

SHI YIFENG

Excerpts from two novels:

I.

From *An Unofficial History of the Heart*

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.

[...]

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 muddied.”

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 poster 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 if 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."

[...]

Translated from the Chinese by Eleanor Goodman

II.

From Eye of the Earth

Synopsis :

Kid An's childhood is a happy one, until a case of corruption in a state-owned enterprise leads to his father's suicide. The leaders of the company divide the plunder amongst themselves, and place all the blame on the head of Kid An's father, an engineer. Enraged, he asks them one question before he dies: why do they have no morals? This traumatic experience leaves Kid An preoccupied with the concept of morality in a way that he can never fully articulate.

When he grows up he demonstrates a great aptitude for maths, science and computing, and is admitted into a prestigious university to study engineering. But behind his apparently gleaming prospects, Kid An continues to fret about the problem of morality. In thinking about and researching the issue he encounters Zhuang Boyi, a history student. Though he is drawn to Kid An, Zhuang struggles to understand his stubborn pursuit of the nature of morality. In order to make money from Li Muguang, the wealthy son of a government official, Zhuang convinces Kid An to sell his services as a writer and produce the essay that Li needs to go and study abroad.

Li Muguang goes to study in America after graduation and eventually settles down in the States, while Zhuang Boyi becomes a documentary director. Kid An's obsession with morals leads increasingly to destitution. He takes on a technical job at a bank, but loses his job when he refuses to change the software to allow his boss to monitor his colleagues. He can only return to the neighbourhood of his university, and a life of poverty. After encountering his old friend Kid An again, Zhuang Boyi reintroduces him to Li Muguang, who is now the boss of a transnational corporation. Li asks Kid An to design an internet supervision system that would allow the real-time monitoring of American warehouses from China, dramatically reducing the cost of manpower. He also plans to develop the system into a commercial product to sell around the world. But while he is working for Li, Kid An discovers a secret: Li Muguang's company is really just a front to allow his family to transfer their capital out of China. This is an affront to Kid An's sense of morality, reminding him of the tragedy that befell his family. He refuses to complete the job, and decides to expose Li's illegal actions. In order to stop Kid An, Li Muguang turns again to their mutual friend, Zhuang Boyi.

These three friends, with their three very different personalities, are each confronted with a different kind of challenge. Kid An is determined to be a saint in the service of morality; Li Guanyin has degraded himself, becoming a money worshipping utilitarian in his single-minded pursuit of profit; and Zhuang Boyi – who does at least have some sense of right and wrong, but is unable to resist the pressures and temptations of reality – vacillates between his two friends. In the end, having used his internet monitoring skills to bring Li Guanyin to public justice in cyberspace, Kid An disappears off the face of the earth. When Zhuang Yibo manages to track him down again, he discovers he is once again enduring a precarious, hermit-like existence in the vicinity of his alma mater.

chapter 3

There had been no direct contact between Kid An and Li Muguang up until that point. I'm talking about the other time Li Muguang hired Kid An – not the time he paid him to write the essay (for a fee that mostly went into my pocket). Because what's such a big deal about getting in a hired hand to do your writing for you? My first position after graduating was secretary at a municipal level government office, and my job mainly entailed writing speeches for the deputy director. It happens every day, at every level of every company. Here's another funny thing: the deputy director I was attached to had originally been a peach farmer in Pinggu, and his Mandarin pronunciation wasn't all that. He'd always manage to turn "worrgh-men" – "we" – into "warrgh-men" – "we bowls". And because the director's surname was Guo, a homophone of "pot", he'd end up reading: "We bowls will rally around the pot to decisively resolve the problem of providing food to the man in the street."

After two years of this there was no way in hell I could have kept it up any longer. Sitting in the company conference room, I really did begin to feel like a clinking, empty bowl, waiting for the pot's last dregs of soup. But there were too many other bowls, and the competition for the pot's attention was fierce. Some bowls would dive down into the pot in search of rice; some had fallen down from some bigger, more important pot; and some bowls, the ones beautifully edged with gold, wouldn't hesitate to leap into the sink and take a shower with the pot. A broken old bowl like me was clearly going to struggle to make it out in one piece, so I gritted my teeth and switched from the One True Path of state employment to a local TV production company.

Since the marketisation of the broadcasting system, the production companies have run everything on a contractual basis: if you film a reel, you pick up the pay cheque; when you don't feel like working, you can laze around at home for a fortnight and no one's going to care. Although it was still essential for the bowls to maintain their relationship with the pot, I was slightly more at ease in a company with this more relaxed management structure. I was a reporter first, spending some time on the society news beat, then I became a writer, and before long I'd managed to acquire the title of director. But I may as well have been a director of cartoons, or animal films, for all the good it did me when it came to actresses. No after-hours one-on-ones for me. I was a director of documentaries, and I mostly made films about poor kids in the mountains walking miles to get to school, or big-bellied female party secretaries, still resolutely leading their villagers in the pig pen repairs even when their waters were on the verge of breaking.

The seasons passed. After several years, one of my films received a government award, and I signed a contract with the company to form my own studio. With the comfort of prosperity, I bought a place of my own in Tongzhou, inherited a second-hand Jeep Cherokee from a friend, and acquired hobbies such as twiddling a sandalwood Buddhist rosary and steeping gongfu tea. In order to project a more directorial image, I grew a beard and took to wearing a green military cap with a five-pointed red star. In other words, I had finally become the thing I had always detested the most: a self-aggrandising poseur.

It was around the time the Beijing Olympics had just finished when my nth girlfriend, a postgraduate student who had majored in sociology, suggested a new topic to me: the "school drifter" crowd from the Zhongguancun and Xueyuan Road area. They were different from the "ant tribes" who had been attracting so much attention in the last couple of years, because these were college graduates who continued to linger in the vicinity of their alma mater. Some of them were earning so little after graduating that they craved the cheap food of the university canteen; some still retained an ostentatious thirst for knowledge, and liked to attend lectures and classes whenever they could; and there were some who were simply unable to make the psychological transition from student life to the real world,

refusing to grow up. My intuition told me that some of these people might yield some worthwhile material, and with a bit of luck I might even be able to scam another dodgy international prize out of it. I quickly started thinking about how to broaden the subject. I got right to work, dispatching a handful of interns to find me some typical examples of the school drifter type, then hitching up my camera ready to tape some interviews. Everything went remarkably smoothly. My subjects offered me a diverse blend of material, but there was one thing they all had in common: none of them imagined themselves to be run-of-the-mill, and they all loved showing off. They came alive in front of the camera, so keen to demonstrate the intensity of their emotions or the loftiness of their principles, and the tone of my stuffy, pseudo-profound documentary ending up shifting into comedy. I'd even gone out of my way to find a folk philosopher I'd known back in the day, but alas, I heard from a former classmate (who had now become a faculty member) that he had been turned over to the public security bureau after stealing the underwear of dozens of female students. After a few days we were approaching the end of the preliminary interviews, and I wanted to take the whole crew out to dinner before we went back to sort through the recordings. But while we were eating in the international students' canteen of my old university, I heard from Zhang, one of the more responsible interns, that she had found one more subject who we hadn't interviewed yet.

"Didn't we get them all?" I asked, re-examining the list of names.

"This one's a bit of a weirdo," said Zhang. "He wouldn't let us take down his name, and completely refused to appear on camera. But I can't help thinking there's a good story there. He doesn't have a job, and he never comes to listen in on classes. He just spends every day scurrying around the dorms. The guards think he's a trash collector – they've chucked him out a bunch of times, but he always finds his way back in after a couple of days."

"Are you sure he isn't a trash collector? Or maybe he's reselling stolen bikes?"

"I've met him once. He definitely didn't look like it," insisted Zhang.

When I was pontificating to these kids who were working for me, I often told them that you always had to see things all the way through. If there was even a single scene still missing then your work was not yet done. I also told them that you sometimes had to keep on chipping away to uncover the truly meaningful source material, and you weren't likely to catch it just by shooting a few reels off the hip. Now it felt like Zhang was turning my own words against me. I left the others to their meal and followed her out of the canteen. Zhang had heard that this guy lived in a place known as the "Armour Village" off beyond the west gate of the campus. The original one-storey buildings there had been topped with creaky, shoddily constructed extensions, and were rented out by the room, or even by the bed. After all these years, this shanty town was no less filthy and dilapidated than it had ever been. The place was bustling, with stalls on either side of the dirt track selling egg-fried pancakes, assorted skewers bubbling in oil, and lamb kebabs. You'd regularly see kids with thick glasses and blank faces go hurrying past with an armful of books. Zhang led me up the alley, and then we turned into a courtyard that was near Old Summer Palace West Street. She rapped on a door. There was no response. Unwilling to concede defeat, Zhang peered inside through the gap in the curtains.

"What are you doing?" asked a short fat woman in flower-print pajama bottoms, who eyed us suspiciously as she walked in with a net bag full of vegetables. Presumably she was the owner of the courtyard.

"Isn't he in?" I asked, pointing at the door.

"He was still in when I left," she replied. "Don't tell me they've taken him in again?"

"Taken him in? You mean the police?"

"Not the police, the university." She curled her lip. "All kinds of trouble I've had from him. If it weren't for me feeling sorry for him, so poor and lonely, I'd have got rid of him long ago."

I gave Zhang a look, and we went out of the courtyard. Sewage was spilling out of the public toilet directly opposite, and the stench of it was getting too much. "Chances are he's just some smalltime thief," I said to Zhang irritably. "I once ran into one in the dormitories when I was here. A few of the guys chased him out and he almost ended up in the lake." Zhang's eyes widened. She was looking over my shoulder. "That's him. That's him," she said, lifting up her portable camcorder.

I had to take a look. I saw a thin, sallow guy with greasy, knotted hair down to his shoulders. He was wearing a double-breasted suit jacket of indeterminate colour and plastic flip-flops. The toilet roll dangling from his hand, fluttering in the wind, was the only speck of brightness on him.

I was flabbergasted. For a while I said nothing. But when he managed to discern my face between the beard and the military cap, his eyes filled with an innocent, joyful surprise.

"Is it... Zhuang Boyi?"

"Kid An?"

Glancing at Zhang, he waved a crusty, mottled hand back and forth. "Out of respect for our friendship, would you mind turning that thing off?"

I had never imagined that my reunion with Kid An, after all these years, would take place outside a public toilet. After I had sent Zhang on her way, I followed him into his small room. The ceiling was low, and you had to duck your head as you stepped in if you didn't want your head smeared with dust. Inside was a bed, a table, and a chair, all of which looked like they had been retrieved from the junk of a second-hand market, and nothing else. In the light of a 25-watt bulb, Kid An looked even filthier and scrawnier than he had outside, and yet – just like Zhang had said – he didn't look like a thief or a trash collector. If you'd asked me, I'd have said he looked like a 1980s vagabond poet with a serious addiction to masturbation.

It made me sad to see him looking so flustered and uncomfortable. We were both graduates of a big-name university, you know? We'd faced the era of reform together, and while reform might not have done us much good, it didn't take too much away from us either – at least compared with some of the kids that came after us. We'd at least had a chance to find a reasonably respectable job without too much difficulty. Everyone else who was on my level of ignorance and incompetence had nevertheless managed to become important enough to indulge in casual office sexual harassment. But Kid An was the star of the science department – they'd said he could fit half of Silicon Valley in his brain. How had he ended up in such a state?

Not wanting to upset him, I didn't ask directly. I continued to act like I was still making a documentary, discussing trivial things so as to incrementally approach the topic of his present life around the university. He told me the famous pickle-stuffed buns of the number one canteen had disappeared, and the video screening room in the basement of the library had closed down. The bathhouse I'd once dubbed "The Pungent Palace" was apparently still open though, and the women's side was more pungent than ever. "But the bathers aren't what they used to be," he said, sucking in his breath, and in that moment he suddenly still seemed to have a glimmer of his old wit.

It was like something out of a classical poem: the buildings retained their magnificent glory, while Kid An had crumbled away. But since he still seemed relatively stable, I finally cut to the chase: "I haven't seen you in all these years since we graduated... I thought you'd stayed to do a postgrad in the electronics department?"

"Talk about just deserts." He lowered his head and gave a bitter laugh. "I should really thank you. Without that five thousand you gave me after graduation, I wouldn't have had a home in Beijing."

I looked around his so-called "home", and my face flushed. Fortunately Kid An continued his narration without noticing. No, he hadn't transferred to the history department after graduating, but nor had he accepted the offer to become an electronics postgrad, even

though they'd been prepared to waive the usual English language and political entry requirements. There was one very simple explanation for his decision, and it had nothing to do with his interests or his sense of purpose: he needed to start making money. Kid An's father had died when he was about ten years old, and his mother had provided for him by cleaning pig intestines at a meat treatment plant. Over time, the alkaline solutions had burned away his mother's hands, and the exposure had caused such damage to her eyesight that she was unable to continue doing manual labour. Fortunately she'd managed to keep going until her son had graduated from university with a desirable diploma. Getting him through university was the best chance she could see to change the family's fortunes, and if she could only achieve this goal then all her suffering would not have been for nothing. But Kid An's newly acquired credentials might as well be scrap paper if they didn't quickly translate to cash.

"I really can't work any longer," his mother had said to him. "My hands feel like they've been bitten by a thousand ants, and I can live with that, but if I go blind then I'll only ever be a weight around your neck."

It was Kid An's mother who did the deciding when it came to his career. They decided against a specialised communications company because she didn't think it was sufficiently stable source of income; against a large scale state run electron tube factory, because the salary was too low. After weighing up all the options, Kid An's mother decided that he should go and work in a bank. And what was an inveterate engineering graduate going to do in a bank? This was the time when financial institutions were starting to digitise their services, and they needed people like Kid An who were qualified to provide "technical support". But all that really meant was being in charge of the Local Area Network equipment.

So Kid An put on a black suit and slotted a gold tie pin across his chest. It was a rewarding job at first: the salary was impressive, it was a stable income, and the work didn't keep him too busy. None of the technical problems he had to deal with in the office were remotely challenging for him – the most difficult it got was reinstalling operating systems and recovering hard drives, and if the worst came to the worst he could always just order a new computer and put it on the company tab. It wasn't like they didn't have the money. Kid An was living a comfortable life for a while back then. He was assigned a nicely furnished room in the company dorms near Xidan, and the labour union kept them well stocked with fish, meat, fruit, and rice. And he was able to send a bit of money home each month – enough to look after his mother in the city of H, plus a little spare to go into the "future wedding fund".

But three years ago, all that had changed. One day, while Kid An was on his break, he received an unexpected phonecall from the president of the sub-branch. Apparently he wanted to meet him, for a chat. This was the first time he had been specifically summoned by his superiors. Kid An was bemused, but he showed up on time at the door to the president's office nevertheless.

[...]

Translated from the Chinese by Dave Haysom