



友年



lang="en">

The Left Ear

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Chapter 1

N/A – The Left Ear –

1 I'm a Good Girl

With God as my witness, I am a good girl.

I get good grades. I'm helpful, and I'm hardworking. I respect my seniors. I'm happy to live out life, day after day, going to bed at 10 PM each night, and getting up at 6 AM the next morning. The first thing I do when I wake up is pull open the curtains and look out the window. The sky is always just starting to light up at that time. Even in the summertime, the sun has only started to peek above the horizon. Then I will sit in front of the window and read in English, with a loud and sweet voice. My mom will walk over and hand me a cup of thick(?) milk. I gulp down my milk and continuing reading.

My mother stood in the room, early in the morning, looking at me lovingly.

It's a pity though, I am a good girl with a slight defect. My heart, and my left ear. When I was born, that's how I was. I had surgery on my heart, and it was very advanced technology. There weren't any scars left on my body, so I don't have to count that. But the hearing in my left ear isn't very good. If you stood to my left and spoke to me, it's very possible that I wouldn't hear a thing you said.

So when I'm reading out loud, I'm especially loud.

Although that's how it was, I never felt that it was a bad thing. Before age 17, I naively loved myself like that. Just like the many good-hearted people in the world, naively loving me.

But what's cornier than that is that one day, when I was 17 years old, I suddenly fell in love for the first time. I don't remember what the weather was like that day. All I remember is his face. It was dusk, and he was leaning on a railing across the street from the school, carrying a faded backpack. His face was very handsome. That was the first time I'd seen him. I was so scared, my heart was inexplicably racing non-stop.

His name was Xu Yi.

I once hated that name a lot, because the second character was very difficult to type with Wubi. I practiced for several days before I could successfully type it over and over.

Wubi is a method of typing Chinese, which is based on the shapes used in words/characters (versus phonetically-based systems, like Pinyin). I don't know how to use it, but supposedly once you learn it and all the shortcuts, it's much more efficient compared to using phonetic systems. In any case, the character for his name isn't easy to type using Wubi. Which is a bit ironic, because it's a very easy word to write: 乚 (yì).

The white screen was filled with this name. I used red, the words big and lively. Just like him, standing in front of me.

After learning of Xu Yi, my blog now had meaning.

And I do mean learning of Xu Yi.

The fact is, we don't know each other, we've never met, and there's no chance for us to meet. All I know is that he's a senior, soon to graduate, and he gets good grades. I also know that there's a girl from a technical school who's madly chasing after him.

I've seen her before. The way she dresses is very strange. Sometimes I think that she really seems like a plant, especially that one time she stood outside our school, wearing a green dress. She had painted on green eyeshadow, and her face had some gold powder. She held a sunflower, standing there all by herself.

And there was another time when she painted four words onto her white dress: I love Xu Yi.

A lot of girls would scream when they walked past her.

She'd become a fixture in front of our school.

The most important thing is, that in the end, Xu Yi actually fell in love with her.

He fell in love with her.

One day, after school ended, he walked up to her and said, "Let's go see the cat that you feed."

The girl cheered out and jumped up. She spread her arms and ran in a circle, like a glider. Then she stopped in front of Xu Yi, and said, “Handsome, I finally believe that love is something to fight for! Hahaha, I’m so happy, I could die!”

The girl that liked to make her eyes green... I later learned that her name was Bala.

I finally met Bala, at the noodle shop behind the school.

Later I thought, this was something I’d always expected to happen.

I still remember, it was raining that evening, so the shop was very noisy. After my evening class, I was hungry, so I went to the noodle shop. She was sitting at a table near the wall, with her back to me, wearing a pink cardigan. She really grabbed your attention. When I got closer, I realized there was a 555 dangling from her mouth, a British brand of cigarettes. She sucked on it like it was very enjoyable, like the way a little girl would eat chocolates. The small TV in the shop was playing a drama series on mute. I watched her, but her eyes never left the TV.

I sat across from her.

And then she gave me a glance.

Then she extended her hand, and took some cilantro from my steaming bowl and placed it into her own. She silently spit out her cigarette butt, and then started eating her noodles. It was the first time I’d seen her so clearly. Her hair was pulled into a bun behind her head. She had an oval face, no sign of pimples, and her eyes were especially big. I felt that she was very pretty. It was that kind of pretty that got prettier the longer you looked, that startles you a bit. She wasn’t wearing green eyeshadow.

At the time, I thought to myself, “No wonder Xu Yi...”

“Are you also from Tian High?” she asked, looking at the name tag on my chest.

“Mm,” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “Do you recognize me?”

I shook my head.

“All the bad kids at your school know me,” she said proudly. Then she laughed, her face so refined.

When we finished our meal and left the shop, it was raining heavily. The water flowed down the eaves. We couldn't leave, and just stood close to the wall.

I couldn't hold back, so I asked, “Do you also like eating cilantro?”

“Not especially, but I like to steal other people's things.”

I was a bit surprised. She reached out and touched my face, and laughed. Her eyes bent into crescent moons. She said, “Ah, other people's things are what's good. Little girl, you'll understand.”

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I didn't know how to respond to that, so I only said, “I don't like when it rains.” She looked up to the sky, and said, seemingly to herself, “...won't come.” Then she rushed into the rain.

I shouted to her, “Hey!”

She turned around.

I pulled out an umbrella from my backpack. “You'll get a cold if you're drenched in the rain.”

“What about you?” she asked me.

“It's okay, I live nearby.”

“Thanks!” She took the umbrella, and ran a short distance before stopping. She turned around and shouted, “I'm Bala! I'll be back here next Saturday. I'll return your umbrella then.”

They say that Bala and Xu Yi broke up. He fought because of her, and became a bad kid.

Saturday came again. Before class was over, I asked the teacher if I could leave early, saying that my stomach hurt. She easily believed me, because she'd never have thought that an honest girl like me would lie. But I did lie. My stomach didn't hurt. I went to the noodle shop.

I was shocked, when I first entered the shop. Bala was sitting very close to a

boy, her face right next to his. She laughed, charmingly and movingly.

That boy was obviously not Xu Yi. His name was Zhang Yang. I recognized him, he was a senior at our school too.

When Zhang Yang saw me enter in my uniform, he seemed a bit uncomfortable, and pushed Bala away.

Bala greeted me, "Hi!"

I sat down, and responded lightly, "Hi."

Zhang Yang quickly payed, and left. Bala's gaze followed his back.

After awhile, Bala stepped in front of me. "Do you have a smoke? I'm out."

I shook my head.

"Oh, right," Bala said. "You're a good kid, you don't smoke! But, why did you skip school?"

As she spoke, she fluttered her big eyes at me.

Goodness, she had on green eyeshadow again.

"My stomach hurts today."

"Your stomach hurts, and you're still eating lamian noodles?" She laughed, "Is it hurting because you're hungry?"

"Bala," I looked at her green eyeshadow as I spoke. "Why did you break up with Xu Yi?"

Bala looked at me, and then laughed out loud so hard that tears came out from her eyes. She said confidently, "I know! You like Xu Yi, don't you?"

I stubbornly stayed silent.

"You don't want to date." Bala said, "You're a good kid." She pulled out the umbrella from the bag behind her, "Here you go, good baby."

When I took my umbrella back, I told Bala, "Actually, I don't even know Xu Yi."

"Oh?" She let out another exaggerated laugh. It was then that I noticed that she was wearing earrings. They were also green, like big green teardrops, swaying back and forth on her ears.

That day, I'd already walked far away, when I heard Bala calling me. She must have been shouting very loudly for me to hear. I didn't head back, but her following words were very clear.

Bala said, "You want to know what kind of girl Xu Yi likes? Come back next time, and I'll tell you!"

I decided to write a letter to Xu Yi.

The desire was like a rock, pressing down on my heart for many days. Pressing down so that I couldn't breathe. I couldn't come to terms on my own, so I could only write.

My letter was very simple. I said, "You should know, one failure doesn't mean much. And one wrong choice isn't really anything. You have to believe that, in this world, there will always be someone who cares about you. Hope that you'll be happy."

This was, of course, an anonymous letter. I dropped it off at the post office, and then walked home quickly. I was almost home when, for some reason, I thought about the noodle shop that wasn't far away. My feet started heading that way.

There was a shortcut to get from my house to the noodle shop. They were remodeling houses, and the road wasn't good to take. So not many people go that way. That day, I walked on the path, surrounded by wire fencing, and it seemed like there was movement up ahead.

Although my hearing isn't very good, I'm very sensitive.

I knew something must have happened.

The sky was already dark as I headed up ahead. Soon, I confirmed that my hunch was right. I saw that the girl being pushed up against the wall was Bala. The boy with his back to me was very tall, and he kept kicking her with his knee. Quickly and ruthlessly. She bit his arm, the look in her eyes very frightening. The hatred from her eyes was almost like blood dripping out.

I ran up as fast as I could, and pulled the boy away. Bala screamed out in an earth-shattering voice, "Get away!"

The boy was Zhang Yang.

Zhang Yang stepped back, extending a finger on his hand. In a low voice, he said, "Go ahead and try. If you don't get rid of it, don't expect me to let you off." And then he walked off, without looking back.

Bala dejectedly slid down the the wall. She clutched her abdomen, as she knelt down.

I squatted down next to her, intending to pull her up. But I couldn't.

I pulled out the lighter from her pocket. The fire shined onto Bala's dirty face. Her big eyes were like two glass balls that had gotten dirty. The wind blew, the fire flickered, and then it went out. In the darkness, I said to her, "I'll send you home, okay? Tell me where your house is."

"Do you have any money?" Her voice was the same as usual, as if nothing that had just happened affected her at all.

I took out all the money I had with me, 70 something dollars (a little more than 10 USD).

"That's enough." Bala stood up unsteadily. She said, "Home, I need a bath. And to buy some medicine."

I went with Bala to buy some medicine, and then we went back to her house.

She lived with her grandma, and there was no one else at home. Her grandma was playing mahjong with some old ladies, and no one took notice of Bala's return.

We slipped into her room. She let me sit, and then she went to bathe. There weren't many books on her desk, but there were a lot of high-end cosmetics. Her bed was covered with pretty clothes. I picked up a fashion magazine, and the model on the cover had on the same makeup as Bala.

Bala came back quickly. After bathing, she looked very different from usual. She had on a white nightgown, and slowly walked over to me. As she approached, she lifted up her dress. In the chilly moonlight, I saw the redness and bruising on her stomach. It was ugly and terrifying.

Why was love like this.

Dearest Xu Yi, this is what love is. Why is the love in our youth so beyond redemption.

Dearest Xu Yi, I can only call out lightly in my heart.

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“Oh yeah, what’s your name?” Bala asked me.

“Li Er,” I said.

“‘Er’ for ear?”

“Just about, add a ‘wang’ to the side.”

“There’s such a word?” Bala asked curiously.

I nodded, and helped her apply the medicine.

The character for Li Er’s name is 珥 (ěr), which is made up of 耳 (ěr, meaning “ear”) and 王 (wáng) radical.

As I swabbed on the medicine, Bala trembled slightly. She whispered, “Do you know? Do you know what’s inside here?”

My hand started to shake.

“There’s a little baby.” Bala used her hand to caress her belly, saying, “Say, do you think I should give birth to it? Maybe she will be a beautiful little girl.”

I threw the cotton swab to the ground. With a quivering voice, I asked, “Whose is it? Xu Yi’s or Zhang Yang’s?”

She laughed out loud. “Don’t worry, Xu Yi’s just like you, a good kid.”

“But, why?”

Bala leaned onto the bed, and tidied up her nightgown. With a serious tone she’s never used before, she said to me, “Little Ear, do you know? When you love someone, you can do anything for him.”

When I walked into “Forget It” Bar, it was the third day of the Lunar new year (late Jan – early Feb).

“Forget It” Bar was near the technical school. Every weekend, it was packed full with all sorts of bizarre guys. They dyed their hair different colors, and played

billiards, topless in the wintertime, shouting out foul language. The lady boss at the noodle shop told me I'd be able to find Bala there.

When I arrived, Bala was loudly telling a joke. She saw me and pulled me outside. The snow had stopped, and the sun was blinding. Bala blocked her head with her hand, and asked me, "So, Little Ear, why are you looking for me?"

"Xu Yi," I said. "I heard he did really bad on his exams."

"Is that so?" Bala said indifferently.

"Why don't you help him?"

"Well, why don't you?" Bala said.

I bit my lip and said, "I can't."

"If you love him, just tell him." Bala pulled out a cigarette and lit it, looking at me.

"Please," I said.

Bala threw the cigarette butt to the ground and stepped on it. "Zhang Yang would kill me. But he's gone to his grandmother's in Shanghai, for the new year. How about this. You invite Xu Yi out for me. Then it will be like we've met coincidentally, and it will be less troublesome."

I was actually calling a boy on the phone.

He asked, "Who's this?"

I leaned on the public phone booth, voice quivering, and said, "Can you come to 'Forget It' Bar?"

"Who are you?"

"I wrote you a letter," I said. "I'll be at 'Forget It' Bar, and I'll wait an hour for you."

When I was done speaking, I threw down the phone. I knew he would come. A curious person would surely show up.

I walked out of the booth and back to "Forget It." Bala was standing on the narrow wood stage, singing Faye Wong's "Chanel." I'm your Chanel, you're my model. Before the song was over, I saw Xu Yi. He looked like he'd run over,

forehead covered in sweat. He kept staring at Bala on the stage, eyes never leaving. He looked haggard, and I felt distressed.

“Hi, hi, hi!” Bala cut her song off, and jumped down from the stage. She skipped all the way over to me, and shouted, “Little Ear, your handsome guy is here!”

Then Bala turned to Xu Yi and whistled loudly.

My face turned red and red over again.

Xu Yi walked over to us, and sat down across from me. He cleared his throat, and whispered to Bala, “I just want to know. Is it true, about Zhang Yang?”

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Chapter 2

– The Left Ear –

2 I Won't Forgive You

"It is," Bala said firmly.

"Why?!" Xu Yi shouted loudly. The whole bar heard, and some boys came over.

"Why?!" Xu Yi continued to shout. He grabbed Bala by her collar, shaking her, and said, "I'm telling you, I won't forgive you. I won't forgive you!"

Bala must have felt dizzy from all the shaking, but her face remained expressionless.

Xu Yi was quickly pulled away. Before I could take in what was happening, he'd already been hit to the ground and held down. Countless fists fell onto him.

I couldn't hear anything else.

I shouted out, "Don't! Don't! Don't!" I rushed past, and Bala couldn't hold me back in time. I crazily ran into the group of people, wanting to use my body to block Xu Yi. A beer bottle hit my head.

Blood, red blood.

Again, I couldn't hear anything else.

When I woke up, I realized that I was lying in Bala's bed.

Bala was holding a cat, a very fat one. With a long, dangling white tail, it sat calmly in Bala's arms. Its green eyes were shining brightly, but its face looked like it wanted to eat.

Bala hugged the cat, and said to me tenderly, "Thank goodness you're okay."

"What about Xu Yi?" I suddenly remembered.

"He's fine," Bala said. "I already helped you wrap up your head wound, but what are you going to say when you get home?"

I didn't say anything.

"You can stay here for awhile," she said.

I crawled over and looked at myself in the mirror. I saw a hateful white gauze wrapped on my head. Using my strength, I pulled it off. This hurt a lot. Bala screamed, "What are you doing?"

I said to Bala, "I need to use the bathroom."

Bala extended her hand to point the way.

Enduring the pain, I went to the bathroom and washed the traces of blood out of my hair. Then I combed it. I ran outside to ask, "Bala, do you have any suitable hats?"

Bala had many hats, but I tried on about ten before I found one to wear. It was a little red hat. Bala said her niece left it before.

Bala sent me home, taking me all the way to the noodle shop. She said to me, "Little Ear, you're braver than me. I need to learn from you."

"That child..." I asked her.

She patted her tummy mysteriously, and said, "Don't worry. I will have it."

I covered my mouth.

"Maybe it will hurt a bit, but it will be worth it."

"Your mom doesn't care?" I asked her.

Bala slanted her mouth, "She wouldn't be able to do anything even if she did care."

"Don't be so willful. Bala," I said. "What good will come from this?"

Bala looked at me.

"Bala, please don't be like this. I know, you don't want it to be like this either." When I finished speaking, I turned around and strode away.

When I turned back, I saw Bala standing there, motionless. She saw I'd turned back, and blew me a kiss. Then she turned away and left.

Wearing the little red hat, I walked strangely back home. My mom looked at

me oddly. I was rubbing my face as I walked toward my room. "It was very cold today, so I bought a hat. It feels much better now."

Those days, I had a very strange thought.

I suddenly wanted to become bad.

I felt very stuffy. I was obsessed with the idea that, if I became bad, I would become free.

I made a long post of unintelligible words on my blog. When I finished, I wanted someone to read it, so I sent a link to Bala. She responded very quickly, "Little Ear doesn't seem very happy. Why don't you come to 'Forget It' and listen to me sing?"

"I can't," I said. "But I'm going to read by the river in the afternoon."

That afternoon, I sat on a bench by the river, holding my book and pretending to read. Bala finally showed up, wearing a long, fringed skirt, carrying a rose-red bag. With an exaggerated pace, she dragged herself over. With bright eyes looking at me, she asked, "Do you really want to become a bad girl?"

I grumbled and nodded.

Bala patted my head.

"You want to die?" Bala said. "Thinking about nonsense all day."

Bala laughed, and said, "Little Ear, promise me something."

"What?"

"When my son is born, you will be his godmother. So you cannot become bad. He has to have one good mother. That way, he won't lose to anyone else!"

"What are you saying?" I pushed her and said, "Let's go."

"Where to?"

"The hospital!"

"Let go!"

"No!" I said. "You have to go to the hospital. You have to!"

Bala pushed me away and fell onto the bench. With a smile, she said to me,

“Listen, Little Ear. Even if the entire world wants to kill this child, I will still give birth to him. Nothing will change that, unless I die.”

I was frightened by her smile. After a long while, I said, “Bala, what exactly are you doing this for?”

Bala rested her chin on the bench and spoke leisurely, “You wouldn’t understand. Just like you’ll never become a bad kid. Little Ear, everyone’s fate is set on the day that they are born. You are a good girl, so just live like a good girl. Got it?”

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I didn’t leave the house again during the winter break.

On the first day of the new school term, I ran into Xu Yi at the school’s front gate. He extended a long arm to stop me in my path.

There were a lot of girls around who looked at me.

My face turned red.

Xu Yi said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, in a thin voice, like a mosquito.

“Why did you help me? Were you the one who called me that day?” he asked.

I looked up, flustered.

“Do you like me?” Xu Yi asked again.

I took a deep breath and ran past him, to the classroom.

I don’t know why, but I felt like I was going to die. My little heart that had been operated on wasn’t carrying a heavy load anymore. I was in a confused state, and a week of class passed by. Xu Yi came on Saturday. I was so sleepy, I didn’t realize he was there at first. I was drinking a cup of instant coffee in the classroom, and lifted my cup too quickly. A few drops of coffee fell onto my red, wool scarf. My seat was near the window, and when I looked ahead, I saw Xu Yi. He suddenly extended his hand and, with his finger, motioned for me to come outside. My heart started to throb for some reason. I subconsciously left behind my cup and rushed outside the classroom.

He didn't look at me, and just kept walking ahead. My pace alternated between fast and slow, a bit like an idiot. I didn't know where he was leading me to. It was a Saturday afternoon, and all the teachers were in some ridiculous meeting. What was supposed to be a self-study day became a day off, and there weren't many people in school. It was another damn day of snow, so dusk felt like night. He led me past the playground and lab building. Snow fell onto his short hair and his broad shoulders. My heart was rising and falling in pain. I turned my head to the side and shouted, "Where exactly are you taking me!"

Suddenly, he stopped and turned around. I subconsciously took a step back, my foot going into the thick snow with a light crunch. We were on a small path in the schoolyard. The doors to the bathroom building were closed, the top covered with blue paint. The stairwell to the side was empty. Xu Yi pulled me into there. I was a bit frightened then. We were separated by about two meters of space. I leaned against the wall, biting my lower lip, and looked at him. He wore a grey coat, with ice crystals and snowflakes on his shoulders. The hair on his forehead was a bit wet. Oh Xu Yi... Once, Bala's Xu Yi, with the face of an angel. He was still so handsome.

I sadly crouched down. Then I noticed the coffee on my scarf, so I reached out my sleeve to wipe it off.

"I know that you like me."

"I don't."

"Were you the one who wrote me a letter every day?"

"No!"

"Look at me."

I didn't dare. I stayed crouching, shaking.

He pulled me up by my left arm, scaring me, so I let out a soft scream.

"Don't expect me to like you," Xu Yi said.

"You put on an innocent appearance, but don't think that I don't know. You're part of Bala's group. You guys haven't had enough, is that it? If you haven't, I'll keep playing with you!"

A boy had never been so mean to me. I couldn't get away from his grip, and tears started falling.

Xu Yi looked at me, and he seemed very angry. I thought he was going to hit me. I closed my eyes, when I felt him get pushed away. I opened my eyes and saw Youta. With blood-red eyes, Youta blocked Xu Yi. With a gruff voice, he said to me, "Get back to the classroom."

Xu Yi looked at him in surprise.

I turned around and walked back into the snow. There were a lot of ice pieces on the ground, and I was worried that they'd go into my old running shoes. That would be so cold. I really was an idiot. My face was freezing cold. I reached my hand into a pocket inside my jacket and pulled out a tissue. Because my clothes were really thick, it was really hard to pull out. But I was set on pulling it out. So, with this strange posture, I strode past the lab building and the playground, walking into the classroom. No one chased after me. Big teardrops rolled down my face, but I didn't turn back.

When dusk fell, Xu Yi's mom, my aunt, and my mom were all called to the principal's office.

When Mom came out, she said one thing to me, "Li Er, you've disappointed me."

She grabbed my clothes and said, "Tell me, how did this happen? How did you get involved with that [girl] bully. You really must want to stop living!"

"Don't blame her," Youta came to my defense.

Mom turned her attention to him. "I haven't scolded you yet. You too, going around fighting with people. It's time for the college entrance exams. If you get punished because of this, see what will happen."

When I looked up, I saw Bala. She wasn't wearing any makeup at all today, and she had on very simple clothes. Standing in front, she looked at me with an expression that's hard to describe.

As we passed by her, I didn't dare greet her. Just as I was hating myself for my cowardice, Bala called out to me. But she didn't call me Little Ear. Instead, she said, "Li Er, wait."

Everyone stopped walking and looked at her warily.

“I know about everything,” she said. “I’m here to prove that none of this has anything to do with you. If there’s a problem, it’s all my, Bala’s, fault.”

“Get lost!” Youta called out fiercely.

“I’ll go,” Bala said coldly. “Just so long as Li Er is okay.”

“Of course she’ll be okay. As long as you stay away from her, she’ll be totally fine!”

“Youta!” I yelled. “Don’t talk to Bala like that!”

“Why not?” he asked. “She hasn’t caused you enough harm yet?”

“Because she’s my friend!” I said. “She’s my good friend, and I won’t let you talk to her that way! Never!”

Youta took a few steps back, angrily. Mom and Aunt’s face both fell open. The world grew still. I couldn’t hear anything else. I just saw Bala’s lips crack into a grin. A dazzling glory shone from her face. She looked at me, eyes shining clearly.

And then I heard Bala say softly, “Little Ear, I really didn’t pick the wrong person.”

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The sun this spring seems especially bright. Soft, golden streams flowed down from the green leaves, and the flowers bloomed without a sound. Monday is my least favorite day. I haven’t had a good rest yet, but all the business is going to start up again. I didn’t care for it at all. That day, after morning exercises, I was walking through the playground alone. I thought of going to the canteen to buy some instant coffee, when a strange guy suddenly got in my way. In a panic, he asked me, “Are you Li Er?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Please take this call.” He pulled out a phone from his pant pocket.

“Who’s calling?” I asked.

“Just answer it.” The boy put the phone into my hands. “It’s connecting, hurry and answer it.”

Hesitantly, I held up the phone next to my ear. And then I heard Bala gasping. It was only breathing, but I just felt that it was Bala.

I called out, “Bala!”

“Little Ear, is it you?”

“It’s me, Bala.” My heart felt very anxious, and I couldn’t say anything more.

“Good, [he] found you,” Bala said, hoarsely. “I really need to tell you, thank you. Thank you for lending me your umbrella. Thank you for saving me last time. Thank you for helping my apply medicine. Thank you for publicly admitting that you’re my friend. You don’t know how thankful I am to you...”

Bala’s voice was getting weaker. I didn’t know if it was my ear having problems. In my panic, I then heard the phone cut off. From the other end came endless beeping.

The boy reached out his hand and snatched back the phone. He turned around and ran.

I finally came to and started chasing him. I couldn’t catch up to him, and could only see him run into the Year 3-1 classroom. I didn’t hesitate to follow him in. But the bell sounded, and the students started flocking into the classroom. Their math teacher was standing in the doorway with his lesson plan.

I was also at the door now.

A meddling girl looked through the window and asked me, “Who are you looking for?”

I didn’t speak. My eyes were searching the full classroom for that boy. Just then a piece of paper flew out from the classroom. It said, “Bala’s in the hospital, something’s happened.”

I’m a bad girl. I think it was that way since the day I was born.

They said I was detestable when I was born, crying for three days and three nights. From morning ’til night, and night ’til morning, without stop. It seemed as if it were a big protest to being born into this world.

– The Left Ear –

Chapter 3

– The Left Ear –

3 The Legendary Li Bala

Of course I don't remember the events right when I was born. In fact, there are many things I don't remember. I'm a master of forgetfulness. When I first started at the vocational school, they had us fill in a form. The first item asked for your specialty. In big, flamboyant letters, I wrote "forgetting."

The teacher stared at me with big eyes, and bitingly said, "Do you not know what the word 'specialty' means?" I bit my pen, put on an idiotic face, and just stared back at her. She shook her head and walked away.

I took the pen from my mouth and gave a lively laugh.

It was at that moment that a tall boy abruptly jumped in front of me. He was very tall, blocking all the sunlight from me. It made me feel unhappy. He stared at me and asked, "Are you the legendary Li Bala?"

Sitting on the desk with my legs swinging, I said, "I didn't know I was so famous."

"I'm Blackie," he announced, head held high. "From the moment I found out you would be coming to our school, I decided to pursue you."

On a weekend evening, Blackie wanted to fight with Tian High's basketball team captain. They'd been making trouble for several days. Blackie envied the luck of the Tian High kids, the way they never gave up. It was only 10 in the morning, and I was still sleeping when Blackie called. My whole pillow vibrated, so I pressed the speaker button. As if he were holding a loudspeaker, I heard him excitedly call out, "Wifey, come see! See how I took care of them!"

The technical school's basketball court was, indeed, very run-down. But there was an incandescent lamp there, sort of like a handheld lantern. It hung above the basketball hoop, and when the wind blew, the light flickered. It was very

interesting. No one bothered you in this place, so during the school holidays, kids would show up to play ball at night.

I stopped at the edge of the basketball court. No one paid me any attention. Blackie's head was bare. He liked wearing a sleeveless black shirt and white earring. He was very muscular. Not long after I'd first arrived at the school, I heard a rumor that there were two pregnant girls who'd made a move on him, because they wanted to marry him. But I didn't mind, because I wouldn't get pregnant for him. When I think of how out of date Blackie's clothes that day were, I can't help but to laugh. God help me, won't you?

Seeing that I'd arrived, Blackie looked very excited. He kissed my hand. And as he breathed, he said, "Missus, thank you for coming."

I really wanted to trample him. He continued to say to the guys behind him, "Take care of your sister-in-law. Go and bring a stool!" That's when I saw two golden-haired kids behind him. They had monolids and drooping mouths, with youthful, innocent and foolish looks. As if their lives were on the line, they ran off quickly.

I was both very angry and very amused. Then I turned, and I saw a boy standing against the basketball hoop. He wore a hat, the brim pulled low so that I couldn't see his face. But I could tell that he was chewing gum, his cheeks moving back and forth.

The spot I stood at wasn't actually very far from them. Blackie threw the basketball cleanly to him and said "Start."

He caught it and started dribbling. With his left hand, he threw off his hat, which landed at my feet.

When he lifted up his head, under the shining incandescent light, I saw his chiseled face. Even long after that, I would often recall that moment, recall the way my heart felt then. It was like a container that was filled with water, but then was suddenly emptied out. As if the world were turned upside down. Something like that.

Usually, I'm the most uninterested in that kind of sports competition. But that day, I sat there on a hard stool and watched the whole game.

The final score was 1-3. Blackie and them actually lost. He wiped away his sweat, and with a loud voice, “TMD, you win. Zhang Yang, you’re really something.”

TMD is an abbreviation for 他妈的 (tā mā de), which is like a curse. Sort of the way people will cry out “damn it” or “fuck.”

After the guy called Zhang Yang slowly packed up his bag and slung it over his shoulder, he walked over to me. He didn’t seem to take notice of my flower-print skirt or my green eyeshadow. In fact, he didn’t seem to notice me at all. He just bent down and picked up his cap, placing it back on his head. And just like that, he left without a word.

As you would expect, I followed Zhang Yang as he left. After I passed the school gates, I took off my shoes. That way, he wouldn’t hear my footsteps. He was about 150 meters in front of me. It was a bit far, but I could still follow him. I’m not sure of my motive. I just really wanted to find out where he was going. Little Yang, what a cute boy. There was a strange sort of softness in my heart, even as my soles of my feet were aching. It made me feel so alive.

I held my shoes with my left hand and my skirt with my right hand. In the quiet of the night, I was on my tiptoes, following a boy I’d never seen before. Luckily, there weren’t many people on the path he was taking. Otherwise, I wonder how many people would stare at me with a curious looks. I don’t know. Actually, my mind was completely blank at the time. I just knew that I’d be willing to chase in this direction.

To be honest, my following tactics that day weren’t actually successful. After turning a few corners, I completely lost sight of Zhang Yang. A bit discouraged, I squatted down on the road, rubbed my aching feet, and put my shoes back on. While I was in the midst of thinking about what to do next, someone tapped my on the shoulder.

I heard a very nice male voice say, “Why are you following me?”

I turned and saw Zhang Yang.

“Hi!” I jumped up, “So you were here!”

“You’re Li Bala,” he said. “I recognize you.”

“Ha!” Pleased with myself, I tossed my hair. “Is it because I’m so pretty, so I left a very deep impression?”

He looked at me. Maybe he was trying to figure out if I was pretty or not. But instead, he said, “There’s a lot of broken glass on this road. If you walk without your shoes on, it’ll be very dangerous.”

I was really suspicious about whether or not he had eyes on the back of his head. He was really, really too handsome. Too out of the ordinary. I really couldn’t help myself.

I put a finger in my mouth and bit down gently, to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

“Go home, it’s not early anymore.” When he finished speaking, he smiled, and then turned around and left.

The second time I saw him was inside the noodle shop.

I really liked the noodle shop by Tian High. The noodles there really suited to my tastes. Right when I walked in, I saw him. He was sitting near the window that faced the street, at a two-person table. Across from him was a little girl. She had two pigtails and wore a white T-shirt with small dolls printed on it. They looked just like a pair of lovers, but they seemed to be trying really hard to pretend as if there was no relation between them. I suddenly wanted to laugh a bit. He pulled out a cigarette case from his jeans pocket, and lit up his Double Happiness (cigarette brand) with a match the shop provided.

I laughed.

“Hi, hi!” I shouted out mischievously. “Hi, hi, hi, Little Yang! How are you?”

Zhang Yang stood up and left. The girl also got up and followed him. I realized that Zhang Yang had payed for two bowls of noodles when he was at the counter. The girl obediently walked in front of him. When they walked out of the noodle shop, he lightly patted her back. She turned back to see his smiling, doting face.

You have to believe me. At that moment, I didn’t feel even a tiny bit of jealousy.

I don't know what jealousy is. But as you might suspect, I took him to be a present that I had commissioned. No matter how many people admired it, he was mine.

I was determined to make it happen.

Advertisement

Dearest Little Yang, you're mine.

I asked the lady boss for some paper and a pen. I quickly wrote down my phone number and ran outside. I saw Zhang Yang's back, and he was already almost inside the school gates. I rushed to stop him and pressed the paper into his hands. He took it and walked away without a trace.

Looks like he was even more of a sly fox than I was.

Zhang Yang's text came three days later. At the time, I was with Blackie at an internet cafe playing Ragnarok Online. An alert rang out from my phone. It was a number I didn't know, and the text said, "I'm at the noodle shop."

I pretty much jumped up from my seat, and told Blackie, "Something's come up, I have to go."

I left the internet cafe, sprinting to the noodle shop.

I ran to the entrance of the noodle shop and saw Zhang Yang stand up and walk outside. I understood and followed him. He walked to a small street near the shop. It was really hard to walk there, because houses were being constructed on both sides. Basically, there weren't any people there. I followed him for nearly 200 meters. He stopped in a dark corner, leaned up against the wall there, and lit up a cigarette.

I walked up to him, and wanted to say something. But I realized that I couldn't use the same satirical tone I used with Blackie.

He made me feel all sorts of clumsy and awkward.

I could only stand there and watch as he smoked.

He pulled out his cigarette case, handed it to me, asking, "You want one?"

I took one, and then realized I didn't have a lighter on me. So I put the cigarette in my mouth and leaned over to him. Without any hesitation, he very

cooperatively helped light me up. There was very little distance between us. His eyes were like stars, blinking in the sky. Suddenly, my eyes were wet for some reason.

He placed his hand on my cold face, and softly said, “Li Bala, you’re very famous.”

“Really?” I winked at him. “You’re chasing a famous girl. Soon, you’ll be famous too.”

He pulled me into his arms, and I could very clearly hear his heart beating. And my heart ridiculously followed along, beating fervently. Zhang Yang put his lips onto my ear, “I can chase you, but you have to promise me three things.”

“Hm?”

What Zhang Yang said then was very methodical, as if he’d gone over it in his mind many times before. He said, “One, you have to finish things up with that big and tall boyfriend of yours. Two, go pursue a boy named Xu Yi. No matter what methods you use, you have to catch him in your hands. Three, before you finish the first two things, no one is to know what’s going on between us.”

“No problem,” I said.

“You’re not going to ask why?”

“No.”

“Good.” He tightened his arms, and said, “_____” I listened and closed my eyes.

I didn’t translate what he said there because I have no clue what it means. Probably not important, right? Haha. (Original text: 你把劬P掌鹄础)

“Your eyeshadow... It’s green?” he said.

“Mm.”

“I like it. You’re really a very out of the ordinary girl.”

“Woman.” I opened my eyes to correct him.

He laughed coolly, and then he kissed me. I knew then, I was done for. I’ve kissed a lot of boys before, but Zhang Yang... He was different.

Zhang Yang was definitely different. Using a very old-fashioned phrase to describe it: If he were a flame, I would be the stupid, reckless moth.

The evening after I left Zhang Yang, I went to look for my cousin.

My cousin was the only one who could take care of Blackie. Maybe he got bored after being in the internet cafe for too long, but Blackie had already called me several times. I just didn't want to answer the calls. Zhang Yang was the only thing on my mind. My mouth smelled like a fragrant smoke, Zhang Yang's scent. I was a rippling pond, with no way to calm down.

In order to gain all this, I was willing to pay any price.

Eyes red, I told my cousin, "Blackie messed with me."

He looked at me and asked, "So what do you want to do?"

I told him, "Make him stop bothering me from now on."

The second day at school, Blackie would walk around me when he saw me. His crew was the same. When they saw me, they quickly tried to avoid me, just like a rat to a mouse.

I felt a calm I'd never felt before.

Of course, it was a bit lonely too.

I sat on the classroom windowsill and texted Zhang Yang. I told him that Blackie was easily taken care of, and asked when I should start on the second task. He didn't respond, and I was restless until the start of class.

I saw one of Blackie's subordinates, who said to me with a frightened voice, "Blackie bro wants to see you."

"But I don't want to see him," I said.

"Please, Bala sis. Just go see him, otherwise he'll beat me up."

"What's that got to do with me?!"

"Rather than hitting my body, why not just hurt in your heart," the boy said glibly.

I couldn't help but laugh. Alright, maybe I should go see Blackie once. I owed him an explanation. But I couldn't suffer any losses, so I said I'd meet him at

Forget It bar.

At 8 o'clock, Blackie showed up. He was, strangely, dressed very properly. He wasn't wearing any of those nonsensical things. He took a seat in front of me, and I passed him a cigarette.

His hand was shaking, and it took him forever to light it. We kept silent. After his cigarette was halfway gone, tears showed in his eyes. And then he leaned on the table and started to cry. He beat his fists onto the tabletop, like a low-grade TV drama actor. In order to keep him from a fool of himself, I pushed him to a small room behind the bar. He came to embrace me, and I pushed him away.

Bala," he pleaded, with tears running down his face. "Don't leave me. You know, I really like you."

"Doesn't matter," I said with a cold face. "I don't like you anymore."

"All along, I haven't touched you. It's because I really like you. Can you really not tell? I can't be without you."

God, he was actually so nauseating.

"Blackie," I walked closer to him and said. "Forget it, forget me."

With bloodshot eyes, he looked at me in despair.

Someone came and knocked on the door. I told him it was nothing, implying that he should go. Blackie wiped away his tears. As he made his way to the door, he turned around. In a very loud voice, he said, "Li Bala, remember this. I'm not afraid of your cousin. I'll still wait for you to give me another chance. I'm going to conquer you."

When he finished speaking, he made a clean exit.

It was the first time, in all the time that I'd known Blackie, that I'd felt he was kind of cute. His tears, his confidence all pointed to him being a real man. It was the first time I felt respect for him. But, he wasn't the kind of guy I liked. I liked someone like Zhang Yang. That was set by fate, and no one had any way to change that.

I calmly waited for Zhang Yang's news.

Then one day, he told me to get online.

I went on, and we added each other on QQ (instant messenger). He sent me a photo of the boy named Xu Yi. He also sent me the boy's daily schedule. He said, no matter what, I had to find a way to make this boy fall for me.

I asked him, "How are you going to thank me?"

He told me, "You think I don't know what you want? Don't worry. When the chance comes, I'll make your wish come true."

I responded, "Chances are created."

And he said, "I don't like speaking about terms with others, especially girls."

You see, I've searched mountains and rivers, and I finally found someone who was more bad than me. If I don't sacrifice my life for him, who would I sacrifice for?

In all my years, it was usually boys chasing after me. I had never so carefully and deliberately gone after someone. That's to say, this Xu Yi kid would be pretty happy. It was after I starting "chasing" him that I understood, that I found out that he and Zhang Yi were the same. They were both very influential at Tian High. Or in other words, they were enemies. But there was a lot that was different between them too. That is, Xu Yi was really a very good kid.

I was like a cloud of disaster, slowly swimming into his life. It wasn't that I didn't feel any guilt for what I was doing, but for my Little Yang, I had no other choice.

I thought up many plans to get close to Xu Yi. I would follow him after his evening self-study classes. Once, I even got a bicycle to ride around after him. Soon after, everyone knew that there was a bad girl, Bala, who was pursuing him. One time, he pulled another girl to walk along with him. He was trying to tell me he was already taken, but I didn't pay any care to that. I even flashed him a smile and gave a whistle. I shrugged and walked off to the side, no longer watching them.

On the weekends, I would go to the gym to watch him play ball in the afternoon. I'd always sit there the whole time, no matter how hot it got. When he scored a point, I'd shout loudly, "Xu Yi, I love you!" Actually, I was there to

watch Zhang Yang. What I really wanted to say was, “Little Yang, I love you.” Sometimes Zhang Yang would go there to play, but he’d never pay me any attention, as if he didn’t even know me. When students from the other schools came to play and heard my shouts, they’d cry out with ambiguous laughter. Xu Yi must have felt embarrassed, his face a bit red. But there was nothing he could do.

One time, I was following him and suddenly started singing out, “Hey, boy in the front! Look over here, look over here!” That scared him quite a bit, and he ran away. Later, I found out that when he walked alone, he would nervously look around a bit before he felt assured.

Sometimes I would write him a letter and leave it in his mailbox. I’d just talk about whatever, like my family’s cat, the flowers on the balcony, *etc.* But he never responded.

But I knew that I’d disrupted his life greatly.

He told me later that I was like a sweet-smelling plant that enchanted him. He wouldn’t know how to stop if he got caught in it, so it was best to just ignore it.

But finally, he gave into temptation. It was on the weekend, after school, when he came up to me and said, “Let’s go see that cat of yours!”

Hoo-hoo, I succeeded!

I really wanted to tell Zhang Yang about this news, but I didn’t have the time. I brought Xu Yi to the river bank. That was the only small river we had. Though there wasn’t a great view, it was very peaceful there. I saw a very good girl sitting on the river bank, reading. Maybe it was a novel or something. But when she saw us, she quickly put away her book and ran off.

I’ve seen this girl numerous times. She was very cute. I didn’t ever want to be that cute in this life.

Xu Yi asked me, “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing.” I looked away, “Have you finally fallen in love with me? So, chasing after guys was this much work, huh.”

At that side of that small river, Xu Yi walked away until he stood 5 meters away

from me, his back to me. I also didn't walk closer to him.

In the final moments of sunset, the sky was painted a lustrous red. The wind was very strong. I'd left home in a hurry that day, so my hair was tied into a messy bun. My hair now flew and stuck to my face. I said loudly to him, "So, you're not even willing to talk to me?"

"I'm really pretty, right? I know I'm really pretty."

"Xu Yi, my friend, I like you."

He clenched his fist, as if he wanted to punch a hole into something.

Eventually, I squatted down by the river, without another word. This surprised him, so he turned around, thinking I'd already left. Seeing me still there, he started to rub his eyes.

I muttered, "There's sand in my eyes."

I lifted my head up and said to him, "There's sand in my eyes. Come and help me blow it out, won't you? It really hurts."

He didn't move.

I said again, "It really hurts, okay? Come over and help me."

Xu Yi finally made up his mind, and he walked over and crouched down, wanting to see how my eyes were. When he saw the way my eyes were smiling, it was already too late. I reached out my hand, quickly and gently lifting up his face, and I kissed him. He was surprised by the kiss, but he didn't try to escape.

He was so wonderful, I was touched. In that moment, I really felt I wasn't a person.

I was tricking him, this wonderful child.

– The Left Ear –

Chapter 4

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4 Long Ago Dried Up Meadow

It's not that I didn't feel guilty, but love made me lose reason. At three in the morning, I ran over to an abandoned building on the outskirts of town. I climbed the stairs and went for a smoke. I watched as the cigarette butt dropped, a weak spark, hopelessly falling to the grass below.

There was dirty mud on the grass.

I told myself, "Bala, you're not bad. You're just capricious."

One day after school, I walked out and suddenly saw Xu Yi.

He was carrying a large backpack, leaning against the huge Chinese parasol tree at the school gate. He watched as I approached, his eyes carrying a grief that he tried to hide but couldn't hide.

I walked over and brightly said, "Handsome, what's up? You actually skipped class today?"

"I missed you, Bala." Xu Yi said with some difficulty, "I haven't heard from you in two days."

I extended my hand and pinched his face. "I'm sorry, baby. I've been so busy the last two days."

"Busy with what?" he asked.

"Busy with what... Hm, let me think." My eyes lifted up toward the sky, and I saw Blackie. A very tall Blackie, with seven or eight boys behind him, walking out from the school.

My heart skipped a beat.

I wanted Xu Yi to leave quickly, but it was already too late. Blackie's gang surrounded us quickly. He was wearing those dazzling metal ornaments again.

The way he looked, standing there silently, was kind of scary. He looked like a dog that would eat a person up.

I nudged Xu Yi and said, "Go first."

Xu Yi didn't move.

Blackie said gruffly, "Could this be the pretty boy that you like? Bala, your taste is really getting harder and harder to understand."

"You dare touch him?" I asked Blackie. "I'll be done with you."

"Hahaha!" Blackie laughed to the skies. "Li Bala, I just realized that you don't fucking know how to love!"

"Yeah," I said. "I fucking got rid of you, so now all you have left is to be jealous! What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? I don't want to do anything, I wouldn't know how. Even if I were going to do something, I wouldn't tell you about it!" Blackie said in a rushed voice. Such a tongue twister, but he actually said it so smoothly.

"Leave!" I hissed out.

Blackie's crew looked at me, one by one, anger all over their faces.

Xu Yi stood next to me, breathing heavily.

My mind was racing. If they started fighting, should I call 110 (emergency services) or find backup? Or should I go get a teacher? Before I could figure things out, Blackie snapped his fingers, and with a defeated voice said, "Let's go."

After he spoke, he was the first to turn around and walk away.

I'd just gotten a hold on my heavy heart, when something I never would have expected happened. Xu Yi charged forward, wielding fists. He came from behind and gave Blackie's shoulder a heavy blow. And he shouted out, "Baldie, I'm warning you. Don't you dare bully Bala! I won't let you bully her!"

Then, it was chaos.

My poor, thoughtless child... It was eight against one, so you can guess the outcome.

He was hit until his head was broken. He ended up lying in the hospital for an entire week, and he also got punished by his school.

In the end, my selflessness earned Zhang Yang's trust. He finally stopped over at my house. He raised his thumb at me, "Well done, girl. I knew you could do it."

The old woman was out playing mahjong again. From my experience, she definitely wouldn't be coming back.

I said, "Little Yang, you should reward me. I've led someone astray for you."

"Oh come on," he said. "Don't tell me it was the first time."

But it really was the first time. In my small room, I saw Zhang Yang approach me.

There was a mix of scents in my dorm. A light scent of female menstrual blood, the smell of undergarments, body wash and shampoo, and all sorts of perfumes. Of course, there was also Zhang Yang's scent. On the balcony, there was a pink wind-chime. At three in the afternoon, in the warm, idling air, you could hear a tinkling sound. All of this made me feel dizzy. I pushed him away gently, and jumped over my bed to the door, closing and locking it carefully. Slightly embarrassed, I sat down on my bed and said, "Come here."

That's how I was. For a love that came suddenly, that wouldn't see light, I selflessly gave myself.

This world has lied to me, so I must pay it back. I won't let go of any little bit of happiness that belongs to me.

I could see myself in Zhang Yang's eyes. Ah, how beautiful I was.

When I woke up, I realized he was still sleeping.

His eyes were closed, his breathing was even. Long eyelashes fluttered. Before then, I never knew that boys could have such long and pretty eyelashes. I couldn't help myself and reached out my hand. He didn't wake up, only letting out a vague grunt, before turning over and continuing to sleep. I got up from the bed and pulled on my nightgown. I saw a spot of red on my sheets, long and murky, like a map that suddenly had a new mark on it. It wasn't at all like I had imagined.

To be honest, I didn't think that it would hurt that much.

I turned and headed to the bathroom to clean myself up. In the mirror, I saw my face, slightly haggard, but unable to resist happiness. I squeezed the left side of my face, "Girl." And then the right, "Woman." Then I laughed out loud, shamelessly.

In the mirror, I also saw an upside down clock. My mother sent it from the US. I don't know why she sent a clock, but I knew it was very, very special. I remember when Grandma received this international package that had crossed thousands of miles, her face went purple with fury. She promptly threw the clock into the backyard. With dust flying, there came a deafening echo. In the middle of the night, I slipped out back and brought it back quietly. But since then, it's had to suffer staying inside this small bathroom that belonged only to me.

Right now, it was telling me that it was 7 at night.

I suddenly felt very hungry. I wasn't sure if the sleeping boy would also be hungry, but I knew that I should make something to eat before he woke up. I crept over to the door and walked out to the kitchen. The refrigerator was shamefully empty. It actually dared to call itself a refrigerator? I slammed the door shut and went to check the rice cooker. It was half full. I took a sniff, and it smelled...edible.

I decided to cook a pot pan of fried rice. It would feed me and my darling as well.

Of course, I also had to feed my cat.

I suddenly felt like I was a good, sweet girl, with such a sense of responsibility.

With my very contented heart, I began frying my rice. God knew, this was what I was good at. I completed the task with ease. Even when the oil was cooking in the pan, I found time to pick some green onions and vegetables from the backyard. Just as I finished up, I heard the sound of keys being inserted in the door.

My... That... Oh God.

I quickly turned off the fire, ran to my room, and locked the door.

After about a minute, the old woman started beating on my door, “Why did you close the door? Come out, come out! Do you hear me? Open the door!”

The fierce knocking woke up Zhang Yang. I covered his mouth and shrugged to him, helplessly. I signaled for him to remain silent.

With some confusion, he began to pull on his shirt and trousers. With even greater confusion, he looked at the ambiguous spots on the bed sheets. The old woman was rapping loudly on the door – oh, it should be that she was beating the door. “Li Bala, come out! Don’t think that I don’t know what you’re up to!”

I motioned to the window with my mouth, signaling to Zhang Yang that he should leave that way.

Zhang Yang took the hint. He held my face in his hands, and forcefully sucked on my lips, before he turned to the window and disappeared into the night.

I quickly closed the window. Then I turned around and grabbed some dirty clothes and magazines to cover up my sheets. Finally I went to open the door, lazily asking, “Aren’t you tired? You’re not young anymore, you should watch out for your health.”

The old woman came into my room in a flash. Her gaze and posture was like those secret agents in American movies. She scanned my room and asked, “Where is he?”

“Who?” I said.

“When you ran inside before, I saw someone lying on the bed.”

“You old people sure are interesting.” I saw down on the piles of clothes on my bed and flipped open a magazine. “Look. When you’re done, please get out. I want to sleep.”

“I’m warning you,” she walked closer, finger pointing to my nose. “If you want to make trouble, go ahead. But not here. Otherwise I’ll throw you out!”

“Where are you going to throw me to?” I asked her. “This house belongs to my father. Don’t you forget that.”

She angrily turned around and walked out.

I closed my door, sat down, and started clearing out my mind. I decided to take

care of the problem on my beds sheets. I didn't pull off the sheets, but rather, retrieved a basin of water, a brush, and some soap from the bathroom. Then I crouched down on the floor, slowly and patiently brushing at the sheet. I watched as the mark disappeared and melted away, as I smiled and thought how good a day it was. My wish finally came true. I gave myself to him.

How wonderful.

I didn't want to go anywhere that evening. Wearing a dirty pair of jeans and a thin, pink cardigan, I walked alone, along the river. I was feeling surprisingly good, and I even hummed a little tune. I kept recalling the moment when Zhang Yang's face was right up next to mine, and when I saw my beautiful reflection in his dark eyes. It was like a movie, replaying in my mind, over and over again, tirelessly.

I waited for so long. Finally, I, Li Bala, let the person I love, love me.

I leaned against a tree on the river side and pulled out my cellphone. My fingers slid along the orange screen and then dialed a number. The phone rang for a long time before someone answered it. A lazy male voice came, "Who's looking for Zhang Yang?"

"Me," I said, lighting up a cigarette.

"He went to evening self-study."

"Oh."

He hung up the phone, not caring about or asking who I was.

I guessed that he must have been Zhang Yang's father. Maybe there were too many girls who called Yang, so he was no longer curious about it. I felt a bit desolate, my mood dropping from boiling to freezing. Maybe it was because I was hungry. The taste of the cigarette in my mouth was unusually bitter. I got down from the tree and walked around twice. I began to feel uncontrollably irritable. I decided to go to the noodle shop to fill my stomach first.

The noodle shop was pretty empty and still at 9 PM, but the boss was smiling, waiting for the influx of students after evening self-study. During this idle time, the four shop boys were playing poker behind the counter. The boy who lost five dollars grew red in the face from shame, with a look of despair.

I put five dollars on the counter, “Extra beef! Large bowl of noodles!”

I found a suitable place to sit and continued smoking. They were 555s (cigarette brand). I wasn't used to smoking them, but when I wasn't feeling good, I would smoke 555. Then I saw her, wearing a cute backpack and a black T-shirt, her face flushed pink. She opened the door and came inside. This girl was from Tian High. I've seen her before, but we never spoke. To be honest, she really looked very cute, so much that I suddenly wanted to tease her a bit. I held my cigarette high, my eyes wandering to the TV, with an arrogant look on my face. I thought she would be afraid, that she'd frown and hide from me. Then I could have a great laugh about her loss.

Who knew that she would sit down right in front of me?

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That gave me a big surprise. I glanced over at her, and she was watching me, a pair of big, bright eyes. I felt a bit jealous. I decided to keep teasing her. I reached out my arm and took some of the cilantro from her bowl, placing it into my own. I thought that after that, she could stand up and angrily storm out. Who knew I'd be wrong again? She only looked at me briefly before lowering her head, continuing to eat her noodles, as if nothing had happened at all.

My interest in her started to grow. This child was quite cute and clever, so much that she really made people want to love her. I noticed that her ears were turning a cute red color. I always liked picking out nicknames for people, so I decided to call her Little Ear.

She was like my Little Yang, clean and pure.

Not long after, I found out her name. She was called Li Er. Sometimes she was called Wood Ear. The similarity between that name and the nickname I gave her was amazingly coincidental.

This world is like that, made up of innumerable coincidences. Little Ear and I weren't the same type of girl at all, but we came to understand each other and become good friends.

I swear, when we walked out of the noodle shop, and she pulled out her umbrella to give to me, that's what I thought.

“If you get wet, you’ll get a cold,” she said to me. I took the umbrella, and the handle was still warm from her hands. No one had treated me that well before. Moreover, we were strangers. My heart felt like a piece of cotton that had been punched, a deep nest being formed, unable to rise back up.

I held the umbrella, running all the way to Tian High. It wasn’t until I arrived that I realized I’d never opened it up. A lot of mud had splashed on my legs, making me look dirtier. I hid in a corner, hoping to see my dearest come out. My heart was tangled up with emotions, and I couldn’t escape. Suddenly, someone rapped lightly on my head, giving me a great fright.

“Hi,” he said. “I guessed you’d be here, and here you are.”

It was Xu Yi.

Oh, that was strange. I had been keeping an eye on the school gates, but I hadn’t seen him come out.

I smiled at him a bit stiffly.

“What’s the matter, Bala?” He took the umbrella in my hands and covered my head, asking with concern, “Your lips are purple. Are you cold?”

“Oh, a bit,” I said.

“You waited a long time for me, right?” Xu Yi said. “Third year (senior year) is like that. Even after self-study is over, the teacher talks on endlessly. But I can take tomorrow off. I think I can come out and play with you.”

I hugged myself as I listened to him speak. Absently, I responded, “Really? You’re not afraid of your mom?” I still watched the school gate out of the corner of my eye. And that’s when I saw him, walking out from the school, side by side with a girl. He had an umbrella, but it was always tilted a bit towards the girl. If I wasn’t remembering wrongly, I saw that girl at the noodle shop before.

Zhang Yang must have seen my too, but he didn’t pay me any attention. It seemed like he only nodded slightly at me and then walked past.

It was drizzling in the evening. There was a lingering scent of lilac in the air. I stood under Xu Yi’s umbrella, watching Zhang Yang hold an umbrella for another girl, as they walked past me. That girl’s face was filled with a proud

arrogance as well as happiness. For the first time, I realized what it meant to be crushingly defeated, to be utterly heartbroken. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't pull my gaze away from their backs. I really wanted to jump out at them and snatch away his umbrella and stand in front of them. But I couldn't do it, because I knew very clearly that if I did, then Zhang Yang would never be mine.

I swallowed. A bit of impatience spoils great plans.

"What are you looking at?" Xu Yi asked me. "Do you know him?"

"No," I said. "I just think he's kind of handsome."

Xu Yi tried hard to laugh, "Is he handsome, or am I more handsome?"

"Of course my boyfriend is more handsome." I grabbed onto Xu Yi's arm and said, "Look at them like that. Let's go over and see who's the better couple!"

He stretched out his arm and pulled me to walk in front of him. With one hand, he held the umbrella, and with the other, he made sure that I walked forward carefully. We turned a corner, and another, and another, until we arrived at a place he thought was safe. We were under a large building.

It was an office building, and it was empty in the night, pitch dark.

I leaned against the wall. Xu Yi extended his hand, resting it atop my head. I could smell the scent from his body, youthful and eager, very different to Zhang Yang. This kid that I turned bad... I was afraid he would kiss me at that moment, so I turned my head and rested my chin on my shoulder. The fakeness of that innocent action made me a bit disgusted (at myself).

Voice hoarse, Xu Yi said, "Bala, the more I see you, the more beautiful you are. Really."

"Are you going the ball court to play tomorrow?" I asked, evading his comment.

"Didn't I say I would spend the day with you tomorrow?" he said. "Think it over, where should we go to play?"

"I don't have anywhere to go tonight," I said.

"What's wrong?"

“I had a fight with the old lady at home, so I left,” I said.

“Ah? Then what are you going to do?” He seemed a bit flustered.

Without reason, I said, “I want you to stay with me. Tonight, the whole night.”

“But, Bala...” He held me. “But my mom...”

“Forget it.” I lightly pushed him forward. Pretending not to care, “Forget it. I’ll stay at the bar for the night. It will be day soon anyway. You should hurry home. Bye bye!”

“Bala!” He rushed over to grab me. “Don’t be angry. I’ll think of something.”

“Like what?” I said.

Surprisingly, he said, “Why don’t you come to my house!”

I stared at him with eyes wide open.

– The Left Ear –

Chapter 5

– The Left Ear –

5 Straight to the Point

“My house is big, and my parents don’t come out of their room at night. Stay around my house, and I’ll go inside first. When it’s safe, I’ll send you a text and open the door for you. And in the morning, you can leave early. They won’t know at all.”

“Then where would I sleep?” I asked, straight to the point.

“Sleep...” He thought for a moment before saying, “You can sleep wherever you want.”

“Deal,” I said.

That day, 80% of my brain was bad. I had this impulse to do something bad, and I couldn’t stop myself. I thought of Xu Yi’s parents, and said to myself loftily – Li Bala, you really are something. You know you’re walking into a tiger’s den, but you don’t care.

Xu Yi brought me home. When we were almost at the door, he motioned for me to wait as he went inside.

His home was on the fourth floor. I waited between the third and fourth floors, lifting my leg up to the railing, and then I pulled out my 555 (smoke). It was the last cigarette in the box, so I crumpled the box and tossed it down. Then I suddenly wondered if Xu Yi, this good kid, would have any smokes. If not, it would be a very long night here.

Just as I was thinking about it, my phone rang. I turned the ringer on my phone off, and the screen kept flashing the words “Zhang Yang.”

I answered the phone, a bit flustered.

“Where are you?” he asked.

I bit down on my smoke and said, "I'm at Xu Yi's, waiting for his parents to sleep. Then I'll slip inside and spend the night with him."

"You dare?!" he said.

"I guess so," I responded.

"Come to the old place, I'll be waiting." When Zhang Yang was done speaking, he hung up.

I was glad I didn't wear my pointed shoes that day. I put away my phone and ran down from Xu Yi's place. I ran the 100 meters or so to that small street – that familiar, muddy path. Thinking of my darling waiting there for me, I felt like a light dove, the wind whistling beneath my wings.

He was really there.

I slowed my steps, calmed my breathing, and slowly walked closer to him.

I was worried that it was just a dream.

"Hi." He was leaning against the wall, wearing his cap again.

"Hi." I extended my hand and waved through the air, looking like a major fool.

He hooked his fingers to mine, and I was like a child shooting marbles (?). In an instant, I was in his arms. As I held him onto him, I thought I wouldn't ever want to let go. Even if the heavens split and the earth sinks, I wouldn't.

"Bala," Zhang Yang spoke into my ear. "I think I've actually fallen a bit in love with you."

I closed my eyes, not responding.

In my heart, I proudly thought, "Of course, of course."

"I want to talk to you," Zhang Yang said. "I'm just afraid there isn't a place."

"Come with me!" I broke free from his arms, and pulled him along as I ran. After a while, he stopped and asked me, "Hey, where are you taking me to?"

"Shh!" I turned around, raising a finger to his lips, motioning for him to be quiet. He grabbed onto my waist and started kissing me forcefully.

"Bala, Bala..." he said. "I love you. I can't let you be together with anyone else."

I can't!"

"Okay, okay," I said, as if coaxing a small child. I patted his back, saying, "I won't be together with anyone else. I promise."

"Okay." He lifted his head and asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"Let's go, I'll take you somewhere." I grabbed his hand and kept running forward. After we'd gone half way, he let go, and then grabbed my hand in his. He smiled playfully and said, "I'm more used to it like this."

"Are you usually the one who holds a girl's hand first?"

"No, I'm never the one to initiate." He laughed again.

Under the winter moon, I couldn't stop watching his expression. I couldn't calm my excited emotions. And like that, we held hands, heading toward the outskirts of town, to the abandoned house I often went to.

First, I climbed the roof with a sense of familiarity, and Zhang Yang followed behind. He asked me, with a sense of strangeness, "How did you find this place? I never knew there was such a place."

"This place used to be a labor workshop. But they stopped making things, so the place has been left empty. There's nothing at all inside. When I'm not feeling good, I like to run over here, and sit on the roof by myself."

"Then, what about now? You're not feeling good?" Zhang Yang asked me, as he pushed away the hair in my face."

I stopped him and cleaned up my messy hair, tying it up.

Seeing how he stared at me as I tied my hair up with a rubber band, I hit him with and asked, "What are you looking at!"

He smiled and then sat down on the roof, looking off into the distance.

I took out my silenced phone and saw that I had ten missed calls. All from Xu Yi. There was a text as well. "Where did you go? I want to see you right now. Come over, okay?"

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I didn't care and just turned off the phone. Sitting next to Zhang Yang, I asked,

“What do you want to talk about?”

“Do you think that I’m a very bad person?” He cut right to the chase.

“A bit,” I said. “Almost as bad as me.”

“I don’t think you’re bad,” he said. “I never would have thought that it would be your first time today.”

“Oh,” I said. “It’s better not to talk about that, don’t make it awkward.”

“Do you regret it?” he asked.

“Of course not,” I said with a laugh.

“Why?” He turned to ask me, his eyes burning brightly.

I answered, “I love you, Zhang Yang. You lured me in, and from the first moment I saw you, I fell in love with you.”

“You’re not at all ordinary,” he said. “You should know, at the start, I just wanted to use you.”

“I was willing to be used.”

“This might bring you trouble.”

“Even if it causes my death, since it was trouble you brought, I would still enter the underworld with a smile.”

“Bala, there’s a lot I want to say to you. You’re the first girl who’s made me want to pour (my heart) out.”

“Then talk.” I moved closer to him, and I could feel the warmth from his body. I reached my finger out to his face, swimming back and forth. He pulled my hand down, placing it over his chest, and I could feel his heart beating. Ba-dump, ba-dump, beating steadily, beating for me. I couldn’t be any more happy, when I heard Zhang Yang say, “Actually, ever since I was born, I wasn’t a happy child.”

“Why?” I asked softly.

“When I was two years old, my mother left me and my father, to run off and get married to some other man.”

“So what?” As if trying to comfort him, I said, “My parents both left me and

went abroad.”

“I wish she had gone abroad, to somewhere I couldn’t see or feel. But, you know what? She stayed here, and gave her love away to someone else. She could hate my father, but I couldn’t understand how she could hate the child who she gave birth to. What do you think, can there be such a mother in the world?”

I suddenly recalled, “Oh yeah, when I called earlier, it was your father who picked up.”

Zhang Yang said, “Should have been. He doesn’t care about my matters.”

“Your mom, where exactly did she go?”

Zhang Yang sat still and pulled me closer. He said to me, “Listen closely. My mother is now Xu Yi’s mother. Xu Yi and I were about the same age. My mother thought my father was too poor, so she fell in love with Xu Yi’s father. Then she just left us to marry him.”

So that was it!

I asked, “Then what about Xu Yi’s mom?”

Zhang Yang said coldly, “Xu Yi’s father is scum. That poor woman, I heard she took some money and returned to the countryside.”

“So... Your mom became Xu Yi’s mom?”

“Seems unthinkable, right?” Zhang Yang said. “I never would have thought that there could be a mother like that. I’ve gone to the same school as Xu Yi since elementary school. She would come for parent-teacher meetings for Xu Yi, and when she saw me, she couldn’t even bother to give me a glance. And Xu Yi was always that kid, always first in everything. I couldn’t stand it. Every day, I would wonder, if he couldn’t move again... I admit, I was very contemptible.”

I felt Zhang Yang’s tears, a warmth flowing down the back of my hand, in the cold winter night.

“That’s enough (don’t keep talking).” I lifted my face and moved closer to him. He held onto me tightly, his head moving over my chest, and he let out a suppressed whimper.

I felt a pain, as if my heart were being torn apart.

This lonely child. I promised I would never let him cry another tear.

Never ever.

Never.

I arrived home at 3 in the morning.

I thought I was going to have a big fight with the old lady. For example, maybe she locked the door, and no matter how much I knocked, she wouldn't open it. And maybe she would also close my window, so I wouldn't be able to get inside that way either. Then maybe I would screech at the door, or use the garbage can to charge at it. I was too excited, so I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to cause a little trouble.

But that's not what happened at all. I put my key in the door and easily opened it.

I went into my room and lied on my bed, fully clothed I didn't bathe. I couldn't bear to. I wanted my body to retain the scent of the person I loved, the scent of the evening, the scent of the Double Happiness (cigarettes) that we smoked, and also...the scent of love.

I tried to sleep for half a day, but I still couldn't fall asleep. So I sat up. With a ballpoint pen, I wrote on a piece of paper, "I'll definitely make him happy."

I brought the pen to my mouth, as if it were a cigarette, and looked at my unpretty handwriting with satisfaction.

This was an oath I made to myself. I would do all I could to carry it out. So at 3 in the morning, I texted Xu Yi, "Forget me."

After I sent it, I threw my phone to the side and fell asleep.

At 6 in the morning, strangely, I woke up. I checked my phone as usual. There was a message from Xu Yi, "I will always love you, Bala."

Always?

Always*. In this case, literally would translate to "for this lifetime."

Then he should just treat me as if I were dead.

Soon enough, the whole city knew about Xu Yi and I breaking up.

One day, Xu Yi showed up to Forget It Bar and ordered ten bottles of beer. He sat here, drinking slowly. He didn't say that he wanted to find me, but everyone knew that he was using this method to force me out (to see him).

It had been several days since I'd sent him the text message, and since then, I hadn't bothered with him. I wanted him to realize it quickly. This was a plot. The sooner he ended his misery, the less guilt I would feel.

I'd actually always been a bright, good girl.

But he wasn't able to understand my good intentions. I heard that that night, he'd gotten really drunk, and his parents had to come to drag him away. He wasn't willing to go though. He broke all the beer bottles, cried out my name loudly, and grabbed onto the bar doors, refusing to let go.

I spent that entire night with Zhang Yang, and I didn't know about what happened at the bar. I turned off my phone, locked my door, and turned off the lights. In the darkness, we explored each other, and I felt like a volcano erupting before being extinguished. From hope to despair, and despair to rebirth, again and again, tirelessly.

After he left, I sat alone in the dark. The moonlight was coldly shining on my red-patterned dress. Then I had a thought. I would have Zhang Yang's child.

With this thought having emerged, I could no longer get rid of it. I spent a lot of time considering the price I would have to pay. Dropping out from school, being cast aside by thousands of people, becoming the topic of a tabloid, or becoming the antagonist of a TV station... But actually, all of those thoughts were in vain, because this was something I was very clear about. I was a very committed person, and for this idea, I would give up everything.

That's when my mom called. She said she'd already taken care of the formalities. She was taking me away.

I held onto my phone for a long time. This was something I had once looked forward to so much. When they had just left, I had cried into my pillow all night long. At the time, I was very fragile and sensitive, dependent on someone for everything. But now, it was all different. I wasn't the Bala from back then anymore.

I was me, and no one could change that.

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“Not going,” I said.

On the other end, there came a sigh. “Mom and Dad will work hard to make up for all these years.”

“You should give up on this, it’s not going to happen.”

I quickly realized where I was wrong.

I went to the drugstore and bought a piece of blue paper. It reportedly could tell the result. I hid in the bathroom and watched as a red line slowly appeared on the blue sheet. A little smile appeared on my face.

I sent a text to Zhang Yang, telling him that my heart hurt from how much I missed him. Forgive me for such language, but it was really how I felt. After I sent the text, I returned home. The old lady had called over a bunch of people to play mahjong at my house again. I walked around the living room to my bedroom, and no one paid me any attention.

When I got to my room, I closed the door, and dropped onto my bed. I fell asleep very quickly.

I was a bit hazy when I heard a knocking sound. I opened my eyes and saw him there, wearing his handsome cap. But he wasn’t at the door, he was knocking on the window.

I jumped out from bed and opened the window to let him in.

He gave a few breaths, “It’s really cold. I was standing there knocking for ages before you woke up.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I fell asleep.”

“Sleeping in the middle of the day, I salute you,” he said.

“Of course I have to sleep.” I pat my stomach and said, “Now I have to take good care of myself.”

He looked at me a bit nervously. He really was such a smart kid.

I sat down on my bed and pat the spot beside me, “Come, sit down.”

Zhang Yang pointed outside.

I said, "Don't worry, as long as the sky doesn't fall down, the people outside won't pay any attention."

Zhang Yang sat down next to me and held me, "You know, when I got your text, I lied to the teacher to get out of class. I couldn't let you feel sad, isn't that right?"

When he said that, I felt a pang to my heart. It was the kind of pain that came from happiness, and it was harder to bear than real pain.

"When you finish school, we can spend all the days together," I said.

He thought for a moment, "I have to get into Tsinghua (University), Bala. Will you come to Beijing with me? I really like Beijing."

"Okay," I said. "I'll go with you. You can study, and I'll wait for you with our son."

He said, "Don't say nonsense."

I pat my stomach, "I want to give birth to him."

His face turned green in a moment.

"It's fine," I said. "I'll definitely raise him well and let him have a good life."

He turned my face and looked into my eyes, "This bad kid who likes to lie. Watch how I'll take care of you!"

He started tickling me, and I laughed, trying to hide. I didn't dare be too loud, lest the people outside the room would hear me. Zhang Yang grinned, his plot having succeeded. It was at that moment that I suddenly felt a pain in my stomach. I pushed him away and walked quickly to the bathroom. Then I vomited.

When I finished vomiting, I turned around to see Zhang Yang standing at the door.

He was wearing his cap again. And with a tone that scared me, he asked, "Is it really true?"

I rinsed my mouth with water from a glass.

He said, “I asked you, is it really true?”

I spit out the water from my mouth, and said clearly, “Yes.”

He came over, pinched my chin and said, “Get rid of him.”

“Dearest,” I held onto him. “Let me give birth to your son. Don’t worry, I am capable of raising him.”

He pushed me away, and pointed at me with his finger. “I’m only going to tell you once more. Get rid of him. Remember, I don’t want to say it again!”

“Okay,” I said, lowering my head.

“Good.” He reached out his hand and stroked my hair. Then shortly said, “I’m going back to class. We’ll text each other.”

“Zhang Yang!” I reached out to grab him. “When can I see you again?”

“We’ll meet when it’s time to meet. Take this money, it’s all I have. If it’s not enough, you figure it out. If you need to borrow it, I’ll pay you back when I get next month’s pocket money.” When he finished speaking, he pulled out all the money in his pockets and dropped it on my bed. He turned away coldly, went out the window, and disappeared.

I feebly walked to the bed and sat down.

There was 333 dollars in total.

A very ominous number.

The word for three, 三 (sān), sounds like the word for scatter *parting* leaving, 散 (sàn).

– The Left Ear –

Chapter 6

– The Left Ear –

6 Memories That Can Never Be Erased

I looked at the bed sheet and saw a trace of the mark that was still there, that memory that would never be erased. I didn't regret it. No matter the craziness, I wouldn't regret it.

I told myself, "Zhang Yang, dearest, I'm sorry. This time, Bala won't be listening to you."

When Xu Yi saw me again, I was having ice cream on the street.

Recently, I've always been wanting to eat certain foods. Sometimes it's soy milk, sometimes it's cake, and sometimes it's melon seeds. That day, I wanted to eat ice cream.

Standing on the street, I ate the five-colored ice cream tastily.

Xu Yi walked up to me, "It's such a cold day, you should be careful of your health."

That gave me a great big fright. I turned around and saw him. He wore an overstated coat, jeans, and he wasn't carrying a backpack. His eyes were bloodshot, and he was thinner.

I feigned an easygoing smile, "Child, you have final exams. You can't skip class."

"What's the difference," Xu Yi said. "Whether I skip or not, it will be the same."

I flipped my ice cream over. "Don't give up on yourself. Forget the past and start again." The ice cream dripped to the ground, like thick tears.

"I want to know why," he persisted. "When you love someone, how can you forget just because someone says to forget? Where did your passion at the start go?"

“I’m heartless.”

“Rubbish!” His bloodshot eyes scolded me.

I laughed, lifted my head, and finished my ice cream in one bite. I waved bye at him and strode away.

Dejected, he called after me, “I can’t forget you!”

I kept walking forward, ruthlessly. When I passed the street corner, I couldn’t stand it anymore and turned around to look at him. He stood alone on the winter street, serious and desolate, with an air of desolation. Large cotton (?) fell down, his wings that could not fly.

And then I received Zhang Yang’s text.

He said, “I’ll be waiting at the old place.”

I looked at my phone, it was almost 6 in the evening. Winter days were getting dark quickly, and dusk had already come. When I arrived at the old place, the sky was already dark. I saw him leaning there. He wasn’t smoking, but playing with his phone. When he heard my footsteps approaching, he looked up and waved in greeting.

“Which girl are you texting?” I walked close to him, trying to see his phone.

He didn’t pull his phone away. I realized it was a new phone. Samsung, new, impressive.

I pulled my coat together. With my back to him, I whispered, “We haven’t seen each other in half a month, dearest. Why didn’t you come to my place when you were free?”

“We have a test in the night self-study class. I only have 15 minutes.” He turned me around and started kissing me. With his other hand, he held his phone and took a picture of the kiss. When I saw what he was doing, I laughed. He let go a bit and whispered, “Concentrate!”

But I couldn’t. I started to feel the uncontrollable nausea again. I pushed him away and crouched down on the side of the road, trying my hardest not to vomit. He quickly crouched down as well, asking, “What’s going on? You still haven’t got rid of it?”

God bless, I felt a lot better.

I stood up and said, "It's nothing. I just have a slight cold."

He looked at me, unbelieving.

I shouted out loud, "I already said I was fine."

"Li Bala," he pointed at me with his phone. "If you dare lie to me, do you know what will happen?"

I softly leaned against the wall, smiling as I said, "Are you going to kill me? I really wish you would."

"Don't lie to me. I don't believe you right now." He started getting agitated. "I'm warning you, you'd better not provoke me!"

"And what if I do provoke you?" I also started to not believe, and I became angry, sneering, "I really want to know. Will you scold me or hit me? Or say you want to break up?"

He put his phone into his pocket, walked to me, and pinched my chin. "Do you know, the thing I hate most is when someone threatens me."

His eyes looked very scary, as if they were going to start dripping blood.

I sensibly didn't answer.

I waited for him to calm down a bit.

"Answer me. Did you get rid of the kid in your stomach? Don't lie!"

"No," I said.

"Say that again, louder. I didn't hear you."

"No!" I cried out.

"This crazy woman, what are you trying to do?" He pushed me against the wall and started hitting my body with his knee. Once, twice, three times... He seemed like he was using all his strength. It hurt so much that I couldn't breathe. Forget screaming. I could only open my mouth and bite down on his arm. Just as I felt I was about to faint, someone suddenly charged out from nowhere, and pushed aside Zhang Yang.

I tried to see who it was. Little Ear!

After she pushed away Zhang Yang, she spread her arms out in front of me, protecting me. I could clearly tell that she was afraid. She was shaking, but she courageously stood there, like a mother bird protecting her babies. Firm, not willing to leave.

“Get away!” I shouted to Zhang Yang. I was really afraid he might hurt Little Ear.

Seeing a stranger appear, Zhang Yang felt a bit afraid. As he stepped back, he stretched his finger out. In a low voice, he said, “Go ahead and try. If you don’t get rid of it, I’m not going to forgive you!” Then he left without looking back.

I couldn’t hold myself up anymore, sliding down the wall. I knelt on the ground, clutching my abdomen.

My Little Ear, oh, thank you.

That evening, Little Ear, who probably counted as a stranger, sent me home. Her small, warm hand held mine, leading me through the painful city, giving me a sense of stability.

The pain also strangely seemed to be diluted by her warmth.

That evening, I learned her name. Li Er.

Er as in ear, with a *wang* radical.

When she helped me apply medicine, I told her my secret. I couldn’t keep it in anymore, and I really wanted to tell someone. To me, she’d already become someone I could pour my heart out to.

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In all my years, the one person who made me want to pour my heart out.

I knew she wouldn’t betray me. But even if she did, I wouldn’t blame her. This little girl named Little Ear made all the goodness in my activate. She made me more tender and soft than when I was in love. I have no way to describe this feeling, but it gave me happiness, so I just went with it.

With God as my witness, I was very lonely.

That night, I watched her leave, that cute little girl. I was worried she'd be afraid, but I really didn't have the strength to send her home. She turned back and smiled at me. Her smile was as bright as starlight. I leaned against the door and blew a kiss to her. She blushed. She put her hands together and tilted her head, motioning for me to sleep early. Then she turned around and left. I was a bit dazed as I watched her walk away and disappear into the distance.

The old lady's game was finished oddly early. She had a cup of tea and kept looking outside. Very strangely, she asked, "Is she from Tian High?"

I ignored her and went back to my room.

I didn't expect that Zhang Yang would come that night.

It was 12 o'clock. I hadn't slept yet, when there was some motion at the window. I jumped up and opened the window. There he was.

We stood there, on either side of the window. The biting winter wind flew inside. I watched him, but didn't tell him to come inside. Finally, I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry." He was like a small child, lowering his head to apologize.

He was trembling, his inner fears coming out. "No matter what happens in the future, Bala, you have to remember, I really love you. I really do. You're the first girl who's made me feel something."

"Okay," I said defeatedly. "I'll go to the country hospital to take care of it tomorrow."

"I don't want to either," Zhang Yang said. "But we'll have a second one, a third one. We'll walk down the street, holding their hands. Just give me some time. I'll give you happiness."

"How long?" I asked him.

"How long are you willing to wait?" he turned the question back to me.

"For my whole life," I hesitated. After I spoke, I chuckled at my own words. He asked nervously, "Why are you laughing?"

I honestly responded, "I'm laughing at myself, for having become the kind of girl without a backbone that I used to hate the most!"

He hugged me, his cold feet against mine. He didn't say anything.

After awhile, it seemed like he'd fallen asleep. Even when there was a light snoring, I didn't wake him to leave. Instead, I set my phone alarm for 6 AM. When he woke up, I wanted the first thing he saw to be the person he loved the most.

I wanted to be the person he loved the most.

For the rest of his life.

It must be that way.

The 102 bus, all the way from the terminal to the country hospital.

It was about an hour away from the city by car. I'd been there before, two years ago. That time, I'd accompanied one of my cousin's girlfriend for an abortion. My cousin gave me 2,000 RMB (about 300 USD), and left an unfortunate girl in my hands. That girl was one year younger than me. All along the way, she chewed her gum nonchalantly, and kept sharing boring details about her and my cousin, including how he flirted with her. She was washing my cousin's clothes for him, and then it was almost like falling into a fairy tale. I saw her sharp fingernails, and I knew right away that she wasn't the kind of person to be hardworking. Moreover, my cousin didn't even like her. He probably just liked her because she was young and naive.

The hospital was dirty, and the nurse's face was very stiff. I remember how she was chewing her gum as she went into the operating room. She might have even been whistling. But when she came out, it was like she became a completely different person. Her face had gone pale, and she could hardly stand up. I'll never forget how she grabbed tightly to my collar and told me, "I want to kill your cousin."

Now, it was time to go back.

I went by myself, but there was no one pulling my collar. It was just me.

I also whistled loudly, as I walked into the hospital.

I remember the OBGYN department was on the third floor. After I took my ticket and walked to the second floor, my phone rang. A text came. It was Little

Ear with greetings. Being remembered was such a happy thing. I happily returned her call. She still spoke very softly. It was so timid that it made you want to jump through the phone to hold her. When I finished talking to Little Ear, my phone rang again. This time, it was Zhang Yang. He was definitely in the school courtyard making this call. I could hear the sound of the wind blowing past.

“We’re in physical education class,” he said. “I remembered you, so I ran off to call you. It’s really cold today. Make sure to take care of yourself.”

“Mm,” I said.

“Is everything taken care of?”

“I’m doing it now.”

“By yourself?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated before saying, “That won’t do, Bala. Why don’t you wait two more days. Wait until I’m on break, and I’ll go with you. You can’t go by yourself.”

“It’s okay.”

“I said it won’t do!” Zhang Yang said. “To be honest, I was really nervous today. I keep worrying that something (bad) will happen. Hurry and get on the bus and come back. At most, it’ll be a week before I’m on break. I can take several days off. Let me go with you.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m already here. Once it’s taken care of, you won’t have to worry.”

“But what if something happens to you? Wouldn’t that be more worrying?” Zhang Yang asked. “Listen to me, and come back.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I love you,” he spit out the words. Then he hung up.

I was in a bit of a trance. I stuffed my phone into my jeans pocket. Standing on the staircase, I wasn’t sure if I should go up or down. Two nurses passed by me,

looking at my pretty, pointed heels and my strange hairdo. Then they finally left.

I finally turned around and went down the stairs.

In that moment, I realized. Even if Zhang Yang hadn't called, I wouldn't have been able to carry this out. Inside of me was my own baby. My dearest and me, our baby. He deserved to be born into the world. No one could kill him, I couldn't kill him.

It's just that love made me softhearted for a moment.

I took the 102 bus back to the terminal. As we passed Tian High, I couldn't stop myself from getting off. I stood in a corner, not far from the campus. Originally, I wanted to see Zhang Yang and give him a surprise. I didn't see him though. But I did suddenly spot Little Ear. She was wearing a pink jacket again, her face flushed, looking very cute.

She walked home alone, looking rather lonely.

I know that she treated me as a good friend, but I couldn't pull up the courage to shout to her in front of Tian High. I'm someone surrounded by trouble. So I stayed in my corner, silently watching as she left.

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The next time I saw Little Ear was already the third day of the new year. Zhang Yang went to his grandmother's place in Shanghai. He said he'd go to the hospital with me when he came back. I was a bit more energized, and I didn't feel like sleeping all day anymore. I could even make jokes. I was joking with a friend at Forget It Bar, when I saw Little Ear. It surprised me. I didn't really like that she was coming to this kind of place. I pulled her outside.

But then she brought up...Xu Yi.

It should have been the second time now. The first time was at the noodle shop. I suddenly felt a bit cheerful. It looked like my Little Ear was struggling with a crush. There were a lot of kids like that at Tian High, not daring to love, not daring to hate. Not even daring to speak out loudly. Those people didn't have anything to do with me, but I couldn't not care about Little Ear.

She told me that Xu Yi did very poorly on his final exams. She wanted me to help him. I smiled and looked at her. I was sure my smile would unsettle her, but

it didn't. She softly pleaded with me.

I really couldn't stand her begging, so ridiculously, I agreed to see Xu Yi. But I had her bring Xu Yi over. She turned around and went to find him. To be honest, I didn't really think she'd be able to bring Xu Yi here. When I was on stage, singing the familiar, sad song, I saw Xu Yi. He had run over. Little Ear wasn't in his eyes at all. He rushed straight to me, asking, "Is it true about you and Zhang Yang?"

So it was out in the open now.

I didn't deny it, and simply said, "Yes."

Xu Yi was like a madman, clutching onto me, refusing to let go, as if he wanted to take my life. I saw my cousin at the counter snap his fingers. Several people surrounded us and pulled him away. They started kicking him. I wanted to stop them, but two people held me back, pulling me over to the counter. I shouted to my cousin, "Don't fight him! Just throw him out!"

My cousin struck a match and said, "This kid's been causing trouble all day. That won't do."

Then I saw Little Ear, my brave Little Ear. She threw herself into the group of people, wanting to protect Xu Yi with her thin body. I ran over, trying to grab her, but I couldn't grab her. I watched helplessly, as a beer bottle hit her on the head.

Blood streamed down her face. Maybe she felt pain, maybe she felt fear, as she softly lied on the ground.

I rushed forward and slapped the rotten guy who broke the bottle. It didn't seem like enough, so I hit him again with the back of my hand.

Finally, the bar settled down.

I bent down and held Little Ear in my arms. She seemed to be completely unconscious. I shook her with all my life. Her eyes flickered open, before closing again.

Beside me came a voice, "Bala, stop shaking her. She'll be fine. I'll go get a doctor."

“No need,” I said coldly. “Take her to my house!”

Xu Yi crawled up from the ground and looked at the girl laying in my arms. It seemed like he didn't recognize her, and he didn't understand why she would act so selflessly for him. I said to him, “You'd better go. Remember, her name is Li Er. She likes you. In the future, you're not allowed to bully her. You hear me?”

“What kind of games are you playing?” he asked, voice hoarse.

This unreasonable idiot! I wouldn't care about him anymore.

With two boys carrying Little Ear, we left Forget It Bar.

Little Ear, I'm sorry. It's my fault. I shouldn't have let you get hurt. I held her close, my heart aching. I wished the person who'd gotten hurt was me instead of her.

With God as my witness, what I said was the truth of all truths.

Later on, I saw something Little Ear had written on her blog. She said that she wanted to become a bad girl. That made me feel overjoyed. She didn't know. Bad wasn't something you became, it was something you were born as.

I said it before. I was born as a bad girl.

Oh, no. A bad woman.

During winter break, I got sick.

– The Left Ear –

Chapter 7

– The Left Ear –

7 Cousin's Phone Call

It was a pretty serious sickness. I had a fever, I vomited, and my whole body felt like it had no strength. That meant that going to the hospital for my operation kept getting pushed back.

Not even two days passed after Zhang Yang returned from Shanghai, and he had gone back to school for class. The third year (senior/last year) studies meant he didn't have free time to think about me. One day, I was sick and lying in bed, when a knock came at the door. The old lady wasn't home. I thought it was someone here to collect the water or electric fee, so I didn't bother with it and pretended I hadn't heard.

About 15 minutes later, I got a call from my cousin asking, "Where are you?"

"I'm sick, hatching chicks at home," I said.

"What kind of sickness? Love-sickness?"

"You're right."

"How about this, I'll go visit you now."

"Boss, no need to go so far."

"That's it. I'll see you soon."

He hung up. I thought he was just kidding around. He wasn't a very serious person. I'd never taken anything he said to heart. But not too long later, someone really came knocking on the door. Through the door gap(?), I saw his dirty off-road car, so I opened the door.

When I opened the door, I was stunned.

My cousin was sitting in his car, he hadn't gotten out. And then he drove away. Standing on front of the door was a beautiful woman holding a big bad. When

she called out to me before, I almost didn't recognize her. She hadn't aged at all. In fact, she looked even younger and more elegant than I remembered her.

"I came over before and knocked. You didn't open the door, so I thought you weren't home."

"I was sleeping," I said.

"What? You're not going to welcome (invite) me inside?"

"What do you mean?" I moved aside. "This is your house. There's no such thing as welcoming or not welcoming."

She smiled, carried in her luggage, and took a look around. "This place hasn't changed at all. But you've gotten bigger and prettier."

"You're really too polite," I said sarcastically.

"I'm here to pick you up. Your father and I have everything set. We've found your school as well. Oh right, how is your English?"

"I only know one sentence." I dropped onto the sofa, and patted the armrest. With a sing-song voice, I said, "Fuck you!"

I wasn't sure if it was because my pronunciation wasn't right or if she had already prepared herself. But she wasn't angry at all.

The door opened. The old lady, keys in her hand, scolded, "Why is the door unlocked? What if a thief came inside?"

When she looked up, she saw her.

For a brief moment, the old lady looked surprised. Then she took a broom from behind the door, pointed it at her, "Get out! Out! You said you weren't coming back, so you should never appear in front of me!"

She said gently, "Don't be angry. I'm just here to take Bala, and I'll go."

"I'm not going!" I jumped up from the sofa. I went to my room and slammed the door shut.

"Bala," she came to my room and knocked on the door. "Open the door, I (Mom) want to talk to you!"

Then the old lady screamed, "Are you going or not?! If you're not leaving, I'm

going to call the police!”

I opened my door a crack, “That’s enough! Is that shameful or not, calling the police! If you’re able, call the Flying Tigers (?), just call the all the federal agents! Let them broadcast it on Phoenix TV!”

The old lady was so surprised by my words that she couldn’t say anything. My mom reached out and pulled me, “Let’s go. We’ll talk outside!”

“I’m not going!” I pushed her off. She stepped forward and pulled at my hands again. Then she felt my forehead, and said, surprised, “You have a fever?”

I turned away.

The old woman was standing at the side, saying, “Her nerves are just about burned up!”

“She’s really got a fever! Why aren’t you taking care of her when she’s got a fever?!” My mom dragged me over, shouting, “Let’s go! I’m taking you to the hospital!”

“Please, leave me alone!” I broke free from her hold and went to my bed. I think I must have gotten a fever again, and it was particularly bad. I didn’t want to go anywhere. When I got to my bed, I just wanted to sleep. The deeper the sleep, the better. I wasn’t even worried that I’d never wake up again.

When I woke up, I realized I was lying in a hospital bed. It was white all around me. White walls, white sheets, white clothes on the nurse giving me the IV drip.

She sat next to me, looking dignified.

I turned my head to the other side.

“Bala,” she reached her hand out to turn my face to her. Her eyes were big and bright. They didn’t look like they belonged to a middle-aged woman. I absentmindedly wondered if I’d be as beautiful when I reached her age. Then I sadly thought, of course I wouldn’t live as long as that.

Living is too tiring. I wouldn’t live too long.

She looked at me, tears rolling down from her eyes, wetting my sheets. I heard her say with a weak voice, “I know you’ve suffered a lot. I don’t blame you for doing wrong things. Get rid of the child, and I’ll take you away. We’ll never come

back.”

Then she leaned over to hug me. I knew, she didn't want anyone to see all her tears.

I used up all my energy to control the overwhelming emotions, keeping a blank face.

I stayed in the hospital for three days. They said that they'd do the abortion once I got better. The evening of the third day, when she went to the supermarket, I sneaked out of the hospital. The hospital food was hard to swallow, it always tasted like medicine. When I left the hospital, I headed straight to the noodle shop by Tian High. I pushed open the door. As if I'd been in prison for ten years without food, I said to the boss lady, “Two bowls of noodles!”

“Two bowls?” The man in the shop looked at me, unbelieving.

“Two bowls!” I said loudly, again.

I sat down in my usual spot. To my left, there were two noisy girls from Tian High. They were chatting, their voices high-pitched and sharp, even as they tried to sound mysterious. It made me uncomfortable. I was about to scold them to shut up, when I heard a very familiar name. I couldn't help but listen in on their conversation. “I heard Xu Yi was beaten to a pulp again. He's been really unlucky recently, always being beat up.”

“He's floating in a sea of love, how can he not be hurt? Who told him to keep trying to steal someone else's girlfriend!”

“But seriously, that girl looked so nice. I didn't think she'd be like that.”

“You mean Li Er? We were junior high school classmates. I know her. She usually doesn't speak out, you know. But it's a shame this time. She was called to the dean's office. How is she going to face people after that!”

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“Yeah, yeah. The girl who doesn't speak up is going to end up the worst. Hahaha...”

...

I pushed my bowl of noodles forward and stood up. I walked over to those girls' table, and coldly asked, "Who were you talking about?"

The two girls looked up and saw me, seeming to recognize me, and got a scare.

I pointed at them, "I'm warning you. If anyone dares say a bad thing about Li Er, I'll make it so you don't dare go out at night anymore. Do you believe me?"

They looked at me, I looked at them. They were flustered, didn't dare to exhale, didn't dare to say a word. They grabbed their bags and ran out.

I didn't feel like eating noodles anymore. I decided to go to Tian High to see Little Ear.

I ran over to Tian High and saw Little Ear coming outside. Seeing how she looked, I knew immediately that she'd been bullied. She was walking behind her parents, and I shouted out to her. The boy at her side gave me a fierce look, telling me to go away. I watched Little Ear. I just wanted to make sure she was okay, and then I'd leave right away.

I know, in a lot of people's eyes, I'm not good enough to be her friend. And there are a lot of places that won't welcome me. I didn't want to bring any more trouble to Little Ear, but with God as my witness, for her, I want to be responsible for what I can be responsible for. I knew, and could confirm, that her problems were all my fault.

"Nothing will happen to her. Just stay away from her, and she won't have any problems!" The boy ran at me, screaming.

Oh. From the bottom of my heart, I wasn't angry at him.

At that time, I thought that it was really good that Little Ear had a boy to protect her. I didn't expect Little Ear to get angry. Her face flushed, she screamed, "Youta, you can't talk to Bala like that! Bala is my friend! She's my good friend, and I won't let you talk to her that way! Never!"

Time stopped in that moment.

In the past days, all the discomfort in my body disappeared. Against the evening sky, there were golden snowflakes floating down. In that moment, it felt like I was in an online game, like a villain who had a spell cast upon her, being

reborn. In that moment, I felt elated and rejoiced. I saw Little Ear, her flushed, cute, little face. I saw Youta, with an outraged expression, and the parents standing behind them. I really couldn't hold back, and a grin escaped on my lips.

Good friend.

I thought then, "In this whole world, there might not be any warmer, touching words."

On my way back to the hospital, I was stopped by two ruffians. They said gruffly, "Bala *jie*, Hei *ge* is looking for you."

Jie (literally "older sister") and *ge* (literally "older brother") are added to their names, kind of as a form of familiar address. Hei *ge* is Blackie, but the younger kids don't call him that I guess.

"Tell him to come himself," I said. "I have to go back to the hospital to take care of my illness."

"Hei *ge* said that there are some things he wants to talk to you about. You might be interested."

I patted one of the boy's heads, and said with a laugh, "I'm really sorry, Bala *jie* isn't interested in anything right now."

The two kids looked at each other, and one of them pulled out a photograph for me to see. It was a bit blurry, and you could tell the person in the photo didn't know their picture was being taken. But it was very clear who the subject of the photo was.

"He *ge* said that he has a lot of photos likes this. If you're willing to go, he'll give them all to you."

"Where is he?"

"At his uncle's place."

Oh, so that house still hadn't been sold.

I turned around and strode forward. The two boys followed with some distance between us. I turned around to yell at them, "Go home and drink some milk! Your Bala *jie* still knows how to find her way!" The two boys didn't leave, still following far behind. If they want to follow, so be it. If I weren't important,

why would they follow?

The door wasn't locked, and the lights weren't on either. I went inside, and Blackie sat in the dark. I couldn't see his face clearly. The falling snow was getting heavier, and snowflakes flew in from the broken window. It was the same temperature inside and outside of the house. But Blackie was only wearing a thin sweater. It was a black turtleneck, and on the chest was the word "stuffy (as in when your heart feels stuffy).

I asked, "Where did you get this kind of actor-like clothing from?"

"Stole it," he said. "From a university student."

"He didn't report you?"

"Report me for what? I took him for a drink."

I took out the photograph, "Don't you have better things to do?"

"I'm doing it for your sake."

I picked up a small wooden stool in front of me and threw it toward him, "I'm warning you. He needs to take the college entrance exam. If you affect him at all, I'm not going to let you go!"

Blackie didn't avoid, and the stool hit his forehead. It left a deep impression and blood flowed down.

He wiped the blood off with his sleeve, nonchalantly. With a sniff, he said, "Fuck, doing all this for that bastard, is it worth it?"

"Go ahead and try cursing him again."

Blackie stood up, "I'll curse him if I want! Bastard! Bastard!" As he cursed, he reached to the old table behind him, and threw a pile of photos to the ground. Then he went to the wall to turn the light on. "Open your eyes wide and look at your honor student. Kao, you wanted to win him over. Win him... Look at this guy who won you over, see how sincere his feelings for you are!"

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The snowfall was getting heavier, and the cold inside the house made me feel like I'd shrunk. The light irritated my eyes. I crouched down and picked up each of the photos to look at. They were all of Zhang Yang. Zhang Yang and a girl that

I'd seen twice before. Together. They were eating together in a restaurant. Zhang Yang held her as they walked in the cold. In the schoolyard, he held her bag for her. Waiting at the cafeteria...

The pictures should be pretty recent.

Blackie said, "You might not know who this girl is. Her surname is Jiang. Her name is Jiang Jiao. Her father is Jiang Da'ning. Maybe you haven't heard of him, but I'm sure you've heard of Jia'ning Group. This city's most beautiful buildings, the most perfect districts, they're all related to him."

I didn't make a sound.

Blackie continued, "Zhang Yang is a piece of garbage. He used you to get at his rival, Xu Yi. Jiang Jiao was Xu Yi's girlfriend in junior high. He's afraid of losing her. Zhang Yang's family is very poor. They live in the city's poorest area. If you don't believe me, I can take you there to see. It's only five minutes from here. Everything he has was given to him by this girl, including his new clothes and new phone. He can't leave her. He needs to rely on her to pay for his university tuition. They already had a plan set up. They'd go to Shanghai to study together, and then leave the country..."

"Shut up!" I shouted. "I won't believe in your shit!"

"I love you, Bala. I'm the only who truly loves you," Blackie said, moving forward to hug me. "As long as you're willing to be with me, I promise that in this life, I will be utterly and completely devoted to only you!"

The blood on his forehead had dried. He faced me with his ugly wound. I pushed him away in disgust. I didn't believe in him. I'll always remember what Zhang Yang told me. He would take me to Beijing. He would hold hands with my and our son, and we'd walk down the street together. None of that could be fake. It couldn't be!

"I knew you wouldn't give up." Blackie opened his phone, also a new model, a Samsung. He said, "The boys took his phone, and I put something even more interesting for you to see."

When he finished speaking, he put the phone in front of my face.

First I saw Zhang Yang and me, kissing. It was on the road behind the noodle

shop, the background a blur. I saw my reaching up to snatch the phone... That was the end.

And then, there was Zhang Yang walking on the street by himself. He turned around and suddenly there was the sound of a girl laughing.

Zhang Yang moved closer to her, and the two of them made faces at the camera. The girl laughed sweetly.

...

The last one. Zhang Yang leaned against a sofa, and lazily said, "Bala, you bitch."

From the side, there was a burst of laughter. Zhang Yang also laughed, it was a small laugh. When he was done, he stood up, reached out his hand and blocked the camera.

...

He said with a smile, "Bala, you bitch."

My dearest, he smiled and said to me, "You bitch."

Blackie put away the phone, and held me. His lips came to my ear and he whispered, "Bala, I love you. You have to believe me, I'm the only one who truly loves you. With my whole heart and soul. Let's be together forever, okay?"

I struggled to push him away, stumbled out the door, and fell into the snow.

I decided to leave.

Although I had nowhere to go.

I only wanted to confess to one person, but I didn't have her phone number.

I packed a simple bag and walked to the front of Forget It Bar. I wanted to borrow some money from my cousin. He stood at the entrance to the bar, smoking a big cigar, as if he knew I'd be coming to find him.

I didn't ask my favor yet. But he spoke. He said, "Bala, you came at just the right time. I'm taking you to the hospital. Your mom's waiting for you to have the operation."

I turned around and ran.

Several people were chasing me. They easily caught me and restrained me. Ignoring my screams, they pushed me into the backseat of the car. One person sat on either side of me. My cousin got in the car and personally drove. As he drove, he spoke to me earnestly, "Why suffer so much when you could just have a nice life? Follow your mom. Change the environment, and start again. Love? It's all dog shit. You'll forget about it in the blink of an eye."

"I want to get off, stop the car," I said.

"I'll let you off when we get to the hospital," he said.

"I'm saying it once more. I want to get off, stop the car!"

He said slowly, "I'll say it once more. I'll let you off when we get to the hospital!"

The snow was getting heavier. The road in front wasn't visible at all. It was as if we were driving on an adventure through the jungle. I took a look at my surroundings. Then I said to the boy on my left, "Come here, I want to tell you something." He listened and moved in. I opened my mouth and bit down on his ear. He covered his ear, shouting. That's when I crossed over his body, pushed the car door open, and jumped out.

To be accurate, I rolled down from the car. I fell into the snow, and the flying snowflakes made it hard to see. I wanted to stand up, but I wasn't fast enough. Behind me, there was a three-wheeled truck used in farming. The driver didn't see me, and pressed onto my body with ease. Everything turned black. Strangely, I didn't feel any other pain.

My cousin's car was stopped in front of me. I saw them rush over together. On the snow, there were red blossoms appearing. They were very pretty, so I tried to smile. Just like Zhang Yang smiled as he cursed me. But I couldn't. Because I'd already lost consciousness.

I seem to have seen my soul soar above my body. She flew over the narrow roads and square fields. With a strong desire and great purpose, she went straight to Tian High, going through classroom after classroom, searching for someone. She wasn't looking for Zhang Yang. Not Xu Yi, not Jiang Jiao. She was looking for the girl with little ears. From the moment she was born, Bala wanted to be a good girl like her. In front of a crowd of witnesses, she loudly called me

her good friend. Bala owes her a thank you. She must say this thank you.

She must say it.

She must.

My dearest Little Ear, can you hear me?

– The Left Ear –

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Chapter 8

– The Left Ear –

8 The Summer Day the Wind Blew Past

On Jiang Jiao's 18th birthday, we went to the karaoke bar to sing.

The summer day that the wind blew past.

This is also the title of a song (被风吹过的夏天) by JJ Lin. Reference?

In the dark and crowded private room, beer bottles filled the table. The smell of cigarettes made people cough and made them sleepy. My wife, Jiang Jiao, was singing with another boy. She was a pretty good singer. The way she closed her eyes when she sang made her look a bit like Da S, who played Shancai in Meteor Garden. For no reason, this soft, emotional singing made me feel tired. I suddenly thought of the girl that once sang on a bar's narrow, wooden stage. The way her singing was open and indifferent, her eyes aloof. This sudden memory made me feel uneasy, so I got up and went outside.

Da S is the nickname of actress Barbie Hsu, who played the main character in the hit 2001 Taiwanese drama, Meteor Garden.

The late August sun roasted the earth. The high altitude sun continuously spit out blood-red rays. The world had become a bound-up circle. I waved my hand to get a taxi and jumped inside, "To Nanshan."

The air conditioning inside the taxi made me a bit uncomfortable. The driver looked at me through the rearview mirror. A person wearing casual shorts and a t-shirt, in the middle of a summer day, wanting to go to Nanshan. If he didn't have a problem, he must be crazy.

Five minutes after we left, my phone rang. As expected, it was Classmate Jiang. An angry shout came from the other side, "Dead Cockroach, where are you?"

Cockroach was Classmate Jiang's nickname for me. I don't really remember where it came from anymore, but it probably meant I was one of the four pests

(rats, bedbugs, flies, mosquitoes). Forgive me, for my memory has been rather poor recently. I can only remember that as a form of retaliation, I'd chosen the nickname "Housefly" for her, but she didn't agree to it. Under her tearful gaze, I changed it to "Dumpling," which she readily accepted. She'd said happily, "Dumplings are things with substance inside."

Their nicknames didn't really come out of nowhere, by the way. I assume part of the reason is that the words sound like parts of the character's names. Dumpling (jiǎozi) for Jiang Jiao, and Cockroach (zhāngláng) for Zhang Yang.

She had this smug way of saying things, that I just had to listen to.

"Hurry and talk. Why aren't you talking? Where are you?" She was getting impatient.

"Bathroom," I said.

"Why've you been gone for so long?"

"Taking a shit," I said.

"Cockroach!" she yelled. "I don't care, you'd better show up right now!"

I hung up and turned off my phone.

Nanshan was more than 20 km away. After a long while, the car stopped on a narrow street. The driver said, "This is as far as I can go. It's hard to turn around if I drive up farther."

I payed the taxi fare and got off. It was my first time coming here, and I was a bit confused about how to get going. I followed the mountain road, as I pondered how I would find the place I wanted to go to. Just as I wished, the heavens gave an answer. I really didn't know where to go anymore, when I saw someone walking down the mountain. She carried a small, red umbrella and had on a small, blue backpack. I recognized her, and I suspected she recognized me too.

When she lifted her head and saw me, she looked a bit caught off guard. She lowered her head and kept walking down, wanting to pretend that she hadn't seen me. I stayed where I was, not moving. When she passed by me, I reached

out and grabbed onto her arm.

She looked up, even more flustered, but she didn't speak.

"Take me there," I said.

She wanted to break free from my hold.

"If you don't take me there today, don't even think about leaving," I threatened.

"Let go first," she said lightly.

I let go, and she looked over me again. I felt her gaze grow stronger. Then she turned around and walked up the mountain. I followed her up, and very quickly, I was too tired to keep going. The petite figure in front of me looked completely at ease though. About ten minutes later, my eyes grew wide. The whole place was a cemetery, row upon row, under the blazing sun. It was utterly silent and tranquil. She took me along a small, winding trail. Shortly after, she stopped.

I knew we'd reached our destination.

I don't know why, but my heart felt a bit panicked. I saw a bunch of fresh flowers on the gravestone in front of me. Yellow chrysanthemums, I think. Or maybe something else, I wasn't sure. As I approached, I saw the photograph on the gravestone. It was black and white. Young, beautiful, a face I hadn't seen in awhile. Those fearless eyes. My heart suddenly felt like it was being pulled out by someone, and then tossed into the air. In a minute, I wouldn't be able to find it again.

I couldn't help but kneel down, my head bowed, tears falling uncontrollably. They fell down to the grass, quickly evaporated by the sun.

"She was at peace. You shouldn't have come to bother her." I don't know how much time passed, when the girl standing beside me with the red umbrella spoke.

"Who are you?" I asked her.

"It's not important who I am," she said coldly.

"Are you her good friend?" I asked with some uncertainty. "You look familiar, but I'm not sure where I've seen you before."

She said, in an even colder tone, “We went to the same school. I saw you all the time. Actually, we’ve met a few times.”

I remembered!

Memories of the past flashed in my mind, and my heart felt an inexplicable shock.

“You killed her,” she said. “She don’t forgive you. It doesn’t matter if you cry.”

After she finished speaking, she opened her red umbrella, turned around and left. I stood up from the ground, ran ahead, and grabbed hold of her. “You must have been there before she died. Tell me, did she say anything?”

“I heard you got into a major Beijing university,” she asked.

I nodded.

“Congrats,” she said.

I shouted impatiently, “Don’t give me that crap, tell me what I want to know!”

She didn’t seem to be afraid of me. “I’m sorry to disappoint. She didn’t say anything at all. At least, I don’t know what she said.”

“Please tell me, I really want to know.” I softened my tone, trying to coax her.

“Maybe you should go ask Blackie.” She dropped that sentence, and left without turning back.

Perhaps it was because the evening was approaching. The burning sun finally felt dulled. A cool breeze blew across the mountain. I sat in front of Bala’s gravestone, watching as the far off clouds slowly floated past. I hadn’t expected a heavy rainstorm to come. It only felt like a few minute, and the sky had changed completely. As the wind blew, it grew stronger. Bean-sized raindrops hit my body. I didn’t have anywhere to hide, and neither did I want to hide. Let the rain fall harder. Let it fall and shatter everything on the world. I didn’t expect any kind of redemption. In this moment, I only wanted to do this, to be with her. I thought back to when I stood outside her window on a snowing, winter evening. I thought of when her warm feet came closer to mine. In this storm, let me remember it, with no one to bother me.

With no one to bother me...

When I got back to the city, it was already 10 at night. The temperature was still as warm, even after the storm. My hair and clothes, which had been soaked, had already dried up.

Because I couldn't hail a taxi, I walked for a very long time. I thought of the girl who also went to visit Bala. Maybe she visited often. I wonder how she usually returned home. She looked a bit frail, and if she had to walk this long way, she would surely fall to the ground from being tired.

I didn't expect for Classmate Jiang to be waiting for me at the streetlight near my house.

At first, she'd been crouching on the ground. When she saw me, she stood up and leaned against the light pole, looking at me haggardly. She had already gone home to change into a new dress, and I noticed she'd even redone her hair. Her dark, reddish hair was messy, curling around her head.

I walked over to her.

"I'm 18 years old," she said.

"Happy birthday," I said.

"I got my hair permed," she said.

"It looks bad," I said.

Her face twitched, and then she started to cry. She didn't throw herself into my arms. For a moment, I wanted to reach out and hug her, but in the end, I didn't.

So we stood there like that, at an impasse.

With a heavy heart, I waited until she finished crying.

But she just kept crying.

I maintained my temper and kept waiting.

Fortunately, no one passed by this scene. But even if someone did pass by, it wouldn't matter. I'd been the subject of gossip for a long time already. No matter what happens around me, people weren't curious anymore.

Finally, I pat her back, saying, "Alright, if you cry too much, you'll turn old. Your new hairdo already makes you look old enough."

She lifted her head to look at me, "You don't like it? I know you like it!"

"What are you saying?"

"You can't forget her. I know you can't forget her!" Jiang Jiao grabbed at her hair, crying and screaming, "If that's the case, you should just hurry and forget about me! Zhang Yang, from now on, we're through!"

"Okay," I said.

She looked at me with widened eyes. I knew that she was already regretting what she had said. But I just kept looking at her, sticking to what I decided.

She looked at me hatefully, then pushed me away and ran forward. In front of me, a motorbike sped forward. Looking at her, she didn't seem to realize she needed to dodge. My thoughts were booming, and I ran to her quickly, pulling her out of the way.

The motorbike came to a halt. It was only a millimeter away from us.

"You're crazy!" The man on the motorbike was about 40 years old or so. After he scolded us, he drove off.

Classmate Jiang Jiao's wild and curly hair brushed my cheek. It was very itchy. I wanted to push her away, but she was holding onto me very tightly.

She sobbed, "Cockroach, don't stop liking me. Please, don't leave me."

"We're through. You said it, not me."

"I was wrong, I was wrong," she acknowledged her mistake, faster than the blink of an eye.

"Okay," I pushed her away lightly. "I'm really tired today. You should go home to rest too. If there's anything else, we'll talk tomorrow, okay?"

"Send me home, okay?" she said. "The road ahead is really dark. You know, I'll get scared."

I was really tired. And I was so hungry I was seeing stars. But there was no way out of it, I could only walk her back home. She held my hand, tightly, not letting

go. After a few steps, she moved my hand to her waist. After we turned the corner to an alley, I clearly felt her shudder.

“Next week, we’ll leave this place.” In a trembling voice, “I really hate it here. After we leave, let’s never come back. How about it, Cockroach?”

I forgot to mention, Jiang Jiao also got into the same university in Beijing, the same department too. She actually wanted to go to Shanghai to study, but because I liked Beijing, she ended up choosing the Beijing university.

“Okay,” I said.

“I won’t cause trouble in the future,” she said. “I’ll be good.”

This kind of promise, I’d heard it a thousand times before.

After we left the alley, my hand involuntarily pulled her a bit closer. This street looked completely different in the day compared to the night. It seems to have been many nights since we’ve walked through here together. On the side of the road, there was a broken, old house. I’ll never forget that winter night. I rushed over, and Jiang Jiao had been tied up by Blackie and his guys. Blackie held a shining knife to me, “Your choice. All of us here do your girl in front of you, or you take this knife and take care of it yourself!”

That was the day Bala was buried. Floating in the sky were the last snowflakes of spring.

I said to Blackie, “Let Jiang Jiao go. This has nothing to do with her!”

“I’ll be the one to decided whether it has to do with her,” he said. “Slap yourself ten times, and I’ll think about letting her go. How about it?”

I said, “Ten? That many?”

“Quit your fucking crap!” He stepped forward and kicked my shin, and I painfully fell to my knees.

Blackie pointed the knife to my face and gestured, “This face isn’t bad. It could fool a girl, definitely could fool one. But top student, did you ever think about the consequences of fooling someone?”

At that moment, the sound of police sirens neared.

Blackie put his knife away, “What did you do?”

I stood up with great effort, and said coldly, “I called the cops.”

“Don’t forget, your phone is in my hands!” Blackie called. “If I’m unhappy, this will end up in Bala’s cousin’s hands.”

“So what?” I said. “It won’t explain anything.”

Blackie leapt at me with his knife. I hit the knife out of his hands. This big and useless thing, with an ugly expression. I held the knife to Blackie’s neck, forcing them to release Jiang Jiao.

“Don’t let her go,” Blackie said, with bloodshot eyes. “Big deal if we all just die together!”

“Think about your great future, this isn’t worth it,” I said to his lackeys.

“Before the cops show up, get away!”

Four or five kids looked around at each other, and in the key moment, they chose themselves (over Blackie) and fled. One of them, before leaving, even went to untie Jiang Jiao. After she was released, she sat in the corner, unable to get up.

I let go of Blackie, “You should get out of here too.”

He looked at me in disbelief.

“If you don’t go, it’ll be too late!”

“This account isn’t settled. One day, I’ll be back to take care of it!” Blackie spit out the words before running off.

I went over to help Jiang Jiao up. With a pale face, she asked, “Did you really call the cops?”

“Would it have helped?” I said.

Still, I really had to thank the police car that passed by.

That time, Jiang Jiao was deeply frightened. I had to stay with her for three days and nights before she was brave enough to step through the school doors.

Of course, it was very peaceful here now. Classmate Jiang’s father’s money was really the most useful thing. Nothing happened to Blackie. He just left, and I

heard that he would never be returning.

Never come back, that's good too.

In a short half year, a lot of things completely changed. Disappeared. Out of sight. The most painful thing was that the things that disappeared would never be seen again, would never return, but had left behind a thin, pointed needle. It kept piercing into your heart, unable to be pulled out. When it wanted you to hurt, you hurt.

"We're back at my house," Jiang Jiao's low voice came. "I told Auntie Wang to make you fried rice. Today is my birthday, and we even bought a cake. If you don't come to celebrate, how can that be?"

She was always like this, playing with wits, one step at a time, until she got what she wanted. Even though I wasn't happy about it, I surrendered to my starving stomach.

"Okay," I said.

Jiang Jiao lifted her face to look at me, "Cockroach, you're done for."

"What?"

"You've already said, 'Okay' three times today. It seems like other than 'Okay,' you can't say anything else."

"Oh (affirmative)," I said.

"Come on, it's my birthday. Can you be less absent minded?"

"Oh, okay," I said.

It was the weekend. I was standing at the phone stall in the mall, selling phones.

School would be starting soon, so a lot of people were there to buy a phone. I stood for so long, my feet were weak. And I had to talk so much that my mouth had gone dry. At 6 o'clock, it could be said business wasn't bad. I sold eight phones.

The manager came to me with a smile, "A handsome guy really knows how to get things done. Look, all your customers are female."

That's when I saw her, the girl I met when I went to Nanshan. She wore a white dress, and stood at the stationary stall. Next to her was a boy who was my classmate, Youta. That kid was a geek. He skipped a grade straight into Year 3 (senior year). His life seemed like it was devoted to studying. He ranked first in the city again, with about 30 points more than me, at rank 5.

Three minutes later, the two of them walked in my direction. She was carrying a bag, the notebooks and pens she just bought. When they walked about half the distance, I saw Youta try to carry the bag for her. But she firmly rejected.

When they saw me, they were both a bit surprised.

I smiled at them.

Youta also smiled, asking, "Zhang Yang, what are you doing here?"

"School's about to start, I've got to get together my tuition," I said.

Her face was taut the whole time, as if she didn't see me.

"Do you need to buy a phone?" I asked.

"Yes," Youta said. "I want something affordable and suited for a student to use. Do you have any recommendations?"

She said to Youta "You take a look, I'm going home first."

Youta grabbed onto her. "Wait, let me take a look. I'll be done really fast, and then I'll send you home."

"Who needs you to send me! It's not like I don't know the way!" After she finished, she valiantly turned and strode away.

I laughed and said, "Your girlfriend's pretty tough."

"No," Youta quickly explained. "She's my sister."

"Oh?" I said. "Take a look at this Nokia, the price is pretty good."

"Oh, forget it. I'll come back to look tomorrow!" Youta pushed me away, and hurried after that girl.

Oh, ah... Sister.

The manager gave me my pay for the day, and told me I could get off work. She

asked, "Are you coming tomorrow?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll stand until the last post!" I pinched out 80 dollars as a gift to her, and then headed out the big doors.

Compared to the air-conditioned mall, the air outside was definitely hot. After standing at the counter for the whole day, my legs ached and were trembling a bit. My mouth felt very dry, so I ran over to a cold drinks store near the mall and bought a large cup of iced cola. I sat next to the bus stop to drink it.

When I turned my head, I suddenly saw her, standing right next to me. It gave me a pretty big scare. She was still carrying her bag, wearing her pure, white dress, eating a rainbow ice cream. But Youta was nowhere to be seen.

I was feeling pretty alright, so I spoke up and asked, "Where's your brother?"

Her face reddened, and she looked very cute. But her next actions weren't at all the timid actions I was expecting her to make. Instead, she responded quickly and playfully, "I got rid of him."

"Ah, you should remember. Don't just casually get rid of nice guys who treat you well. You'll regret it later." When I finished speaking, I crushed the cola cup and threw it to the floor.

She looked at me, then picked up the crushed cup and threw it into the garbage can beside us.

I lit a cigarette and smiled at her. She looked away. Just then, the bus arrived, and she jumped on. It was the 5 Bus. It wasn't the bus I needed to take, but for some reason, I couldn't help myself and followed her on.

There were a lot of people on the bus, so there weren't any seats left. She wasn't very tall, so grabbing onto the hanging rings on the bus were a bit difficult. I stood next to her and said, "If your bag doesn't have anything too valuable, why don't you let me carry it for you?"

She didn't respond, but instead held her bag closer.

"Give it to me," I said, as if dictating an order.

She still didn't answer, but her facial expression started to look a bit tense.

I found it somehow interesting, so I teased her, "If you don't give it to me, then

I'll just hold your hand."

Before my hand even touched hers, her bag crashed into my arms, carrying her warmth. It was really quite heavy. I leaned over to ask, "Why buy so many notebooks? Are you writing a diary?"

She ignored me.

I said, "Why aren't you answering?"

She lifted her small face, "Just because you ask, does that mean I have to answer?" Our faces were very close to each other, and when the bus shook, they grew even closer. The evening sun shone on her white face. Her skin was really nice, not like Jiang Jiao's, and not like a lot of other girls. It was spotless and very clear. And her eyes. It was unimaginable how clear they were. As I kept staring at her, her face reddened. It showed how flustered she was, but she stubbornly refused to turn her gaze away.

It was really interesting, don't you think?

At the next stop, she jumped off the bus, and I jumped after her.

"Thank you," she said. "Give me back my bag."

"What if I didn't get off the bus with you?" I said.

"Then you wouldn't have followed me at the start," she said confidently. "You would've taken the 11 bus if you were going home, right?"

"Wow," I said. "FBI Agent, is this where you live?"

"No," she pointed ahead. "Then next stop is my house."

"Then why did you get off here?"

"I'm not telling you," she said.

Wow.

I held my arm. In the evening flow, I looked at this strange girl that you just couldn't wrap your head around. Then she asked another question that confused me, "Are you hungry?"

I thought for a moment, "A bit."

“Follow me,” she said.

And just like that, the once arrogant Zhang Yang followed the small girl. And he was carrying a bag of stuff for her as he walked. I didn't have time to think about how that happened, but curiosity really is a person's greatest enemy. And so I followed her, all the way to the noodle shop I used to frequent.

“Since you carried my things for me, I'll treat you to a meal,” she turned around to tell me.

This was a place I was very familiar with, even though I hadn't been there in a long time.

I sat down at a table against the wall. She ordered two bowls of beef noodles, and then sat across from me. She pushed one bowl towards me. I added a handful of cilantro to my bowl. Then she reached out her hand and grabbed the cilantro in my bowl and put it into hers, and nonchalantly started to eat.

“There's so much cilantro here, why did you take mine?” I asked her.

She laughed lightly, “You don't know, but someone once told me that other people's things are the best.”

I was silent for a moment, and then asked, “Was it Bala?”

“Bala really liked the noodles here,” she said. “I saw you and her here together before, but you definitely wouldn't remember.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I don't remember.”

“The day you went to see her, it rained on the mountain,” she said. “I kept wondering if you would had caught a cold.”

“Why are you worrying about me?”

“I'm not telling you,” she said that sentence again.

She lowered her head and ate her noodles. She ate and ate, and then looked up and said, “Why aren't you moving? Didn't you say you were hungry?”

I said, “I'm always like this. I'll be very hungry, but I then I can't eat anything.”

She took a pair of clean chopsticks, stretched her arm out and mixed my noodles for me. She said gently, “Hurry and eat. If the noodles get soft, they

won't be good."

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Li Er," she said. "Li spelled with *mu* and *zi*, Er as in ear with a *wang* radical."

In an early chapter, Li Er was called "Wooden Ear" (I think that's what I translated it to): *mu zi er*. Those are also the characters that spell out her name, 木 *mu* – 子 *zi* – 耳 *er*. A *mu* 木 (wood) on top of *zi* 子 spells her last name, Li 李. And then an *er* 耳 (ear) is part of her given name, Er 珥.

"Is Youta really your brother?"

"No," she said.

"Then, your boyfriend?"

"I don't have a boyfriend," she said quickly. "I don't date."

"You know, I'm really envious of Youta. He got into Tsinghua (University). That was my dream."

She comforted me with the familiar words, "Your school isn't bad. Not everyone can get into Tsinghua."

I lit a cigarette and handed it to her. She shook her head, and said seriously, "Smoking is bad for your health. You should cut down."

I bowed to her. And then I hungrily gulped down my bowl of noodles.

She took out a napkin from her bag and handed it to me. If someone we knew came into the shop right now, most of them would think that we had some kind of ambiguous relationship. But she was very calm and composed.

Advertisement

That night, I insisted on sending her home.

She insisted on taking the street behind the shop. The houses there had already been built. There were lights now, and even flowers planted in the ground. But aside from the people who lived nearby, no one would walk there. I followed her, step by step. Suddenly she stopped and asked me, "Do you remember this place?"

"I remember," I said.

“That time you hit her here, I pulled you away.”

I endured the panic that grew inside, and teased, “If I were to hit you today, who do you think will pull me away?”

“You won’t,” she said.

“Why are you so sure?”

“I’m not telling you,” she said.

“Then let us try it out!” I grabbed her, and she cried out softly. But it was just softly, and she didn’t even use her energy to push me away. This mysterious girl... In that moment, I had an impulse to kiss her. But I didn’t. She was right, I couldn’t do it. Indeed, I couldn’t do anything to her.

I let her go and said, “Let’s go, I’ll (*gege*) take you home.”

“No need, my house isn’t far. It’s that building.” She pointed ahead. Then she took the bag from my hands, “Zhang Yang, see you later.”

She called me Zhang Yang, as if we’d known each other for many years, as if we’d been friends for a long time.

“Go!” I shouted, waving my hand.

I watched as she walked ahead. She didn’t go far before she turned around and rushed toward me. She asked very directly, “I want to know your phone number, or WeChat (messaging app) or QQ (IM program) is okay too.”

When she was done speaking, she handed a pen and a new notebook to me.

I wrote it for her, under the streetlight. Then she thanked me and left.

Damn!

When I got home that night, I found Jiang Jiao and her mother. My father was adding water to their teacups. By the looks of it, they’d been there for quite awhile.

“Hi,” I greeted them as if nothing strange had happened. I hadn’t see her for a few days, and Jiang Jiao’s new hairdo really was a mess. It was like a bird’s nest sitting on top of her head. She had on purple eye shadow. I hated that vulgar purple color the most. I recalled the straight-haired Jiang Jiao, wearing her black

and white school uniform. At least the her back then didn't make me feel hatred toward her.

"Zhang Yang, we were just discussing with your father, about the two of you studying in Beijing," Jiang Jiao's mother said. "He said he wouldn't send you two off. Jiang Jiao's father is also busy, so I'll be the only one to send you two. We have a house in Beijing, and the two of you can stay there on the weekends..."

"Okay," I said, with a smile.

"Cockroach, have you eaten yet?" Jiang Jiao asked.

"I have," I said.

"What did you eat?" She was always like this, insisting on asking until the end.

"Noodles."

"How can that be nutritious!" Jiang Jiao's mother called out. "Let's go. We haven't eaten yet, let's go out to eat together. A Sichuan restaurant opened recently, and it's not bad. It's not far from here."

"Let's go," Jiang Jiao pulled me.

"I'm not going," I said with a sigh. "I've been standing all day at the counter, I'm very tired. I want to sleep."

"You went to sell phones again?!" Jiang Jiao cried out. "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

I glared at her, and she shut her mouth.

"Auntie, have a seat. I'm going to shower." When I finished my greetings, I grabbed an undershirt and headed to the bathroom. Jiang Jiao followed me to the bathroom door. I asked her, "What? You want to watch me shower?"

Her lips cracked open, "What, it's not like I haven't seen it before!"

"Go outside and wait," I said.

She stood at the door, not leaving. "Cockroach, are you still angry? If I didn't come to find you, were you never going to look for me?"

"What are you talking about?" I said, pretending not to understand.

“I just like your bad temper,” she suddenly said, with a light. She hugged me, “You’re really sexy.”

Suddenly a pair of clear eyes flashed into my mind. With some difficulty, I pushed Jiang Jiao away, coaxing her, “Alright, I’ll come outside when I’m done showering.”

She finally let go.

That evening, Jiang Jiao slept at my house, on the narrow, wooden bed. With the slightest movement, it would creak and creak. Jiang Jiao held onto me, refusing to let go. Then, out of nowhere, she started to cry. Her tears fell onto my chest, and it was a bit itchy. I still didn’t have any other desires. “It’s okay, Cockroach. We’ll leave this place, and everything will be better. It’s okay...”

As she muttered on, I fell asleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night, and realized that Jiang Jiao hadn’t slept at all. She sat near the window of my room, wearing a big t-shirt, smoking. She looked very comfortable smoking, but she’d never smoked in front of me before.

I sat up and looked at her. Her curly hair and the dark outline of her face. I knew that this capricious girl had given me many things. She suffered all sorts of problems for love, I knew that.

She heard a sound and turned around. With the light of the moonlight, I saw her crying. Big drops fell down her face, as she cried without a sound.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“I saw a shooting star,” she said. “It flew past, and then it was gone.”

I reached out and motioned for her to come over.

– The Left Ear –

Chapter 9

– The Left Ear –

9 It's My Own Choice

She put out her cigarette and returned to the bed. She came over to me, and I felt how ice-cold her body was. Unable to stop myself, I held her closely.

“Cockroach, it’s my own choice. I know I won’t ever be able to beat her, but that’s okay. She’s already gone. I’m willing to fight against a spirit until the end. It’s my own choice. No matter how hard it is or how much it hurts, I’ll persevere until the end.”

“Enough nonsense!” I told her.

“Okay, I won’t say it.”

I kissed her cheek, and she reached out and hugged me. The old, wooden bed started creaking again. I patted her back, “Sleep. Don’t smoke anymore. If you smoke too much, your teeth will turn yellow and your skin will get old. How ugly would that be.”

“Cockroach, am I pretty?”

“Pretty.”

“Am I gentle?”

“Gentle.”

“Then, do you love me?”

“...I love.”

“I’ll love you for the rest of my life.”

“Oh.”

...

She finally fell asleep. But I couldn’t get to sleep, no matter what I tried. I

climbed off the bed and sat by the window. Jiang Jiao had just been sitting there. I picked up the cigarette box, and realized Jiang Jiao had smoked all of my cigarettes. I threw the empty box out the window. It was very dark outside, but I didn't see a shooting star like Jiang Jiao mentioned. From the window, I saw the screen of my phone flashing, like I had unread messages. It was a number I didn't recognize, and there was only one word, "Goodnight."

I think I knew who it was.

Li. Er.

But I knew that I wouldn't go to seek her out.

I just wanted to go. To leave.

Jiang Jiao was right. Leave this place, and everything would be better.

At the train station, I saw Li Er again.

They were there as a big family, to send You Ta off.

You Ta saw us and was very happy, "We're on the same bus, that's great. I thought I wouldn't know anyone and the whole trip would be very lonely."

Jiang Jiao said glibly, "To be on the same path as the first-rank is our pleasure."

Someone at the side quipped up. It should have been her mother. She said, "Li Er, you must work hard. Next year, it'll be your turn."

She had on her small face, not responding. She didn't look at me either, as if we'd never met before.

You Ta was in the same train car as us. We put our luggage to the side. Jiang Jiao asked You Ta, "That girl just then, was she your girlfriend?"

"No," he said. "She's my cousin. She's in Year 2 at our school."

"Year 2?" Jiang Jiao asked with surprise. "She looks very young, like a middle school student." When she finished, she nudged me. "Cockroach, don't you think so? Doesn't she look very young?"

"Who?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

You Ta said, "We're talking about Li Er. Didn't you see her last time?"

“Oh,” I said.

Then I turned my head and slept. When I woke up, I saw that my phone had a message. “Hope your journey is smooth.” I checked my watch and saw that it was 10 at night. The train was chugging along, and Jiang Jiao and You Ta were both asleep. I went to the exit for the train car and had a smoke. Then I took out my phone and dialed that number.

She picked up quickly. Her voice was low, probably afraid her family would overhear.

“I’m Zhang Yang,” I said.

“I know,” she said.

“When I get to Beijing, I’ll probably change my number. Should I send my new number to this (your) phone?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I took You Ta’s old phone to use, but I don’t often check it. Today was an exception.”

“Why is it an exception?”

“Because I was waiting for your call,” she said.

“Wow, how did you know I was going to call?”

“I’m not telling you,” she said again!

“Make sure to study well.”

“I will,” she said. “Next year, I’ll go to Beijing for university.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll write to you, maybe not.”

“Whatever you want.”

“Then... Bye.”

“Bye.”

I hung up the phone, and saw Jiang Jiao standing beside me. With a cold face, she said, “You’re sneaking around. Who did you call?”

“My dad,” I said.

“He didn’t even come to send you off,” Jiang Jiao curled her lips.

I didn’t say anything, so she said, “I’ve never seen a father like that.”

“You fucking shut up!” I yelled at her.

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She didn’t say anything. The train was getting more rickety, and suddenly Jiang Jiao lost her balance. I caught her and she ended up in my arms. She giggled, and then said loudly, “I’m really happy, we’ve finally left! Yay...”

For a moment, I really thought I’d forgotten the past.

When I first arrived to Beijing, my life followed a very regular pattern. I went to class in the daytime, and tutored two junior high students at night. On the weekends, I went with Jiang Jiao to her house in Beijing and we watched DVDs. No one cooked for us, so we went to the supermarket to get some instant food, and ate until our stomachs didn’t feel anymore.

Jiang Jiao started freely smoking in front of me, it was a fancy foreign brand. I wasn’t used to it, so I just kept smoking my Double Happiness. Cheap and true. We usually saw each other once a week. We smoked and watched movies. Then at 3 or 4 in the morning, we’d go to sleep. We’d wake up at 12 noon the next day, and then continue smoking and watching movies.

Jiang Jiao liked watching Korean dramas, but since I didn’t like them, she also watched crime films. I wasn’t picky about them – American, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Mainland. As long as they had shootouts. Jiang Jiao said, “At the weekend, I went to the movie store and bought a whole bunch. The store owner thought I was buying them to start a business, to rent them to other students.”

“Then rent them out,” I said, as I ate a bowl of instant noodles. “Why not earn money if you can?”

Jiang Jiao glared at me, “I can’t become that person!”

Right, a rich daughter. Whatever.

Jiang Jiao climbed onto my shoulder, “Cockroach, studying is really pointless. I want to drop out.”

“Then what do you think is meaningful?”

“I want to go sing.”

That gave me a scare, “Who gave you that bad idea?”

“Someone mentioned it to my dad, said my image and singing weren’t too bad.”

“It’s your dad’s money that’s not bad!”

“Don’t be disappointed!” She pushed me away and jumped in front of me. She put her hand to her waist and struck a pose, saying, “Look at me. Don’t I look like a celebrity?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Then when I become a celebrity, you can be my manger!”

“No.”

“Fine, if you don’t want to, then don’t. You can be my boss!” Jiang Jiao climbed back over to me. “Cockroach, let me tell you. There are guys pursuing me at school. In one day, I get ten short messages. It’s so annoying.”

“Let them send it to my phone, I’ll take the annoyance for you.”

“Hahaha!” Jiang Jiao laughed. “Be honest, how many girls are pursuing you?”

“I’ve never counted,” I said.”

“Ooh, ooh, you can never have a change of heart.”

“Even if it wanted to change, there’s no space.”

“Then what have you been busy with?”

“With you,” I said.

“Oh, you’re so bad!” She fell into my arms. What happened next was just a matter of time. In the critical moment, Jiang Jiao pulled out a condom and said, “Dearest, you forgot this.”

I pulled the condom from her hands and tossed it to the side.

“No, no.” She was a bit afraid, strongly disagreeing.

I rolled off from her onto the ground. Lying there, I also didn’t know what was the matter with me.

After awhile, Jiang Jiao came over and climbed onto my body. She said, lightly, "Okay, Cockroach. As long as you're happy, I'll agree."

I pushed her away, and got up. "I'm hungry, let's go out to eat. If we eat any more instant noodles, I'm going to vomit."

She sat up on the floor, in a bit of a daze. Then she put on her clothes and followed me out.

That evening, we had dinner at a restaurant near Jiang Jiao's house. We ate a lot, until we were full and comfortable. We each had a glass of beer too, our cups clinking here and there. We looked just like a close, loving couple. But I knew we weren't like others. Of course, the problem wasn't with Jiang Jiao. It was with me.

"Cockroach, you're a bad guy." Jiang Jiao downed the rest of her beer, and with a red face, she said, "See how I take care of you tonight."

But in the end, nothing happened between us that night. The problem was with me again. No matter what, I couldn't. Jiang Jiao comforted me, "It's okay, I've heard of some medicine for it."

"What are you saying?!" I yelled at her.

"Hehe, I know you're too tired." She said, in a good mood, "Let's sleep."

That's when my phone sounded. A text. I took my phone from Jiang Jiao's side of the bed and looked at the message. "Is Beijing cold? Take care of yourself."

There was no name.

Jiang Jiao tilted her head to me, "Who's so concerned about you?"

I thought for a moment, "I don't know."

"New girlfriend?"

"What's the matter with you? Aren't you my girlfriend?"

Jiang Jiao jumped up from the bed, pointing at me. "Zhang Yang, I want to hear the truth! When you first liked Bala, you hid it from me, right? Don't think that I don't know anything. I know very clearly in my heart. You had another woman, you didn't love me. I just don't understand. If you didn't love me, then

you didn't love me. Why did you have to lie about it?!"

"Don't make a fuss," I said. "Just sleep, okay?"

"No, I want to make a fuss. I just do. If you don't explain yourself, I'll keep this up for three more days! Tell me, who is she?"

"Are you fucking done?"

"Not done!" Jiang Jiao pulled her nightdress over my head. "I know she must be a whore. I know, you fucking love whores!"

I reached out and slapped her. I don't hit women, but a lunatic must be hit. Then I put on my clothes. Jiang Jiao was really on fire. She jumped on the bed again and grabbed onto me, "Forget it, I won't bother you anymore. Let's sleep."

You want to sleep, then sleep.

I turned over and slept.

But my phone sounded again with a text. It was the same person who didn't leave their name. This time, it was a question. "There are some things and some people... Just because you want to forget them, do you really just forget?"

Jiang Jiao opened her eyes, and forced herself from looking at my phone. With her slightly swollen face, she looked at me.

I deleted the text.

I knew, it was Li Er.

She knew my new phone number.

I didn't respond, because I didn't know what to say. With God as my witness, I really want to forget. But God must also know, I can't forget.

As December came, I'd already grown accustomed to the weather in Beijing.

I went online sometimes, but my inbox was always empty. But once, I received a letter from Li Er. Simple greetings. I wrote back, the same things I always said. I told her to study well. She didn't respond in a long time. It must have been because she was busy with Year 3 activities.

What I didn't expect was that I'd see Blackie again.

One day, I went to an office building to find work. There was an internet company looking to hire, and I wanted to test my luck. It was an impressive looking building. When I got to the lobby, I saw him. He was wearing a security uniform. White gloves, and looking like he was pretending to be something he wasn't. He was directing someone to stop. I pulled my cap down and walked past him.

The people at the internet company were very polite. The short man who greeted me said that they'd already found someone yesterday, and that I should be faster next time.

"Okay, next time, I'll definitely take a rocket here," I said.

The man cheerfully said a farewell. I was on the elevator, going down. When I passed the exit, I was grabbed by someone.

"Kid," he said. "I've been waiting for you in Beijing. You even came right to the door."

"What do you want to do?" I said. "If it's a fight, I'm not afraid of you."

"Not a fight," Blackie said. "Fighting is what a crude person does. I want to invite you for a drink. You dare to go?"

I asked him, "Who's buying?"

He said arrogantly, "Me, of course."

"Right now?" I asked him.

"Of course not. I don't get off work until 6:30. We'll meet at Sanlitun (an area in Beijing) at 10."

"Okay." I waved goodbye and left. He yelled after me, "Make sure you show! If you don't come, I'll think it was because you were too scared!"

Ah, we don't know who'll be scared.

At 10, I finished with my tutoring. I arrived to Sanlitun right on time. Blackie was already waiting there. He'd already changed out of his uniform. He was still bald, wearing a black, leather jacket and pants. Black gloves and black glasses. It was like he was trying to look like Batman.

“I didn’t think you’d show. I was right before when I said that at least Tian High had a man in you.”

I said coldly, “I don’t like to owe people. If you think I owe you something, let’s clear our accounts tonight.”

“You don’t own me anything. You owe her, but you’ll never be able to repay it. So, I’d like to get some justice in her stead.”

“Okay,” I said. “How do I repay it?”

“Drink 20 bottles of beer, and don’t vomit. Then this account is settled.”

“That simple?” I said.

“Simple or not, we’ll see after you’re done drinking.”

“Alright,” I said. “Where are we going?”

“Follow me,” Blackie said.

He walked in front of me, with an air of importance. He took me to a bar, turned and said, “Enter.”

I went inside. It wasn’t very big, and there weren’t really many people. Blackie asked me, “So? Do you think this place looks familiar?”

I didn’t think so.

“Don’t you think this place looks like Forget It Bar?”

His brain must have been fried.

We found a place to sit. Blackie quickly brought over 20 bottles of beer and placed them in front of me. The singer on the stage started to sing. It was a girl, with long hair, but I couldn’t see her face clearly. She sang, “I am your Chanel, and you are my model...”

“Do you notice? That singer, she has on green eye shadow.” Blackie said as he opened a bottle. “Drink! I want to see you drunk!”

He had gloves on as he tried to open the bottle. It wasn’t very convenient, but he didn’t seem to want to take them off.”

“Let me,” I said.

In the end, I didn't get drunk that night. Blackie poured all the alcohol that I was supposed to drink into his own stomach. He sat there, his eyes rolling, and said, "When I have money, I come here. I don't have friends in Beijing. Zhang Yang, let me tell you a truth. When I saw you today, I was actually very happy. I felt that I didn't hate you so much."

"Then why didn't you ever go back?"

Blackie smiled, and slowly pulled off his glove in front of me. Both hands were missing a little finger. It was an astonishing sight.

"Who did it?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

"You need to ask?" Blackie said. "They told me never to come back. If I dared, they'd kill me."

"Jiang Jiao's father?"

"I don't know," Blackie said. "The guy I offended was too powerful. I didn't dare to check."

A heavy block fell on my heart, and it felt as if I couldn't breathe.

"You have a cigarette?" Blackie asked me.

I pulled out my Double Happiness to give to me, and even lit it for him. His mouth and hand trembled.

"I miss home," Blackie said, with red eyes. "I have no friends in Beijing. I live in a basement. When I have money, I drink. Sometimes I don't have enough to eat. I really miss my mom."

"Then go home," I said. "Don't worry, no one will dare do anything to you!"

"Maybe. But you don't know what I'm actually scared of. There's another reason I'm afraid to go back."

"I want to ask you something."

"Ask."

"When she died, were you there? Did she say anything?"

"I wasn't there." Blackie pulled another bottle to his lips. "She left her final words for a girl. You should go ask her."

“Really?” I asked. “Was she called Li Er?”

“Li Er?” Blackie thought for a moment. “Maybe. She called her Littler Ear, Little Ear...”

“Oh,” I said.

“Actually, whether I’m dead or alive, it makes no difference.” Blackie was really drunk, his speech was becoming incoherent. “Zhang Yang, I know why Bala liked you. She was born a noble, a different station to me. She would never be mine, but I was willing to protect her for the rest of my life. I didn’t do a good job, I let her die. I stole your phone, I told her some nonsense stuff. I am guilty, the same as you. We both cannot be forgiven. I regret it, I regret it!”

As he spoke, with his four-fingered hand, he pounded the table. Again, and again, and again.

The singer on the stage was still singing, “Whose angel am I? Whose model are you? My love, let us be together. Let us choose, you’ll be happy, I’ll be happy. You’re a model, I’m Chanel, Chanel, Chanel...”

Blackie was dead drunk. He hummed along, his tone was off, his eyes were wild.

I slapped his face, “Bro, are you okay?”

He mumbled, “I’m fine. I just want to sleep.”

I payed the bill, and stuffed 200 dollars in Blackie’s pocket.

Then I left the bar and walked out into the vice of Sanlitun.

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The new year was soon approaching, and the atmosphere was very lively everywhere.

Several girls invited me out for Christmas, but I flatly rejected.

There’s a phrase, something like “The hears is as peaceful as still water.”

Chinese sayings are quite profound, and they really left you impressed.

That day, after her calls didn’t go through for a long time, Jiang Jiao came to my school. From her school to mine, you had to cross half the city. She was

dressed up like a cloth doll, with a thin jacket, gloves and a scarf. She had on outrageous boots and a backpack with cartoon images, catching the attention of those passing by. She breathed out, stomped her feet, and acting cute, said, “Cockroach, where have you been these days?”

We were standing on the sidewalk, light rain falling, as the school speaker blared behind us.

“My phone stopped working. I’ve been looking for a new job,” I shouted out. “I won’t have time on the weekends anymore!”

“I’m here to pick you up. Come with me to a Christmas party!” She was also screaming. “If you don’t go, I’ll die for you to see!”

I pulled her to a secluded area, and the loudspeaker wasn’t as loud. Jiang Jiao finally straightened her hair, and it looked much better. I touched her hair, “I really can’t. I have to go to the restaurant soon.”

“What are you doing at the restaurant?” she asked, eyes wide.

“Waiter,” I said. “They needed someone who spoke English and was handsome, and I can do that.”

“But that won’t do for me!” she said. “I want you to come with me!”

“I want to go with you too, but I don’t have time.”

“Let me show you something,” Jiang Jiao said. She took off her colorful backpack, opened a pocket, and showed me. I took a look and had a scare. I hurried to close the bag and said, “What are you doing?”

“My dad came to Beijing. He gave it to me,” Jiang Jiao said.

“The rich really are the rich,” I said.

“Don’t be like this. We have so much money, you don’t have to work so hard,” Jiang Jiao said. “Having some extra time to play isn’t bad, right?”

“That’s your dad’s money,” I said ruthlessly.

“There’s no difference with my dad or your dad,” Jiang Jiao muttered unhappily. “It’s not like you’ve never used his money before.”

“I’ll return it,” my face darkened.

“That’s not what I mean. I misspoke, okay?” It was the usual words again.

“Okay,” I said. “Go have fun. Be careful carrying around that much money though.”

“I came so far,” her eyes were getting red. “I came so I could see you and have a happy Christmas. Why are you treating me like this?”

“This is how I am. It’s not like you don’t know that.”

“If that’s the case,” Jiang Jiao lifted her head up, eyes staring at me. She spit out the words, “Zhang Yang, let’s break up.”

“Fine!” I said.

Jiang Jiao was silent a moment. She didn’t act out as I expected. She picked up her bag, and stood on the green grass for awhile. Then, without looking at me, she turned and left.

At that moment, I felt an impulse to go after her and grab on. But I controlled myself.

I knew I owed her. I would pay her back, but this wasn’t the right time.

The restaurant I went to was very high-class. Working there for one evening was like tutoring for a week. The people who went there were all upper class folks. I liked seeing them. Although I was only a waiter, I felt a certain understanding. Because I’d be watching people eat the whole time I worked, I went to the cafeteria to eat before going to work.

When I finished eating my noodles, I found a large group of people gathering on the field. People were running around spreading the news. There was someone who wanted to commit suicide at the graduate building.

The graduate building was the first building to the left of the field. You could go up to the rooftop. Last time, a boy had tried to commit suicide there. He had depression. But I heard that he didn’t jump, because the police pulled him back. I still remember that day. Jiang Jiao happened to be there as well. We were passing by, and she had to see what it was about, so I was pulled into the crowd.

Later, she scolded me for not having humanity. “Someone was going to get rid of their life, couldn’t you be a little concerned?”

“You’re the one who has to live your life,” I said.

“What if one day I’m the one standing up there?” she asked me.

“Then I’ll catch you below,” I said.

“What if you don’t catch me?”

“Then I’ll have three minutes of silence for you.”

Then she scolded me for not having humanity.

I didn’t realize that after two short months, there would be another show to see. I walked through the field toward the school exit, but I saw more and more people running to the graduate building. Someone cried out, “A beautiful girl is throwing away money. Hurry and collect some! Your loss if you don’t!”

My heart skipped a beat.

Then I also turned around and started running.

The person standing on the roof was really Jiang Jiao. The first thing I saw was her scarf, red, like a flag flying on rooftop. She held her colorful backpack with one hand, and with the other, she was tossing handfuls of money down. Some people were grabbing the money, some were screaming, some were trying to keep order. It truly was a sight to behold.

I passed by the crowd and ran up the stairs.

There were already people on the rooftop, but they were afraid of provoking Jiang Jiao, so they didn’t dare get closer.

“Jiang Jiao!” I shouted out, pushing the others aside. “Get over here!”

Jiang Jiao turned around to look at me, but she ignored me. Instead, she shouted happily down at the crowd, “Happy new year!” Then she threw more money down.

Screams swallowed the whole campus!

I walked towards her.

She turned around and snapped, “If you come any closer, I’m jumping.”

“I’ll jump with you.” I didn’t slow my steps, but instead said, “I just happen to

want to jump as well.”

“I said, don’t come over!” She cried out. One foot was already over the edge, her body unstable. Dangerous all around.

The people below started chanting in unison, “Don’t jump, don’t jump, don’t jump!”

“Love,” I reached out my arms, with gentle words, “Come here. We’ll spend Christmas together.”

Suddenly, a stream of tears flowed down from her eyes. “You’re lying. You stopped loving me a long time ago.”

“I’m not lying,” I said. “I was just playing earlier. Who knew you would have taken it for real. Look, I’m still here, aren’t I? Haven’t I always been here?”

“You’re lying, you’re lying...” She kept shaking her head, with a flurry of emotions, not believing.

“I’m not lying. I love you. Love, don’t act recklessly, okay?” I knew that the only thing I could do now was to coax her, to let her calm down.

“Really?”

“Do you believe me? If you jumped off, I would jump right after you.”

“Really?” Her voice had already relaxed.

“Stop throwing money.” I stepped closed, “With that much money, we can watch a lot of DVDs. Moreover, if you jump down from the fourth floor and die, forget it. But if you were to break your arms and legs, how are you going to become a famous singer?”

She rubbed her tears with her sleeves.

I took advantage of this time, while she wiped away her tears. I stepped forward and pulled her back down to safety. She hugged me with her strength and bit on my ear. My left ear was in a lot of pain after she bit down. And then I heard her say, “Cockroach, remember this. If you dare lie to me, I won’t look to die. But I will make sure you die a horrible death!”

I couldn’t hear her clearly, and I felt like my ear was going to fall off, no longer

belonging to me. I suddenly thought of Blackie's ugly hands, missing their little fingers. I held onto Jiang Jiao, as an unspeakable fear floated in my heart.

Many days later, Jiang Jiao was smoking one of Double Happiness, and said to me, "Actually, I had no plans to jump that day. I was just testing my acting skills. If you hadn't shown up, I would have finished throwing away the money, and then gone to enjoy the holidays."

This was my old Jiang Jiao. I kept thinking that I had enough to deal with her, but often times, it was just an illusion. A kind of beautiful illusion.

As virtue rises one foot, vice rises ten. In this world, who dares to say who will be the world's savior?

Just wash up and sleep as early as possible.

During winter break, I went home.

Jiang Jiao's family spent New Year's in Beijing, so I traveled alone. On the eve of New Year's, I arrived in the city I spent more than ten years growing up in, the place I never thought I'd return to. When I got off the train, I felt I could breathe easily. The air in this city was something I was familiar with, accustomed to. Apparently this city had already left its mark on my life. It wasn't something I could forget just because I wanted to.

When I pushed open the door, he was very surprised.

He was on the sofa, watching TV. He was alone, with a bowl of noodles and the lively New Year's Gala celebrations.

He was already old, with gray hair. He smiled, wrinkles all around his eyes.

"Dad," I shouted.

"Oh," he replied.

I was away for more than half a year. He never sent me any money. I never wrote him any letters, just a few phone calls to let him know I was safe.

He didn't know that I'd planned on coming home.

"Hungry? What do you want to eat?" He was a bit uneasy.

"Let's go out to eat!" I pulled him up.

“You think this is Beijing? Who’s still open on New Year’s Eve?” He helped me bring in my luggage. “I made some chicken soup. Why don’t you eat that?”

“Sounds good,” I said.

“Alright! Wait for me!” He hurried into the kitchen.

I sat down on the sofa. The sofa was already very old. When I sat down, I felt a hard piece hit me. Very quickly, he came out with a bowl of noodles, and asked me, “Didn’t you say you weren’t coming back for New Year’s?”

“I suddenly wanted to come back, so I did.”

“Coming back is good too.” He went back to the kitchen and brought out a thermos. He said to me, “Stay here at home. I’m going to make a quick visit to the hospital, and I’ll be right back.”

“Why are you going to the hospital?”

“Someone’s staying in the hospital. I’m going to send him some soup,” he said.

“Who’s at the hospital?” I asked.

“A friend,” he said. When he finished, he put on his shoes, and carried the thermos out.

– The Left Ear –

Advertisement

Chapter 10

– The Left Ear –

10 Jiang Jiao's Text

I didn't know what kind of friend he had at a hospital, but I was too lazy to bother about it. Outside the window, I could see snow start to fall. I thought about it, and decided that I'd go to the mall tomorrow to buy him a nice pair of shoes. The TV was very noisy, so I turned it off. At the same time, my phone sounded. I thought it would be Jiang Jiao's text. But when I looked, it was actually Li Er. "Happy new year!"

I quickly called her back, and she picked up very quickly. She seemed to be outside, it was very noisy. I could hear the sound of fireworks in the background.

"Little Ear," I said. "I want to see you."

She didn't speak for a long time, "What did you just say?"

"I said I wanted to see you."

"You're back?"

"Yes," I said. "I came back."

"What did you just call me?" she suddenly asked.

"Little Ear," I said.

"Oh," she said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm at home," I said.

"We're setting off fireworks at Victory Square. If you want, you can come join us!"

When I put down my phone, I tossed on my jacket and headed to Victory Square. Walking from my house, it took about ten minutes to get there. I already saw her from afar. She was wearing a red jacket, her hair was tied up in a cute

ponytail. She was standing next to You Ta, who was helping her to light a long firework.

The fireworks lit up her smile. In that moment, I thought of Bala. Logically speaking, she and Bala were completely different. But in that moment, I was a bit confused, as if they were the same person.

I called to her, but she didn't hear, maybe because she was having too much fun. So I stood at the side and had a smoke, waiting for her to realize I was there.

My cigarette was half gone when she ran over to me, smiling, and said, "Zhang Yang, you're here. Why didn't you say anything?"

"How were your final exams?" I asked her.

She laughed, "They were okay."

You Ta followed over, "Li Er, do you still want to light anymore? Ah, Zhang Yang. I nearly didn't recognize you."

I touched my chin. It was already three days since I last shaved.

"I'm not setting off anymore," Li Er said to You Ta. "I want to have a talk with Zhang Yang."

You Ta's face tensed up.

"I'll be done quickly," Li Er said to You Ta.

"Okay, you guys talk. I'll go over there," You Ta said, and then he left.

The lights around the square were dim. Li Er glanced at me, and then she laughed.

I asked her, "What are you laughing about?"

She said, "It's New Year's, but you didn't shave or get a haircut. You're like a caveman."

I touched my chin and asked her, "There are so many people lighting fireworks. Do you know which is the one you sent to the sky?"

She thought for a moment and then responded, "Sometimes I know, sometimes I don't."

“Go get a firework. I’ll take you someplace,” I said.

She looked like she was hesitating. but after a short moment, she responded, “Okay.”

“Then go get a firework.”

She went to get one. After a moment, she came back with a bunch of fireworks. She said to me, “You Ta’s watching me. He just asked where I was going. What do we do?”

I reached out and grabbed her arm, then said one word, “Run!”

Then I pulled her after as I ran. She turned at You Ta’s shouts, but she didn’t hesitate or slow down at all. Like that, she held onto a bundle of fireworks and followed me to the edge of the city. We ran until we reached that abandoned house.

“Where is this place?” she asked, panting

“A haunted house,” I teased her.

She wasn’t afraid though, just looked around, very interested.

“You came here with Bala before, right?” she asked. She was a very smart girl.

“Come, let’s go to the rood.” I took the fireworks from her arms. I started climbing up first, and reached my hand out to help her.

She waved her hand, saying, “You go up first. I can get up on my own.”

I climbed up quickly and waited for her. She climbed up halfway and then stopped there. I knew she was afraid, but I didn’t move, just folded my arms and watched her. She lifted her head and looked up at me. Against the darkness, I could see the white of her eyes clearly. She carried a bit of shyness and also fear. I reached out my hand, “Come on, Little Ear.”

She finally reached out and put her hand in my palm. A small hand that felt like it didn’t have any bones. I only pulled gently, and she already climbed up.

Maybe because it had rained the past two days, the roof was a bit wet. I pulled her over to a dryer spot and said, “Look, this should be the best place to set off fireworks.”

“When I get back, You Ta will probably destroy me.”

“Are you afraid?” I asked her.

She laughed, “If I were afraid, I wouldn’t have followed you. Let’s set off the fireworks.”

“Okay.” I took out my lighter and helped her light the longest firework. It shot straight to the sky, and the sky became as magnificent as her smile. She jumped up excitedly, “It’s so beautiful! Zhang Yang, there’s only the firework I set off here!”

I was a bit dumbfounded.

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She turned to look at me. With a smile, she asked, “What are you thinking about? Are you thinking of Bala?”

I scared her a bit, “If you say those two words again (her name), be careful, I might take you out!”

She laughed. When she finished laughing, she suddenly asked me, “Do you still remember Xu Yi?”

Bullshit.

Li Er continued, “You wouldn’t know, but something’s happened to his family.”

“What?” I pretended that I wasn’t interested, but for some reason, my heart jumped.

“Something happened to his dad, and he was arrested by the police. And his mom is sick, living in the hospital. I heard it was cancer. She won’t live long.”

I tried to keep my cool.

“Why don’t you have any reaction?” Li Er asked me.

“What kind of reaction should I have?” I asked her.

“You should be happy.” Li Er picked up a long firework. “You have Xu Yi so much. Isn’t this the ending you always wanted?”

I grabbed her arm, “What exactly did Bala tell you? Tell me!”

“I also want to know,” she smiled, not trying to pull away.

“You have to tell me today.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll force you to say it!” I tore the firecracker from her grasp, and in one swift move, pulled her into my arms. This nasty little witch. If she really thought I wouldn’t do anything to her, then she was very wrong!

Our faces were very close. Her body was very soft, and I could very obviously feel her shaking. It took all my strength to stop myself from kissing her. We were at a stalemate for about a minute. I don’t know if it was because she was cold or scared, but her lips started turning purple. In the end, she caved and said, “Okay, Zhang Yang, I’ll talk.”

I let go of her and released a sigh of relief.

She turned toward me and told me, “The day I went to hospital, I only found Bala’s room with the boss’s(?) help. When I got there, she was already in a bad condition. The bed was surrounded by people. When Bala saw me, her eyes lit up. She raised her left hand and told me, ‘Little Ear, come over here.’ So I went over. Bala’s face was very pale, like a piece of white paper, no color at all. She said to me, ‘Little Ear, there’s something I want to say to you.’ I bent over and then Bala reached out and grabbed onto my shoulder, pulling me in close. Her lips approached my ear, but they weren’t warm. They were ice cold. When she finished speaking to me, her arm just dropped down from my shoulder...”

“So what did she say to you?” I couldn’t help and interrupted her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I really want to know too.”

“Cut the crap!”

“Zhang Yang, I’m not lying to you,” Li Er said. “If you don’t believe me, I can show you my medical records. When I was born, the hearing in my left ear was very bad. Often times, especially when I’m anxious, I won’t be able to hear from it. But when Bala spoke to me, she spoke to my left ear!”

“She spoke to my left ear!” she cried out again, tears sliding down her face.

I couldn’t stop myself from holding her. Her warm tears had already opened up

my ice-cold heart, leaving me temporarily disoriented.

Damn it!

I sent Li Er home at 10 in the evening. It was the street by the noodle shop. We were both silent. That day, I sent her all the way to her building. When I was about to leave, I asked her, "Will you get scolded?"

"Probably," she said. "But I'm not afraid."

"Okay," I said. "If You Ta dares do anything to you, I'll help you!"

She smiled, and we said goodbye. I watched as she left. After about five steps, Li Er suddenly turned around and brought her hands around her mouth. She shouted out, "Zhang Yang, Happy New Year!"

I returned her greetings. But I just mouthed the words, not making any sound.

She cocked her head to the side and smiled, then went up.

Not long after I returned home, he came back with an empty thermos.

I asked him, "Where did you go?"

He said, "The hospital."

"Who did you send the soup to?"

He said, "A friend."

I asked again, "What friend?"

He ignored me and headed to the sink to wash the thermos. I followed after him, grabbed the thermos, and threw it to the ground. It rolled to the floor, splashing water all around.

I screamed at him, "Do you have no self respect?! Are you doing this to let everyone laugh at you? Will that make you happy?"

He looked at me with his old eyes, saying one word at a time, "I did what I should do."

"She doesn't love you. She didn't even want her own son. Such an evil woman, this is her retribution. Retribution doesn't deserve sympathy! I'm telling you, if you go the hospital again, I'm not letting you go!"

“Yang’er,” he grabbed me. “Calm down. Sit down and listen to me, okay?”

“I have nothing to say to you!” I pushed him away. “In any case, you’re not allowed to go to the hospital again. Otherwise, I’ll never come back to this place. Never!”

“There’s no one to take care of her. Something happened to their family. Her son is away, and was embarrassed, so he didn’t come back for the new year,” he explained to me. “I can’t just leave her like that. No matter what, we once had affections for each other...”

“Enough,” I cut him off. “You call that affection?”

“Zhang’er,” he said. “There are some things I’ve never told you. Actually, she isn’t your biological mother. She is Xu Yi’s biological mother, so that year, she chose to go back. As she should have.”

Shocked, I stared at him. But I knew, he wasn’t lying.

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“Listen to me,” he sat down on the old sofa with a big block in it. He told me about it slowly. “Many years ago, your mother was a a great beauty here. A lot of men chased her or admired her. I was one of them. But she only liked Xu Ruiyang. His family was very wealthy, but his mother was very strong. So in the beginning, they dated secretly, and on one knew about it. One day, she became pregnant with his child. That was Xu Yi. This wasn’t something that could be hidden anymore. Xu Ruiyang’s mother was furious when she found out. She ordered them to break up, and she told her to get rid of the child. Xu Ruiyang finally gave in, and brought it up with her, to end their relationship. Your mother was heartbroken, but she still loved Xu Ruiyang. No matter what, she refused to go to the hospital for an abortion. In order to keep her child, she ended up on my doorstep one rainy night. She knelt down and asked me to marry her.”

I asked, “And you just agreed?”

“Yes,” he said. “I liked her for many years already. It was my one chance, so of course I couldn’t let it go. But we never thought that after the child was born, the Xu family would come to take him. They said the child was their family’s and couldn’t be left outside. They left 10 thousand dollars, took the child and left. My mother, your grandmother, felt that this was a very humiliating situation. So she

went to the children's welfare center, brought you back, and we raised you as our own. Your grandmother did this on her own. We're not even very clear about it."

"But for her, you payed so much and endured so much. And the Xu family did so much to hurt her. Why did she choose that guy?"

"Perhaps that's just the way of life," he sighed. "When you were two years old, Xu Ruiyang's mother passed away. He wanted her to return, and she missed Xu Yi. So she made that decision. I know that you've hated her all these years, but she's already like this now. She doesn't have much longer to live. Zhang'er, I hope you can go to see her. She's always missed you. Actually, you know, these past years, my health hasn't been well so I haven't been working. She's given us not a small amount of financial aid. When there was news of you, she was happy too..."

I asked with a tremble, "Then, who are my biological parents?"

He said, "I don't know. Actually, after your grandmother passed away, I tried to find your parents before. But that year, the welfare center already wasn't there anymore. There was nowhere to investigate. Yang'er, you can blame me. I know, I've been useless this life. I didn't have a good job, and I didn't make a lot of money. I always made you suffer difficulties. But my love for you, it's real. I swear, it's all real..."

"That's enough!" I cut him off.

He looked at me, despondent. His eyes were all bloodshot.

I wanted to get up, put on my jacket, carry my bag, and leave. But something seemed to be keeping me stuck to the chair, and I couldn't get up.

The bell rang for 12 o'clock. Outside, there was a deafening sound of fireworks. They lit up the whole city, illuminating the 19 years that I thought I knew but was actually completely ignorant of.

Regardless of all else, the new year had come.

– The Left Ear –

Chapter 11

– The Left Ear –

11 Initiation of the College Entrance Exam

It was finally over.

I buried myself in books for the long summer break. Every other day, I'd go to the library and bring back a big pile of books. During that time, I liked to read foreign novels. One by one, I'd borrow them to read, I don't even remember the names. Sometimes in the midst of a story, the main character would cry. When I read that, I never felt anything, but I would continue to borrow another book.

Just like that, I kept reading. Patiently waiting for my admission notice, patiently waiting for the summer break to pass.

Sometimes I would log on to my blog and post a few lines, or chat a little with You Ta on QQ, or check Zhang Yang's letters. I heard that Zhang Yang went to Yunnan, but I didn't know if he was having fun. The contact we had with each other was actually very little. Sometimes a letter would come, but it would just be a few words, nothing new. Sometimes I'd be sitting by the window, reading my books, when I recalled that night that he hugged me. The me from that night didn't really seem to be me. Bold, rash, reckless. I thought about Bala's attachment to him, and it was probably like this too. The unfortunate thing was that it cost her her life, something that she'd never get back.

The day I received my admission notice from Shanghai, Mom invited our relatives and friends to go out to eat and celebrate. I was in the Chinese (language and literature?) department. Dad was happy with that. He would always chatter on, "Daughter studying Chinese is good, good, very good."

My aunt yelled at him, "Ay, aren't you done yet?"

He laughed. Then he'd pound the table with his chopsticks, like singing the opera.

Everyone was very joyous. Except for You Ta.

My mom scolded him some, “What’s the matter with you? Your sister got into college, but you’re not happy. Are you brokenhearted over someone?”

“I haven’t been dating! Don’t just say things!” he rushed, and everyone laughed together.

I knew that You Ta wasn’t dating. He was continuing his studies at Tsinghua, and would take the post-grad entrance exams and go abroad. For him, it was the obvious and natural path.

I looked at him with a smile. He didn’t understand and asked, “What are you laughing about?”

I said, “You got fatter.”

Slightly embarrassed, he said, “And you’ve gotten thinner. Are you trying to lose weight?”

“What do you mean,” I said. “My genes are very good, no matter how much I eat, I don’t get fat.”

“You’re becoming more of a smooth talker,” he criticized me.

He was always like that, acting like an older brother every chance he had. I didn’t bother with him, but turned my attentions to the fish in the pan. But he still couldn’t stop, “Watch out for the bones. This fish’s bones are really serious.”

I said, “If you’re scared of bones, you just shouldn’t eat fish.”

In a somewhat helpless voice, he said, “You’re always so mean to me.”

The restaurant package wasn’t bad, and they even had a big terrace. When we finished eating, the adults all went outside to chat. I saw You Ta stand up and walk out to the terrace to look at the sky. I thought that I was a bit mean earlier, with a temper for no reason, and it was a bit unreasonable. So I walked over to him, and asked, “What’s the matter? What’s with the frown? Are you really feeling heartbroken?”

“No,” he said. “The stars at home are really the best to look at. The ones in Beijing are all inevitably building tops.”

“When are you returning to Beijing?” I asked him. I knew he’d made a special trip back to celebrate with me. His break was very busy, with a lot of things to do.

“Another two days,” he said.

I feigned relaxation and asked, “Actually, you could have just called to send your congratulations. You didn’t have to come all the way back. I know you’re really busy in Beijing, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Very busy. I have a couple of jobs.”

“Don’t think about money so much,” I said. “Your health is important.”

“Li Er, I like someone,” he suddenly said.

“Who?” I almost jumped from surprise. “What’s she like? Tell me!”

“It’s better not to say,” he said. “Actually, I’m working too hard to make money so that I can buy her a new phone.”

“Oh,” I ridiculed. “The power of love really can’t be calculated. Hurry and tell me, what’s she like?”

He said the same thing, “It’s better not to say.”

“Oh,” I said. “When I have time, I’ll go to Beijing to play with you guys?”

He turned around and asked me, “Why do you like Beijing?”

“I’ve never been, so I want to see it. And also see who your girlfriend is.”

“Then why didn’t you try to go to a school in Beijing?”

“You think I’m like you, and can get into any school I want to?” I asked. “I’m already very happy to have gotten in somewhere. Also, Shanghai is close to home, so my mom won’t worry as much.”

“With your college exam scores, you could have gotten into a lot of schools in Beijing. Moreover, I’m in Beijing. Why would your mom worry?”

“Let’s not talk about this,” I said. “Tell me, where are you going to take me out to play?”

“Wherever you want,” he said.

When he looked at me, his eyes were full of favor. I couldn't look into his eyes anymore, so I shifted my attention and looked up at the sky. In that moment, I realized, even if I were to go to Beijing, I couldn't go to find You Ta.

I understood why You Ta brought up him and his girlfriend. Maybe he understood in his heart too. We weren't the same. He said it so that I would feel at ease. He and I would always be family. We would be brothers forever, but it would never become love. And I would be starting college soon. The past felt like a different lifetime. I hoped that I could have a new start, to be reborn from this world that I can't forget.

"Make sure you take care of yourself when you go," he said to me.

"Oh," I responded with an uncommon impatience.

Suddenly, I saw a shooting star cross the sky. I pulled on You Ta's sleeve and shouted, "Hey, shooting star! Shooting star! Hurry and make a wish!"

The star disappeared in a moment.

You Ta scolded me, "Stupid, there's no point in grabbing my clothes. You should tie a knot on your clothes then make a wish. Then the wish will come true."

I shrugged and frowned.

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You Ta asked me, "Li Er, if the shooting star could really grant you a wish, can you tell me what you would wish for?"

"You first!"

"You first."

"You say it first!"

"Okay, I'll go first." You Ta thought for a moment, "I wish that the girl I like will always be happy."

Oh, he was so infatuated!

It was my turn. I coughed, and then said seriously, "I hope that everyone in the world will be happy."

You Ta looked at me, and I blinked back.

He suddenly reached out his hand and lovingly pat my head. I laughed and moved away.

The sky grew dark. My phone sounded. It was You Ta. He said, "Li Er, where did you run off to?"

"Outside," I said.

"It's like this, my train leaves at 8 for Beijing. I just thought I'd call and let you know."

"Oh, have a safe trip. Also, make sure to give greetings to your girlfriend from me!"

"Thanks," he hung up. Relief washed over me.

It was 7 at night when I got home. Mom asked me where I went, and I said I went shopping. She pointed to a box on the table, "You Ta bought that for you."

I looked at it, and it was a cellphone. Nokia's new model.

Mom told me, "Your aunt told me that he used all the money he made over summer break to buy this. Originally we were going to buy you one since you got into college, but we couldn't turn away You Ta's kind intentions."

I just stood there, my mind completely blank for five minutes.

When I came back to my senses, I looked at the clock on the wall. Then I ran out the door, carrying the cellphone box. Mom shouted after me, "Li Er, where are you going?!"

"The train station!" I said. "I'll come back after I see You Ta off!"

I took a taxi to the train station. Standing in the station, with people coming and going, I called You Ta. He told me he already got onto the train. It felt like something was stuck in my throat, and I couldn't say anything. He asked me first, "Do you like it? I remember you said you liked Nokia."

"You Ta," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," he said. "I understand clearly. I know that there are some things that you can't force. I'll respect your decision."

“You Ta,” I said. “Don’t be like this.”

“Okay,” he answered gently. “I won’t be like this in the future.”

I couldn’t stand anymore. I could only hold my phone in one hand, the box in another, and crouch on the ground.

I heard You Ta’s voice in my ear, “Li Er, do you know when you look the cutest? It’s when you smile. So remember, no matter what, you have to be happy. You always have to be happy. I’m going, bye.” When You Ta finished speaking, the phone cut off. My tears were uncontrollable and fell.

That evening, I went outside the city. I don’t know why, but I suddenly really missed that rooftop that Zhang Yang took me to before. I missed those fleeting and beautiful fireworks. I went to the market and bought a big lighter and a pack of cigarettes, carrying them as I walked. Counting on my memories, I walked for a long while, but couldn’t find the place. I stood out on a field and lit a cigarette. It was my first time smoking. It was 555 brand, I’d seen Bala smoking them before. The smell of the cigarette wasn’t as choking as I’d thought, but it tasted a bit bitter on my tongue. I recalled the way Bala smoked smoke rings and tried it myself. But it was futile and I didn’t succeed. Then I started coughing severely. So I coughed as I smoked and wandered aimlessly around. I kept searching my memories for that rooftop that took in your loneliness, that you could send fireworks off of. I was a capricious child in that way. On that, actually, Bala and I were exactly the same.

The next time I saw Zhang Yang was two days before school started.

I was carrying a pile of books, heading downstairs. I was going to bike to the library to return my books. He was leaning against a tree, not far from my house, smoking. He’d gotten tanner and thinner. He was wearing a big t-shirt, and he hadn’t shaved in many days. If it weren’t for his cap, I almost wouldn’t have recognized him.

“Little Ear,” he called to me.

My steps were a bit unstable.

“You came at just the right time,” he said. “I was about to call you.”

“You’re back?” I found my balance, and with an easygoing tone said, “Long

time no see.”

“Yeah.” He put out his cigarette. “Where are you going?”

“To the library to return my books.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said.

“I was going to ride my bike.”

“Then I’ll take you,” he said. “Where’s your bike?”

I handed him my books. Then I went to the garage and took out my dad’s bicycle. The afternoon sun was already not so strong. Zhang Yang put all the books into the basket of the bike. Then he stepped over and onto the bike, turned around and said to me, “Let’s go.”

I hesitated a bit. He smiled and asked, “Scared?”

I got onto the bike.

Zhang Yang peddled and we traveled briskly on the street. The trees on either side of the street were both dazzling with green leaves as the breeze blew. I heard the sound of my white skirt and the friction of the bike wheel. It was a lyrical sound, as if someone’s heart were sighing.

Again, hopelessly, I thought of Bala. I remembered her riding her bicycle, following Xu Yi. Suddenly stopping and going, with a naughty look. Riding the bike at 18 years old, that years memories. A smiling girl, with green around her eyes. The feeling felt so fresh and alive then, as if she’d never left, and she’d always been by our side.

“What are you thinking of?” Zhang Yang turned and asked me loudly.

“Why did you suddenly come back?” I asked.

“My dad’s rheumatism has gotten worse, so I came back to bring him to see a doctor in Beijing.”

“Oh,” I said. “How long are you staying?”

“Just today,” he said. “We’re going back tonight at 8. The tickets are already bought.”

Ah! He was only here for the day, and he came to see me.

“Was Yunnan fun?” I asked.

“I didn’t go, I’ll go next year,” he said. “Oh yeah, where did you get into?”

“First choice,” I said. “Shanghai, Chinese department.”

“That’s good,” he said. “Girls studying Chinese is good. Shanghai isn’t far away.” He sounded just like my dad.

I jumped off the bike in front of the library and thanked him.

He suddenly said, “Go return your books. I still have time. I’ll wait for you and send you back.”

“Thank you, but you really don’t have to.”

“Enough nonsense,” he said. “Go!”

I held my books and ran into the library, worried the staff would be too slow. When I ran out with empty hands, I saw that Zhang Yang was really still waiting there. He was holding a colorful ice cream, and said to me, “You seem to like this one?”

I steadied my heart, not letting it jump up and down with pain. I felt I didn’t hate him anymore.

Bala, let’s both stop hating, okay?

I took the ice cream and ate some, letting the sweetness melt. Then I smiled at Zhang Yang.

“Home?” he asked me.

“No.” I made a decision just then, and said, “Zhang Yang, take me to that rooftop. I wanted to go again, but I couldn’t find it.”

Zhang Yang thought for a moment, “Okay, let’s go!”

Biking was a lot faster than walking. In just a little bit, we’d already reached the destination. This place looked very different in the day compared to the night. The place was rundown, overgrown weeds, a crooked tree.

Zhang Yang leaned on the bike, and said, “You have to come here at night. It doesn’t have meaning in the daytime.”

“Did you always come at night before?”

He looked at me and said, “I’ve only been here twice. Once with Bala and once with you.” He laughed and pulled out a cigarette.

“Give me one,” I said.

“Kids stay to the side!” he said.

“I’ve already smoked several,” I said.

“You?” He stared at me.

“You can’t control me,” I said.

“Don’t push me,” Zhang Yang pointed at me with his cigarette in hand. “If I wanted to control, there’s nothing I can’t control. Do you believe it?”

“I do,” I said.

“Very smart,” he praised. “If you weren’t such a good kid, you’d suffer.”

I looked down at my white dress. There was some mud on it. Zhang Yang bent down and flicked it off. Then he said, “Let’s go back.”

That evening, I crouched down on the small balcony outside my window, smoking. I didn’t crave it, but the cigarettes calmed me. It was 10 PM, and the train headed for Beijing left two hours ago. Two hours, about 300 km journey. And then, it would become 400 km, 500 km, until it was more than 1,000 km.

This long road, I knew it would be difficult to turn back.

Goodbye (see you later). Maybe, we’ll never meet again.

I was the only one who could see my stubborn pursuit. But I hoped I wasn’t wrong. I couldn’t be like Bala, wrong, time after time.

When school started, my parents both sent me to Shanghai.

After we finished the necessary procedures, the three of us went to eat at a simple restaurant near the school. As we ate, Mom’s tears started falling. Dad quickly handed her a napkin. “Don’t worry, our Li Er can definitely take care of herself.” As he said that, he winked at me.

“That’s right, Mom.” I held her hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll call you every day.”

She sobbed, “This child... You’ve had misfortune when you were young, and you’ve never left home before. How can I not worry!”

“Okay, Mom.” I said softly, “These people are all from my school. Think about how embarrassing you’re being.”

“Don’t cry,” my dad said to her. “Tonight, we’ll go shopping in Xintiandi (shopping district)!”

“I want to bring my daughter to the big hospital to get her ear checked,” Mom suddenly said. “There are lots of cars in Shanghai, and the traffic is very disorderly. What if—”

“Mom!” I cut her off. “I’m fine. Don’t just blindly worry. When I cross the street, I promise to carefully check the traffic lights, okay?”

“You definitely can’t listen to your music player as you cross the street!”

“Mm.”

“Make sure to get to the cafeteria early to eat. It’s bad for your stomach to eat cold things.”

“I know.”

“Outside is different from at home. Be sure to get along with others. If you can give way, just give. Don’t be too serious about things.” She was nagging so much. At that moment, I really admired my dad for putting up with it for so many years.

“Okay,” I answered obediently.

“My daughter knows best,” Dad said. “There’s no better child than her. What’s there to worry about?”

“So what if she’s good? There are lots of bad people outside.” My mom’s thoughts really kept curving. My dad and I laughed together, the two of us tacitly continued eating.

Sometimes I think about it, how much my parents love me and how much I also love them. But they cannot see into my heart. I can’t imagine what would happen if they saw me on the balcony smoking, saw me in the arms of a boy. Maybe my mom would faint, who knows. But from that, I really believed that

saying, "Hearts are as deep as the seas."

Who knows what someone else is thinking. And who is someone's savior.

I knew this, but still, I couldn't help but to adhere to my own persistence.

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Luckily, after freshman orientation was the weekend. I bought a map of Shanghai and studied it for half the day. Then I changed into a new dress and sat on the train for a long while. Then I walked for another long while, before finally arriving to that school. The school plaque was a bit old, and it didn't quite look the way I imagined. I asked the security desk and also several students, before finding the location of the place I was looking for. I stood at the male dormitory and looked over the list of names that listed everyone's room. The list was already a bit tattered. I ran my finger across the list, until I finally stopped on a familiar name. An overwhelming sadness took over my heart.

1. He lived in 302.

It was a very old building with wooden stairs. It would creak a lot as you walked on it, as if you had stepped wrongly. I walked up, step by step. In my heart, I said, "Xu Yi, I'm here."

I knocked on the door. The person who opened it was a boy with a crew cut, who seemed he'd be kind of brash.

"Who are you looking for?" he asked cautiously.

"Xu Yi," I said. "Is he in?"

"Nope." He was going to close the door.

I grabbed hold, "Please tell me where I can find him."

"Call him."

"Please let me know his phone number."

"Don't have it," he said.

"Please," I said. "It's really important that I find him."

He held a book in his hands. After looking me up and down, he finally told me,

“Turn left outside the school gate. Keep going for about ten minutes, and there will be a bar. He’s usually working there on the weekends.”

I thanked him and left. Shanghai in September, the sky was bright and there were few clouds. 365 days. From the moment I learned he was studying in Shanghai until now, I’ve gone this path for 365 days. I thought of him carrying a large backpack, walking out the school gates. I thought of the struggle-filled nights spent in the classroom, unable to abandon ideals for the heart’s desire. Right now, I was going to see him. I wasn’t as flustered as I used to be. After all, I was just seeing a friend. After all, he’d been waiting for more than a year.

The bar’s name was just one word: Wait.

It sat at the corner of the street. The front was very small, and if you weren’t paying attention, you’d have just passed it by. I pushed open the door. It was noon, so there weren’t really any customers inside the bar. The facilities were very simple as well. A few red sofas. A long, dark wood table with long glass bottles of yellow chrysanthemums. When I sat down, I saw him. He was wearing a uniform, and came over with a menu, asking, “What would you like to drink?”

I looked at him, and couldn’t speak for a time.

He recognized me. He left the menu on the table and walked away.

“Xu Yi,” I called him. I belatedly realized my voice was hoarse.

He stopped, his back facing me.

“Do you have any time today?” I asked. “I want to talk with you.”

He turned around and said to me, “I’m sorry, miss, I’m working. I don’t get off until 11 PM.”

I laughed and responded, “Alright, I’d like a glass of water.”

“I’m sorry, we don’t sell water here.”

“Then, watermelon juice,” I said.

A few minutes later, he brought me a cup of red watermelon juice, with an extra glass of ice water. There was a golden slice of lemon in the water. He placed the cups on my table, and said in a low voice, “I’ll buy. Leave after you’re done.”

His tone was very cold. I held back my tears, refusing to let them fall so easily.

He left.

I pulled out a thin book from my backpack. It was an old one, "The Lover" by Duras. I'd seen the movie before. Tony Leung and his French lover, in a hotel in a foreign land. The way her eyes asked for love, regardless of all costs, gave me a feeling of excitement. To be exact, I'd only seen half of the movie. That's when my mom came back from buying groceries. When she looked at me with uneasy eyes, I turned the TV off.

The ending was just as I had thought. They part.

When I closed the book, it was already evening. The bar was starting to get lively. A group of stylish women pushed open the door, and entered laughing. They seemed to be from the Art Institute, and were very familiar with the place. I saw a girl with a big, flowery dress and red sandals hold out her hand and pinch Xu Yi's face.

Xu Yi smiled. My Xu Yi, with the face of an angel. He was just as handsome as ever.

"Xu Yi, I'm going camping tomorrow. I counted you in," another girl cried out.

"Great!" Xu Yi reached out an arm, and gave a quick pat to her head. The girls laughed, a bit ambiguously but also brightly.

They were very closed.

I put 50 dollars on the table, put on my backpack, got up and left.

I walked out the bar and looked at the unfamiliar Shanghai sky, filled with high-rises. I'd already lost the desire to cry. I had to pay the price for my willfulness, I knew.

Suddenly, someone came behind me and grabbed on.

I turned around and saw Xu Yi.

"Your money," he handed me the money. "I already said I would treat."

I pushed him away.

"Just take it," he said. "I still need to work, so I can't talk long. Don't come

back again.”

I accepted the money.

He turned around and entered the bar.

When I got to the train station, I decided to turn back. I told myself, I can't give up so easily. I can't! So I went back to the bar's entrance. I sat down on the side of the street and started reading. The evening light made my eyes sore, but I kept reading. Eventually, the words in the book wouldn't go into my eyes anymore, but I still insisted on reading. I've said it before, but I'm often powerless to my own will.

It was 11:05 at night. I saw Xu Yi exit the bar. He'd changed into his own clothes. No backpack. His hands were in his pocket, and he whistled as he walked down the street. I rubbed my numb legs and then got up to follow after him. I knew that there were a lot of girls chasing after him. I'm sure that he'd become very accustomed to it, and I had no other way. At that moment, I really wish I had a white t-shirt and green paint to write "I love Xu Yi" on it. Then I could stand in front of him, without the need for anything else to say.

But before I caught up to him, a green SUV stopped in front of him. Three men jumped out and spoke a few words to Xu Yi. One of them reached out a fist and punched Xu Yi in the face.

Xu Yi covered his face and dropped to the floor. He quickly got back up, wanting to run away. But someone had a strong grip on him, and then stuffed him into the car.

I ran over, and shouted out, "What are you guys trying to do?"

My sudden appearance caught them off guard, including Xu Yi. "What are you still doing here?" he asked me.

"Waiting for you to finish work," I said.

"Who's she?" A blond haired boy chewing gum pointed at me, and asked Xu Yi.

"Don't know," Xu Yi said.

His face was emotionless, fresh blood on his nose. A sharp pain hit my heart.

"Really?" Blondie asked. "You really don't know her?"

“What are you trying to do?” I kept asking.

“Ah ah ah,” Blondie smiled. “We’re friends, just inviting him for a drink. Little girl, if there’s nothing, just go home to wash and sleep.”

“Wait!” I said. “If you insist on taking him, I’m going to call the police!”

“Don’t cause trouble!” Xu Yi shouted loudly.

“Oh? Interesting!” The way Blondie looked at me scared me, but I stared back, refusing to lose.

“Who exactly are you?” he asked me.

“I’m Xu Yi’s friend,” I said.

“Girlfriend?”

I looked at Xu Yi. His face was expressionless, and then, with difficulty, I nodded.

“Well, your boyfriend owes us more than 5,000 dollars. Are you going to pay it back for him?”

I thought for a moment, then nodded, “Okay.”

Xu Yi looked at me with surprise.

“Okay,” I said. “But all my money is on a card. It’s too late now, so I’m not sure if I can withdraw any. At the latest, when the bank opens tomorrow, I’ll definitely return the money to you.”

“You heard it, we’ll pay you back tomorrow,” Xu Yi said. “Come back tomorrow.”

“I’ll trust you once more!” Blondie pointed to Xu Yi and said, “Tomorrow’s your deadline. 10 AM, back here. I’m warning you, don’t play any tricks. Otherwise, you’ll have to personally come see our boss to explain it.”

“Got it,” Xu Yi said.

The blond boy and them jumped into the car. As the car started moving, the window rolled down. The blond haired boy with chewing gum shouted to me, “Little girl, be careful what kind of friends you make!” Then the window closed and the car sped off.

Xu Yi looked at me, then pushed me away and walked ahead.

“Hey!” I called after him. “Hey!”

“Go,” he said. “Didn’t you hear him? Be careful what kind of friends you make.”

“Do you still remember me?” I asked with some hope.

“No,” he answered just as I had imagined.

“You’re lying,” I said.

He thought for a moment, then asked, “Are you really going to lend me money?”

I thought for a moment, then nodded my head.

“Are you hungry?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Then let’s go eat first,” he said.

Xu Yi finished speaking and walked ahead. I followed behind him. We didn’t speak, and he didn’t look back at me either. When we arrived at a small restaurant not far from his campus, he pushed open the door and entered. I followed him inside. The restaurant was empty at night. There were streaks from the water that was wiped on the floor earlier. The tables were covered in a red checkered cloth. On top of the cloth was a thin, greasy, plastic sheet. Xu Yi frowned and pulled the plastic off. That left a clean tabletop. On the finely checkered cloth, someone had drawn a bear, heartlessly staring at me.

A plump, expressionless woman handed us a menu. Xu Yi ordered a few dishes and said, “A bottle of beer.”

I held onto my bag and sat down across from him. Xu Yi finally looked at me, and then asked, “What about you? You want a bottle?”

“I don’t drink,” I said.

He pulled out a pack of Yunyan (cigarettes) from his pocket, took one out and handed it to me. I shook my head. He lit one for himself and smoked in silence.

I asked him, “Why do you owe people money?”

He said, “None of your business.”

I said, “If you want me to help you pay it back, it is my business.”

He lifted his eyes to look at me, “Lost a bet.”

I said, “Then don’t bet with people in the future.”

He said, “Okay.”

The food came out. He ordered a big bowl of rice and wolfed it down. I sat across from him and watched as he ate, but I didn’t have an appetite at all. Actually, I was very hungry, but I couldn’t swallow anything. I remembered sitting across from boy before, as he ate his noodles. He said to me, “I’m always like this, hungry, but I can’t swallow anything.” That’s what I was feeling now.

Xu Yi suddenly asked me, “Where do you live?” I told him the address. He said, “That far? You have to go to the bank first. Will you make it back by 10 in the morning?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I can get up early.”

“Why don’t you just not go,” he said. “I can arrange for you to stay in the female dorms.”

I was a bit hesitant. He saw my doubts and said, “Don’t worry. Only girls stay in the female dorms.”

I rolled my eyes at him, and he laughed.

“Your name?” he asked me.

“Li Er,” I said.

“Right, I remember. That’s the name,” he said.

He smiled, and it was mesmerizing. Suddenly, I was dropped back to Year 2 of high school, my lonely and empty 17. I first saw him on street after the sun had set. A boy was leaning against the railing, wearing a large backpack that had been washed white. His face was so handsome. At that time, I was still a young and naive girl. Love started to take root in my heart. It turned my world upside down, left me utterly confused, unable to recognize myself.

Chapter 12

– The Left Ear –

12 Time Won't Lie to Us

Time just passes by, but time won't lie to us. My faith in love made the blood in my heart boil. So, I also smiled at him.

He was a bit taken aback at the smile. Then he finished up his rice and said to me, "Check, let's go."

That night, Xu Yi sent me to the female dormitory and made a call.

Not long after, a short-haired girl came down. She greeted Xu Yi, then smiled and grabbed onto my shoulders. "Okay, let's go."

I wasn't used to being so close with a stranger, so I pushed her off.

Xu Yi gave a meaningful smile, then said to the girl, "This is my younger sister. Take care of her."

The girl smiled and asked him, "How many younger sisters do you have?"

"Just the two of you," Xu Yi answered.

The girl laughed and said goodbye to him. Then she pulled me upstairs.

In order to avoid having to speak too much to the girl, I quickly went to bed and pretended to be sound asleep. But I heard her introducing me to the other girls, "Handsome Xu's newest girlfriend."

They called him Handsome Xu. I recalled the dumb looking boy I saw at his dorm in the morning, and guessed that Xu Yi would be more popular with the girls. What happened next confirmed my guess. The plump girl helped me to pull a blanket, and even told the other girls to be more gentle. A touching feeling crept into my heart, and it made me more tired, so I really fell asleep.

Early in the morning the next day, Xu Yi was already waiting for me downstairs. He was in a new pair of training clothes. A girl passed by him and cried out softly.

He said, "I'll take you to our cafeteria to eat breakfast."

"No need," I said. "I'm not hungry."

"But I am," he said. "Let's go."

I persisted in not going. Then he said helplessly, "Fine, we'll go out to eat."

I followed him out, silently leaving the campus. On our way to the bank, he stopped by a bar's takeout counter and bought a few fried buns. We split them to eat. He pulled out a napkin from his pocket and handed it to me. It was scentless, but of good quality. Books say that boys who carry around napkins are ones with character.

As we walked, he asked me, "Li Er, how do you write your name?"

"*Wang* radical with *er* from ear."

"Are you good friends with Bala?" he asked.

"Yes, but Bala's dead," I said.

"Right." He glanced at me, "But we're still alive. We can't do anything about that."

"Don't get hurt again because of her," I said.

He laughed haha, "It's cute how silly you are. She's already dead, what's there to be hurt about? Moreover, she is her, and I am me. Our relationship ended a long time ago."

I felt stifled and couldn't say anything. And like that, we arrived at the bank. I asked him, "How much do you want? Five or six thousand?"

He thought for a moment, "Six."

And then he added, "Don't worry, I'll return it quickly."

"Oh," I said.

"Thanks," he said.

I lifted my eyes to look at him. It took me a lot of courage. He also looked at me, but this made me feel a kind of despair that left me a bit scared. I felt like I was looking at a stranger. And maybe, he never felt that I was familiar at all. I

painstakingly insisted to myself, maybe it was just a scary illusion I'd conjured up on my own.

God, where can I understand what true love means?

Nine days after I helped Xu Yi pay off his debt, I got a phone call. He got right to the point, "Li Er, I still need another two thousand."

I said, "I don't have it."

"Okay," he said. "Bye."

I stared at my phone for a long time, then I called him back. He answered very quickly. I finally said, "I'll send it to you at the weekend."

"That's too late," he said. "I'll come to your school to pick it up."

At noon, I went to the bank near my school and withdrew my last 2,000 dollars. I stuffed it into my backpack and waited at the train station exit for Xu Yi. Pairs and pairs of couples passed by me. A boy leaned over and lightly kissed his girlfriend on the cheek. I averted my gaze and looked at the ground. There was a very dirty brick. There was some green chewing gum stuck to it. My stomach was very uncomfortable, and I felt as if I was going to faint. That's when Xu Yi appeared in front of me. He said, "Li Er, your hair's gotten long. You should cut it."

Dizzily, I asked him, "Why did you bet with them again?"

"This time wasn't because of a bet," he said. "I'm doing some work for a company, so I need to upgrade my computer."

I lowered my head and opened my bag, pulling out the money and handing it to him. He accepted it and gave his thanks. I said, "No need." He said, "Then, I'm going. I still have things to finish."

I said, "Oh."

He turned around, back to the train. After two steps, he turned back and said, "Li Er, do you have time this weekend?"

I nodded my head.

He said, "Come to the bar then. I don't have to work on Sunday, but I'll be

hanging out there at night.”

I smiled.

He waved at me, then left.

After Xu Yi left, I decided to skip class. I went to a hair salon. The worker greeted me happily, suggesting this and that type of haircut. I cut her short, “I don’t have any money. Just cut it, make it short.”

Maybe because they saw they wouldn’t be able to make money from me, so they sent me to a barber who seemed a bit foolish. He must be an intern. In the mirror, I saw his hands trembling. I tried to calm him, saying, “It’s fine. Just cut it short. The style doesn’t matter.”

After hearing me say that, he smiled at me gratefully. Then he said, “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you like it.”

While I was at the salon, I texted You Ta, “Please lend me 1,000 yuan. I’ll return it to you very quickly.” I’d given all the money my mom left me on the card to Xu Yi. If I don’t figure something out, I’ll starve to death.

Please note that I’ve been (and probably will continue to) use dollars and yuan interchangeably. Money is all in RMB; you can look up if you want to see how much it is in local currency.

You Ta didn’t respond to text, but called right away. He asked, “Li Er, what do you need money for? Aunt didn’t leave you enough money to use?”

While the hairdryer was on noisily in the background, I lied, “That’s not it. I’m buying a new computer, but I’m a little short on the money.”

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“Does your mom know? Did she agree to it?”

“If you don’t want to lend it to me, that’s fine.”

He kept asking, “You just started school. Why do you need a computer?”

I said, “I want to write some things.”

“Oh, okay. By the way, how is Shanghai?”

“It’s fine,” I said.

“Okay,” You Ta said. “Send me your card number.”

“Don’t tell my mom,” I said.

“Okay,” You Ta said reluctantly. “But I’m happy you thought of me. Just know, no matter what it is, I’ll always be willing to help.”

“Mm,” I answered, a tug at my heart. “Thank you, I’ll return it to you as soon as possible.”

“Don’t work too hard. Shanghai’s big. If you do any tutoring or something, you might have to go really far. You’re a girl so be careful. Don’t be blind, got it? If there’s anything else, you can tell me.”

I suddenly really wanted to cry. At the same time, I really wanted to know, if You Ta knew why I was borrowing money from him, would he kill me?

I put away my phone into my pocket. The barber straightened my head and turned to the mirror. In the mirror, I saw me, with short hair and big eyes. The front was very neat. I was very happy with my new haircut, so I made a face at the mirror.

That week, I found a job. I helped tidy up books at the library. The person who introduced me to the job was Senior Lin. She was already in Year 3, also in the Chinese department. She often helped out at the library, and since I visited there often, she started to talk to me. She was very nice, spoke with gentle words. She was very neat with her work. She didn’t make people nervous, so I slowly started to like her. Sometimes, when the library was mostly empty, Lin would sit across from me and reach out to touch my forehead. She touched it gently and said, “Li Er, there really aren’t many girls like you who like to read books.”

When Lin and I left the library at 9 PM after cleaning up, we were already so hungry we were going to faint. Lin suggested a place to eat. I declined, saying I had some things at the dorm. Lin looked at me lovingly. I turned around to wave goodbye, and she still stood there, at a distance, looking at me lovingly. Lin didn’t have a boyfriend, so she was lonely on the weekends. Actually, I really did want to eat with her, but I didn’t want her to treat. And I couldn’t afford to treat anyone, so it could only be like this.

I had some biscuits and water when I got back to the dorm. I felt a lot better.

The other girls in my dorm room weren't there. They'd already found things to entertain themselves. I leaned on my bed, struggling with myself. For the whole day, I kept myself very busy, so that I wouldn't have to face this struggle. He already started a new life. He'd forgotten Bala a long time ago. I should have washed and slept already. I closed my eyes. I didn't even have to dream again. But I couldn't do it. Not even three minutes later, I lost to this struggle. I changed into a pair of clean jeans, put on my Hello Kitty sweatshirt, and put on my backpack. I opened the dorm door and left.

The October evening on campus was filled with an indescribable scent. It was intoxicating, and I wanted to cry. I carried a depressed mood as I walked down the street. I'd turned into a light piece of paper, unable to be controlled. When I got to the school gate, I saw Lin. She was with a slightly fat, tall boy. I slowed my steps. I saw him try to hold her hand, but she pushed it away gently. I saw her hold back some resistance. I thought I understood. Lin didn't really like that boy, she was just lonely. She just wanted someone to have a meal with her. But me... Why did I do it? I hurt myself for no reason, and there was no saving me.

The last train for the day whistled away behind me, as I walked up the stairs. Seeing the strange and unfamiliar Shanghai October sky, I don't know why, but I suddenly thought of setting off fireworks on the roof that night. I was willing to believe that every firework that lit up the sky would never be extinguished. They would eventually ascend to the heavens and become the stars in the sky. But those people who were setting off the fireworks had already scattered into the seas of people, no longer clear where they were headed.

I pushed open the bar doors. It was 10 PM. Compared to the last time I was there, the bar was full and lively. A band was performing. The girl stood on the stage, singing, "*Oh... Oh... I look back and forth, but that picture's the best. You and I, we take pictures until we've turned old. If we didn't seek out trouble, what would we need to grieve over? You and I, did we love just for the fun? Watching the days pass by, it's no big deal...*"

People's silhouettes shook back and forth. I looked all around but didn't see Xu Yi. A waiter passed by, and I grabbed onto him. I asked him, "Excuse me, do you see Xu Yi?"

"Xu Yi?" He looked at me, and gave an ambiguous smile. He pointed to a

corner, "There!"

I turned that way and finally saw him. I couldn't see his face, but I knew it was Xu Yi. Xu Yi, whom I cared about deeply. I wanted us to love each other. He was holding a girl close to him. She had on green trousers and a red top. She closed her eyes. Happiness oozed from her smiling face. He was kissing her.

No, I should say, they were kissing each other. Deeply, intoxicated, as if no one else were around.

I went deaf. I couldn't hear any music. I stood there, and felt something slowly start to break apart. I couldn't contain the panic and the despair. I told myself, "Li Er, you sought this out yourself. This is what you must bear."

You deserve it.

.....

"Until the end, you can never give up!"

I had read a book by Chiung Yao at the library. She wrote of love in such a flowery way. It wasn't easy for her story to move me, but this one sentence had really gotten to me.

I stood up unsteadily, and Lin eyed me with concern. Then I left the library.

The November weather was a bit cold.

With my head hanging low, I walked along a small, quiet path on campus. I took out my phone and typed out a text, "Love, tell me, what should I do?"

I sent the text to Bala.

Bala Bala.

I closed my eyes.

Bala Bala, my love. If right now, you can see me from heaven, please guide me. Show me that I have to persevere. Give me the courage to keep believing, to keep going until the end. Let me know that we'll be able to find the happiness we seek.

That night, in my dreams, I returned to 17 years old. I dreamed of that snowy winter day. A tall and thin boy, wearing a large gray coat, leaned in to me. He

pointed a finger at me and said, "I'll never like you."

I looked at his arrogant face. Hesitatingly, I reached out, wanting to touch it.

This face that was cleaner and whiter than a girl's, with large and bright eyes. The dream was blurry but also strong enough to shock me. But when I reached out my hand, he turned around and ran.

He ran out the blue doors into the piles of snow, never turning back. I wanted to call out his name, but I suddenly forgot what his name was.

How can I call you back?

In my dream, I slowly dropped to the ground. I tried really hard to remember his name, my head felt like cracking.

Bala, my love. I know that you won't be able to answer me anymore. You've already gone, leaving me here in constant hesitation. Left hand or right? I don't know if I should reach out or let go. Do you know, I always keep trying to guess what your final words to me were. After many days passed, I insisted on believing that you'd told me the secret to unlocking happiness. It wasn't until today that I have to admit, our happiness is something far away, something hard to come by.

I was tortured for the whole night by this hopeless dreamland. When I woke up, the sky was already bright. The girls in the dorm had already left, and then I realized it was the weekend. I had a missed call from Lin. I washed up quickly and rushed over to the library. Lin was already there waiting for me. She had bought some pancakes and handed them to me.

"You didn't pick up my call, so I was starting to worry." Lin looked at me, and said with a blaming tone, "Li Er, you're a kid who makes people worry."

I bit off a mouthful of pancake and laughed.

Lin said, "Sometimes I want to transfer your brain into a computer and see what's inside."

I continued giggling, and then said, "I want to make money, the more the better."

She looked at me in surprise, "Why do you already have a financial crisis when

school just started?”

With some difficulty, I asked, “Can you not ask?”

She gave me a tolerant and meaningful look. She pulled out a Mizuno planner from her pocket and opened it to reveal more than 30 name cards.

“From Monday to Saturday, except during class house, I can probably help you contact them. If you’re willing to go out in the evenings, I can help you figure things out until 12 o’clock.

I reached out my hands, greasy from the pancake, and lightly hugged Lin. She cried out and jumped in surprise.

And then Lin really did arrange things and packed my schedule full. I wore running shoes every day so that I could run from the nearest district to school, and I wouldn’t have to take a taxi. I pulled up my hair and tied it up the way Bala used to do. My whole face was revealed, and it wasn’t beautiful to look at, but I didn’t care.

One evening before we slept, the Suzhou girl in the upper bunk asked a question. She asked what the ugliest hairstyle in the world was. And when she finished asking, the other two girls both laughed out loud. Lying in my bed, I also politely laughed along. Then I pat my own hair and said, “Pretty girls, look this way!”

After I spoke, they continued to laugh contentedly. Peacefully and wearily, my eyelids closed and I fell asleep.

You have to know, a good night’s sleep is invaluable to me. The next day, I was refreshed and went to class attentively. After my classes, I went to buy a fresh cake to deliver to Lin. Lin handed the pile of books in her hands to a boy, and then smiled at me from the desk. The gentle atmosphere in the library reminded me that winter would soon arrive. My hair grew out fast and was already long. It was disorderly and stuck to my neck, leaving me warm. I didn’t want to go to the salon to get it trimmed. When my bangs got long, I’d just use a pair of scissors and a mirror to cut them. Sometimes I did a bad job and the bangs looked really ugly. But I didn’t care. Anyway, my hairstyle was already notoriously poor. Compared to the bright, gorgeous girls in my dorm, I was dim and dark.

Sometimes I could think of him, for no reason. I thought of him suddenly appearing in front of me, with a nice tone, saying, “Li Er, you should cut your hair.”

He wouldn't show up again, I thought sadly.

Lin was my only friend. When we had free time, we would kill time sitting in the library. During this season, Lin could wear a turtleneck sweater to cover the mark on her neck. The plump boy who liked her would bring her a hamburger and warm milk when she read. He never said anything, just leaving it on the table before going. Lin never touched it, even until it turned cold. Sometimes she would force me to drink the warm milk, saying, “Li Er, you're too skinny. I'm really worried that the wind will blow you away. You should eat more, and your cheeks will get rosy.”

After hearing that, I brought my hands to my face and rubbed until they were flushed. Then I looked to her and laughed.

It was really comfortable with Lin, and she never asked me questions about my background. Of course, I also didn't ask too many things about her. Lin's social skills were much stronger than mind. Sometimes she would drag me to the carnival to work. Or we'd help sell phone cards for the mobile phone company. Or we'd hand out pamphlets at the mall. She always had lots of ways to learn money. I followed behind her, relaxed, comfortable, never having to think too much or stress.

Lin ate the soft cake I bought her. She licked her fingers and said happily, “Let's go watch a movie tonight. There's a good movie with Tom Cruise. I'll treat.”

I said, “I like Andy Lau.”

“Bad taste,” she scolded me.

I laughed. I said that on purpose. Actually, I really liked Tony Leung. Aside from “The Lover,” I'd also seen his other film. He played a man who was forever loyal in love. It made me cry several times and my heart ached. I still remembered, the name of the movie was “Everlasting Regret.” It was adapted from Wang Anyi. What a genius name. Everlasting sorrow (hate), a moment of pain. Perhaps that was the truth of love.

“What are you thinking of?” Lin waved her hand in front of me.

“I have to go to a student’s home,” I said. “It’s my first time, I have to do a good job.”

Suddenly my phone rang. In the quiet library, I looked at my phone and saw Xu Yi flashing on the screen. Flustered, I quickly turned it off.

It rang again, and I turned it off again.

Then I ran out of the library.

The phone kept ringing relentlessly. Lin followed me out, and brought my coat,” You forgot your clothes.”

“Thanks,” I said.

She looked at my phone. It was still ringing.

“I have to go,” I said hastily. I turned and ran out of Lin’s sights.

That evening, there was a heavy storm. I left the student’s home and took the train back to school. Torrential rain. I didn’t bring my umbrella. If I got back late, the dorm would be closed. I stood in the subway for a moment, then pulled my hood on and ran into the rain. As I approached the school gate, a figure rushed to me and covered my head with an umbrella. It was Lin.

In the heavy rain, she shouted to me, “Why did you turn off your phone?”

I said, “It ran out of batteries.”

She pulled me over to the school as she scolded, “Why didn’t you take a taxi? There’s so much rain!”

“I don’t have money,” I shouted back to her.

“That’s enough!” Lin threw the umbrella to my feet. “Li Er, I hate that you torture yourself like this. Let me tell you. If a girl doesn’t love herself, no one will be willing to love her!”

When she finished saying that, she ran off.

I stood in the rain in a daze for a long time. Then I picked up the umbrella and went into the dorm with heavy steps.

That evening, Lin's voice rang over and over in my head, "Let me tell you. If a girl doesn't love herself, no one will be willing to love her!" I tried to struggle (free) ever since those agonizing, spell-like words were spoken out loud, but I couldn't. It felt like my body had been bound up and was sinking into the deep ocean. I couldn't breathe.

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When I woke up, I realized I was lying in a hospital.

Lin stood at my side, and gently asked, "Dearest, I bought a fresh chestnut cake and some congee. Do you want to eat some?"

"Where am I?"

"The hospital," Lin said. "You had a 40 degree fever and were saying crazy things. Really scared your roommates. Since they knew I was your only older sister (friend), they called me."

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't say that," Lin stroked my forehead. "Li Er, I'm sorry. I'll never leave you alone again."

I turned my head and tears fell.

"Who's Bala?" she asked, wiping away my tears.

I looked at her in surprise.

She said, "Last night, you kept calling 'Bala.'"

I didn't know how to respond. I'd been living in Bala's world for a very long time. My youth was tied into hers. Even though she would never come back, but I never thought about leaving this place of hers. I looked at Lin, and then I saw an illusion of Bala. I believed that Bala and Lin were the same. Standing at a place that had nothing to do with (romantic) love, both loving me, liberating me from all my pain.

From that angle, I was very blessed.

"Who's Xu Yi?" Lin suddenly asked.

I had another scare. Did I also cry out Xu Yi's name? Then, am I... Oh God, my

God.

Seeing my nervous state, Lin smiled. She said, "The person called Xu Yi kept calling your phone. So I answered it and told him you were sick. He said he'd come right away."

My first reaction was to jump up out of bed, but I didn't have the strength. None at all. Lin held me down, "Li Er, calm down."

"Lin," I said. "I don't want to see him."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded.

"Okay. Then sleep, you need to rest. I'll take care of him." She gave me a pat.

I looked at the bright tube of liquid dripping into my body and felt very sleepy. Then, I really fell asleep. When I woke up again, it was the middle of the night. Lin was lying on my bed, sleeping. I smelled a light aroma of lily. Lin was awakened and raised her head up, "Do you need something? Want to eat? Or go to the bathroom?"

I turned to look at the flowers. Lilies. They were really very beautiful in the dark night.

"He came," Lin said. "He sent the flowers. And he also had me give this to you."

Lin handed me a thick envelope.

I opened it and it was full of money.

"I counted it already, 3,000. He said he was returning it, so I accepted it," Lin said.

"Where is he?"

"He said he was busy so he left. He said to call him."

"Oh," I said.

Lin giggled, "But really, that kid is really handsome. No wonder you were so restless."

I pulled out the white piece of paper from inside the envelope. "Thank you."

Because of those two strange and courteous words, I felt another pang to my heart, something I could neither settle nor express. Even if I used all my body's strength, he was still a warmth that I would be unable to get close to.

Two days later, I left the hospital. I didn't call Xu Yi, and he didn't call me either. My work that night was selling cake at a coffee shop. We sold cakes from 9 to 11 PM. I stood under the tent, advertising to all the passersby.

When I'd nearly finished selling the cakes, thunder sounded from the sky. I looked up and started cleaning up the stand.

A voice came, "Sell your remaining cakes to me."

I lowered my head, about to head off. But he grabbed my arm from behind and turned me around.

My God, this was a big street. Although I didn't look up, I knew it was Xu Yi. The person I still couldn't bear to look at, Xu Yi. He'd come. There was no where to escape to.

He hugged me gently, and with a sigh, "Li Er, it's strange. I miss you."

It was that sort of light, kind of a hug, but not quite a hug. The last piece of cake fell from my hand. Maybe because of the cream left on my fingers, there was suddenly a taste of love in the air. So, accepting my fate, I closed my eyes.

After a long time, he let go and said, "Come with me."

Like a fool, without a word, I followed him. We walked, side by side, on the midnight Shanghai street. This district isn't really considered bustling. Coupled with coming rain, the streets were already mostly empty. The sound of thunder and wind sounded together. The parasol tree leaves in November were still quite thick, and they whistled in the wind.

At 17 years old, I wished so much to walk side by side with him. I glanced at him from the side and looked at his long and straight nose. In that moment, it felt like the rest of the world didn't exist.

After we walked a bit, he still didn't stop and he didn't seem to be headed anywhere. I stopped and asked, "Where are we going? If it gets any later, I won't

be able to get back into school.”

Xu Yi stopped and looked at me casually. Then he looked up at the sky. He quickly pulled me under a tree, and stared at me with gentle eyes, different from in my dream. Word by word, he said, “Li Er, be my girlfriend!”

That’s when the rain started to fall.

I pushed him away.

He suddenly grabbed my hands and pulled them to his chest, and I couldn’t move. The rain hit my head. I closed my eyes and shook my head crazily, as if I’d been bewitched.

Almost as if he’d also been bewitched, he held onto me tightly so I couldn’t move. He kept saying, “Promise me, promise me, promise me.” I couldn’t stand it anymore. I bent down slightly and bit his shoulder.

He didn’t move, not even a tremble. My hair bun finally fell down, and it must have been drooping uglily. Just as ugly as a newborn octopus.

I cried.

In the end, I still cried. I cried as I kicked him with my old running shoes, the pair from two years ago. The ones I’d run through the snow in. His grip loosened.

“Be my girlfriend,” he said again. But his voice had become very gentle. The hand holding mine finally let go. Clutching my head, I dropped to the ground. I suspected I was dreaming.

I felt hazy, as he carried me on his back and ran back to my school. And again, hazily, I heard him say, “I won’t ever like you.” Hazily, Bala held onto my thin body at the side. Xu Yi was being stepped on by numerous feet. His head was covered in blood. My head was heavy and in pain. Everything, as if I’d been tossed into a boiling pot, started scrolling through my mind.

The world had turned upside down, peace gone.

“Come on, it’s raining too much. Let’s go over there!” he shouted as he pulled me over. He pulled me under the roof of a shop. He helped me wipe off the rain from my body, but it was really no use. We were both already completely soaked.

I was shivering from the cold, and I suddenly wanted to smoke. So I asked him, "Give me a cigarette."

When my heart was feeling empty, I would think of how Bala looked smoking. She stood on stage singing, then she would come down. She bowed her head, lonely, and would light up a cigarette. The light lit up her face, as if lighting up all the warmth and desire.

Xu Yi asked me, "What did you say?"

"I want to smoke," I said.

He pulled out a cigarette, it was Yunyan. He lit one for himself, and then another for me. I was trembling and it went out right away. Xu Yi came over to light it again, but I pushed him away. His hand suddenly grabbed onto my fingers. I subconsciously pulled my hand away. He reached over again to hold me. I turned my head. With a cigarette still in his mouth, he stubbornly turned my head back.

I felt like a hypocrite. So in my heart, I sent out a little villain, harshly slapping my own hand.

"Will you listen to me?"

"No."

"My dad went to jail for corruption."

"I know."

"My mom got cancer, she died."

"I know."

He roared at me, "You little witch, how much do you know about me? Tell me!"

With despair, I said, "Xu Yi, don't be like this." I felt the uselessness of my words. I curled up (from cold) in front of him, unable to say any more.

After Xu Yi calmed himself, he looked up and said, "You've always loved me, right? You wouldn't lie to me, right?"

I still didn't say anything, just turning my head.

He kept holding my hand, saying, “I went to see you at the hospital. You were lying there in the bed, sleeping. I watched for a very long time, and you seemed very familiar. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen such a familiar face.”

I still turned my head to the side, although it wasn’t attractive or a position that was easy to maintain. But I was touched by his words. I couldn’t keep a hold of my emotions anymore and fell to the temptation to turn my head back. In that moment, Xu Yi’s face was approaching. And then, he bit onto...my...lips.

My heart was beating crazily. I wanted to push him away. Taking advantage of the moment, he grabbed on tightly to my hands and pulled them over his chest.

My lips really hurt then. My cold fingers held onto his warm neck. I wanted to break free, but he kept hold.

Compared to the elegant and quiet youth in my memory, Xu Yi had transformed into a stubborn and selfish man. This was my first kiss, in a strange city, under the eaves, rain falling onto the empty streets. And I gave it to my lovely Xu Yi. As if to complete it, tears flowed down, my heart ever so painful.

Much later, I read a magazine. It said that when a man placed a woman’s hand on his heart before he kissed her, it was true love.

– The Left Ear –

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Chapter 13 (1/2)

– The Left Ear –

13 Together With Xu Yi (1/2)

I was already together with Xu Yi at that point. We were sitting on the park bench, and when I saw that sentence, I started laughing to myself. He moved over from the other end of the bench, wrapped his arms around me, asking, “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

“There is.”

“I said there isn’t, so there isn’t.”

“There is!” He pinched my cheeks with his hands. Then seriously, he said, “You’re getting fatter. Ear Pig.”

“You’re the pig.”

“Ear Pig, Ear Pig.” He was so proud of his jingle that he laughed so hard his shoulders were shaking.

At that moment, I pushed his shoulder.

“Ah—” Xi Yi shouted up to the sky.

“The pig is slaughtered,” I retaliated. I rolled my eyes and laughed, before continuing to read my book.

And like that, I’d become Xu Yi’s girlfriend.

It was like something I’d been waiting a long time for, but when I finally attained it, I felt an odd sense of restlessness. And as time passed by, this worried feeling grew greater and greater. Sometimes when I wasn’t careful, I’d get swallowed up by it. One day, Xu Yi called me and said, “Li Er, even though you might not be the world’s most beautiful (*mei*) girl, you’re definitely the world’s best (*meihao*) girl.”

I moved my phone from my right ear to my left. In a low voice, I said, "Can you say that again?"

He might have repeated himself, but I didn't hear it.

My left ear was still the same. In the most critical moment, it would go deaf. But I didn't tell Xu Yi about this, just like I didn't understand all there was about him. I knew that we were both kids who'd been hurt before. We were sensitive, fragile, suspicious. My only wish was that our love could grow in the direction I imagined. It didn't need lots of drama or ups and down. Being peaceful would do.

Per my suggestion, Xu Yi quit his job at the bar and cut off his relationships with those no-good people. When he had time, he worked for a computer company. This gave me, more or less, a sense of accomplishment.

When we weren't busy, we'd go on dates. Our dates were completely different to how other college students dated. Sometimes they would be in his tiny office at the computer company. He'd be buried in his computer and I'd be buried in my book. Sometimes it would be at McDonald's. We would sit across from each other, eating our own hamburger and fries. Sometimes it would be on the street. He held my hand as we walked down the old Shanghai alleys. I liked when he held my hand, because he held on very tightly, and he wouldn't let go. This left me feeling assured. I told Lin about this, and she laughed at me, saying, "Dear child, that means that you're lacking a sense of security."

Maybe that was true. My sense of security stemmed from myself. Deep inside my heart, there was a very dangerous thread. I couldn't touch it, because if I did, the result would be disastrous.

So I was stuck at an impasse. I learned to keep my life stable.

But Xu Yi never brought me any troubles. He depended entirely on himself for money, so he was always short on it. Maybe it came from the wasteful habits in his childhood. Whenever he had money, he'd never think about what would happen when he was out of money. For example, when winter came, he bought me a red coat that cost more than a thousand dollars. It was indeed very pretty, but I felt bad for a very long time. He nonchalantly told me, "Don't worry, I'm working on a new piece of software. I'll have money soon." In the end, his

software wasn't successful, and he made no money. On the contrary, because he had to buy computer parts, he hit a financial crisis. I often lent him money. I didn't have enough though, so I would ask Lin to help me get more jobs. Sometimes Lin got mad, saying she would stop caring about me. But in the end, she would always come to help me.

One time, I received a stranger's call while in class. It was a girl. She said Xu Yi brought me things, and told me to go to the school gate to get it. Good thing that I was in a large lecture that day, and I was also sitting near the classroom door. So, I sneaked out of class. As I made my way to the school entrance, I wondered to myself what surprise Xu Yi would have brought. To some extent, I felt much more fear than anticipation about it.

And indeed, it was so. The "surprise" that day went like this. A fashionably dressed girl asked me if I was Li Er. I said I was, and she rushed at me. She laughed and then slapped me against the ear. Then she jumped into a taxi and left.

I covered my face and slowly sank to the ground. About two minutes later, I stood up and went back to my dorm.

When I was eating lunch in the cafeteria, I saw Lin. She asked me with surprise, "What happened to your face? It's all swollen!"

"Nothing," I responded, trying to keep calm.

"No," Lin persisted. "Something's definitely wrong. Your eyes are also swollen."

"It's really nothing," I said.

I didn't want to let anyone find about me getting slapped. Including Lin. Including Xu Yi. But in the end, Lin found out. The story had been all distorted by witnesses, and it was very unfavorable for me. Lin secretly called Xu Yi and scolded him. I didn't know about all of that.

On the weekend, Xu Yi had me go to find him at his school. He met me at the school gate. The moment he saw me, he embraced me in his arms. I blushed. He lovingly touched my face and said, "How have you been these past few days?"

I said, "Pretty good."

He smiled and brought me across the big street. All the girls we passed by looked at me with unfamiliar gazes. That was the biggest reason I didn't like their school. In that not very big campus, the handsome Xu Yi was just the same as when we were at Tian High. No matter what, he was always at the center of attention, a topic people never grew tired of.

It was just like Lin had said, "Your broke (rotten?) kid has this terrible air of nobility on him."

She always called him a broke kid, and didn't approve of our love.

But that wasn't a big deal. I understood Lin. Lin's love life hadn't made any progress. I knew that she really liked a certain boy, but he didn't like her at all. That chubby boy was still persistent in his pursuit of her, but Lin wasn't moved by it at all. The dilemma of the world.

Xu Yi brought me to the school's courtyard. There were some boys playing basketball there, and some girls cheering on the side. He kept pulling me forward, until we arrived in front of the group of girls. He pointed at one girl and asked me, "That day, did he hit you?"

I looked at the girl. She was wearing different clothes, but I wouldn't forget what she looked like.

I shook my head, pulled Xu Yi and said, "Let's go."

Xu Yi calmly said, "I'm going to ask you again. Did she hit you?"

I still didn't say anything. The girl jumped out from the crowd, "It was me! So what if I hit your sweetheart? Why don't you hit me back? Go ahead, hit me!"

Xu Yi slapped her on the face. After he hit her, it wasn't enough, so he went again.

"Don't, don't hit her!" I shouted, doing all I could to hold him back.

When news got out that Xu Yi hit a girl, his popularity at school rapidly declined. But he didn't care. He held me in his arms, "Li Er, in this life, I won't bully you. If anyone dares bully you, I won't let them go!"

I asked him, "Why do you treat me this well?"

"Because you treat me well." He gently bit my finger, saying, "I know. You're

the only girl in this world who treats me well without wanting anything in return.”

I lifted my head up to look at him. I thought he would kiss me, but he didn't. He looked at me for a long time, before finally turning away with difficulty. I knew that between us, we had some inexplicable obstacles, but that didn't mean anything. As long as he had patience, I would have at least as much patience.

When the new year came, I planned to go home with Xu Yi. I thought about it for a long time, and did my best not to upset him when I made the request. But as I suspected, he rejected the idea. Instead, he wanted me to stay with him in Shanghai for New Year's. But for me, that wasn't really a possibility. My parents had already arranged to meet me. And there was You Ta. If I didn't go home, even if I had a good reason, they would all come over to Shanghai. I apologized to Xu Yi. He shook his head as if it wasn't a big deal, “It's okay, you should go home. You have your family.”

“Xu Yi,” I said apologetically, “I'll be back very soon.”

“It's okay,” he said. “Go home and have fun.”

The day I left Shanghai was very, very cold. Xu Yi sent me to the train station. He wrapped his coat around me. Between the two of us, that was considered a very intimate act. He sent me all the way to the platform. I came out from inside his jacket and jumped onto the train. When I turned around and saw him, I suddenly felt like crying. The new year was almost here. Days meant to be spent with family, but here he was, all alone. So I dragged my heavy luggage and jumped back off the train.

“What are you doing?” he asked me.

“I don't want to go,” I said.

“Silly girl!” He pulled me into his arms, pulled his coat over our heads, and kissed me senseless. The train's whistle sounded. Then he suddenly let me go, picked up my luggage and pushed me onto the train.

“Go back!” he said.

“I don't want to,” I said. “I want to stay here with you.”

“Go! Go!” He ignored my plea and pushed me onto the train. Then he turned around and stepped away from the platform.

The train started moving. I faced the conductor, tears streaming down my face. Used to seeing these types of partings, he unsympathetically gave me a push. “Hurry inside and don’t block the way!”

Just like that, because I missed Xu Yi so much, I passed the most absentminded New Year’s of my life. Even when You Ta suggested setting off fireworks in the square, I wasn’t interested. It was as if enjoying myself would have been a mockery to love, a betrayal to Xu Yi. You Ta finally asked me, “What’s wrong with you, Li Er?”

“I’m in love,” I said to him.

“Really?”

“With Xu Yi,” I said.

I thought he would blow up, but I was wrong. You Ta only gave a soft “Oh.”

I couldn’t be bothered about his feelings. What was more important was that after Xu Yi messaged me New Year’s greetings, he turned his phone off. He didn’t want me to worry, but regarding that point, it wasn’t something I could help.

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On the second day of the new year, I went to Bala’s grave.

On the green grass in front of the gravestone was a bundle of yellow roses. There were even beautiful dewdrops on them. I leaned over to touch the petals. A familiar feeling came, and it gave me a fright. Someone was standing in my path.

“Little Ear,” he said. “Where are you going?”

“Ah!” It wasn’t easy to pull myself up. “Happy new year, Zhang Yang.”

He smiled, looking at me, “You seem to have grown taller.”

“How can that be,” I said. “I haven’t grown anymore after my 16th birthday.”

He reached his hand out and pat my head, “Happy new year!”

“Are you home for New Year’s?” I was talking nonsense.

“Yeah,” he said. “Home for New Year’s.” He was also talking nonsense.

“School starts soon for me,” I kept talking.

“For us too,” he went along with me.

“What are you still doing here?” I asked him.

He pointed ahead, “I’m waiting for my dad, he’s up ahead.”

“Oh,” I said. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

I walked a few steps and wanted to look back. But I knew, no matter what, I couldn’t look back. Then I heard him shout from behind, “Little Ear!”

I slowed my steps.

He said, “If you ever change your email or phone number, remember to let me know.”

I turned around, tried my best to put on a smile and said, “Sure, I’ll do that.”

He raised his hand to say goodbye again. I also smiled at him, waving goodbye. In that moment, I suddenly, for no reason, thought of Tony Leung. As I walked down the mountain, I was deep in thought. A person in and outside of a movie would definitely be different. That’s not the frightening thing. What’s most scary is when you can’t tell whether you’re in the movie or outside of it.

I returned to Shanghai five days before school started.

I didn’t tell Xu Yi. One, because his phone was still off. Two, because I wanted to surprise him.

I arrived in Shanghai at 3 in the afternoon. Without concern for my luggage headed to school, I carried my big backpack and headed to Xu Yi’s school. Because school hadn’t started yet, their school was also pretty deserted. Xu Yi wasn’t in his dorm. I started to feel a kind of panic, as if I’d just lost him like that, in a sea of people. So I went to the computer company that he worked at. It was already after working hours, so their doors were shut tight. But the door wasn’t locked, so I gently pushed, and the door opened. Because of all the rushing about, I was already tired. My hand almost couldn’t carry my big bag anymore,

so I put it on the ground and walked ahead without it. I knew that Xu Yi often stayed in that small office, the one at the end of this corridor.

As I approached, I heard a noise.

I hesitated and stopped. Then, unable to stop myself, I walked ahead.

I stood outside the door and lifted the door handle. Inside, Xu Yi's voice came, "Who is it?"

I didn't make a sound.

He quickly came and opened the door. The moment he saw me, he was very flustered. Then he promptly asked, "What are you doing back? Why are you back?" He tried to block my view with his body. I looked inside and saw a figure in the shade. Red pants. Long, seaweed-like hair. I couldn't see her face.

I couldn't stop the nausea from coming.

"Li Er!" Xu Yi grabbed my hand and said, "Don't imagine things."

I pushed him away angrily.

When I turned around to leave, the girl in the back laughed out loud smugly. The sound pierced my eardrums, just like knife into my heart.

Game over. The door slammed shut behind me. Xu Yi didn't chase after me.

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During May break, I went to Lijiang City in Yunnan by myself. Standing at Four Square Street, hearing the camel bells in the background, looking up at the Lijiang sky, I felt completely at ease. It was like I'd shed a layer of skin and grown up. This Li Er and that Li Er were completely different.

I believed that growing up was a good thing.

Love sinks into the into the deepest part of the sea. The love that I once thought would last a lifetime turned into a ridiculous wound that I didn't want to face. Xu Yi disappeared, he'd never be a part of my life again. Although we were in the same city, but there was no news of him again.

Maybe he'd already forgotten me. I was working very hard to forget him. That was good.

I changed my phone number. Other than my family and You Ta, no one knew my new number. You Ta didn't know about my heartbreak, because when he sent a short text, he would also ask about Xu Yi. I nearly stopped going online. The news reported that blogs were becoming popular. A lot of celebrities had them now. My blog was deserted.

I sat in a small shop near the water, in the old city of Lijiang, eating corn on the cob. And I suddenly saw a familiar figure. He wore a cap and carried a big bag. He was also by himself. I put my head down on the table, and my heart skipped a beat.

He hadn't seen me.

And I wasn't positive it was him.

It was all a dream. And I had long ago accepted the nothingness and cruelty of dreams.

I returned to the small inn and lied down on my bed. Someone knocked on the door. And when I opened it, I surprisingly realized it was him. It was really him. I wasn't mistaken.

"Little Ear," he said. "It really was you."

My voice shook, "How did you find me?"

"I saw you, so I followed you," he said.

I smiled and let him in. It was a small room, and he was very tall. It seemed like he had to bend down a bit. I asked him to sit and gave him a cola I bought. He shook his hands, and asked me, "You're here by yourself?"

I nodded.

"You didn't let your boyfriend come along?" he said.

I shook my head.

He smiled, "This place is nice. Why don't we go hiking on the mountain tomorrow?"

"Okay, okay." I finally nodded my head.

There was a light rain in the evening. As people's silhouettes passed by, the

sight was more beautiful than words can describe. Zhang Yang sat to my side and opened an umbrella. We looked just like a couple. Maybe it was the rain, the lights, or the high and low singing voices coming from the lake, but my heart was a bit confused. Zhang Yang and I both had a bit too much. The rain stopped, and the moon came out. Zhang Yang suddenly put his hand on my shoulder and gently said, "Little Ear, turn around and look at me."

I turned and let him see my flushed cheeks.

"Let me ask you something," he said. "Do you like me a little?"

My mouth cracked open and I laughed.

"Don't laugh," he said. "Tell me seriously."

I pointed at my left ear, moved my lips, pretending I hadn't heard.

He suddenly got close to my right ear, and shouted loudly, "Little Ear, do you like me a little?"

Suddenly, my mind went blank.

I still hadn't answered his question, but he also didn't force me to answer. We walked back to the inn together. On the way, he bought me a pretty shawl. I put it over my shoulders and followed him quietly. Just then, his phone rang. He stopped to answer it. I kept walking forward, and I heard him shout, "I told you to stop calling! Even if you call again, it won't change anything!"

...

The farther I walked, the less I could hear.

I returned to the inn to tidy my things. When I'd made up the bed to sleep, Zhang Yang knocked on the door. He was carrying his backpack, and with a heavy tone, said, "Sorry, Little Ear. I'm afraid you'll have to play on your own. I got a call, and my dad is sick. I have to go back."

I asked with concern, "It's so late, how are you going to go?"

"I have my ways." He pat my head again, "Be good, and take care of yourself. Don't be unhappy."

Then he left.

I closed my door, and disappointingly cried again.

– The Left Ear –

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Chapter 13 (2/2)

– The Left Ear – N/A

13 Together With Xu Yi (2/2)

Because I was worried about Zhang Yang, I didn't sleep that night. The next morning, I wanted to call and ask where he was, if he got back home or not, how his dad was doing. But no one answered the phone. Then I just turned off my phone. That evening, I felt uneasy, so I called again. A girl answered. She asked who I was, and I said I was Zhang Yang's friend.

She said, "You're Li Er, right?"

I said, "Yes."

"I'm Jiang Jiao, Zhang Yang's girlfriend," she said. "I know you're You Ta's cousin, we've met before."

"Oh," I said.

"He had a fight with me a few days ago, so he ran off to Lijiang. But everything's fine now," Jiang Jiao said. "He's very tired, he's sleeping now. I don't want to wake him up now. Come to Beijing to visit when you have time."

"Okay," I said briskly.

When I got back to Shanghai, I went to a shop near the train station and changed my phone card again.

I didn't have anything to be afraid of, but actually, I was afraid of something. So, changing it wasn't bad either.

In this world, there's no such thing as true love. That phrase was still best, living peacefully. That was best.

When I opened the door to the dorm, I realized that everyone was looking at me with strange gazes. I touched my face, then said, "Is something wrong?"

"You... Nothing happened at Lijiang, right?"

“Something happened?”

They looked around at each other, then told me to ask Lin.

I flew to the library. Lin was helping someone check out some books. When she saw me, she ran over from the counter. She hugged me and looked me up and down, “Are you okay? Li Er? You really scared me.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Xu Yi said you were in a car accident in Lijiang and were critically injured. It wasn’t true?”

My head was booming. After a long time, I finally asked, “How much money did you lend him?”

“7,000,” Lin said. “My entire savings.”

I held onto Lin, my whole body shaking.

I decided to go find Xu Yi. I had to talk things through with him. I sat on the train for a very long time, walked for another long while, until I reached his school. The whole way there, I kept thinking about what I should say to him when I saw him. When faced with someone you once loved deeply, how can you talk about blame? I didn’t have a clue. I saw Xu Yi at the school’s gate. He was standing there waiting for me. The early summer wind blew gently, his hair brushing against his forehead. He really made my heart break.

He looked at me, but didn’t make a move. I walked to him, as if I were in a dream. He reached out to hug me. I pushed him away, but he kept hugging. I told him to get away, but he held on. Tears falling, he said, “Li Er, don’t act like this. I know I’ve done something wrong to you, it really hurts me.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked him. “Why are you doing this?”

“My dad’s out of jail. He said he was wronged by someone. He pesters me every day, it’s really annoying. Do you know, Li Er, I miss you. Don’t leave me. I think about you every day.”

My heart went soft again, like a marshmallow that was roasted too long. Once it hits the air, it deflates and disappears.

“When he came out, he didn’t have a job. I’m really tired, really tired.” Xu Yi

held me, not letting go. “Li Er, I know that you’re the one who treats me best. I finally understand.”

I pushed him away gently, “Don’t act like this. This is the front of the school. Let’s find somewhere to talk, okay?”

“Okay.” His eyes shined.

We went to a park near the school. Once, we had sat on those stone benches, reading and laughing. But my feelings of the past were long gone. And I knew, they would never come back.

“Why did you lie to Lin?” I got to the point.

“For my dad,” he said. “He came to Shanghai to find me. He wanted to stay in Shanghai to work. His old friends wouldn’t help him, and he had nothing. Then he got into a car accident. His leg was fractures, so he’s in the hospital. We needed a lot of money, and I couldn’t get it. I didn’t have any options...”

“That’s enough!” I didn’t believe anything he said. I cut him off, “The story you’ve come up with could air on TV. Xu Yi, do you know what I can’t stand the most? It’s lies! Lies!”

His face paled, “Am I that kind of person in your heart?”

I grit my teeth, “Yes.”

He suddenly smiled, “That’s fine. Then you won’t get hurt.”

I kept gritting my teeth. “Yes, I won’t.” After I said that, I left the park, not looking back.

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The days were like that, passing by, one at a time.

The evening of Christmas, there was a performance at the stadium. Lin brought a bunch of light sticks from somewhere or other, and insisted that we sell them. The snow finally fell started falling, and in just a moment, the everything was covered with it. I held a bunch of colored sticks and stood at the stadium entrance. I saw a huge poster with a very familiar face on it. She wore red clothes, with a bright smile on her face. Her name was printed on the side: Jiang Yaxi.

Jiang Yaxi?

Lin was shouting out loud from my side, "Light sticks, support your idol! Binoculars, see your idols! Light sticks, support your idol! Binoculars, see your idols!" Seeing me staring at the poster with a blank look, she pulled me over, "What's the matter, Li Er?"

I pointed to the poster, "I think I know her."

"Jiang Yaxi?" Lin said. "No way. She was at the bar yesterday. Didn't you say you didn't know her?"

I said, "I think she's my schoolmate."

"No way," Lin said. "She's really popular recently. She just released an album, and it's selling well. I heard she grew up in Hong Kong. How can she be your schoolmate?"

I turned to look at the poster, examining the refined face with makeup. But the snow was getting heavier, and it was blocking my site. Lin held up the things in her hands. The colorful things were flashing attractively in the snow. Lin was feeling pretty happy, waving them, saying, "Look at me, not bad right! Go, go! This Christmas really is lively. Li Er, let's go in to watch the performance later."

"We don't have tickets," I said.

Lin blinked, "Trust me, I've got an idea."

Lin was really impressive. She made a phone call and said a few things. A quarter of an hour after the concert started, a short man came out from inside and brought us in. And it was even the inner stadium.

When I went in, I saw her. She was dancing and singing on the stage. The audience below were waving their light sticks, screaming out loud.

In all fairness, her singing wasn't bad.

After the song ended, the stadium settled down. She smiled and said, "Next, I'll sing a song you all like. It's also the song that brought me into stardom. It's different from the song just now. This one's a very calm and sad song..."

Before she finished speaking, the audience below were already shouting, "'The Shooting Star When I Was 18!'"

“That’s right,” she said. “‘The Shooting Star When I Was 18.’ I wish all of you happiness. On this white Christmas, I hope that everyone can have a sweet love.”

She called herself Yaxi.

Under the stage, her fan club was holding up boards with her photographs. They started shouting again, “Yaxi, Yaxi, we love you! Yaxi, Yaxi, always number one!”

She smiled brilliantly. With the lights shining on her youthful face, her beauty would really make others envious. Lin grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the stage. “Let’s go look closer, see if she’s really your schoolmate! If she is, we’ll get an autograph!” Without a choice, I followed her. The lights on the stage suddenly went out, and countless shooting stars flew across the background to the stage. She sat on the steps and started to sing.

When I was 18, I saw a shooting star
It whispered to me that, in love, there was no such thing as ‘forever’
The boy I loved was by my side and lightly kissed me
He said he loved me, that it would never change
No one could tell us how far ‘forever’ really was
Don’t know when it was that we stopped believing in the promise of ‘forever’
The years that would be forgotten were carved into our hands
The hopes are gone, the tears won’t fall
The past was hard, but the tomorrow’s not far off
It’s already quiet now, many years have already passed
I remembered the wish I once made on a shooting star
The boy I loved left my side long ago
Before the tears fell, in a beautiful memory of yesterday

No one could tell us how far ‘forever’ really was
Don’t know when it was that we stopped believing in the promise of ‘forever’
The years that would be forgotten were carved into our hands
The hopes are gone, the tears won’t fall
The past was hard, but the tomorrow’s not far off
How should I tell you this?
My love, I’ve never forgotten, I’ve always remembered
The shooting star when I was 18

It kissed my cheek

Under Lin's guidance, I'd already unknowingly arrived right near the stage. I thought, I saw right. I definitely wasn't wrong. The girl singing on the stage was indeed from my school. Zhang Yang's girlfriend. Her name is Jiang Jiao. She was famous in school because her family was wealthy. I figured, every Tian High student would recognize her. It was very hot inside the stadium. Lin had already taken off her jacket. I pulled my jacket closer and buried my head. I told Lin I wasn't feeling well, that I would leave first. Lin felt my forehead, and said, "Goodness, Li Er, are you having a fever again?"

I forced a smile, "How could that be? I just didn't sleep well yesterday. You stay here and watch, no need to worry about me."

Lin didn't let it go, "No. But I can't go back with you either. I still have to go return the merchandise we didn't sell."

"It's fine," I said. "I can go back on my own."

As I left the stadium, I turned back to look at Jiang Jiao. Oh, no, it should be Jiang Yaxi. She wore a purple dress, with wavy hair, and she looked just like a princess. But I didn't dare to look at those people near the stage. I was afraid I'd see so and so. There were some thing in the past that didn't need to be brought back up. Just then, I saw someone charge at the stage to give flowers. He hugged Jiang Jiao. As the crowd screamed, he lightly kissed her on the cheek.

Lin turned around to find me, and I ran off in a hurry.

The one sending the flowers was Xu Yi.

That New Year's, I returned home.

You Ta came to the train station to pick me up. He wore a yellow jacket, and he looked like a cute bear. He helped me carry my luggage, then said, "Why did you get thinner again?"

"Didn't want to get fat," I said snappishly.

"What about Xu Yi?" He looked behind me. "Why didn't he come back with you? I heard his dad's out of jail, and he got his position back."

"We broke up," I said.

“Really?” he asked, unbelieving.

“We broke up a year ago,” I said.

His expression was strange.

We arrived home and realized Auntie and them were all there. When the door opened, Mom and Dad both jumped in for a hug. I didn’t know who I should hug. I took off my coat. My mom’s eyes were a bit red. Sobbing in front of everyone, she said, “Why have you gotten so skinny? You’re not eating well at school?”

“No matter how much I eat, I won’t get fat,” I explained.

“You didn’t come home for summer break, working all day!” Dad scolded. “Look at you, a girl. Even You Ta missed home more than you!”

“Yes,” Auntie followed. “You should at least call home more often. It’s not like your parents can’t afford to pay the phone bill!”

You Ta had a gloating smile on his face. Everyone’s eyes were focused on me, so I quickly changed the topic. “I’m hungry. Is there any food? I didn’t eat anything at all on the train.”

That evening, I ate a lot. But You Ta, who usually eats a lot, ate very little. I hated the way he looked at me with his worry-filled eyes. I really hated it. So after I finished eating, I chatted with Auntie and them. Then I excused myself, saying I was tired, and I went back to my room. Not long after, Mom knocked on my door. She said, “We’re going out for a walk, and we’re going to send your aunt and uncle back.”

“Okay,” I said. “Don’t stay out too long.”

“You’re tired, so wash up and sleep early.”

“Okay,” I said.

I saw You Ta through the door. He’d already put on his ugly yellow jacket. His back was facing me, as he put on his shoes. I shouted over to him, “You Ta, make sure to buy fireworks. Let’s go light them at the square for New Year’s!”

He seemed to only make a vague sound, but I assumed it to be an affirmative. Then they left.

After they all left, the house was really quiet. I sat on the sofa in the living room, looking around. This three-bedroom house represented my entire youth. I remember that we moved in on the day of my 14th birthday. Everyone was really happy. I wore my white dress and sat across by the window. It felt that I suddenly had a new world. I was elated and very satisfied.

Those days, they were already gone. That simple and innocent time was just an image in my memories. Just as I was working really hard to pull myself out of this shameful contemplation, the doorbell rang. I got up to open the door, and there stood You Ta.

I expected this.

“When I was putting on my shoes, I left my phone on the cupboard,” he said.

I silently let him enter.

He retrieved his phone and stared at me, “Li Er, you’re completely different to the way you used to be. Do you know?”

“Really?” I asked. “Maybe.”

“I don’t like seeing you like this,” he stressed.

“No one’s forcing you to look,” I glared. Calmly, I said, “You don’t have to be so angry.”

He hit his phone with a *pa!* and then slammed it onto the cabinet. He yelled at me, “Look at yourself now. You just broke up, right? Even if Xu Yi owes you, what about everyone else? Your dad? Your mom? What about us, who you always hate and think are overreacting? Li Er, I’m telling you. If you think that pain is something for one person alone, if you think that torturing yourself only involves yourself, then you’re wrong. You’re really, really wrong!”

After You Ta finished yelling at me, he closed the door and left.

His phone flickered on the cabinet. He forgot it again. I walked over and opened the phone. On his screensaver, I saw a smiling face, pretty as a flower. It was from a photograph. The 14 year-old me. That was the me in You Ta’s memories. Me, who didn’t understand the world, who didn’t have secrets. A cute, clear me.

But everything was different now.

You Ta, the fool. We can't go back.

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On New Year's Eve, I found You Ta at the square. He had a group of little kids I didn't recognize with him. They were in the midst of setting off fireworks. I walked over to him, and like friends who hadn't met in a long time, I smiled and greeted him, "Hi."

"Hi," he smiled just like a little kid. Then he put a firework into my hands.

"I heard that you're going abroad after you graduate?"

"That was the plan," he said.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?" He didn't understand.

"Thank you for worrying about me," I said.

"You're my little sister. How can I not worry about you?"

"You Ta," I said. "Promise me. No matter what, you'll always be well."

He looked at me as he said, "I will. What about you?"

I tried really hard to smile, "I will too."

"First Place *gege*, First Place *gege*," one of the little kids pulled at him. "Come here. We're waiting for you to light the biggest firework. Hurry! We can't wait anymore!"

I laughed and signaled for him to go.

You Ta asked, "Li Er, are you coming?"

I shook my head, "I'll just watch from far away."

You Ta was pulled away by the kids. I looked at the ground, it was a bunch of fireworks that he'd bought. I picked up some and started walking to the edge of town.

As always, the road was dark and wet. I walked quickly, with purpose in my eyes, as if heading to an appointment I couldn't miss. I thanked my lightweight

running shoes, which made me feel like I was really flying. I held onto my fireworks, acting as the most capricious child in the last hour of the last day of the old year.

I arrived there shortly. That abandoned house, that rooftop that appeared innumerable times in my memories and my dreams. It was like a temptation-filled fortress from a fairy tale, with a golden gleam. I put the fireworks into my pockets and climbed up the familiar path. When I stood on the roof, I was surprised to find that there was a red flickering in front of me, twinkling like a star. I shivered. Then I realized what it was, it was a cigarette! Someone was up here smoking! I stepped back in fright, when a familiar voice floated to my ears, "Little Ear, you're finally here."

And then, he stood up. He swiftly walked over to me, and pulled me in for a hug. As if I were under a spell, I couldn't move.

It was Zhang Yang! It was him!

For a brief moment, I wanted to push him away. But his strong arm made it so I couldn't move away. I felt the warmth of his embrace. His body was right up against mine. His lips slid over to my left cheek, and then to my ear. "Can you hear me?"

I couldn't say anything, and could only nod my head.

He said, "Good. Do you know, medical experts have proven that sweet words have to be spoken into the left ear. If you can't hear, then I'll take you to get it cured. Even if it takes a lifetime, I must cure you."

"Zhang Yang..." I called him.

"Don't move," he said. "Just be good and listen to what I have to say."

I shivered. I suspected I knew what he would say. I felt like I was going to faint. This sudden happiness left me unable to resist. And I didn't want to resist it.

And then, I heard very clearly in my left ear, "I love you, Little Ear."

"I love you, Little Ear!" He shouted out once again. Then he lifted me up, and the fireworks in my arms dropped. As I screamed, the whole world turned into a giant playground. I saw, not too far away, fireworks lighting up the whole city.

Every star was as bright and magical as the sun. And the happiness I was looking for, I knew that it had finally arrived.

Bala, my love, can you see?

Epilogue: A Song

They all said that our love wouldn't end well
But I never gave up my efforts
When the last cold rain comes in the spring
There are some stories whose traces I had to write down
As for the secrets between us, leave them at the bottom of your heart
We don't have to let anyone else know
They say that the words you hear in your left ear are all sweet words
The left ear's love is lost in the wind
Who will take pity?
You have to believe that I won't leave, that I'm always here
Listen with your left ear, listen to the love that's disappeared
The left ear hears, it hears this immortal legend
The left ear hears, it hears
And you haven't left, you're still here
You've never left, you've always been here
To protect all that's passed

– The Left Ear – N/A

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