

We're All in the Service Area

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Just before dawn, Gui Ping was drifting into the haze of sleep when the alarm on his cell phone started clanging nonstop. He rolled over, sat up and, as usual, first canceled the ringing sound, then turned on the phone. A moment later, also as usual, his phone sounded with one incoming message after another. Gui Ping thought there were at least five or six, but after counting, he realized he had underestimated. There were seven, all sent after he had turned off the phone the previous night—one was actually sent around five that morning. It wasn't even anything urgent or important. The sender was someone who always woke up early. When he woke up, the whole family was still sleeping and there were no signs of life on the streets outside the window either. He had probably just sent that message as a way of getting rid of the loneliness of an early bird. Of these messages sent from midnight to dawn, only one required an immediate reply. None of the

others were very important, and Gui Ping did not have time to answer each one. He rushed to the venue, put the phone into vibrate mode, and began the meeting.

When the meeting ended, he found that matters, like the unanswered messages and phone calls, were stealthily piling up. Midday he met a client, and there was another meeting in the afternoon. At least he was able to finish his lunch in good time, and still had twenty minutes left after his meal. He quickly escaped into his office and lay flat on the sofa, closing his eyes to relax. But even in this brief time, his phone sounded with two more messages and three calls. Gui Ping answered the last one, feeling irritated. As soon as he saw that there were only five minutes left, *click*, he turned off the phone, forcing himself to close his eyes. But he felt they started to twitch involuntarily and simply could not close them as if his eyelids were stuck together.

He heard his office clerk Xiao Li knock

on the door. “Director Gui, what happened to your phone? Are you in there?”

Gui Ping sat up and said dejectedly, “I’m here. I know, it’s time for the meeting.”

He grabbed the phone from the table and then, suddenly deciding otherwise, tossed it back on the table—perhaps a little too forcefully, for the phone swished across the table and fell to the ground with a thud. Startled, Gui Ping rushed to pick it up. Then, remembering he had turned it off, he hurried to switch it on, checked, and only relaxed when he found it undamaged. Grabbing the phone, he started to walk out of his office, but just then the phone rang. When he answered, it was an old acquaintance whose child was going to enter school, and he was hoping Gui Ping could put him in touch with some officials from the Department of Education. Feeling the situation awkward, he knew that if he tried to get out of it, his friend would not be happy, but if he did not get out of it, he would be inviting trouble for himself. As he was thinking of what to say, Xiao Li again knocked on the door, calling “Director Gui! Director Gui!”

Mind alight like the flames of hell, Gui Ping told the acquaintance on the phone: “I can’t talk now. I’ve got a meeting. Let’s talk about it later.”

The acquaintance said urgently, “Will it be a long meeting? What time shall I call back?”

Though Gui Ping heard it clearly enough, he pretended he had not, hanging

up the phone. Still feeling frustrated, he resolutely turned off the machine once again. He tossed it on the table, flung the door open with his hands empty, and went out to the conference room.

Xiao Li followed him in confusion. “Um, Director Gui...Where is your phone? I tried to call you just now. Why was it off? It wasn’t stolen, was it?”

Gui Ping snapped, “I wish.”

Xiao Li said, “Is it charging?”

“Charging my ass.”

Xiao Li stuck his tongue out, not wanting to speak out of turn. Still, he couldn’t help but look at Gui Ping’s hand, because that hand was always carrying the phone. Seeing it suddenly empty now made Xiao Li feel strange.

There was one meeting for which the confidentiality level was high, so cell phones were not permitted. Gui Ping had left his in his office for the half-day meeting, and he felt very relaxed and worry-free. After that meeting, whenever Gui Ping felt frustrated, he would turn his cell phone off, pretending he was attending a confidential session. The dissatisfaction this had caused and the criticism it had invited were immediately evident in both his superiors and subordinates. One of his superiors said, “Gui Ping, have you been traveling again? Are you always on the plane, and that’s why you have to turn off your phone?”

His subordinates said, “Director Gui, your phone is always off. If we can’t reach

you, do you still want us to approach you with these matters?”

Gui Ping knew he was defeated. He couldn't win the game against the phone, and he had to return to how things were.

Xiao Li, still nagging as he trailed behind Gui Ping, said, “Director Gui, your phone's not charging. Did you forget it? Would you like me to get it for you?”

Not knowing whether he should feel amused or annoyed, Gui Ping said, “Xiao Li, sit down and we'll start the meeting.”

Xiao Li finally fell silent.

In the afternoon meeting, unlike the one that morning, Gui Ping was not in the lead position, so he could duck out of the limelight and, as he usually did in such situations, take the opportunity to reply to text messages, or softly tell a new caller, “I'm in a meeting,” or even, if the call was important, answer it and slid out of the conference room into the corridor to talk.

But today he had tossed his phone aside and now sat, empty-handed and relaxed, in the conference room. He felt so happy and at ease that he could not help but release a deep sigh, as if he had expelled the rancor harbored in his heart against the phone. The feeling of freedom was like flying.

Shortly after the start of the mind-numbing meeting, Gui Ping looked at the colleagues seated around him. Some hid their phones under the conference table and yet couldn't help retrieving them and, constantly looking at the screens. Others left them

sitting on top of the table, but often picked them up to glance at them because, after all, the vibrating alert was not as noticeable as a ringing sound, so one might inadvertently neglect a call. When a message did come, the person's face might change, showing joy, anxiety, or calm, but none could resist exercising the thumb immediately, quickly immersing themselves in the world of the screen.

At first, Gui Ping watched them with some sympathy, seeing them controlled by their phones, unable to escape. But gradually he became antsy, the fidgeting of his hands turning into a mental unrest. Then, the calm he had felt before turned into a sort of emptiness, uninhibitedness into anxiety, until he grew emotionally volatile. Restless, he felt as if his mind were captured by his mobile phone locked in the office.

The woman sitting beside him noticed that he was uncomfortable—as if thorns were sprouting out of his body—and said, “Director Gui, are you on your monthly flow?”

He replied, “No, I stopped flowing—I've already gone through menopause.”

Everyone laughed, but it was not enough to settle Gui Ping's unease. He thought first about what day it was, then whether there might be some important phone call or message for him, or something important he needed to do, or some urgent work he had forgotten. And on top of all this, whether some extra responsibilities might be

landed with him. Once he started thinking this way, more things came to mind and he grew more anxious. His seat seemed to have sprouted a bed of nails. Finally unable to sit any longer, Gui Ping left the conference room and went to the washroom. After he finished, he stood at the door to the men's room, hesitating. In the end, he did not go back to the conference room, but to his office.

In his office, nothing was out of the ordinary, but Gui Ping had a strange feeling, as if he had been cut off from the outside world for ages. Seeing his phone on the desk, he snapped back to reality. He quickly turned it on, and a moment later a text came in. *Beep beep beep*. One message, two, three. Before he could even read them, a call came in. It was his wife, her tone urgent.

“Are you alright? You weren't in the office, and your phone was off. Are you hiding from someone?”

Unable to explain, Gui Ping simply said, “It was charging.”

His wife replied, “Don't you have a spare battery?”

He answered, “I forgot to charge the other one.”

His wife wondered. “The sun must have risen in the west today. Isn't your nickname ‘Always On-call Gui,’ and now you forgot to charge your phone?”

Gui Ping twisted his mouth in a self-deprecating smile. His wife started talking about the things she wanted him to do.

In order not to prolong his wife's endless chatter, he decided to immediately agree to all her requests. Anyway, whether it's one louse or many lice, it still itches, and whether it's one debt or many debts, one still has to pay up. Gui Ping always seemed to owe other people favors. As soon as he paid one off, the next started to pop up. He was never clear of debt.

Taking his phone back to the conference room, Gui Ping started to read his messages and send replies. The woman next to him said, “Finished charging?”

He asked, “What makes you think it was charging?”

She replied, “Your phone never leaves your hand, and your hand never leaves your phone. Just now when you came to the meeting without your phone, wasn't it charging? Surely you didn't forget. Everyone else might forget to bring their phones, but you never would.”

Gui Ping said, “I didn't forget. I purposely left it behind. I was irritated.”

She laughed again and said, “Even though you were irritated, you still ended up bringing it. You really can't get by without your phone.”

Gui Ping said, “Do you really think I wouldn't dare to turn off my phone?”

She said, “Turning off your phone is no crime. There's nothing to ‘dare’ or ‘not dare.’ I just think that if you turned it off, you'd go mad.”

Neither of them realized that they

were speaking rather loudly until they saw one of the leaders looking at them from the rostrum. They quickly stopped talking. Gui Ping calmly read his messages, replied, and all at once rediscovered his anchor. He was no longer anxious, and did not feel the nails poking his posterior anymore.

Before he had finished answering all the messages that needed replies, a call came in. Gui Ping looked at the number of the incoming call, but did not recognize it. Anyway, his phone was on silent mode, and the ringing wouldn't be heard in the conference room. He put his phone down on the thick file of materials he needed for the meeting, buffering the vibrations from his phone. The vibrations went on, and he simply ignored. He finally felt relieved after the vibrations stopped. Then it started vibrating again, buzzing for a longer time, and more insistently. Feeling a little trapped, he finally gave in on the caller's third attempt. He had to pick up the call. He slipped down further in his seat, putting a hand over his phone, and in a muffled voice said, "I'm in a meeting."

The voice on the other end was startlingly loud. "Oh, ha ha! Gui Ping, I knew you would answer. I had already decided that if you didn't answer on the third try, I would look for someone else. But as soon as I thought that, you answered. Ha ha!"

It was a shock not only to Gui Ping's ears, but even the colleague sitting beside him could hear the voice. She said, "*Aiyoh*, a soprano."

Even though Gui Ping said he was in a meeting, the woman did not seem to care—she went on in the same high-pitched voice, launching into the long story she had called to tell him. Gui Ping could only walk out of the conference room, clutching his phone in his palm. Only when he was in the corridor could he speak a bit louder. "I'm in a meeting. I can't always go out like that. The boss is glaring at me."

The soprano said, "What do you mean 'always go out'? I called you three times, but you only answered once. At most you only go out once."

Gui Ping thought, *people are so self-absorbed. If I answered just one call from everyone, could I survive it?* But he only kept the thought to himself. He knew the soprano's temper, how she could go on a rampage and how it would end up with his defeat, so he hurriedly said, "Right. Go ahead."

The soprano finally turned to the matter she had called about. She talked and talked. Gui Ping could not help but interrupt. "I see. I'm in a meeting now. I can't leave. As soon as I can get away, I'll help you settle it."

Finally the soprano was satisfied, but she was just about to hang up when she added, "When you settle it, call my cell phone right away, OK?"

Gui Ping gave in, and got it done with, at long last. He regretted that he had not resisted. If he had not given in and answered the third call, she would have looked for

someone else to take care of this. Obviously he had done fine on the first two times, so why did he give in on the third? This high-pitched woman was the type he felt quite bothersome, so he had not stored her number in his phone. And now that he had allowed her to get in touch with him, he was caught. It would be too awkward to refuse to help her with this matter. Regretting that he had not held out until the end, he grasped his phone and went back into the conference room. He ran into Xiao Li, who was sneaking out. Noticing his boss's chagrin, Xiao Li asked in concern, "Director Gui, is everything OK?"

Gui Ping waved his phone toward Xiao Li and said, "Irritating."

Xiao Li, thinking he was going to throw the phone, quickly reached out with his hands, only to grasp at thin air. Gui Ping said, "Turning off the phone is no good. Turning on the phone is no better. It sucks."

Xiao Li observed Gui Ping's expression as he said cautiously, "Director Gui, actually those are not the only options. There is a third possibility."

Gui Ping squinted at him and said, "On, off—what's your third option?"

Xiao Li smiled secretively, and explained that it was an option devised by people who wished to escape their loan sharks.

"What is it?" asked Gui Ping.

"Go out of the service area."

"Pooh!" Gui Ping said, "How can that be—outside the service area? We aren't in

a wilderness or a desert. How can we be without service?"

Xiao Li said, "Do you want to try? When your phone is on, take out the card, put back the battery, restart the phone, and then you will be outside the service area."

Gui Ping tried what Xiao Li had suggested. When he dialed his number from his office phone, he heard, "We're sorry, the number you called is not in the service area. Please try again later."

Gui Ping was thrilled. He was free to move in and out of the service area.

Only one day after Gui Ping had resorted to this trick, the boss caught him and gave him a scolding. "I'm working myself to death. Where have you been hiding? In which mountain resort were you seeking your pleasure?"

Gui Ping hurriedly responded, "I didn't go into any mountains. I was in the office compound the whole time."

"If you were in the compound, why was your phone outside the service area?"

Gui Ping said, "But I was in the service area. I was."

The boss was furious. "Bullshit! What kind of rotten phone are you using that tells me it isn't in the service area? If you are always outside the service area, you might as well stay out of service."

Frightened, Gui Ping rectified the situation with his phone. He did not dare to leave the service area again.

Of course, Xiao Li did not escape Gui Ping's scolding, nevertheless he was a sort of eager beaver, indefatigable in seeking solutions for his boss. He then suggested, "Director Gui, just forget about the trouble and store all numbers in your phone and don't leave anyone out. When you get a call, you will know whose it is and whether or not you will answer it. The decision lies in your own hands then."

Gui Ping took this advice and purposefully applied it during the next meeting. As he sat in the conference room, he sorted through all the numbers—those he had to answer, those he could ignore, those he could afford to ignore and those he wanted to ignore, and stored them all in his phone. As he was just about done with the task, the meeting ended. When he went out of the conference room, the phone rang. He glanced, saw it was a call he could ignore, and simply slipped the phone into his pocket, letting it continue to ring there.

Gui Ping found this a very workable solution. He had already stored the numbers of most of the people related to him into different categories, so if he wanted to answer, he would answer, and if he wanted to ignore a call, he would ignore it. He had finally taken over control of his phone. If the caller's number was not stored in his phone, then it was definitely not someone directly associated with him and he could ignore the call.

It went on like this for a few days,

and it really reduced the number of hassles he had to deal with. Of those who usually looked for him to do them a favor, most were like the woman with the high-pitched voice. Knowing he was approachable, they came to him with all sorts of issues, big or small. Now that they couldn't reach him, they had to find other people to trouble. Even though it was a little awkward meeting them the next time, all he really had to do was to say sorry, he hadn't heard the phone, or perhaps that he had been in a meeting and it wasn't convenient to answer the call. Then it would blow over, saving him a lot of effort.

But the effort-saving days did not last long. One day he was going to attend a meeting, and just as he was going into the conference room, someone tapped him on the shoulder. Startled, he looked back and saw that it was the Administrative Deputy Minister of the Organization Department of the CPC. With a smile on his face, he said, "Director Gui, you've been busy?"

Gui Ping's heart skipped a bit at first, and then he started to wonder in his mind. His relationship with the deputy minister was not close to the point of bantering with each other. He quickly tried to turn the table on the deputy minister, and tested the waters, "Not too bad. I'm busy, but not nearly as busy as you."

The deputy minister smiled and said, "Whether you're busy or just messing around, whatever the case, all I know is you're busy. Why else would you not answer

my phone calls?”

This gave Gui Ping a huge fright, making his heart pound. He stuttered a few times, then said, “Mr.—Mr. Minister, you called me?”

“When I called your office, you weren’t there. When I called your cell phone, you didn’t answer. Then I know you are a difficult man to reach.”

Gui Ping, really panicking now, resorted to the truth. “Mr. Minister, I didn’t know it was you calling.”

The deputy minister smiled. “You mean you didn’t store my number in your phone? I must not be very important to you then.” Knowing Gui Ping was nervous, the deputy minister slapped him on the shoulder, making him relax a little. “Don’t worry, anyway it is not about your promotion. If it were, I am not supposed to call you in person.”

Embarrassed, Gui Ping laughed. The deputy minister continued, “So don’t worry, you didn’t miss anything. I just wanted to ask you to take care of someone. He was assigned to your Reform Commission. I just wanted to ask you to keep an eye on him, make him feel at home. Just a joke. Don’t you Office Directors all like to be called by fancy titles like the palace chamberlain? Well, this young fellow had just entered your unit, and if he had the palace chamberlain’s attention, it would have made a great difference.”

Anxious, Gui Ping asked, “Who is it?

Which department is he with?”

The deputy minister said, “I don’t need you to look after him now. He’s not in your unit anymore. He was transferred a couple of days ago. Don’t worry, it’s nothing to do with you. Nowadays, it’s normal for young guys to job-hop. If he didn’t, that’d be rare. So leave them alone.”

As they were talking, the deputy minister walked into the conference room with Gui Ping, his manner almost affectionate. Many people in the conference room noticed it and one commented later, “I didn’t know you were so close to the deputy minister.”

Gui Ping was very upset. The opportunity had been right on his doorstep, and he had slammed the door in its face. But how could he have known the deputy minister would call his line directly? Looking at it now, taking such a strict approach to governing the strange numbers on his phone had been a mistake. A big mistake. Huge. Admitting a mistake meant it was time for change. Gui Ping found the directory of the leading cadres, all the leaders—anyone who was on the directory—and entered the numbers into his phone. Fortunately his current phone’s memory was large. Storing that many numbers would not make it explode.

Now Gui Ping could finally relax. He could avoid unnecessary troubles, but also would not miss out on an opportunity when it came his way. But after a long, long time, not a single high official called his phone.

Still, he was not worried, and did not feel the effort was wasted. He was prepared. Forewarned is forearmed.



A few days later, Gui Ping's classmates from university held a gathering for all those who still lived in the same city. Over the years, some had left, some had come back, some had come back and left again. Now, what was left could just fill up one table. On that day, everyone seemed to be in good mood, and all came.

As soon as they sat down, they all took their cell phones out from a bag or pocket, setting them on the table where they were sure to always be in sight amid the dishes and wine glasses there. Gui Ping did not take his out, leaving it in his back pocket, set on vibrate as well as ring mode. If the gathering was lively and everyone was speaking loudly, and he missed the ringing, he would still feel the vibration on his rear. It was almost foolproof. There were also a couple of the more reserved female classmates who did not take their phones out and place them on the table, but they held their bags close and unzipped, not obstructing the sound of the phones' ringing. In this way they could drink and reminisce without a worry.

The conversation was very lively and engaging, with many of the classmates' old romances—whether open or secret—being the topic of discussion. There were some romances that seemed really heartbreaking at

the time, so painful those involved felt like dying. Discussing these romances after so many years had passed, had become a sort of enjoyment. Whether they had been directly involved in the tale or merely spectators, they all enjoyed the light touch of sadness and happiness brought on by time.

When they had finished talking about old times, they started to discuss the present. Now this one was having an affair, that one had a way with women, who was whose mistress, who was doing what with whom, and so on. Then one classmate pointed at another and said, "I saw you the other day shopping with some woman. It wasn't your wife, so I didn't dare call you."

Everyone coaxed him, urging him to tell all. He happened to be an honest but untactful guy, and he kept swearing and denying anxiously, but no one believed him. Exasperatedly, he looked here and there, as if looking for something to prove his innocence. Then they saw him take out his phone and fling it on the table, "Take out your phones," he said.

Most people's phones were already on the table. Several pushed theirs forward, while others pulled theirs back, but no one knew what he wanted to do. Then he said, "If there is anything going on, the phone will be full of secrets. Who dares? Let's all exchange phones and see each other's contents. If there are secrets, you won't dare. But I dare!"

As soon as he finished saying this, a couple of the friends turned pale and quickly

reached for their phones. One said, “A phone is private. How can we just swap and look at each other’s phones? What are you, a voyeur?”

And of course there were others who did not panic, but were quite open. Some were even excited by the idea, saying, “Look. Go ahead. Let’s lay everything bare here on the table.”

Gui Ping didn’t care either way, but he did feel that this naive classmate was going a little overboard. He said, “Who would be silly enough to keep that kind of message? You think anyone would want to bring it home for a spouse to read?”

The classmate obstinately rebutted, saying, “If you really feel that way about someone, you can’t bear to delete the messages.”

Everyone laughed, saying he obviously had some experience in this area, since he knew how it really felt. It went on for a while until the classmate could not withstand their assault and so, red-faced and angry, he shoved his phone into another classmate’s hand and said, “Come on. Take a look”.

And so the group was divided into two camps, those willing to share the secrets of their phones and those who refused to participate in the game, keeping their phones firmly clutched in their hands, afraid someone might snatch them. Another group, including Gui Ping, were either not afraid at all, or pretending they didn’t care to save their face. They all put their phones on the

table, and the one who had suggested the game mixed them up with his eyes closed. Then everyone closed his or her eyes and picked one. Gui Ping got hold of a female classmate’s phone. Just as he started to inspect it, he sneaked a look at her, noticing how embarrassed she looked. Something inside him stirred, and he said, “Forget it. I don’t want to look at a woman’s phone.”

He handed the phone back to her and she put it away. However, she would not rest her sharp tongue. She said, “Why don’t you look? It’s your own loss if you don’t.”

He didn’t bother about her, but his own luck was not so good. His phone had been taken by one of the nosiest guys in the group. The first thing the fellow did was to look through the messages. Disappointed, he said, “Hm. You’re well prepared.”

Gui Ping said, “Of course. If not, why would I take it out and let you look?”

But the fellow would not give up so easily. He inspected the phone book to see if he could find any suspicious characters there.

A look of shock came over him. The fellow’s face reddened and he blurted out, “Gui Ping, you’re so influential. You even have the higher-ups’ cell numbers.” He went through the names stored in Gui Ping’s phone, reading them out one by one. “These are all the big wigs and VIPs.”

The stunned group of classmates all turned to stare at Gui Ping, saying things like, “Wow, you are sly. Such an impressive background, and you never told us.”

One also said, “It’s called keeping a low profile, you know? A low profile is the thing these days.”

Gui Ping, unable to offer a good explanation, could only laugh it off.



He had not imagined how long the echoes of this laughter would follow him. The next day, a former classmate sought him out at his office, a weighty gift in hand, asking Gui Ping to help contact the Deputy Mayor in charge of the cultural industry. The classmate was planning the city’s biggest, highest standard video game arcade. The Department of Culture had given the green light, but the documents were not signed by the deputy mayor, and they could not proceed without his signature. He had tried to get in touch with the deputy mayor several times, but always came back empty-handed. Now it all depended on Gui Ping’s power.

Gui Ping, knowing that this sort of apparition came through the door opened by his phone, had to say frankly, “Actually, I don’t know the deputy mayor.”

His classmate said, “Impossible. You have his number in your phone. How can you not know him?”

Gui Ping confessed the truth of what had happened, beginning to end. Hearing it, his classmate said, “Ha! Gui Ping, since you became an official, you’ve become more twisted. I’m surprised you don’t have President Hu Jintao or Premier Wen Jiabao’s

numbers stored in your phone.”

Gui Ping joked, “If I knew their numbers, I would have stored them too.”

His classmate was angry. He said, “Tell me in good conscience, all these years you’ve been working for the government and I’ve been struggling in the private sector, have I ever come to you with any kind of trouble? Just this once. One time I come to you and you refuse me. Is that fair?”

Gui Ping knew that no matter what he said, his classmate would not believe him, but there was also no way he could approach the Deputy Mayor. He could only put on a cold expression and say, “Anyway, you can think what you like, it doesn’t matter. There’s nothing I can do to help in this matter.”

Angry, his classmate left, but did not take the gift with him. Gui Ping felt like shouting for him to come back, but he thought that would be going too far, so he did not call after his friend.

The pile of gifts was left sitting there. Whenever Gui Ping saw them, he felt awful. He moved them into a corner of the room, but his eyes kept roaming there involuntarily. He cleared a space in the cupboard, put them inside, and closed the cupboard door, feeling better once they were rid of the sight. All along he had enjoyed a harmonious rapport with his classmates, but now that perfect feeling was ruined by the mistake he had made in storing these numbers in his phone. He went back and forth in his mind, trying to decide if it was really wise to input the

numbers of all those officials, both those he knew and those he didn't. He picked up his phone, ready to delete the unnecessary numbers, but could not decide which to keep and which to discard. It didn't feel right to delete them all, so in the end he did nothing.

At first he worried that he had offended his classmate, but then he hardened his heart. *If he's offended, he's offended. I'll make up for it when I get the chance.*

But he did not realize that the offense would not be so easily resolved. After a couple of days, the classmate came again. Changing his tactic, he came into the office and sat on the sofa. He said, "I'm not leaving until you promise to help me."

Gui Ping said, "I have work to do. It's not convenient for you to just sit there."

His classmate said, "It's convenient *for me.*"

"But not for me," Gui Ping replied.

"What's not convenient? Just pretend that you've set something on the couch, it should be fine. Do your work. It's not like you're in the Secret Service. If I overhear you working, I'm not going to announce it to anyone. And even if I do, no one is interested." And with that he attached himself to Gui Ping's office with a death grip.

Even so, Gui Ping could not make this phone call because he really had no contact with this deputy mayor at all, no connections—his line of work was not under the supervision of this mayor. And even if they had been together in any meeting, the

deputy mayor would be sitting at the rostrum, and Gui Ping could only catch a glimpse of him from a distance. There were always many officials at the rostrum, and this deputy mayor would have just been one in the crowd. Besides that, he might have glimpsed the deputy mayor on the local news on TV. They only shared an on-rostrum-off-rostrum/onscreen-offscreen sort of relationship. How would it look for him to approach this deputy mayor with some business not his own—and especially such sensitive business as planning a giant video game arcade?

So his classmate sat on the sofa. When people came in to report or discuss work matters, he just looked away, showing he was not interested in Gui Ping's work. Even if Gui Ping felt it was nothing, others would find it strange and feel stifled, so that they could not say directly what they had come to say. What should have been simple matters thus became complicated. After a half-day of it, Gui Ping was both physically and mentally exhausted. It was too much. He said to his classmate, "You stay here. I'm going to the washroom."

The classmate said, "You can't escape."

Gui Ping just wanted to slip outside, regain his composure, and think of counter-measures, but he could not just stand there in the corridor while he thought, so he went to the washroom. After spending quite some time there, he still had no clue what to do, and he couldn't simply stay in the toilet, so he made his way back to his office again. But

who would have imagined that the classmate would gleefully greet him at the door. Gui Ping said, “What are you smiling about?”

His classmate said, “Everything is fine. I used your phone to call the deputy mayor, and he said to wait for his call.”

Gui Ping started. “You— you— what have you done?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong. It all went just fine!”

“What did you say to the deputy mayor?”

“Of course I didn’t say it was me. I said it was you.”

For a moment, Gui Ping didn’t understand. “What do you mean it was me?”

“I said, ‘Deputy Mayor, this is Gui Ping from the Reform Commission.’”

Anxiety flooded over Gui Ping. “He doesn’t even know me. What did he say?”

“Yeah right, he doesn’t know you? He knows you very well. He said very warmly, ‘Oh yeah, Gui Ping!’ Then I said, ‘I have a relative who needs to see you about an important document.’”

Gui Ping said, “How come you talk such nonsense? My relative?”

“Classmate, relative—it’s all the same. Why the fuss? If I were your relative, would that be a loss of face?”

Gui Ping felt he was being choked, and couldn’t speak for a moment. Enraptured, his classmate continued, “The deputy mayor said he would get his secretary to arrange a time, and inform me as soon as he could. Oh! Not

me, but you.”

Hardly had he finished when Gui Ping’s phone rang again, and it really was the deputy mayor’s secretary, asking, “Is that Director Gui with the Reform Commission? The deputy mayor has time tomorrow afternoon at four, but at most he only has half an hour. At five he has a reception.”

Gui Ping was astounded, but he knew there was no way out. He could never say that the person who had just called was not him, that someone had used his phone without his knowledge. Fearing Gui Ping might give the game away, his classmate winked at him desperately. Gui Ping glared at him, but he was really helpless in the whole affair, so he promised the deputy mayor’s secretary that he would be at the office the next day at four for a half-hour meeting.

When he hung up, his classmate was overjoyed. Gui Ping, on the other hand, was puzzled, and kept saying, “How could that be? How could that be?”

His classmate wasn’t angry anymore. He said, “Anyway, as things stand, you’ll have to come with me tomorrow. Don’t worry. I won’t come empty-handed.”

Angry, Gui Ping said, “I’ve never encountered a person like you.”

The classmate, on the other hand, left happily.

When his classmate had gone, Gui Ping called Xiao Li in and asked, “Xiao Li, do I know this Deputy Mayor?”

Confused, Xiao Li replied, “Director Gui, what do you mean?”

Gui Ping said, “I don’t remember having any dealings with him, but he hasn’t been the deputy mayor for very long, has he?”

Xiao Li said, “Since the beginning of the year during the session of National People’s Congress, so not more than two or three months.”

Gui Ping said, “Well, he’s never been in charge of our division. At most, he’s been on the rostrum once or twice when I was seated below. He’s way beyond my reach, I believe.”

Xiao Li said, “That’s true. I’ve also seen those leaders high on the rostrum from way below where I was sitting. Which leader would notice me sitting there below the rostrum?”

Xiao Li, noticing Gui Ping’s frown, wanted to take the initiative to play the role of problem-solver. He said, “Director Gui, maybe sometime before he was the deputy mayor, you two came into contact. Maybe it was a long time ago, so you forgot, but the deputy mayor has an exceptional memory, so he didn’t forget.”

Gui Ping said, “Before he was the deputy mayor, where was he working?”

Xiao Li said, “Let me think.” After a moment, it came to him. “He was in the Fisheries Bureau. He was an expert, and also a member of one of the democratic parties. When the government changed, they saw a need for this kind of people, so they selected

him. Later I heard that he joked about it, ‘I never dreamed I would become a deputy mayor.’”

Gui Ping said, “The Fisheries Bureau? Then all the more I don’t know him. I’ve never had any dealings with the Fisheries Bureau.”

Xiao Li thought for a moment, and then said, “Or else, there is another possibility. Perhaps the deputy mayor’s memory isn’t exceptionally good, but exceptionally bad. Maybe he’s confused and has you mixed up with someone else. Maybe he thinks you’re that person.”

Gui Ping said, “Surely he couldn’t be that confused.”

Xiao Li replied, “Or maybe the deputy mayor is really busy and he assumed that anyone who approached him or anyone who called his cell phone must at least be an acquaintance. Think about it, a stranger surely wouldn’t just call a deputy mayor’s cell phone.”

But no matter how Xiao Li analyzed it, nothing worked to clear it up for Gui Ping. After Xiao Li left, Gui Ping took out his phone and looked at it. Looking at the number of the deputy mayor’s secretary who had just called, he thought, *This is a landline, probably the secretary’s office phone.* Then it suddenly struck him that he did not even know the surname of this deputy mayor’s secretary. He only knew that the secretary had not been in this post very long. Gui Ping frantically asked around and learned the

secretary's surname, then his fingers flew over the phone and he called the secretary again.

The call was answered promptly. The voice on the other end said, "May I ask who's calling?"

Gui Ping said, "This is Gui Ping, from the Reform Commission. Just now—just now—"

The secretary had a good memory. He immediately said, "Director Gui, your meeting with the mayor has already been arranged for tomorrow afternoon at four. Is there anything else?"

Gui Ping faltered for a moment, not quite sure what to say. He paused, then said, "I wanted to ask, are you free tonight?"

Out of habit, the secretary immediately reacted strongly. "Director Gui, there's no need."

Gui Ping wanted to explain, but the secretary seemed to think Gui Ping wanted to treat him to dinners and present him with gifts, so he refused, saying, "Director Gui, you don't need to bother. I know you are one of the deputy mayor's close associates, and whatever the deputy mayor asks us to do, we'll give it our best effort."

Gui Ping, testing the waters, asked, "What makes you think I'm one of the deputy mayor's close associates?"

The secretary laughed and said, "The mayor usually doesn't answer his cell phone. He gave it to me to manage. Most of the calls are screened by me before I ask the mayor

for his decision. But when you called today, he answered himself. Doesn't that say it all?"

Speechless, Gui Ping could only give up.

When his work day ended and Gui Ping went home, his mind was a mess. His wife noticed and asked, "What happened?"

Gui Ping could not even say what all had happened, but could only sigh heavily several times. Just as his wife was growing suspicious, his phone rang. Gui Ping looked and saw that it was his classmate calling. He was already driven mad by this classmate, so why would he answer his call? He let the phone ring. The ringing continued insistently. His wife said, "Why don't you answer? Are you afraid to take the call with me sitting here?"

Gui Ping snapped, "I just don't want to answer."

Overwhelmed by her suspicions, his wife reached out, grabbed his phone, and yelled. "Who is that? Why are you so clingy?"

When she heard a male's voice on the other end, she lost interest. She shoved the phone into Gui Ping's hand and walked away bored. Gui Ping held the phone. Even though he was overwhelmed with reluctance, he could hear the "Hello? Hello? Hello?" on the other end of the line.

"Yeah?" he said sharply. "What are you hollering at?"

He was about to throw in a few more harsh words, but his classmate started. "Gui

Ping, I don't need to bother you tomorrow after all."

Gui Ping felt surprised, then joy, but before he could say anything, his classmate continued, "I won't trouble you tomorrow, but it doesn't mean I won't bother you forever." Then he added, "I just got word from the Cultural Affairs Department that a file from high-level administration has arrived, saying that the planning of all video game arcades or shops has been suspended. The project is to be overseen at the provincial level now and it is no longer within the mayor's capacity."

Gui Ping hesitated for a long time, and then started laughing. "You're joking, right? What is going on? The guy at the deputy mayor's office has already made the appointment, and now you want me to inform the mayor that we don't need to see him?"

The classmate laughed, "Then you just go see him about another matter."

Gui Ping said furiously, "Don't come asking me for help again."

The classmate was still laughing. "No way," he said. "I'll still have to rely on you later."

Gui Ping said, "You just said all your approvals will come from the provincial level. I don't know anyone at the provincial level."

His classmate said, "Come on. If you know so many city leaders, your contacts must be very far-reaching. I'm sure you can

get in contact with a few provincial leaders. But, it's not time yet. Things are not very clear. I'll know something soon, though, and if I need help with the provincial leaders, I'll have to get you to run to the provincial office with me when the time comes."

Gui Ping, so angry he could spit blood, said, "I'm changing my cell phone number."

His classmate laughed. "Do you think people won't recognize you anymore just because you put on a disguise?"

The next day, Gui Ping had to think hard to find an excuse to go to the deputy mayor's office. When he saw the stately deputy mayor, he started to panic, as if the fellow could see right through him. Suddenly he was unable to articulate the excuse he had made up for this meeting. Just as he was wondering how he could extricate himself from the mess, the deputy mayor smiled and said, "You're Gui Ping, from the Reform Commission. Actually, I don't remember meeting you before."

Gui Ping, terrified, said, "Then why did you agree to see me?"

"Ah, that's a long story," the deputy mayor said, looking at his watch. "Anyway, since we've got half an hour to talk, I'll tell you about it. I'm sure you all know that my cell phone is always managed by my secretary, so he always has my phone in hand. I never look at or listen to it. I know nothing at all about it. All the calls are answered by him, and he arranges all my appointments. I am at his mercy, and led

by the nose. I have no freedom, because it's always been like that in bureaucracy. It is much the same with the former deputy mayor as with the one before him. I am in no position to change it." He paused for a moment, then went on, "And you also know, I had my own specialty before and was suddenly put in this post. I have not really adapted to it yet, and have just been bearing with it here at first. Right up until yesterday afternoon, when I finally couldn't stand it anymore. I was determined to take back my right to use my own cell phone, so I just asked my secretary to return it to me. Just as he handed me the phone, the first call came in—from you. My secretary was standing there watching me. I wanted him to know that I was perfectly capable of managing my work without him, so I instructed him to arrange a time for our meeting. See, that's what happened."

Gui Ping froze for quite a while, thinking the deputy mayor was joking. But then from the look on the man's face, that did not seem to be the case. He faltered, uncertain what to say. The good news was that the deputy mayor did not want to hear anyway. He sighed and waved Gui Ping off. "Never mind. From now on, this sort of thing won't happen. You won't be able to reach me on my cell phone. I returned it to my secretary. I threw in the towel, since I can't win anyway. Yesterday, I spent the whole afternoon from the time you called onward answering twenty-three phone calls.

All were asking for help from the mayor. Damn, I give up.' He paused, and then added one final thought, "Alas, now I know it's not easy being a secretary, let alone an office director."

Gui Ping said, "That's true. It's aggravating."

The deputy mayor looked at him, and then said, "Right. I still haven't asked, Director Gui, since I've never met you, how did you come to call my cell phone?"

Gui Ping also laid the matter out before him honestly. The deputy mayor listened, and then laughed for a moment. Gui Ping could not tell whether or not there was any amusement in the laughter.



After experiencing this false alarm, Gui Ping immediately changed his number. He only informed a handful of friends, family, and close work associates, not saying anything about it to the rest. As a result, he created for himself, and others, a lot of hassles and invited a lot of criticism. But no matter what happened, Gui Ping just gritted his teeth and bore with it, determined to put his old cell phone troubles behind him. He wanted to say farewell to the bygone days, to live for himself, to take himself firmly in hand and not be controlled by the phone.

But now that his phone lay quietly on his desk, Gui Ping still had no peace of mind, feeling as uncomfortable as if hundreds of

tiny worries were clawing at his heart. The phone did not disturb him, but he went and disturbed the phone. After a while, he picked it up and looked at it, wondering if he had missed something. But there was nothing. Gui Ping began to suspect that the problem was with the ring tone. So he switched it to vibrate mode. The phone would not vibrate. He picked it up and dialed the office number. The call went through. Then he picked up the office phone and dialed his mobile number. It went through too. He waited, but still nothing came from the phone. He messaged his wife. *You OK?* The message went out normally, and his wife quickly replied, *What do you mean?* He received that without any problem either.

His wife's reply seemed to contain some smell of gunpowder. Sure enough, no sooner had he received her message than she called, "What are you up to?"

Gui Ping replied, "It's strange, no one has called or texted all day."

"You're the strange one. When you get lots of calls, you always complain. Today when you have a rare moment of rest, it's like you have ants in your pants."

After his wife hung up, Gui Ping was certain that there was no problem with his phone, but he still couldn't sit still. He called a colleague and said, "Did you call my cell phone this morning?"

"No," the colleague replied.

He called another friend and asked, "Did you text me this morning?"

"No," his friend replied.

Gui Ping kept watch over this new number, which was as quiet as death, and he could not help missing his old number. Using his new number, he dialed the old line. He heard the message, "We're sorry, the number you are dialing has been disconnected." He started to panic.

He called Xiao Li to come in and took it out on him, "You disconnected my old line?"

Xiao Li replied, "Eh, Director Gui, didn't you ask me to change your number?"

Gui Ping said, "I told you to change my number, but I didn't say I don't want the old one anymore. I've had that number for many years. There's sentimental value. Now you've just tossed it away?"

Xiao Li said, "Director Gui, don't worry. It hasn't been tossed aside. I suspended the number, but still held it for you. It just costs five *yuan* a month, and the number is still yours. You can restore it whenever you want."

Gui Ping was distracted for a moment, and then said, "What made you decide to hold the number?"

Xiao Li said, "Director Gui, I had a sixth sense. I just thought you might want it back."

Gui Ping wanted to ask, *What made you think I'd want it restored?* But before the words reached his lips, he decided not to ask. Even such a lightweight as Xiao Li could see him through and this was simply too much

for him, so he hardened himself and said, “I don’t want it. Go now and get rid of the number for good.”

Xiao Li said, “OK. Sure. Director Gui. I’ll save that five *yuan* for you.”

By that afternoon though, the situation had changed dramatically. The calls coming into his phone had increased greatly, as had the incoming messages. There were many from people whom Gui Ping was sure he had not informed of his new mobile phone. Still, they kept calling. Gui Ping said, “Ah, this is strange. How did you know my number?”

The caller said, “Who do you think you are? Is it a big deal to know your number?”

There were also some who retorted, “You’re the one acting strange. Why can’t I know your number?”

Then there were some who were overly

sensitive, “Boo! So what? Do you regret it? You don’t want to be in contact with me anymore?”

And so Gui Ping resumed his old life, the cell phone busy from morning until night. This was normal life for Gui Ping. He had adapted to it early on. He resumed complaining about how irritating the cell phone was, but he also resumed being attached to it. He only found it strange how so many people came to know his new number.

It was many days later that he finally learned the reason. After his talk with Xiao Li, the latter had secretly replaced his new phone memory card with the old.

Translated by Shelly Bryant

