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【運屍人】 - 駱以軍

Excerpt from **Now She Remains in You**

The Body-transporter

In the beginning the idea has indeed crossed his mind – he can seek help from some support system of this city. He dials 119. Contrary to what he has always imagined as heavy-set fellows wearing helmets of a bright yellow and fire-proof jackets the semblance of bear hides, he finds himself greeted by a sweet, girlish voice. He tells the girl that he has got a body here, dead just a moment ago, and that he would like to donate the cornea and the kidneys. (Maybe other organs can be donated too?)

The girl patiently explains to him that the transportation of bodies (or the donation of them) appears to fall outside the scope of the disaster assistance provided by 119. It may be more appropriate to send for an ambulance from the hospital to which the body is to be donated. Okay, I got it. Thank you. He says.

The girl asks, which hospital are you planning to donate it to? May be we can make the contact for you...

No, no thanks. I know what to do now. Thank you so much. He hangs up a bit awkwardly. He lifts his mother up and eases her into the wheelchair. The body is surprisingly petite, and light. His mother simply lies there, quiet and docile, letting him handle her the same way he did in those last days when she has all but given up her will to live.

Between life and death, there really is no fixed boundary. He reflects in his loneliness. He caps the body with a knitted hat, wraps a scarf around its neck, and dresses it in that ratty-grey buttoned sweater of hers.

He remembers the one last time when he wheeled his mother back home from the hospital. They took the metro. Seeing her own reflection on the windows of the closing doors of the train compartment, she seemed dumbfounded. “How come I’ve grown so thin?”

She muttered to herself, on and on. Just like a skeleton.

Now he is wheeling the body of his mother out of the door. She looks no different than when she was alive, her grey eyes staring, as if in shock.

He recalls afterwards: that happened to be the last metro of the night. He pushed his mother into the desolate, empty metro station, an air of melancholy characteristic of sci-fi movies drifted up and down the surrounding metal walls, settling heavily in the almost deserted ticket concourse.

It had been a cold night – the kind of cold night that when one breathed on the windows of

the metro compartment, it would mist over and cloud one's own reflection. He couldn't help but imagine the body melting, stinking, oozing blood, or undergoing processes of the sort, even though he knew he was not pushing a thawing chunk of frozen pork. He did not take the escalator down to the platform, as he would normally do. Instead he took the lift, the kind reserved for the use of people on wheelchairs or have trouble getting around. As he pushed his mother into the lift, she opened her mouth all of a sudden, giving him a start – the wheelchair had probably bumped over the gap in the lift door. He thought, her tongue wouldn't droop out when she was inside the train, now would it? So in the lift he covered up his mother's face, uptilted and mouth slightly agape, with a blanket (stowed away in a folded bag at the back of the wheelchair).

As the lift door opened he heard a long, piercing whistle. That served as the final warning before the metro closed its doors and pulled out. He broke into a mad gallop, pushing the wheelchair in front of him, and made it the split second before the automatic doors closed. The head of his mother lurched forward and back; then the metro started its run.

Only then did he remember that this was the last train of the night.

Luckily I made it, he realizes with a hint of loneliness. While he and his mother have together made that dash from the lift door across the platform and in a flash of crossed the threshold into the metro carriage, only he, and he alone, is recovering his breath (with a slight sense of giddiness and relief).

What if I didn't make this train?

Then I simply will not donate the body. Right now whatever organs that can be picked or cut out for reuse – the cornea or kidneys or anything of the sort – are like portions of sliced fruit packaged in transparent cling wrap, the kind you would discard with a mere twitch of the nose once stored past their expiry date. He will then have to wheel his mother's body out of the metro station, and back to his mother's apartment.

Had that been the case, he would have taken a good, long nap to make up for his lost sleep (how long it has been since he has got any shut-eye?). He would have put aside matters such as the body, and sought the comfort of the dreamland.

But now he has managed to catch this last train after all.

The carriage is rocking slightly. He feels this movement has the cold, monotonous glow of the fluorescent lamps in the compartment showering down in the same haphazard manner as ears of grain are winnowed through a sieve. It is a scene like the Hollywood movies that he has watched on Channel 4 where the male protagonists, crawling through the dank darkness of underground waterways, were caught in a stalemate with the SWAT teams hunting them aboveground. One in the world of the light, the other in a world of shadows where the shape of pipes and wires could barely be seen; where rubber boots splashed and squeaked in puddles; where rats brushed past one's ears in fast furry sprints. The two sides, holding back, gauging their enemies, finally gave in to an exchange of gunfire. In the aftermath of the cease-fire crisscrossing shafts of light poured through the holes in the brick walls from where the sprays of bullets from the carbines left their mark.

Or like all those terrorists who install deadly time bombs (nuclear warheads stolen from the Ukrainian border of former Russia, lethal nerve gases developed by the Department of Defense against international treaties restricting the use of chemical weaponry, or a spreading pandemic caused by the Ebola virus...) somewhere in densely populated areas (the city centre of Chicago; a Boeing 747 airliner; a nuclear-powered deep-sea submarine of the United States Navy; the United Nations Headquarters in New York...). These overused scenarios only serve to remind him of the lights that were etched on to his mind's eye, certain radiant formations that remain invisible to natural vision. By this, he meant that through the polarizing goggles of the male protagonist, one could see with at once infinite magnificence and horror the infra-red rays that trigger the explosion, an intricate web of death spun around the bomb that sat quietly in the darkness, waiting to be defused... He feels as if he, his mother, and these weird, stony-faced strangers on the train have been wrapped as one by these confused, shaking light rays showering down from above. – No one knows one of us here has already stopped breathing, I suppose. He fixes his hostile gaze on some of those silly, slothful, and exhausted faces around him, and discovers that he is the only one standing in the sparsely occupied compartment.

(His mother opens her mouth under the blanket.)

All of a sudden, he notices a face from among those people. At first, the face is a blur. Then, like adjusting the focus of a microscope, he sees overlapped images, then double-vision, and finally, the face appears crystal clear before him.

It is Fu Da-ren.¹

“Huh? That is Fu Da-ren.” He almost cries out. So Fu takes the metro too. He realizes he is shaking his mother by her shoulder, “Mom, wake up, see, Fu Da-ren is on the same train with us.” As if she really would open her eyes, puzzled and bewildered, to see what the commotion was about. And like the way she would shake him awake on one of those bus-rides she took him on in his childhood, pointing out to him, “Look out of the window, see, someone has been run over by a car.”

That Fu Da-ren has donned a pair of white trousers and a pair of sneakers of the same colour. In his hands is a stick of prop held between his legs. A grin is fixed on his face; his eyes are half-closed. He remains still, like a statue in a waxwork museum, knowing that he is sure to attract the spotlight. But sitting as he is among such a brightly lit crowd, Fu looks old and senile.

A face speckled with liver spots.

In a flash of inspiration, a picture reveals itself to his mind's eye: in the darkest recesses deep down in the ocean, a colossal mass is rolling over with clumsy difficulty. Because the picture is taken under a near total absence of illumination, with water being the saturating medium, as the huge mass turns and faces the camera with its rear-end he can almost feel a crushing, drumming pressure in his ears.

¹ Fu Da-ren is a veteran sports anchor. He has over 40 years experience doing sports commentary for TV stations in Taiwan.

What is it? Is it a whale?

Suddenly he remembers: it was the last time in his memory that his mother sat in front of the television in full consciousness. He recalls seeing her wiping her eyes with a soiled handkerchief. He remembers – the television screen was showing a submarine at the time.

A lone submarine in the vast depths of the ocean.

In that split second a chain of questions went through his mind. During those days when he was not by his mother's side, what kind of programme had she been watching? What was it that his mother was crying for? Also, what kind of programme was that? Why was it showing the huge submarine in the deep seas? (Was it the Discovery Channel? Or one of those Hollywood b-movies featuring bloody conflicts in submarines?)

He thinks with a hint of sadness: his mother has accomplished almost nothing with her life. He recalls what his mother has told him: the year she graduated from elementary school, she scored the best grades among all of her schoolmates and she was treated, together with other top-scorers from all other elementary schools in Taipei, by the mayor to a plane-ride over the city.

He finds it hard to imagine such a picture. He cannot imagine that such a filthy, wasted old lady like his mother was actually once an elementary schoolgirl and a top student. What kind of an era was that? Why did the mere act of scoring top grades give those elementary school students the honour of touring the skies with the mayor? And in such a weird mode too. The reward was not something like a return ticket to Thailand or to Penghu or at least to Gaoxiong, plus an all-expenses-paid 3-day trip or treats of the sort. Instead the plane took off from the Taipei Songshan Airport, and then flew in a circle above the Taipei basin, with all of the top-scoring children applauding and cheering like bumpkins, pointing at the dwarfed Danshui River or Taipei Bridge or Guanyin² Mountain down below, and finally landing – again – in Taipei Songshan Airport.

Perhaps all that fuss about taking off into the air is just to let them say proudly they have had “an aeroplane ride”?

May be he has laid his eyes on such a photograph of his mother: dressed in brownish-yellow khaki uniform, a grass-coloured neckerchief tied to her neck, her short hair plastered to the top of her head, his mother, together with twenty other identically-dressed elementary students, were squatting on their heels in front of the cabin door of an American air force cargo plane that looked almost ancient, with a middle-aged man in a suit and black-rimmed spectacles standing beside them. (Was he the mayor at that time?) There was also a young pilot wearing windproof goggles and a leather jacket. All the children were showing their stained teeth in a broad grin for the camera, and only his mother widened her eyes in fear, much like a frail hatchling...

² “Guanyin”: Romanization of 觀音, translated literally as “the Goddess of Mercy”.

But surely her mother never did own such a photograph.

Those strangers who are resting with their eyes shut, scattered sparsely among the rows of rapid-mould polyester seats on both sides of the compartment (that Fu Da-ren has got off the metro quietly in who-knows-which station) have, in this surreal juddering and the unearthly shrieking of winds outside the windows, been turned, one by one, into mud-moulded arhats – those with the names of their donors carved into their bases – sitting in consort on display at both walls of a temple. It is pitch black outside the windows. These unwitting participants of the cortège are sealed in this intestinal cavity of a carriage, their faces in the flickering shadows under the dim lights looked as if plated with gold. Their eyes closed, their expressions are reminiscent of the faces of Bodhisattvas painted on scrolls that have been set ablaze – faces now compassionate, now distorted by greed and lust, now clouded by anger and terror, now composed in calm stillness...

Yet his mother is acting like a bad sport, shrivelling and crumbling between the wheelchair and the blanket. He even gets the impression that she is undergoing a melting process. It is almost like he is travelling all this way to deliver a chunk of ice rather than a human body. He can hardly imagine what will happen when he arrives at the hospital later and lifts the blanket. Will his mother's body still be there in one piece?

Doctor, this is my mother's body. She left me instructions to donate it.

All right, take that blanket off her.

Okay.

Good gracious, how come it is a thawed set of pork entrails? (Only the liver and a white coil of intestines are left.)

What about the rest?

I couldn't make it in time so they all melted away.

.....

When his mother was still alive (that was only a few hours ago, wasn't it?), she always boasted of her exceptional tolerance. There had been a few occasions when he had come across her guests, those vultures of old ladies that she invited around for a gathering in that gloomy, cramped cubby-hole of hers. Amid those formidable old ladies, his mother was always putting on an innocent front. He always overheard those grannies – he didn't think they even have a drop of female hormone flowing in their veins – reproofing his mother in a voice that was most manly. And his mother was acting like a spoiled little girl, grinning and apologizing sheepishly, never taking things too seriously...

Sometimes she joked about her tendency to lose her way; other times she lamented of the personable young chap that she ran into in the streets, the one who conned her into believing that he had lost his wallet and would like to borrow some money for a ticket back to Pingtung, the one whom she met again, on another occasion, at the same street corner, telling the same story about having lost his wallet...

Those old ladies, with their manly voices (they even had lumps – quasi-Adam’s apples – on the front of their necks), berated and cursed with vehemence... “How am I supposed to know...”replied his mother in all innocence.

It was during such times that he could sense, with eerie clarity, the feminine character in his mother’s body.

There had been another occasion (that was many years ago) in which a young man who had been living in the same seedy apartment block – acquainted perhaps by a mere exchange of acknowledging nods when, say, his mother was retrieving morning papers from the letterbox – came to her out of the blue and begged her to act as go-between for him. But that wasn’t entirely accurate, for the couple was already getting down to the details of the wedding. All she needed to do was to go with him, as the matchmaker, on the day he put forward the proposal to the bride’s family, and to say a few words of good fortune. His mother muttered something about how inappropriate it was for her to go because she was born in the Year of the Tiger, and what was more, as a widow, she was not fit to be a matchmaker... and ended up softened by his pleas and gave her assent.

Eventually the day came when she accompanied the young man to his fiancée’s place, only to realize that things were not simple at all. The young man’s parents were not even there, and the girl’s father, who appeared to detest him, just sat in front of the television in the living room, with nothing but his undergarments on. The several brothers of the girl were also distinctly unfriendly towards them. It was not until later that she knew about the money disputes this young guy had with the girl’s family. She went about giving her little speech – as the young man had instructed her to do – and was met with cold indifference from everyone in the living room. She ended up sitting together with a houseful of strangers, including the young man, watching television in awkward loneliness...

Every time his mother recounted this incident her eyes would overflow with tears. Those masculine grannies would burst angrily into a round of righteous denunciation. Only he knew that there was this part of her personality that was hanging disjointed, somewhat like a loosened mortise or a broken side of a picture frame. A certain something had gone amiss in the very foundations of her mind, such that “she” would always remain as vague and indistinct as a blurred patch of writing or a water-soaked portrait, a temperamental figure shrouded in dense fog...

He alone knows that every time her mother lost her way, she would actually do as those characters in humour stories do – going in the wrong direction, then playing smart and switching buses, ending up putting more and more distance between herself and the limited landmarks she could recognize. He alone knows that her mother has truly fallen into an abyss of despair – the kind of isolated despair felt only by a drowning person who did not even have a piece of floating plank to hold onto...

Why a huge submarine in the deep seas?

An underwater grave in the deepest, darkest indigo. A darkness that no ray of light can penetrate. Spongy aggregations of sludge. Its huge cranium, outlined by a fringe of dull blue, lays flat against the seafloor, giving the impression that it possesses gills and does breathe,

and is growling in a muffled, reverberating drone. It is slowly turning around, almost like a kind of huge beast that has, because of certain slippages in the evolutionary process, overgrown itself to the point that its vertebrate can no longer support its weight... He can almost see his mother in her dark cave of a room, her whole face stained blue by the glow of the television screen, which was then showing a scene of the deep seas.

Her mother was crying alone at the submarine on the television screen.

What was that all about?

It feels as if somewhere far, far down in the distant depths, someone is pounding on the walls, wailing. But because those voices are trapped within a container, and buried deep down at the bottom of the ocean, the water pressure – thousands upon thousands of tons of it – has frozen the sounds into individual cubes of jelly...

Someone pats him on the shoulder.

Uh?

You dropped something.

Pointing at the ground. The old blanket. A man was sitting across the compartment, a concerned look on his face.

His mother's face is exposed. Mouth agape. The fringes on her forehead are standing on end, stiffened as if by frost.

It is over. His first thought is, I'm found out! Caught red-handed!

He feels deeply ashamed of himself for having exposed the dead face of his mother in front of this public.

But the man does not show any hint of astonishment. He closes his eyes and continues to sit there.

He crouches down and picks up the blanket shakily, (is it saturated with the odour of decay?) and covers his mother's face with it.

He and his mother are in fact so alike in many ways.

In his childhood, there was once when his mother took him to the drapers. That was an upmarket store. The storeowner, a lady dressed in cheongsam, was walking to and fro, tending to the customers in a mainland accent. Yet neither mother nor son caught the attention of anyone. His mother told him to wait for her in a corner, and walked in timidly to ask for the cut and design of the fabric she needed. He started playing with a Siamese cat sitting in a corner. Then a man carrying a bale of cloth came by and asked him to make room. He stood up.

Clatter-clash.

He had knocked over the blue and white porcelain vase on the counter! He stood over the black puddle of water and ceramic fragments, panic-stricken.

The entire house was staring straight at him. His mother was not among them.

In that torrential sequence of over-exposed frames, only he, a lone kid, was confronting all by himself the huge space looming down on him, a collage of flecks and specks of assorted colours.

The memory of how the incident turned out in the end has completely eluded him. What he remembers that the moment he walked out of the shop, his mother materialized out of nowhere, grabbed his hand and hurried him away. (Her palm was all wet with sweat.)

She must have taken flight in the mere instants after the vase hit the ground.

Ah, it's all coming back.

There were several faces of foreigners, adult males. They were pushing after one another to press their faces against a circular pane of window. With such force they did it, that their cheeks and nostrils became squashed in a comical, piggish manner. Looking at that circular pane of window, you get the sense that you are standing in a downpour, looking into a car, watching as the rain runs down the windshield, and the person in the driver's seat is mouthing words towards you in a deafening silence. Those were faces of Russian men. They were wearing black satin sailor uniforms, their green pupils flashing in burnt-out fear. He suddenly hears with deafening clarity the ring of Russian names, the likes of Tarkovsky, Ivan, Pyotr Donskoi, Chekhov... names that consists of such labiodental phonemes as “т” “к” “fu”.

He remembers the huge, ominous presence of the deep-sea submarine in his mother's desolate room before she died. It hadn't been a Discovery Channel programme, nor was it the kind of Hollywood productions like “The Hunt for Red October” or “U-571”. It was the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk that had grounded at the bottom of the Barents Sea, killing all its 118 crewmembers.

Fragments of news about this vessel that has sunk to the bottom of the ocean bubble up in his mind, like the string of air bubbles pumped out by an aerator in an aquarium.

The first reports in the media were “Nuclear Submarine grounded at the bottom of the Barents Sea. Entire crew of 118 trapped.” Soon after that, hasty and contradictory speculations emerged in confusion. The television broadcasted an interview conducted by a foreign news agency with a veteran submarine pilot named “Bodala Shansky”. He said, “Those stranded on the vessel may be poisoned by the excessive concentrations of carbon dioxide in the air. This may lead to delusion and mental disorders. At the same time they would suffer mental breakdowns from days of staying in total darkness.” The spokesman for the Russian Navy announced worryingly, Kursk is slowly sinking into the sand and sludge at

the seafloor; the tilting of the submarine could pose hindrance to the rescue operation... Sources revealed that weak knocking sounds could be detected from within the sunken vessel, a sign that there were still surviving crew members on board.

But several United States submarines that were monitoring the Russian military exercise in nearby waters reported back that at the time they had heard two explosions (coming from the sea bottom), after which no sign of life could be detected again from within the vessel. As for the mode of rescue, opinions were also split, with each side developing their own theories. Russian professionals suggested tying huge balloons around the vessel, then pumping air into the cabin so that the entire submarine would float to the surface. But this method would have worked only if the hull of vessel had remained largely intact.

Another team argued for the use of the British LR5 mini-sub as “the last hope for the 118 souls on board”. It is a kind of underwater lifeboat that could only carry 20 people at a time, and was flown to Norway after the accident. It could lock on to the escape hatch of the Kursk – then lying on the sea bottom – with its pressurization chamber, and proceed to pump the sea water out of the vessel so that its cabin pressure would drop to the same level as that in the mini-sub. The access hatch of the mini-sub and the escape hatch of the Kursk could then be opened, allowing the crew to go through.

But the second option was put on hold by the Russian Military with deliberately vague, evasive tactics.

It looked as if the two would lead to two entirely different ways of disclosure: one with inflated balloons, adding float to the clumsy, colossal mass of metal, carrying it upwards until it broke the surface waves; another with a small vehicle, clinging to the hull of the huge vessel like a shellfish, entering it, displacing the people within in stealth, the entire process to be carried out underwater.

In the depths of the ocean lay stranded a gargantuan metal submersible. Not a sound could be heard all around. Except for the heartbeat of the submarine, the heartbeat of the nuclear reactor, and the heartbeat of the 118 Russian men. (Are all they wearing the same brand of boxers? Wasn't it said that their monthly salary was only 50 US dollars? Not one of them had passed their 20th birthday, had they?)

Why was it that he could always witness pictures in his mother's room that he would not otherwise see during normal hours? (For example, the facial close-ups of the Russians trapped in the icy depths, waiting sadly for rescue.)

He remembers his mother telling him on one occasion, “It is like you're a fictitious creature I've created.”

What was that supposed to mean? Why did she say that?

He has always known, since he was small, that his mother would always change her filthy pajamas into outfits that only shameless young women would put on (she would unclasp and clasp herself in darkness, at the bedside, in a rustle of clothing) after he had fallen asleep (actually he was feigning sleep), then lock him in alone and slip out of the house.

In those long nights when he laid alone, waiting, worrying, slipping in and out of sleep, he would be tormented by nightmares, each as fragmented as the other. Those were mostly sexual dreams involving his mother. One dream in particular had recurred frequently, almost running through his entire adolescence. In the dream his mother was completely unclothed, her naked body laid bare, yet her hair, half white, was filthy as ever. He dreamed that his fingers had crept in between his mother's legs into her vagina – such indescribable warmth and wetness it had been. In the beginning he only inserted two fingers, but later on he burrowed in his entire fist. For the slipperiness was overwhelming. In the dream his mother was feigning sleep in a steady rate of breath, such that he knew she was giving her tacit approval. But when his forearms had gone in with the runny moisture and buried deep into the canal, the enveloping warmth had him unable to restrain himself from spreading his fingers. And so the golden, hovering aura of ecstasy was all dispersed. His mother was no longer feigning sleep in his dream. His fist was outrageously embedded in her nether regions, and he was unable to pull it out. Both mother and son, grey-faced, sweat pouring down their foreheads, tried to wrench his anchor of a hand free from between her thighs. Her naked body was bending and twisting in all sorts of bizarre postures, but no matter how hard he tried he could neither crook nor flex his digits. He felt, from the skin around his fingers, palm and wrist, that the fluid on them was gradually drying up...

He always cried himself awake. When he woke up, filled with hate, he would sometimes find his mother still absent, and sometimes already back, lying on one side in her filthy pajamas, as if she had never left.

When he had grown older, there were several nights where as soon as his mother left the house he would immediately get dressed and go after her. He found out that his mother had run off every night just so to go to a pub – an ordinary, inconspicuous pub.

For a few nights, he stood at a dim corner, out of the reach of the street lights, behind the piled up crates of empty beer bottles, watching as his mother took her drink, in solitude, at a fixed seat on the edge of the bar table. He found out that it was an all-girl pub – some are odd-looking shorties with flattop or short hairstyles, others are simply girls that looked nothing out of the ordinary. Then he found out the heavy-set, broad-shouldered barman in a sweatshirt, who was mixing drinks behind the bar, was actually a girl.

But only her mother was an old lady.

He returned home and fell sound asleep, relieved and satisfied. Perhaps his mother only had that bad habit of craving for a drink or two? But since then, he had again dreamed about his mother, in her young, naked body, again feigning sleep. But in that dream, no matter how he moved his hand down the curve of her waist, round her buttocks, up along the inside of her thighs, or felt his way down from navel to groin, he could no longer locate the moist cleft buried in the patch of hair in her crotch. As if it has always been covered by skin, a hollow as smooth and even as the armpit or the crook of thumb.

In that dream, his mother would not let him go in any more.
