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Book Title : 心灵外史

English Title: An Unofficial History of the Heart

Author: Shi Yifeng

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SYNOPSIS:

This book is a novelistic "history of fanaticism" in contemporary China. When young Yang Mai's mother leaves his father, his relatives entrust him to a woman he calls "Auntie." As she takes care of Yang Mai, Auntie also introduces him to a bizarre new world of qigong, pyramid schemes, and house churches. Caught between a desire to believe in something and an inability to believe in anything, Auntie's mental state gradually disintegrates. She has more and more trouble dealing with hardship, and finally banishes herself from the outside world. Once grown, Yang Mai chooses to live according to mainstream pragmatism, but he cannot truly free himself from the psychological crisis that is slowly growing inside him and bringing him deep anxiety. Many years after the two have gone their separate ways, when Yang Mai finds himself in a difficult situation, he suddenly understands Auntie's decline. Recalling her with gratitude and remembering happy memories from his childhood, he decides to try to find Auntie and repay her for her kindness. He also wants to draw Auntie out of her fanatical mindset back into the real world, and to try to help cure himself as well. Things do not go according to plan, and awaiting him are absurdity and danger, strange encounters with unusual people, and a tragic outcome.

TRANSLATION SAMPLE:

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

Sample

Auntie isn't my real aunt. Here's what my older relatives told me about how we're connected. My mother was born into what used to be one of the prominent families in Beijing. Several generations back, one of our relatives was "sent away on official business," and things started to fall apart. After deaths and separations, the only people left living together were two old servants who belonged in the previous century. Auntie was the daughter of one of the kitchen maids. She was a year older than my mother, and so from childhood my mother always called her "older sister." They went to school together and slept in the same room. When the big political movement got going in earnest, the family was deeply affected, and my mother was banished to a distant frontier outpost to be reeducated. Auntie was sent to join a production brigade in Henan, and afterward she found a job and settled down. Water from the Daxiangguo Temple watered the gardens, bringing the humble and noble onto the same level. My mother married my father while they were working at a munitions factory in northeastern China, and then suffered through many years living in a remote mountain valley as a

demobilized political cadre with "excellent ideological training." Their marriage was clearly one of convenience or necessity, and they both accepted their fate. Amusingly, their married life was also a demonstration of another kind of ideology, an intense fight between "the masses and the individual." At first, my father believed their union to be an embodiment of some promising grand ideology, and he devoted himself to changing those things in my mother that he found selfish or examples of the boorish habits of the exploiting class. Later, when the political atmosphere was more relaxed, my mother underwent a metamorphosis into a bastion of "freedom" and "human liberation," and turned against my father. They learned to hate each other, and because of their hatred, their attitudes became all the more entrenched, to the point that even the smallest disagreement would devolve into a theoretical argument. Of course, none of this prevented me from being produced in a careless moment.

Thinking back to my childhood, my "family" memories consist mainly of debate, criticism, oblique accusations, and a sense of confusion. My ears were flooded with grand rhetorical flourishes, as though partisans of two different factions were facing each other with sabers drawn. In addition to the ideological polemics and debating, most of the objects in the house were made out of metal, and even the flowerpots lining the balcony were lathed from 105 millimeter artillery shells. Anything porcelain or glass would be shattered within a few days of being brought home.

I remember the worst fight, which happened when I was in elementary school. My mother stood in the doorway, arms akimbo, saying something in her clear, sharp Beijing accent, to the effect that "the world has changed, and all your phony promises don't mean anything anymore." My taciturn father suddenly lost his temper, picked up the piggybank beside the window and threw it at her. It strayed from its intended trajectory and shattered against my forehead. Bloodstained coins dropped to the floor, but my father was too busy expounding on his opponent's inferior character to even glance in my direction. I squatted down to slowly pick the coins up and put them in my pockets. Then I jingled down to the factory mess hall to eat a bowl of noodles in chili sauce. I knew that when my parents fought, no one would be cooking that night. As I ate my noodles, blood dripped into bowl and mixed with the chili oil, but I kept on eating and eating, as though I could force the cries back down my throat by stuffing it with food. That day, I hung around the factory until after dark listening to thousands of bullets being sprayed in machine gun test trials, until I was so tired I had to go home. When I got back, my mother was gone. She'd packed her bags and left for some distant place.

She never came back. After a few months with relatives in Nanjing, she sent my father an uncompromising divorce notice, declaring that she reunited with her high school sweetheart, and they had decided to start a new life together and "recover all the time they'd lost." It was as though she'd suddenly woken up and realized that she could put her beliefs into practice. Freedom is a beautiful thing, and the freedom to marry whomever one wants is more beautiful than any other kind. My father ground his teeth, then chain-smoked half a pack of Hengda cigarettes as he stared into space.

That was when Auntie came to live with us. My mother had finally remembered that she'd brought new flesh into the world, and had written to Auntie asking her to go to Shaanxi to take care of me. My father was busy making preparations to travel to Nanjing to negotiate with my mother, and so left the house to me and Auntie. I remember that Auntie had nice fair skin and a kindly round face, although her brow was furrowed as though she were perennially contemplating something. Everyone said she was a relative, but I didn't remember her as a relative who'd once "bounced me on her knee." People asked what she did for a living, and she said that she worked in the cafeteria of a print shop in Henan, but she didn't look like a cook to me. The cooks in the munitions factory were all tall and plump. Their fierce faces were so big their necks disappeared, and their hands were always covered in sticky pig grease. One time I was caught stealing a steamed bun from the mess hall and I got a hard slap in the face. I reaped the benefit from it though, since for the next few weeks, every time I ate I got a hint of fresh meat. So at first when Auntie called me to come inside, I pretended I didn't hear her,

lowering my head and staring at the poop stuck to my Liberation sneakers, wondering whether it was from a dog, cow, or human. Auntie wasn't much of a talker, and she took the work of the household upon herself, sweeping, cleaning the windows, fixing the little buoy inside the toilet tank, and taking a basket to market for food that she efficiently turned into meals.

As a nascent food reporter, back then my earliest conception of "sitting down to a meal" came from Auntie. As I said, her mother was a kitchen maid, and so she knew a lot of the traditional techniques in Shandong cuisine—now popular in Beijing—including knife skills, deep fat frying, and the Shandong fricassee. After moving to Henan, she learned to make all kinds of noodle and bread dishes. In the morning, she would fix me a bowl of braised noodles with quail eggs, shredded seaweed, and stewed lamb. Sometimes she would make steamed buns stuffed with cabbage and bean noodles. I liked the braised noodles the best, and when I pulled my face back out of the big bowl, my eyes would roll back in my head from pleasure. Children are fickle, and by the time I'd devoured the second meal I'd lost my initial suspicion, and I trailed behind her all day, nose dripping with snot, calling for my "Aunt." Soon I learned a new word from some neighbors who had moved there from the south, and "Aunt" became "Auntie." It seems to me that "Auntie" is a bit closer and more affectionate than "Aunt."

Auntie would stroke my face and her eyes would redden as she'd say, "If I'd had a child, I would've raised him to be plumper than you."

She devoted herself to fattening me up so that I looked like one of the Young Pioneers riding the "Science" spaceship in propaganda posters. But contrary to her hopes, my appearance didn't change at all even after eating splendidly for days. I was still sallow and thin, like a matchstick with a big ladle for a head. The neighbors all said that if they rubbed me with shoe polish, I'd look like the Rwandan children in the famine. Of course, this made Auntie feel terrible, and gave her something else to worry about, which was that I always seemed a step behind all the other children. I stared off into space stupidly, and if anyone spoke to me, I never seemed to hear them. Only after a long pause would I jolt awake with a little cry as though emerging from a dream.

At ten years old, I still wet the bed.

One night, Auntie silently crept to my bedside and stood staring down at me. I moved my mouth and suddenly my eyes flew open, and I held her gaze, feeling that the room was enveloped in a solemn aura.

After quite some time, Auntie finally said, "Yang Mai, do people at school sometimes say you're...a little slow?"

I answered, "They don't just say I'm a little slow, they say I'm an idiot."

"What did your mom think of that?"

"She said that I inherited inferior genes from my dad."

"And your dad?"

"He said my mom was irresponsible and didn't feed me right."

Auntie muttered something to herself, then calmly continued, "Your development is problematic. It can't stay like this, it'll affect the rest of your life. We need to take action."

I licked my lips and scratched my ears. My first reaction was that we'd have to go to the hospital. The teachers at the factory school were all simple, practical people. In the routine physicals it was discovered that my weight was well below standard, so in addition to the teachers calling me an idiot, they also suspected that my stomach was in a symbiotic relationship with some cute little creatures, and they took me to the factory hospital for some anti-parasite tablets to expel whatever was in there. They told me to carefully inspect my own stool. I took a lot of medicine, but it was no use at all. Not a single parasite was expelled. The doctors concluded that they couldn't blame parasites, they could only blame me. When I finally did get sick, they couldn't come up with any causes or cures.

But my assumption was wrong. The next day, Auntie pulled me out of bed before the hospital even opened. I was drowsy, and my only thought was for a bowl of braised noodles. She

admonished me, "You can't have anything to eat yet, or even any water. Otherwise your qi will be muddled."

With that, we set out from the factory workers' quarters, but instead of taking the paved road, we walked down a winding little path through a poplar forest on the side of a mountain. Here I need to add that when she wasn't feeding me and taking care of household chores, Auntie often walked here, doing what I didn't know. Sometimes before dawn I would wake up having wet the bed. With tears on my cheeks, I'd go out to the balcony to grab clean underwear from the drying rack and find the door to her bedroom open and her bed empty. From the way she confidently led me down those paths, one could infer she was very familiar with the area.

As we passed a few tombstones scattered on the mountainside, Auntie hurried me along, "Come on, I'll protect you. The qi here is too strong. You're an innocent, but your body is so weak you might not be able to take it."

We walked faster until we finally entered the deep forest. At first, everything was enveloped in layers of mist, obscuring whatever was in the distance, but then all at once the sun rose from the other side of the mountain, pouring red light down over the highlands, setting the eyes in the white poplar bark ablaze so they seemed to be watching us. Auntie nodded serenely and said: "It's time."

She told me to keep still, and to close my eyes and try to "clear the mind of everything." She moved around beside me, more spirited than before. Although I was slow as a child, no one lacks curiosity and imagination completely, so from time to time I peeked out from under my eyelids at what Auntie was doing.

What I saw shocked me. She was moving like some acrobatic fighter in a movie, her eyes opened wide and a growl coming from deep in her throat. She took a huge step toward a poplar and throttled the tree trunk with both hands, her shoulders moving constantly and her back stretched taut. She squeezed for a long time, tilting her head back, and then her whole torso bent backwards as she heaved a deep sigh toward the sky—"Aaaaahhh"—like someone drinking a bowl of hot soup on an empty stomach. Once she had throttled that tree, she went on to another, and another, until she finally walked back toward me, her face bright red.

I shut my eyes quickly, and soon felt a palm on the crown of my head. Oddly, I could feel a hot current flow from her hand and seep into my body, and soon I felt nice and warm.

I don't know how long that went on, but finally Auntie said, "It's done."

I opened my eyes. Her forehead was covered in sweat that dripped from her temples. She had put so much effort into helping me, and I should have expressed gratitude in some way. "I have to pee," I announced.

Auntie nodded in satisfaction. "Good. The urine will force all the bad qi out."

I was still shaking after I'd peed against a tree, and I asked her, "What did you do to me just now?"

"First I gathered my qi, and then I released it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a little complicated to explain. It has to do with profound mysteries of the universe, the greatest Truths... Put it in the simplest terms, the world has an intrinsic qi. Every single thing has an outer form, but it also has an invisible, untraceable qi that even scientific instruments can't detect. Some qi is good, and some qi is bad. When someone's healthy, that means the good qi dominates. If a problem develops in the body, bad qi has entered that spot. What I did just now was use my master's qigong teachings to gather good qi from nature and transfer it to your body, so the bad qi was forced out. Now I've done that, you'll get stronger and smarter, and soon you'll be able to keep up with your schooling, and become a cadre or a scholar or a political leader... Actually, even aside from the body, is there anything that doesn't follow that same logic? Why is there corruption in our society? Why can't the country become rich and strong? Why do wars break out all across the world? It's because of bad qi. What the masters do is redistribute the qi, bringing us all into a beautiful new era..."

Back then, her words left me speechless, and many years later, I'm still blown away whenever I think of it. An ordinary small town woman with no professional training aside from cooking in a cafeteria, standing there pontificating about national revival and world peace! Isn't that how the saying goes—no matter how little you have, you must still be concerned for the country? Awestruck by these glorious notions, I had no way to actually understand Auntie's "qigong techniques," and didn't dare raise any objections. After that, when she came to pull me out of bed each morning at 5am, I never complained. "It's for your own good," she would say. In those days after my family had fallen apart, who else gave a thought about what was good for me, aside from Auntie?

So Auntie continued to use her qigong on me, performing her duties like a conscientious doctor and frequently inquiring about how I felt. "Do you feel a bit stronger?" "Has your mind been a little bit clearer these past two days?" "Can you pay attention in class now? Even if it's raining, can you control your bladder while you're sleeping?" She even got hold of a small notebook to record each session of qigong, along with the duration and the "quality of the qi." Every so often she would pull it out and analyze the data. In the eyes of the neighbors, "Aunt Yang" was kindly and shy, a woman resigned to her lot in life. No one had any idea that she was conducting these mystical trials.

I was an experimental subject who could potentially demonstrate the existence of miracles. But I'm ashamed to say I did not live up to my promise. No matter how much effort was put into my growth and development, I showed none of the results that Auntie had hoped for. One market day, Auntie took me to a nearby farmers market that had sprung up in "a response to good policy." When she saw that one of the meat vendors had a large platform scale, she made me get on it. It turned out that not only had I failed to gain any weight, I had actually lost a few pounds. The butcher rudely said that if I were a pig, I wouldn't even get the blue quality stamp on my butt. On the way back home, Auntie's face was unusually stern, her eyebrows knit so tightly that the space between her eyes puckered. Her eyes turned watery, and she seemed on the verge of crying.

I tried to make her feel better. "Don't worry about it. I've been like this for years. I'll just deal with it."

Auntie shook her head. "What are you saying? You can't just deal with it. I won't stand by and watch you growing up the runt of the litter."

I said, "My mom didn't care about it..."

"She shouldn't have treated a child that way," Auntie choked out. "What kind of mother would do that?"

It was the first time I'd ever heard her criticize "the lady of the house." It scared me, and I shut my mouth and fell silent. But then Auntie stroked my head and pressed my cheek against her stomach. She gazed out toward the distant mountain range and said, "My qigong isn't powerful enough. But there is something else we can try."

The instant I recall that pilgrimage Auntie took me on, all the noise and chaos comes rushing back to me.

We departed on May Day, as a fierce wind wailed through the mountains. As it happens, I was allergic to the pollen carried by the wind, and scratched my face the whole way until I was as mottled as a calico cat. From the munitions factory we took a bus into town, and went directly to the train station to buy tickets. We squeezed onto the overcrowded slow train and drowsed away seven or eight hours. It was dark by the time we got to the city. Row after row of low gray brick houses squatted against a dark yellow sandstorm. Workers were working overnight loading and unloading building materials across the many construction sites. From above, it must have looked like an unfinished game of mahjong. Auntie grabbed me by my skinny arm, and we crossed right between the muddy half-built structures. After a while, we passed a temple and then another temple, until there seemed to be local gods everywhere.

We didn't stop to pray at any of the temples. We just followed the twists and turns on the map Auntie clutched in her hand, getting lost twice before we ended up at the gates to a large courtyard guarded by armed police. Of course we couldn't enter. Instead, we stayed the night in a hostel in the row house across the street. Because we'd arrived so late, there were no single rooms left, and instead the attendant let us stay in a six-person all-female room. Six metal cots were arranged side-by-side from east to west, and four of them were already filled. Three of the women were whispering to each other as though they were old friends. The fourth was a white-haired old woman who was huddled up on the farthest bed trying to sleep, her body occasionally twitching. Over her bedding, she had put a piece of brown paper by her feet, on which she had used a cinnabar pen to write a list of startling phrases like "wasted life," "treated like dirt," and "let the people decide." Her handwriting was clear and precise, written in the same Song dynasty style that my mother had also practiced.

Auntie greeted them, then pulled out the enamelware washbasin from below my bed and sent me off to wash my face. "We have important business tomorrow." But naturally I couldn't sleep in this unfamiliar place, so I burrowed my head in the big mildewed pillow and drowsily watched two pillbugs burrowing in and out of the wall plaster. The light was turned out and the women were all asleep and breathing steadily. We had gotten lucky and no one in the room snored. Only the old woman with the fierce posture was grinding her teeth, and would occasionally mumble a mournful sentence to herself.

Suddenly, there was a noise and the fat woman two beds over from me sat bolt upright. But instead of getting up, she crossed her legs, keeping her back very straight. She pulled her hair back into a bun and began to move her head slowly and deliberately. Up three times, then down three times, then to the left three times and to the right three times, as though she were counting every motion. Then she took her hands from her lower belly, where the so-called dantian is located, and lifted both arms like a military general, as though she were holding something high above her head. She looked like people in a propaganda film "celebrating the country on such-and-such an anniversary." What surprised me even more was that as soon as she began, all the other women except the oldest also sat up, including Auntie. They turned their heads and lifted their hands to the sky in perfect unison, like a silent dance company that had been rehearsing together for years.

Fortunately, I hadn't yet seen a foreign vampire or zombie movie, or else I surely would have wet the bed in fear. What could I do in that situation, just a halfwit kid? I could only curl up as small as possible, wrap myself in the blanket, and try my best to pretend to be asleep. At least the women finished their ceremony without devouring me like fresh meat. They each let out a deep breath, as though relaxing their inner organs again, and then leaned back against their beds for a chat.

"The city air is so dirty," the fat woman commented. "You can really tell that it doesn't have the same qi as country air."

Another woman said, "At least the moon is out tonight, so the flow is unobstructed."

They all nodded. The fat woman turned to Auntie. "Fellow practitioner, where are you from?"

"I'm from Henan," Auntie said quietly.

"And that's your son?" Someone pointed at me.

"He's a relative's boy...although strictly speaking, he's not really a relative."

"Did you bring him here to be cured by the master?"

Auntie sighed instead of responding. Her long, sad sigh elicited the sympathy of her "fellow practitioners." Someone told her that my spirit had left my body and my third eye was no longer bright, which was obviously the result of evil qi entering my body. Someone else said not to worry, this kind of disorder was small potatoes to the master. Some retired cadre had been hooked up to tubes for six months, sick as a dog, and hadn't he lived? Some model worker was struck by a truck, flew ten meters and spat out his own liver, and hadn't he been saved? With treatment from the master, they were all alive and kicking. It had been reported in the newspaper, and they'd even taken a group photo in front of a silk banner. If there weren't

all this irrefutable evidence, why would a provincial bureau officially invite the master to lead a public meeting about qigong? Why would the experts at the Academy of Science circulate a public notice, urging the nation to take research into the applications of "paranormal bodily abilities" seriously?

They each proceeded to recount their problems and what they had learned from their practice. The fat woman was diabetic, and her lower limbs had already begun to ulcerate. The woman beside her had slipped a disc in her lumbar vertebra. The third was even worse off, and had terrible herpes sores, which could make her writhe so violently in her bed that once she had bitten a piece of her tongue off. But the women all solemnly swore that once they had begun to study with the master: "My condition got noticeably better, and I expect to recover completely." They were excited to go to the master's public lecture the next day. They wanted not only to return to happy, healthy lives, but also to bring the master's qi back to their hometowns to help their friends and family receive the same benefits. Like Auntie, they not only practiced themselves, but also thought of others. Wasn't that kindheartedness exactly the kind of thing all "practitioners of perfection" should show? Once the master saw it for himself, he would surely be gratified by their benevolence.

The fat woman brought the conversation back to Auntie. "So, what's your illness? You seem like you're in good shape. Why did you start practicing qigong?"

Another woman leaned in eagerly. "Or is it that once you started practicing qigong, you were cured?"

"I've got problems too, real problems," Auntie managed to say.

"What problems?"

"Nothing that bad."

"Oh, tell us. We're all fellow practitioners, you don't need to hide anything from us. As soon as the master looks at you with his all-knowing gaze, won't everything be laid bare anyway?"

I saw that Auntie's face had gotten red, and finally she managed to say, "I can't have children." So that was the problem! The fellow practitioners laughed a bit, all understanding why a woman would want to stay silent about that. Then the fat woman's expression turned secretive, and she said cautiously to Auntie, "With this kind of thing, it's not just you who needs to practice qigong. Your husband also needs to practice. It takes two hands to clap. You both need to do it."

"We've been tested, and there's nothing wrong with him," Auntie said, sounding all the more despondent. "It's...my fallopian tubes."

Well, no wonder! The fellow practitioners started to comfort her, demonstrating how considerate women can be of each other. They reassured her that if the master could make a heart, a vertebra, a brain as good as new, he could certainly deal with a simple fallopian tube! Don't worry, after tomorrow everything will be fine.

They talked until their throats were dry, then took turns pouring themselves some water. When they were done, they got ready to go back to sleep. Before she lay down, Auntie glanced at the old woman and asked, "Is that lady here for the public lecture too?"

"That old windbag's not one of us." The fat woman had already let out two thundering snores, but added sleepily, "The master can't help her."

大姨妈本不是我的亲大姨妈。我和她的渊源，又得从老辈人说起。

我母亲娘家以前是北京的大宅门儿，祖上出过个把“行走”，后来固然也败落了，死的死散的散，搭伙儿过日子的只剩下两户世代因袭的老佣人。大姨妈是厨娘的女儿，她比我母亲大一岁，自小就被叫作“大姐”，俩人一起上学一个屋里睡觉。到了运动风起云涌的时候，家里又受了冲击，母亲被发配到三线去接受改造，大姨妈则插队去了河南，后来干脆通过招工落户在了那里。这就叫大相国寺的水浇了菜园子——贵贱一码平。

在西北的一个兵工厂，我母亲嫁给了我父亲，一个在山沟里苦熬了多年、“很有理论素养”的军转政工干部。这种婚姻明摆着是各取所需，互相都有着认命的意味，但很可笑，他们的婚后生活却表现为不同意识形态、“大我和小我”之间的激烈斗争。刚开始，我父亲自认为是某种光明的、宏大的思想理念的化身，致力于改造我母亲身上那些被他视为自私和无聊的剥削阶级习气。后来政治气氛宽松了，母亲却又摇身一变成为“自由”和“人性解放”的代表，对我父亲反戈一击。他们互相敌视，又因为敌视而更加坚定了自己的信念，以至于为了屁大点儿事儿都要上纲上线——却并不妨碍一不留神把我制造了出来。

回想我的童年，关于“家庭”的记忆基本上只剩下了辩论、揭批、指桑骂槐、阴阳怪气。耳朵里充斥的都是硕大无朋的词汇，仿佛分属于不同阵营的吹鼓手和刀笔吏正在进行面对面的交锋。当然也不止于思想论战，家里的容器大多由搪瓷和金属打造而成，就连阳台上的花瓶都是用105毫米炮弹壳车出来的，这是因为所有的瓷器和玻璃器皿刚买回来不到三天就会粉身碎骨。

印象中，最惨烈的一次冲突发生在我上小学的时候。当时我母亲叉腰站在门口，用字正腔圆的京腔噱里啪啦地说着什么，总之是宣称“世道变了，你那一套已经没有价值了”，我那一向沉默的父亲突然暴起，抄起窗边的一只小猪存钱罐掷向她，结果弹道偏离，“卒瓦”在了我的脑门上。粘着血迹的钢镚儿落了一地，我的父母却还在忙于论证对方品质恶劣，根本没人低头看我一眼。我便蹲下身去，慢慢地把那些硬币捡了起来，踮进裤兜里，哗哗作响地走到厂里的服务社去吃一碗裤带面。根据我的经验，每当他们闹起来，家里照例是没人做饭的。吃面的时候，血又滴了下来，和面汤里的辣椒油混在一起，但我仍然坚韧地吃着，吃着，仿佛只有用食物堵住喉咙，才能让自己不至于哇哇大哭。那天，我在厂区里游荡到深夜，听了上万响试射高射机枪的回音，困得不行了才走回家。这时却发现母亲不见了，她已经收拾行李远走高飞了。

母亲这一去，就再也没回来。她跑到南京的亲戚家住了几个月，随后给我父亲寄来了一封口气强硬的离婚通牒，宣称自己遇到了在学校念书时的初恋对象，俩人铁了心要组建新家庭，“把失去的时间找回来”。她好像突然醒悟到，她所信奉的那套观念还可以通过实际行动来体现。自由是多么美好，婚姻自由则比一切自由更加美好。而我父亲吧唧着嘴，连抽了半包“恒大”牌香烟，一时懵了。

大姨妈就是在这期间来到我家的。母亲总算想起自己身上还掉过一块肉，便写信请“大姐”到陕西来照顾我。我父亲则忙于追到南京去跟我母亲谈判，于是把一个家扔给了我们两个人。记得那时候的大姨妈长相还很白净，一张鹅蛋脸显得非常温婉，但总蹙着眉，一副正在深思什么的样子。都说她是我的亲戚，但我却不记得有过这么一位“还抱过我嘞”的亲戚。人家问她是做什么工作的，她说在河南的一个印刷厂食堂上班，而我看她也不像个炒菜师傅。我们兵工厂的食堂师傅都是膀大腰圆的，脸上的横肉把脖子都淹没了，手上永远沾满了黏乎乎的猪油。有一次我到食堂偷包子被人发现，挨了一个嘴巴，结果因祸得福，此后的半个月吃饭都有肉味儿。所以当这女人让我“叫人”的时候，我就装作没听见，低头盯着解放鞋上粘着的一块动物粪便发呆，同时思考着那究竟是人的、狗的还是牛的屎。而大姨妈也不多说话，自顾自地开始干活儿，扫地，擦窗户，修理厕所水箱里的浮标，又拎了菜篮子出去买菜，三下两下变出一桌子吃食。

作为一个后来的美食记者，我对于“吃饭”这件事情的初步概念，其实是通过大姨妈建立起来的。前面说过，她的母亲就是一名厨娘，因而掌握着许多家传的手艺，以旧时北京盛行的鲁菜为主，重刀功，多油炸，擅长糟溜。定居在河南后，她还对面食有了心得，早上有时会给我做一碗放了鹌鹑蛋、海带丝和卤羊肉的烩面，有时是白菜粉条馅儿包子。犹以烩面最对我的胃口，每次把脸从大海碗里拔出来，我都被香得直翻白眼儿。小孩儿没出息，吃了两顿肚儿圆，我就消除了对这个女人的生疏感，天天流着鼻涕追在她身后叫“大姨”，后来又学着那些从南方迁过来的邻居的叫法，在“大姨”后面缀了个“妈”。

在我的感觉里，“大姨妈”似乎比“大姨”更亲，更贴心。

大姨妈摸着我的脑袋，眼圈儿一红：“我要有个孩子，肯定养得比你胖乎多了。”

她致力于将我喂肥、喂白，喂成宣传画里坐着“科学号”飞船奔向太空的少先队员那副人见人爱的长相。可是事与愿违，即便过上了吃香喝辣的日子，我的外形仍然没有发生改观。我还是那么黄，那么瘦，像根火柴棍一样

另一人充满期待地插嘴问：“还是本来有病，练功练好了？”

大姨妈嗫嚅道：“也有问题，也有问题……”

“什么问题？”

“也不算多大的问题。”

“你就说吧，大家都是功友，谁有必要瞒着谁啊。师父天眼一开，不全都透视得一清二楚了？”

我分明瞥到大姨妈涨红了脸，半晌才说：“我没孩子。”

咳，原来是这么回事。众位功友居然笑了，一副女人很懂女人的样子。而胖女人却又露出了诡秘的神色，往大姨妈的方位探了一探说：“要说这个事儿，不光你需要练功，你爱人……就是你们家那口子，他也需要练啊。一个巴掌拍不响嘛，得双修。”

大姨妈就更加窘迫了：“到医院查过，他没问题，原因在我的……输卵管。”

哦，难怪呢。众位功友便又把嘴撇下来，表示女人最能体谅女人。她们又替大姨妈坚定信念，因为就连心脏、脊椎和大小脑都能在师父手里修复如初，又孰论区区输卵管？放心吧，等明天，明天就一切都会好啦。

大家聊得口干，轮番起来拿暖壶倒水，喝完准备正式睡觉。临躺下之前，大姨妈又往杳杳里的老太太那儿看了一眼，问：“这位大婶儿呢，她也是来听带功报告的吗？”

“跟咱们是裤裆里放屁——两岔儿的。”胖女人已经打出了两个震耳欲聋的呼噜，半梦半醒地说，“她的事儿不归师父管。”