

Suo Er

All the Whales Below the Surface

About twenty years ago when I was eight years old, my uncle was twenty-nine and didn't yet have his full beard. We were on holiday in Qingdao by the sea. That's when I first met Pei--an old friend of my uncle's. He grilled pangolins by the sea for fifty *kuai* a skewer for tourists at the beach.

"Hey," my uncle said after recognizing him, "what are you doing here?"

Pei saw it was my uncle and then, smiling, patted his shoulder. They stood together and talked while Pei kept an eye on the grill. He gave me some of the pangolin meat and I noticed he tapped an invisible cigarette with his finger, a movement that left an impression on me.

"Who is this boy?" Pei asked my uncle.

"My nephew."

They lowered their voice, and I could tell they didn't want me to overhear their conversation. My uncle thought I didn't know what was happening.

They talked until late and my uncle helped Pei close his stand. By then it was dark. Pei had made some money selling the pangolin meat and suggested we go to a new western restaurant. He said he needed to go back to his hotel, which was some distance from ours, to make a phone call, so we arranged to meet at the restaurant in an hour. Pei turned up half an hour late with a lady whose age was impossible to tell.

He introduced her as his girlfriend. She had scarlet fingernails and fluffy, curly hair--a popular style among Cantonese female celebrities then. She and Pei smoked one cigarette after another. My uncle didn't smoke, but he drank with them. They hardly ate, but I ordered a club sandwich, a rib-eye steak, and some dish I've forgotten the name of. It was the first time I had had western food, so I devoured it all. We had a good time. When Pei's girlfriend laughed, her mouth opened wide like a hippo's. At one point, there was a scuffle at the table next to ours and a glass shattered by our feet. This didn't affect our pleasant mood.

Later in the night, Pei excused himself to make a phone call and after an hour we still didn't see

him. His girlfriend went to check on him and she didn't return either. My uncle started to worry and sent me to figure out what had happened. I couldn't find them. My uncle stared at the cluster of empty bottles on the table for some time and said we should wait a bit longer. Pei and his girlfriend never returned.

The dinner cost my uncle half of the budget we had for our trip that summer. We loitered on the beach for three days after that. Pei never returned to sell the pangolin meat, and his hotel informed us he left the night of our dinner. We went home. My uncle was generally forgiving, but I could tell he was angry though he never admitted it to me. I knew he wouldn't forget Pei leaving like he did.

The memory of Pei never left me either. I was curious. My uncle's friends said Pei had studied Chinese along with them at university. They said Pei was my uncle's best friend, but then he lost touch with everyone after graduation. They said he was eccentric, left-handed, a lone wolf who smoked all the time. They claimed others said they saw him working security at a supermarket in Shenzhen. Still others claimed he'd become suddenly rich through stocks and real estate. My uncle sneered at these stories.

"I saw him selling toad meat in Qingdao!" he said, looking at me to confirm his tale.

That wasn't the truth. It was clear my uncle remembered well what happened, but he twisted the story deliberately.

My uncle was the kind of person who always looked older than his years, so his hair started to turn white before he even reached forty. He also started to forget things, but he always had a good memory for what was important. He never married and it was partly because of me. He was a good cook. He had given up a lot for me. Fortunately, I was mature for my age and I didn't cause him much trouble growing up.

"If you hadn't been so good, I would have given you up for adoption," my uncle once said, half-jokingly.

I had become an orphan at seven. My father took antidepressants, but one day he went mad and strangled my mother with his bare hands. I was asleep in the next room. My neighbor called the police. She waited until my mom and dad were out of the house to wake me. She said my parents had urgent errands to run and that she would watch me for a few days. She was a kind woman, but there's a limit to everyone's generosity. I was sent to an orphanage a few days later.

At the orphanage, I was as lonely as a blind horse until my only living relative turned up. I felt an attachment to my uncle the moment I met him. He wore a green checkered shirt, a worn pair of runners and glasses and his soft, short hair made him look gentle. I asked him his name and he told me he was my uncle.

"What's an uncle?" I said.

He explained.

"I thought uncle meant a kind of cracker."

He laughed and rubbed my head. "Do you like your uncle?"

I looked at him but didn't respond. Holding my hand in his, he took me away from the orphanage. I thought his hand was the biggest hand in the world.

After getting engaged, my soon-to-be wife urged me to move out of my uncle's place. She was into Chanel and computers, the stock market and shopping, high heels, airplanes and cities like Los Angeles and New York and Tokyo and London and all the things those places represented. She liked chewing gum and drinking wine; she only smoked when she was depressed. She never thought of having children, not even in her dreams. She believed giving birth destroyed a woman's sanctity, which was to her a quality more precious than virginity.

My uncle and my wife disliked each other, which put me in a difficult position. After we married, I visited my uncle every week, but she never came along. No time, she said. Whenever I was with my uncle and mentioned my wife, he seemed to stiffen.

Once my uncle said to me, "I always had a bad feeling about her. Divorce her. You should marry someone more down-to-earth."

"She won't have that," I said. "Or you won't, you wretch!" I didn't dare reply. We kept drinking beer until we finished all the bottles in his refrigerator. Finally, my uncle said, "You shouldn't visit so often."

"That won't happen." He was my uncle.

"Don't worry about me. Anyway, I might get married soon myself." He didn't look like he was joking.

"Is there someone?"

He nodded.

"Yes. Next month. Our wedding will be next month."

The night before my uncle's wedding, he received a card and gift money from Pei. There was a return address on the package. Incredulously, my uncle studied the card clearly written by Pei, until he said, "How come Pei knows about my wedding?"

"Looks like he hasn't forgotten you."

My uncle smiled in disbelief. He's forgotten everyone except for himself. He paused and added, "I have done the same."

"Uncle, you must still see him as your friend. You've never forgotten him." "You're talking rubbish."

"You can't fool me," I said then.

My uncle gave me a look. "You have become bigger than me, stronger, and more knowledgeable. You feel superior now, too, huh?"

Over the years my uncle had taken on a melancholy tone which slowly filled the gap that had started to grow between us. He disappeared the next morning. He took a train to the remote address on Pei's package which was six provinces away. A week later he returned looking tired and defeated. My uncle's fiancé burst into tears; she and her family thought my uncle had run away from the marriage. My uncle rearranged the wedding plans to have a quaint, modest ceremony, excluding any friend he had known for less than twenty years.

The night before the ceremony, my uncle and I drove for more than 200 miles out of town. We stopped at a gas station and went to pee in the grass. My uncle stalled and asked for a cigarette. I only had one left and lit it for him. He smoked it clumsily and tried to mimic the way my wife smoked. His gesture made me laugh, but then we fell silent still standing in the grass. He put out his cigarette. "Let's go," he said.

"You're serious about all of this?" "I'm not Harry."
"Harry?"

"Updike. Rabbit. I will not run."

When we got back it was two in the morning. After showering, my uncle drank a beer and fell asleep. I couldn't sleep and exchanged messages with a friend who was living on the other side of the globe. Before dawn I took a shower, shaved, brushed my teeth, and tried on the selection of best man suits. None seemed quite right, but I finally chose the one that looked reasonably stylish and I stuck with it. When my uncle woke, he stared at me smartly dressed in my suit. "Have I overslept?" he said.
"No, it's only seven."

He made yam congee, an omelet, and an asparagus lettuce salad for breakfast. After we ate we turned on the news and watched the morning report. Then my uncle suggested we play a football video game. My uncle picked Milan. I was Barcelona. During the game, the phone rang, but my uncle didn't answer. I had a feeling it was his fiancé. She would have never guessed what my uncle was doing at that moment. Eventually, after beating me three times, he rushed me to get ready.

When I was finished, he was still in his pajamas, so I helped him into his suit. We hurried off. As I was driving, my uncle talked on the phone to his fiancé. He seemed relaxed. He said he was already on the way. To put her at ease, he put me on the phone as well.

The wedding took place on the lawn of a holiday resort. We were fifteen minutes late. The host was already getting too hot and had taken off his ridiculous top hat. My uncle walked past me and took the hand of his bride, while greeting the other guests with polite nods.

My wife was already sitting among the other guests. She waved at me and all I could think about was how her manner reminded me of an over-excited goat. I sat beside her. "How come you're so wound-up?"

"Shouldn't I be?" I looked away.

After they exchanged vows, my uncle kissed his bride. The poor little woman was crying so much she couldn't even speak. The guests were in a joyous uproar as they moved to the roasted duck at the reception party. I didn't move. When I finally did, I had no appetite, so I let my wife have my plate. As I looked around, a guest in sunglasses caught my attention. I took him to be a relative of the bride, but his face was familiar. He exchanged glances with me, but his eyes were hidden. I knew it was Pei. I approached him then.

"Why are you here?" I said.

He responded that he didn't know why. He fixed his gaze on my suit for some time and finally said, "I thought I'd like to see your uncle." He fell silent, lost in his thoughts, and then pointed at his chest. "I have a problem here," he said.

I immediately understood what he meant. Pei was almost completely bald. His eyes were still hidden behind his sunglasses, but I sensed what he was feeling.

"I thought I wasn't coming," he said, "but I changed my mind."

"You should have let me know."

He shook his head and then, changing the topic, said, "your uncle is in good spirits today." I looked toward where my uncle stood. He was waving for me to come to him.

"Of course," I said to Pei. "I helped him choose his suit." Pei smiled. "But, for you two, it will never be the same." I uttered a muffled sound of agreement.

The band started. They played Mozart's 4th symphony as I had instructed. The crowd's spirits were high. There were bagpipes too and the sound reminded me of the sea. That was when my uncle approached.

"I was trying to get you to come over," he said. "Who were you talking to?" Pei had disappeared.

Before this encounter, I had met Pei three times. First, when I was eight, which I've already mentioned. The second and third time took place in more recent years. It was a time when I had quit my job and broken up with my ex-girlfriend, a woman my uncle liked very much. I suddenly had a lot of free time on my hands and my uncle suggested I go on a trip somewhere. I bought a ticket to Jeju island and chose an inexpensive location to stay, with good sunlight and a view of huge rocks hugging the coastline. To the east of where I was staying there was a tavern with a limited menu of Korean food. A stream of guests arrived regularly, but there was never a crowd. It closed at eleven. I went there almost every day, either in the afternoon or evening. I would have a few drinks before resting in my hammock that I strung between two tangerine trees.

Pei was also a regular at the tavern at this time, though at first neither of us realized. He always wore sunglasses and a T-shirt with a noticeably large logo. There was something strange-looking about him. I saw him almost every time I was at the tavern.

He had his special seat by the window. He drank beer, read the newspaper, and played on his phone. It was not until the time he got in an argument with someone that I really noticed him. He was arguing with a man with a hoarse voice and a baseball cap; the two seemed to know each other. Their disagreement started soon after they sat down. As their voices rose, the movements of the man's finger reminded me of someone. When he left the restaurant for a smoke, I followed. Though I had a much clearer idea of who this man was by then, I didn't approach him. A few days later, as I was reading in my hammock, this man came over to talk. He asked me what I was reading so I showed him my book, *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil. "A master much neglected," the man said. He asked if I liked Kafka.

"Of course."

We talked about modernism, Eugene O' Neill, Aitmatov, Borges. He said he believed Pu Songling's work belonged in the category of Magical Realism and that Proust was no different from an old woman peeing in the sea. When our literary debate finished, he asked my name and introduced himself.

"I know you," I said.

He was shocked. "You do?"

When I told him I had met him more than ten years earlier, he couldn't believe it. He said I was joking. I asked if he had sold pangolins in Qingdao and I mentioned my uncle's name. His eyes widened and he searched his memory. "Yes," he said, "I remember now. You were the child. His nephew. How old were you?"

"Eight."

He nodded, looking intently at me. I had a feeling that he was going to ask about my uncle, but he didn't. We talked until about three in the afternoon when someone came for him. He said we would meet again.

The next day he arrived later than usual. He sat down in the seat opposite me, looking exhausted. He said he was leaving that day and had come to let me know. As to where he was headed, he mentioned a few South American countries.

"It must be expensive to tour around so many places," I said. He smiled. "I'm not going as a tourist. It's for work."

"What kind of work?"

He pointed to the logo on his T-shirt. For this: Hug the Sea.

It sounded like a slogan from a conservation organization. La Esperanza, hope in Spanish, was the group's real name, a non-profit which promoted conservation of marine animals. Its headquarters was in Argentina. It was the first time I had heard of such an organization so I had a few more questions and Pei answered them patiently. He told me stories of his adventures at sea. Once, a few of them were trapped on an island 200 miles away from Peru at the risk of being eaten by sharks. He had a smile on his face even as he was describing the gruesome scenes, as if it was someone else's story.

As he finished his sixth cigarette, he coughed and said, "You have one last question. Go ahead."

I hesitated, but eventually asked why he disappeared that night in Qingdao, because I thought this was the question my uncle wanted to know the answer to the most. Pei seemed to be taken aback, smoking vigorously, as if he himself was searching for the reason.

Then he told me.

His father passed away that night of bronchial cancer. He was stricken with grief and hurried home to his father's funeral. Later on, he remembered that he hadn't said goodbye to my uncle, but it was too late.

"Does your uncle still remember that night?" He said. I nodded.

He fell silent. I felt he had something to say, but he never did. By that time his last cigarette was dying and he stood to bid me farewell. As he turned away, I had the feeling that I would not meet him again. He surprised me by returning to get my phone number. I quickly wrote

it on a piece of paper. He looked at it, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

"I will be in touch," he said.

I thought Pei was simply being polite and was never going to call, but he did six months later. He said he wanted to meet and asked for my address. I was working for a transport company in Yiwu at the time. He invited me to Hangzhou and I agreed.

When we met, I thought Pei looked fifty years older. He wasn't wearing sunglasses, so his bloodshot eyes were exposed. His hair was disheveled and his chin unshaven. He looked like an old Charles Dickens. He was happy to see me and insisted we tour the West Lake together.

I asked how the past half-year had been for him. He put it simply that it had been a mix of good and bad fortune, but I could tell it had been more trying than that. We talked as we walked the lake, Pei smoking all the time. He asked me what books I had been reading. I named a few aspiring authors' names. A taunting smile climbed his face.

"Those who raise their heads will soon be hunted down," he said. "The survivors are those who stay at the bottom of the sea."

I asked him what he meant. He told me it was a saying that's popular among the people he worked with. He asked if I had ever fished before. I said when I was younger I had in autumn, around the river bay, where the fat aquatic plants gathered swarms of fish. I was rather deft using my special harpoon, standing on the rocks, barefooted. It was a popular way to fish in the rural areas.

Pei nodded and said, "Fish breathe through their gills underwater, but whales are mammals, so they have to rise to the surface for air and that's when the whale fishermen strike."

"How do they hunt?"

"Same. Harpoons. But with much more powerful ones shot from a cannon. The head of the harpoon pops open once it penetrates the whale's skin. The whale has no way of escaping once the harpoon is in its body."

"And your job is to stop these fishermen?"

Pei didn't respond immediately. He took his time looking left and right and then sighed. "It's not a job but a duty, my child."

Despite his determined words, Pei's eyes were filled with defeat and frustration, and I understood that's why he had wanted to meet with me. He continued. "A month ago, we encountered a Japanese boat in the Pacific. We tried to stop them but failed."

"Was there a confrontation?"

He shook his head no. "They were far too cunning. The captain had a calm smile on his face

the whole time. We let down our guard. When we realized what they were up to, it was too late. A colossal sperm whale—its head as big as three trucks—was caught. “Pei used his arms to gesture the impossible size of the creature. “They dragged the whale at the back of their boat for miles until it died, leaving an orange-blood ribbon streaming on the surface of the sea.”

“Later one evening, we came across the same Japanese fishermen on the water. We got close to them and asked to board their boat. They let us on, and I discovered they were having a celebration dinner. A man with a thick beard handed me a glass of alcohol, which I threw down on the floor immediately. He was alarmed. I said I must see their captain. He looked perplexed. It took the bastard some time to come out and he said in clumsy English that we should carry on our conversation in the next room. As soon as we took our seats, I cursed him for what they had done to that whale. He tried to make his case with some kind of naturalist Zen theory, explaining that the chance of their ship meeting a whale was as random as an apple hitting the head of Newton, which required time, place, and the actor to coincide. For him, the whale and everything in this world had a tendency to choose death. I wouldn't tolerate his nonsense, his stupidity. I broke into the next room, which was another sitting room where they were celebrating, and in a fit of rage I kicked over desks and tables and smashed plates and cups on the floor. Their crew tried to grab me, but I made my way to the boat's deck and jumped into the sea.”

Pei took a drag of his cigarette then. I wanted to ask him why he jumped but didn't.

“It was dark. The sea was icy cold. I wanted — should've — died, but I was a good swimmer. My friends managed to rescue me back onto our boat. The Japanese taunted us and sped away. They didn't care at all. Our feat—and my actions—proved to be a failure.”

Pei flicked ash from his cigarette. He asked what I thought about the whole thing. I said his actions were a bit irrational.

“Sometimes acting rationally is not up to one person,” he said.

By that time, we had walked around the lake. He leaned one arm on the trunk of a willow tree to rest. I thought the time had come to bring up my uncle, so I said, “You know this already, but my uncle is like a father to me.”

He nodded.

“Do you know what happened to my parents?” “Your uncle mentioned it to me.”

“My biological father didn't die until I was twenty. We visited him in the hospital every year. He sat behind glass windows in his patient clothes, his head completely shaved. His face was blank. He might as well have been a puppet, but he recognized me and even said a few words. The hospital contacted us when he died. We hurried there and were taken to his corpse. My uncle tried to stop me from seeing his face, but I insisted on lifting the thin cloth that covered him. His face was empty and pale. He was cremated and turned to grey ash, just like everyone else after they die.” “Did your father know about your mother's death?” Pei said.

“I'm not sure. He lived in a maze.”

Pei fell silent. His gaze drifted to a distant steamboat on the lake. I leaned towards him, my chest pressing against his shoulder. He felt it and asked me what was the matter. In a low whisper I said, "It was me who murdered them."

Pei looked at me with wide eyes.

"My father had always had mental problems, but it kept getting worse so he couldn't live without medication. My mother managed his pills. That day I replaced his medicine with something else. When it happened, I was in the next room. I listened to my mother's struggle, but I was too scared to make a noise."

"Was it a prank?"

"I don't know. My mother made me do it. We even practiced a few times. She also told me to lock the door from the inside and not to come out, no matter what." "Surely you hadn't expected that to happen?"

"Everything that happened was her doing."

"Even the adoption?"

"I'm not sure about that."

Pei shook his head, apparently finding everything hard to believe. His finger started that phantom tapping.

"Your mother sure was strange." I gave him a look.

"Thank you for sharing your secret with me. Does your uncle know?" "Of course not."

Our discussion ended then. We were both hungry, but we had no intention of eating together. Leaving the park, I headed towards the subway station to catch my train, while Pei stayed in Hangzhou to wait for another friend. As we went our separate ways, he patted me firmly on the back.

"See you again, my child," he said, "send my greetings to your uncle." I caught sight of a glimmering wetness in his eyes.

A few years passed and I heard nothing from Pei. Yet as my uncle's wedding approached, I thought I should let him know. I dialed the same number, but no one answered. After a few more tries, a woman finally picked up. I said I was looking for Pei. She sighed and didn't immediately respond, but eventually she asked me to wait a minute. She set the phone down and I could hear the sound of her heels walking through a room. I could also hear two men talking. One was Pei, I was sure, and he was cursing and shouting. I thought he would have answered the phone, but I heard the same heels approach and the woman said Pei wasn't there. She said she would pass on a message. I said I knew he was there and that he knew me.

"You must be mistaken," the woman said.

I was getting annoyed and raised my voice. "Ask him to pick up."

"Haven't you people done enough to him?" "She started to sob and hung up."

I didn't know what else to do so I sent him a text message letting him know about my uncle's wedding and asked what was going on. He responded quickly, thanking me for the information. He wrote too that everything was fine with him. I wrote back asking if he was going to come and he responded that he would think about it. I wrote that my uncle would be extremely pleased to see him, but Pei didn't respond after that.

Before the wedding when the card and gift money arrived through the post, I phoned Pei and asked if that meant he wasn't coming. He said he was sorry. He sounded like an old man. I asked about the woman on the phone. He said she was his girlfriend. I asked him where he was, what he was doing, but he didn't tell me.

"Why do you have to be so solitary?" I said. "Why won't you share your life with anyone?"

He didn't respond, rather he coughed until he lost his breath. This worried me, and I asked if he was okay.

"Don't worry, child. I'm fine. I don't want to trouble you."

"No one wants to trouble others, but you still have to care for yourself."

After a pause, he talked to me a little about what he had been doing. It turns out he had left the organization he was working for. He went through a few different jobs, moved a lot, and was now unemployed. His girlfriend was supporting him, which he felt ashamed about. I guessed by then that his health was deteriorating, probably due to his heavy smoking, though I didn't ask him about it because I knew he would not talk to me about it over the phone. Instead, I told him that my uncle's wedding was likely to be postponed. He asked why.

"He went looking for you," I said, "to the address you left on the card." He laughed or coughed, I couldn't tell.

"How stupid is that!" He said. "You should have stopped him."

"He sneaked away without telling me."

Pei was silent for some time, though he still coughed every once in a while. "Are you still there?" I finally said.

"Yeah," he said, "when you have a date, I will let you know."

I said okay and we hung up. Once the new date was fixed, I gave Pei the details, but didn't expect him to come. When I did see him, he looked like a different man. I hardly recognized him. As soon as my uncle approached us, Pei made his way into the crowd, shuffling away like a mole. My uncle noticed his strange behavior and asked me who it was.

"An old friend," I said.

My uncle wasn't easily fooled, but I managed to change the topic by asking him how he thought the wedding was going. Since it was me who organized the whole thing, he complimented me by saying it was a job well done and patted me on the back. We talked about various things. Soon the bride approached. She was short and stout. In her hands she held a tray of champagne glasses. She no longer wore her bridal dress and her make-up was

a mess because she had cried so much at the ceremony. She suggested we have a drink together. As we talked, I glanced over at my wife and saw Pei sitting next to her. Pei must have said something funny, because my wife couldn't stop giggling. Soon she even took off Pei's sunglasses and began to study his eyes. Pei didn't move or try to stop her. I had an impulse to rush to them and throw my wife off her chair. Pei pushed his sunglasses on again, said a few more things, and then left my wife's side. I went to her with my glass of champagne and sat just where Pei had been sitting.

"Do you know that man?" I said.

She looked at me with something like surprise. "Isn't he your friend?"

"Well, yes. I guess what I want to ask is what were you two talking about?" She laughed. "About you, of course."

"What about me?"

She put her hand on her chin and tried to recall. "Well," she said, "he told me about when you were eight and you had western food together and you ate like a monkey. "She started to giggle again.

The wedding lasted until late afternoon when the sky quickly turned and suddenly the sun was nowhere to be seen. The guests were discussing the possibility of rain. I asked my uncle if we should end the wedding soon and he agreed. The last thing he wanted to do was give a speech. When he stood on the stage he reminded me of pictures I saw in school of how the United States paraded their Native Americans like they were an attraction in a museum. Pei was close by though, looking gently at my uncle. I had the strange feeling that the two good friends were never going to speak again.

"I.." My uncle opened his mouth, but he couldn't speak. He couldn't form words. No one knew what was happening.

At that moment, in a loud voice, Pei said, "Why don't you read a poem?"

Speaking so loud like that put a lot of strain on Pei. The crowd was staring. We were all staring. He held a book in one hand—a collection of poems.

My uncle looked at him for some time before he said, "It's you!"

"Indeed, it is me," Pei said, taking off his sunglasses. "Can I come on stage?" "Come. Of course, come," my uncle said.

The crowd made a path for Pei, who still looked like an ugly mole.

My uncle took hold of the book in one hand, while his other hand held Pei's. That moment, it was as if something was coming to an end.

My uncle turned the pages of the old book that he and Pei had written with some friends. They were young whales back then, hidden deep at the bottom of the sea. My uncle read some of Pei's poems out loud and then handed the book to Pei, who read some of my uncle's poems in return. Some of the guests had begun to leave. My uncle and Pei retreated

to a table and engaged in a conversation so deep it was as if there were no one else in the world but them.

Even I didn't exist for them.

I waited for hours in the dark, cloudy afternoon, though it never rained. I remembered many things that day, about Pei's girlfriend in heavy make-up who we met when I was eight, about the tears in Pei's eyes as we said goodbye in Hangzhou. As I watched Pei and my uncle, I felt I was eight again. We seemed to have returned to that beach more than twenty years ago, to the heat and the gentleness of that night in Qingdao.

Translated from the Chinese by Irene Chen, Chen Bo, and Bradford Philen