on her face. "No need," she said hoarsely. "I'm not gonna die."

He looked closely as she lay there, head on the pillow looking isolated, eyes even more sunken than that day she'd come over. She'd been "laid out" for far too long, or she never would have gotten this bad. When he thought of how he'd been "laid out" for a

few days himself, just the month before, he ached in sudden sympathy. “Have you...have you been lying here all this time?” He asked, knowing what the answer would be.

“Uhm, yeah. I haven’t been staying at a five star.” She could actually think of this as funny!

“We’ve got to get you to a hospital—”

“No, we don’t.”

“Let’s go now.”

“I’m not. Gonna. Die.” He was really starting to make her mad. But hey, she had slept with him once, and she was way too lonely, so even though she knew it was silly, she started talking to him in the kind of voice we reserve for close family members. “God, you’re soooo annoying.”

“...I really think you should go, though.”

“I’m not gonna die. A couple of more days and it’ll pass. I mean, the hospital? Come on. Five hundred *kuai*, that would cost.”

He wanted to say “I’ll pay for it,” but the words died in his throat. When it came to money, both of them were the same: pathologically touchy. And they both nursed grudges, once it had come to that. He laughed with her and said, “Come on. Go. My treat.”

“I don’t want to be treated to a hospital trip.” She closed her eyes and rolled over. “I’m not gonna die. Two more days and I’ll be over it.”

He let the issue drop. Instead, to make himself useful, he put water on to heating

and began cleaning her room. Who knows what it was like normally, but at that moment the room could hardly even be called a room, what with the floor being completely covered with used facial tissue, paper cups, opened medicinal sachets of isatis root, banana peels, some socks and also two pairs of wrinkled panties. He complained out loud as he picked all these things up. How could a young lady live like this? Who would marry someone like that? Whoever married a girl like that would have to be a fucking idiot!

He finished up—both his complaints and the cleaning. The water had also just reached a boil. He passed her a cup of water, saying “Careful, hot!” and then turned and went back to the street. When he came back, he’d purchased cold medicine, a thermometer, rubbing alcohol, cotton balls, bread, instant noodles, more tissues, fruit, and a box of Dove chocolate. He pulled all of these things out of a plastic bag and arranged them neatly on the table. Having laid everything out, he sat next to her on the bed and took her into his arms in a half hug while raising a cup to give her the medicine, and then some water. When she’d had enough, she lifted one of her eyebrows and tilted her head to one side. He responded by taking up the bread and beginning to feed it to her. He tore the bread into strips and placed them into her mouth, one by one. Once she’d eaten her fill, she again raised one brow and tilted her head. Then he fed her a pear. Since he didn’t see

a fruit knife around, he nibbled a thin layer off the entire surface of the pear, to save her from eating peel.

“Why didn’t you call me yesterday?” she asked. “Or the day before yesterday?” The food and water had greatly restored her spirits.

How could he answer her question? He couldn’t. So he ignored her. Taking off his shoes, he slipped under the blanket from the other end of the bed. For a moment they just stared at each other across the length of the bed, neither saying a word. Then suddenly she moved over and pulled back the covers. “Come up here. Lie next to me.” “I’m fine here,” he answered with a nervous laugh. “Over there, a man could get ideas. I mean, you’re sick, after all.”

“Big Bro. Hey. Do you even know how much your feet stink?” She gave one of them a kick. “Ugh, I think it actually might kill me.”

* * *

By the beginning of that summer, they had a steady relationship—by steady, one means that there was a rhythm to it that no longer changed. They’d see each other once every week, during which time they had sex twice. It was she who visited him, as a general rule. She lay on the bed, arched like a bridge—this was her favourite rear position. His performances were nearly perfect every time, and on two occasions, she even gave him a full one hundred marks. Both of them

loved to give the other scores afterward—this was an important part of the afterplay. As for the foreplay, there was none, nor did they feel any need for there to be: from the time she hung up to the time she arrived, no more than half an hour would have passed. That half an hour was inevitably tantalizing. In fact it was a half hour of fiery desperation. Ok, that was the foreplay, then: it was the anticipation of the thing, of holding it in the imagination. Desperate anticipation for a desperate imagination.

With no foreplay, the afterplay must surely be more important than usual. Otherwise, what was there to do? Unless they just did it again. As far as the physical part went, the two of them never had any problems. It was always her who brought things to a halt: “Next time, okay? You’ve still got work tonight.” And then the same post-game, every time: record each other’s scores, add them together, and then divide by 2. They always carved this mean score up on the wall, with the result that the whole wall was covered in Arabic numerals. Who could have known what crazy accounts those numbers recorded?

After the first few times, he gave up keeping score. The man of course, always got the short end of the stick. A man’s gotta have some standards. And yet, precisely for this reason, she kept on keeping score. She said that in the digital age, feelings don’t count; to say anything one has to assign it a number.

The exact cruelty of these numbers didn't hit them until that afternoon. They really were pretty cruel. He'd arranged to meet her at one in the afternoon in Drum Tower Square, saying that he had some good news for her. Who'd have known that no sooner did she arrive but he clammed up. He wouldn't say a word, no matter what she asked. Back at "home," he still didn't speak, but what the heck, might as well do it anyway. The first time, he couldn't finish. All she could do was to wait patiently. The second time, it was over for him even faster. With a forced cheeriness, she announced to him, "Zero plus zero divided by zero is still zero!" She even went to the trouble of pulling a compass out from one of his drawers and using it to carve a perfect circle over the hopeless one she had already put on the wall. She didn't in the least notice how angry he got the moment she began carving. He snatched the compass from her hands, and then, with a loud whoop, threw it out the window. His face had turned the color of ash. In an instant, the air around them felt poisoned.

He'd been too rough, leading to the compass scratching her hand. Although the wound wasn't deep, it was a frightful three centimeters in length. In all these days, they'd treated each other as brother and sister—this despite the sexual release involved—so much so that she thought of him as her older brother. Now here he was, turning against her, and now how was she supposed to act?

She pressed down on the wound, which had begun to bleed. It hurt bad. In this instant, the party most deserving of extra care was, of course, her. But as she well knew, it was certainly her little game which had injured his masculine pride, and so it was him, rather, who needed taking care of. It hadn't occurred to her that he would remain so unmoved as to shove her away with both hands, causing blood to splash on the wall. Now this really did hurt her feelings. You're supposed to be the big brother, and little sister has been so caring, so yielding...What else do you want, anyway?

She paid no more attention to the wound, but just picked up her blouse and put it back on. She's going to leave, and never wants to see you again. You earned the zero—who are you to get mad now.

Her leaving finally caused him to calm down. Coming up from behind, he threw his arms around her. He lifted her arm, saw the blood, and suddenly began to sob. Clutching her hand in his palms, he began to lick at it with his tongue, over and over. The expression on his face was one of total dejection. It almost looked like he was the one bleeding. Her feelings softened toward him. It turned out she cared deeply. "Big Bro," she cried out to him. He ended by wrapping her wound in one of his cheap ties, and then covering his own face with her hands. From inside there he asked, "Am I really so useless? I'm just a born zero, aren't I?"

"I was just joking, babe. Why take it

so seriously? And it's not like it's our first time."

"I am. I am useless." He spoke now with a new firmness. "I am just a born zero."

"You're fine, babe. You know I like how you are in bed."

He laughed. Strange, though, how the tears could surge so fast. "Of course I do know that. I'm not so bad, really."

"I've just got no self-confidence anymore," he went on. "I almost can't take it anymore."

She understood. She'd understood for a long time, really. She just couldn't figure out a good way to bring it up. That morning, he'd gone for a major interview, and he'd survived that only to lose all his dignity while facing her.

"Ah, but then you aren't worth as much me," she consoled. "I've faced potential employers more times than you would believe. See, how my face just keeps getting shinier? But you've never said I'm getting any prettier. But this face of mine was once two hundred *kuai*."

"It's not about the interview, dammit!" Clearly tired of her teasing, and less appreciative now of her kindness, he'd started to get worked up again. "It was the look she gave me, that female hiring manager. How could she look at me like that? What am I, chopped liver? Chopped shit? Chopped farts? Fuck!"

She hugged him. She understood. She should understand. So she could stay

in Nanjing, ever since her third year in university, she'd faced any number of eyes. Wanna know what the scariest thing in the world is, to people like him, like her? The coldest, most unfeeling thing in the world? Eyes. The eyes of some people could skin you alive. Some people's eyes could come all over you. The ones that came all over you were the worst—just one little slip and those eyes would mess you up so bad, your face and body would never feel clean again, and no amount of scrubbing and changing your clothes could help. The variety of powers held by the eyes is inscrutable to those who haven't actually had to face them.

She pulled him onto the bed and poured herself down over his back, soothing him, gently rubbing his chest, planting kisses into his hair. She grabbed his head and turned it to face her, flashing him a wicked smile. Sexy as hell, she looked him straight in the eye and announced, "I'm your manager and you're a piece of shit. You looking at me? You really think you can have me? Hm?" In that moment, the dam broke on all the despair he'd kept bottled up inside, which surged out as pure sexual aggression. With one swift movement, he turned her over and threw her onto the bed, then entered her from behind. She cried out sharply, the pleasure shooting out to the ends of her hair. She let out a series of wanton, sexual howls. At last she understood how amazing his doggy-style could be.

"Sooo nice." She was sprawled over the

bed, now, rubbing her own tummy with one hand, cooing softly. “Right now, I really feel that my stress is gone. So relaxing! You?”

“You bet.” His voice was gravelly and slightly out of breath still. He stared upwards at the ceiling. “I feel pretty good, too.”

“I’ll tell you what, bro,” she went on. “As long as we don’t stress too much, life’s going to be okay. We’re gonna make it through all this!”

* * *

So that’s how it was. Except for when it was “that time of the month,” they met up once a week and did it twice each time. They didn’t live together, but as they became closer to each other, sometimes they would even speak their own dialect. He had had the idea that if she were to come live with him, it would certainly save her a lot on expenses. But each time he was about to bring it up, the words got stuck and wouldn’t come out. It might mean savings for her, but it would also come down to extra costs for him. There’re three meals in every day, right? Could he possibly cover them all? What if he didn’t have enough—could he ask her to move out again? He knew they’d break up if that happened. Better not to rock the boat—just keep things as they are, for now.

But he did worry about her, and more so lately. How was she going to make it in this town? No, they should move in together. Then they could do the groceries together. And sex would be more convenient. Sex is

weird, that’s for sure. Some kind of drug that always takes away the stress. How does that work? Also odd: once you do it a lot with somebody, you start to cling to them. You get so close. You want to take care of her. But what does it mean to “take care” of somebody? He couldn’t actually say for sure. Still, these thoughts, minor as they were, would surface in his mind during sex. Back at the beginning, when they first started, he had been thinking only of himself. His mind was focused on just one thing: taking care of his “little problem.” But now, things were different, and he was more like an older brother. He had to be good to her. He did everything he could to create a situation that would make her a little happier. If she was better, he was better, too. He just hoped she could get better in time.

* * *

When the cool of autumn set in, she took a trip home to see her family. He had actually hoped to go back with her, but it didn’t end up happening. There was no way the job he’d made for himself at Hubu Lane Market would wait for him if he took two weeks off. Any number of young men stronger than he already had their eye on it. He also didn’t send her off with any formal gift for her family—just a bag of fruit presented as she was leaving. “For the road,” he said. “You can eat them as they are—they are already washed.”

* * *

They say, “Take brief partings over new marriages.” What a marriage was like, the two of them couldn’t say, but the benefits of a “brief parting” soon became clear to both of them. Yeah, it was only two weeks, but that was long enough to really make a difference. He blew in like the wind, and she called forth the rain. The earth moved, it was so good. This time, she didn’t give him a score. Instead she let loose the side of her that was the most aggressive, primal, and wanton. She asked for it again, and again. Eventually it was he who begged off. “I can’t,” he said, sounding slightly pathetic. “I’ve got to get to the night shift.”

“I don’t care. You’re the big brother, so you should be good to me.”

Okay, then, he’d be good. They went to bed in the afternoon and didn’t think of getting up again till deep in the evening. Later on, when his “goodness” was all used up, she lay naked on his slick and shiny chest, talking endlessly, talking with one arm hooked around his neck. The two of them were completely content, totally enthralled with each other. Suddenly she stopped short, with a little “Oh!” as if she had suddenly thought of something. Bending her waist down towards her top, she found the pocket and fished out her cell phone. Clutching her cell phone, she said, “Big Bro, can I talk to you about something?” Cupping her breasts in his palms, his chin on her shoulder, he raised his head slightly. “Go ahead.” She

pulled up a photo on her phone, photo of a man. She explained, “This guy is...uhm, named Zhao. He’s single, and makes about one hundred and sixty thousand a year.” Clickety-clack went her fingers over the keys. Another photo of another man came up. “This guy’s name is Hao. He’s been divorced once, has a seven-year-old daughter, and his annual income is about...uhm...three hundred thousand. He also owns a house and a car.” Finishing her presentation, she put the phone on her thigh and took hold of his hand. She intertwined her fingers in and around his, with slow massaging motions. “I just wanted to go over all this with you—which one do you think is best?”

He picked up the phone and compared them. He looked back and forth at each one several times. Then he said, “I think, the guy named Hao.” She considered for a moment before saying, “That was my thought, too, actually.” He said, “Go for the higher salary—always safer.” She said, “That’s what I think, too.” The discussion was just that simple. The conclusion couldn’t have been easier to arrive at. So relieved and so exhausted, she lay there in his arms, hand in hand, caress followed by caress. After a time, she said, “Big Bro, help me get my clothes on, please.” Suddenly she’s dainty. Buck-naked himself, he helped her into her clothes. He even smoothed out the wrinkles in her pants for her. He was going to see her off, but she said no, go back and eat something. You’ve still got the night shift, she said.

So he didn't see her off. After she was gone, he sat on the bed and lit a cigarette, idly picking up hairs she had left behind on the bed. That crazy girl, always whipping her head every which way during sex, no wonder the whole bed was covered in her hair. He picked it up strand by strand and, having no place to put it, he just wrapped it around the tip of his left index finger. His cigarette done, he stubbed out the butt and started getting dressed. Clothes on. Time to

go downstairs for something to eat. He was about to cross the road when he suddenly felt a slight pain in one of his fingers. Looking down. Hello, that finger's covered with hair. He pulled the hair off and set it on fire with his lighter. They'd both left the building, but the air around was all her. Man, she smelled good.

Translated by Jesse Field

Notes:

1. Translator's note: The colloquial term for the PRC's currency, the *yuan*.

