

G H O S T T O W N

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GHOST TOWN

A NOVEL IN 45 CHAPTERS

*Translated from the Taiwanese
by Darryl Sterk*


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“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”
—WILLIAM FAULKNER, *Requiem for a Nun*

“We are all in the gutter,
but some of us are looking at the stars.”
—OSCAR WILDE, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*

Written for my hometown, a non-existent Yongjing

G H O S T T O W N

PART 1:
MOM'S GONE MISSING

1. The first row of townhouses

“Where are you from?”

That was the first question T asked him. T gave him a lot: a German passport, a new home, an escape route, and a lot of questions. Right from the start, T liked to ask questions. What’s your hometown like? How many brothers and sisters do you have? How hot does it get on the island in the summertime? Are there cicadas? What about snakes? What do the trees look like? What are they called? Are there any rivers? What about canals? When is the rainy season? Are there ever any floods? Is the soil fertile? What all gets planted? Why can’t I accompany you to your father’s funeral? Why go home? Why not go home?

The question marks caught on his hair and nicked his skin. T’s questions were hard to answer, so he didn’t. He dodged, or lied, until his made-up biography was full of holes and contradictions, like a badly written novel. And so he wrote one. The first chapter opened with a table on which a few objects had been placed: one gun, two knives, and three diaries. The gun would have to be fired in a subsequent chapter, the knives should be used to dismember and flay, and the diaries would solve the riddle at the heart of the story. But the novel of his life was a total mess. He wrote and wrote and forgot about the gun, the knives, and the diaries. Instead, he obsessed over an assortment of trash that was strewn on the table and littered

his narrative with irrelevant clues, like a mural on a factory wall, a pair of bright red shorts, and a face with a plastic bag over it. When a person is rotten, his novel will be, too, full of holes.

He was a guy who was all holes from his mouth on south, holes he stuffed with everything he didn't want to talk about—all the incidents that had made a mess of his memory and which he claimed to have forgotten. When the holes ripped, as they did from time to time, sundry stories would come tumbling out.

How should he tell these stories?

Unable to get them off his chest and out of his mouth, he could only keep writing: I grew up in a small town.

A rural backwater in central Taiwan, his hometown was first settled by immigrants from Guangdong Province in China early in the nineteenth century. On level wasteland, they built their settlement, a street surrounded by homesteads. Soon the land was traversed by artificial waterways that probably resembled T's German *Kanäle*. The oldest of these "canals," or "ditches" had drawn muddy water from the longest river in the country since the late eighteenth century for farmers to irrigate their fields with. Early on, there were internecine brawls, not to mention never-ending disasters that put the fear of Fire and Flood in people's hearts. No wonder the settlers called the place Yongjing. It was an expression of their aspiration for eternal (*yong*) peace (*jing*).

The terrain around Yongjing was flat not rolling, but gazing east you could see green hills and, on a clear day, the mountains of the Central Range beyond. Gawping west, you couldn't see or even hear the Muddy Waters, but the old-timers used to say that if you walked thataway you'd eventually hit the Taiwan Strait. Few did. The inhabitants left this patch of prairie seldom if ever. Most of them never went mountain climbing, never saw the sea. They stayed home and farmed the land. The

soil retained moisture relatively well and was passably fertile. Local produce included flowers, betel leaf, and rice. After several centuries of settlement, it still looked like a farming community. The buildings were low-slung, single-story. A few of the old, three-wing residential compounds were declared national heritage sites, but not many tourists made the trip. Prosperity still hadn't arrived.

In the 1970s a contractor came to Yongjing and obtained a piece of land for a row of townhouses, a first for the township. Ten units, three stories each. The project was supposed to be a prelude to prosperity. When tall buildings start going up it means that a place is going to escape from poverty. At the time, a lot of folks had never seen taller! The building materials and methods were also unprecedented: reinforced concrete, ceramic flush toilets, and crushed granite floor tiles, Taiwan-style terrazzo.

He grew up in one of those townhouses, the fifth from the left. The sixth from the left used to be his eldest sister's place, but now it was sitting empty. The seventh was once a VHS video rental store, but now the whole building was charred black. There was a "For Sale" 出售 sign on the balcony. The place had been "For Sale" for years. The top half of the second character 售 had fallen off, leaving a yawning "mouth" 口 that transformed "For Sale" into "Way Out." The phone number on the bottom of the sign was too mottled to make out.

He stood looking at the sign, lost in thought. After many years in prison, he could really use a way out. Instead, he'd come back here. He knew better than anyone else that this place could never be a way out, not for him. Could that ruined sign lead him all the way back to those bright red shorts?

His eldest sister was the only one who stayed. She now lived in the fifth house from the left, his old home.

The small town was also a ghost town, to him.

A "ghost town" is deserted. His hometown was indeed out

of the way, remote from civilization, far from any metropolis. Nobody had heard of it. When Taiwan's economy ran wild in the 1970s, Yongjing didn't keep up with the pace of development. There was a brain drain. When young people like him left the countryside they never came back. They forgot the place, they even forgot what it was called. They left behind an aging generation that could never leave. Originally a blessing, the name became a curse. Intended to signify Eternal Peace, Yongjing came to mean Always Quiet. It was really, really quiet.

The summer he got out, there was a drought in central Taiwan. The roads were like stovetops in the afternoon. He could fry eggs, stir-fry rice, or simmer congee on the asphalt, no need to fire up the range. It'd been so many years, but everything matched his memory of the place. The weather certainly did. Boy was it hot! The afternoon heat could slow the second hand of the clock. The trees took an afternoon snooze, the wind died down. If you held your breath and listened you could hear the earth snore, the thick, heavy sound of hibernation. Not until the next rain would the land even consider waking up. As a boy, he'd find a tree and fall so deeply asleep in the shade that absolutely nothing—neither the crowing cock nor the throbbing cicada, neither the squealing pig nor the hissing snake nor even the baaing sheep—could wake him. Truly, he slept like the dead. But after he grew up, he often suffered from insomnia, especially as an inmate. In prison the scarcest commodity is noise. You can't hear the rain fall or the wind blow. The fluttering leaves are inaudible. He told the prison doctor it was too quiet, how was he supposed to get to sleep? Would medication help? He thought of asking if there was a pill that could help him hear the rain. Back home, the rain struck the "ironskin" roofs, playing a bright, brassy, percussive symphony. If he heard rain falling on sheet metal shingles, he could fall asleep for sure.

He came back because he really wanted to hear the rain.
What he heard now was a sewing machine.
That was his eldest sister Beverly.

As her foot worked the treadle, a midday soap opera played on the television beside the sewing machine: the nasty mother-in-law had just slapped her poor daughter-in-law on the cheek. Cocks were crowing, electric fans whirring. He faintly heard firecrackers from the next neighborhood. He hadn't slept in a quite a few days. He'd taken quite a few connecting flights. His mind was so muddled he didn't know where he was, but the sound of the sewing machine was unmistakable. He'd really come home to this ghost town.

Ghost towns are deserted, but where are the ghosts? Are there any?

There were a lot of ghosts in the countryside, living in people's oral accounts. Folks used to tell him never to go near the copse of bamboo out in front of the townhouse. There was a lady ghost lurking in there, a poor daughter-in-law who was driven out of her husband's home after her chastity was compromised. She walked into the bamboo and hanged herself. She had haunted the bamboo ever since, hanging in wait for young men to seduce. When the dogs howled at the moon, they were "blowing the dog conch" according to the Taiwanese idiom, meaning the beasts had seen a ghost. So go to sleep, Mother would say, and don't open your eyes, cause if you do, you'll see it, too. Even if you see it, you can't say it. If you see it run away—try to outrun it if you can. Don't look when you should not, if you do, you're gonna get caught. The kids said the most ghosts were to be found in the willow trees that lined the irrigation ditch along the field. Don't touch the leaves, they used to say, or you'll get mixed up with a ghostly maiden. You're certain to get zero on every examination, and the only way out of the mess would be matrimony. The maidens in the willows were actually lonely old spinsters waiting for

some unlucky sod to come marry them. There was another ghost in that ditch, a beautiful lady who jumped in a well after she was abused by a Japanese soldier. She was rescued, but then she got raped by the doctor she was taken to. In the end she drowned herself in the Muddy Waters. But instead of being washed out to sea, she ended up stuck in the irrigation network. She floated all the way to Yongjing, where she stopped in the middle of the ditch. There she stayed, no matter how fast the water flowed. A temple in her honor was built on the shore, at the foot of the old town wall. His friends said that the moss along the waterline was fresh green blood from her ghostly body. The ditch reeked so bad because of her ghastly stench. As for the mushrooms budding on the banks, don't touch them, let alone eat them, those are her nipples. If you touch one, your luck will turn. If you eat one, your guts will become a haunted house. You'll die, blood spraying from your eyes, before seven days are up. If you see a red envelope on the road, don't go anywhere near it. It contains the Eight Characters of that lady ghost's birth. If you pick it up hoping to find money inside, you'll have to take her to wife.

Later on, another lady ghost joined the others, a member of his own family. She ran around disheveled, yelling her head off, until she drowned in the ditch.

That reminded him of an old saying, "hang the cat in a tree, throw the dog in the stream." One time, Mom rode her scooter with him on the back and a pet dog in his arms. He was supposed to toss it in when they got to that irrigation ditch. Afraid of the ghosts, he cried and cried. His mom told him to hurry up. Here, the ditch was practically a slough, because the locals treated it as a gutter: it was clogged with dead dogs and hogs, rotten watermelons, old scooters, even a betel nut stand. Everything stank in the hot sun. A million flies cavorted in celebration, enjoying an all-you-can-eat feast. He made out the putrid carcass of the neighbor's dog, Yeller. Crying, he'd

refused to toss their dog in. He said he wanted to bury it and erect a grave marker. Mother grabbed it out of his arms and threw it into the dead water with a splash. A cloud of flies scattered and immediately reformed with an ear-splitting buzz, as if to say thanks. They hadn't finished with the rotten dogmeat and here they'd been served fresh.

How was he to tell T? That this was the kind of hellhole that he was from?

How was he to tell T about his absurd upbringing? Five elder sisters, one elder brother, a father who never talked, and a mother who never stopped. The snake killer. Red Shorts. The irrigation ditch. The Wedding of the Century. The bishopwood tree. The White House. The hippopotamus. The Eternal Prosperity Pool. The secret basement. The starfruit orchard. The temple to the Lady at the Foot of the Wall. The Tomorrow Bookstore. The silver water cistern.

In jail he often dreamed about the doggie cemetery behind T's place. As a boy, T raised three dogs, which he buried one by one in the backyard. On each wooden grave marker he pasted a picture. That was the kind of dog burial he had fantasized about growing up in Taiwan. He'd finally seen it in Germany. He also dreamed about the slough Mother threw the dog into, but he never saw a shadow of a ghost. Now that he was all grown up, he didn't believe in ghosts anymore. He was no longer afraid of them. Ghosts weren't scary, people were. The living were the cruelest, not the dead. In his dreams the slough didn't stink, the water wasn't dead. The lotus flowers bloomed, the mushrooms grew in dense mats, and from the heat and the hue of the willows and the silvergrass, he could tell it was high summer. Drawing water from the ditch to irrigate the fields, his father was a white-toothed, dark-skinned youth, the most respectable eldest son in town. He smiled in the sun, teeth twinkling. The lotuses were all bashful in his presence.

Pity that he killed T.

If T were still around to ask, he would point to that row of townhouses and say, “This is where I grew up. It’s Ghost Festival today, the Day of Deliverance. The ghosts are coming. I’ve come back, too.”

2. *Stuffed into the crack in the floor*

“What’ll we do? What’ll we do?” Fourth Sister hollered over the phone. “Mom’s gone missing!”

Beverly ended the call and collapsed on the floor. It didn’t matter whether she hung up or not. Barbie wouldn’t even notice. She’d just keep hollering.

The hot summer raged, without rain or cloud to bring relief from the sun, which shone munificently on the town. This heat would be the death of her, but she still couldn’t afford to turn on the air conditioner. She forced herself to save on electricity because she hadn’t had enough work to do this month. The floor was nice and cool. She pressed herself against those terrazzo tiles to give her sweaty, aggravated body some relief. A long crack had appeared in the floor after the big earthquake a few years back. She decided not to repair it. Everything in old house falls apart, no matter what. The wall cancer—mold and peeling paint—had metastasized. Rats ran rampant. The pipes were often blocked. Sheet metal shingles had been blown off several times. She still remembered what the house looked like when it was brand new: off-white tiles on the exterior walls, snow-white paint inside, shiny floor tiles. The tiles looked pebbly, like they would poke your feet, but they were smooth to walk on, even slippery. The freshly waxed floor was like a slide.

She rolled over and eyeballed the crack. Today was Ghost Festival, which meant that the Gate of Hell was wide open.

Maybe she could see hell through the crack. It was right by her sewing machine, a sign of vitality. Every time she looked, it seemed to grow a bit bigger. She checked a few more times, hoping to see it widen. Maybe one day it’d get so wide she’d be able to stuff herself in. Then nobody would be able to find her.

She remembered the day of the earthquake. Her husband Little Gao tore into the back yard, grabbed a few potted orchids, and ran out, without a glance at her. She hadn’t gotten up at all. She just kept treading. She had a batch of garments to deliver the next day. The earthquake didn’t matter. The walls could fall, the house could collapse, she didn’t care. But please don’t let the power go out. Because then the sewing machine will stop working and I won’t be able to fulfill the order and get paid. She hadn’t paid the bills that month. The only other thing she was hoping for was that her husband would keep running with those orchids, out of town, to disappear and never to return.

When she was young, she wished she were an orchid. But after that earthquake she felt sorry for those orchids.

How old was this house? The year baby Keith was born, they finally left the three-wing compound and moved into one of the new houses in this row. Counting on your fingers, it was the fifth from the left. Back in the day, this row of townhouses was a construction project to welcome the future to the town. Out back, a fishpond; in front, a rice paddy. The contractor said the feng shui was ideal, that it was a den for dragons, a place to raise a family and make a fortune in. Whoever moved in would take off, just like the town. The small town would grow into a big town, then a city. Tall buildings would go up in the fields, neon signs would flash. At the time, Father was making deliveries around the clock in a beat-up flatbed. Watermelons, potted tree seedlings, garments, you name it. For a time, he mostly delivered betel nut and betel leaf, which

reminded him of all the raw red mouths he saw around town. He, too, wrapped nuts in leaves, and chewed his way to a bloody good business plan. He would wholesale green gold. Local farmers grew tons of leaves, and although the quality and texture didn't compare to the leaves from eastern Taiwan—Yongjing leaves were thin and bland—production was steady and they went cheap. The betel stands in central Taiwan depended on leaves from the fields of Yongjing. Father cut deals with the farmers, who sold him their harvest, which he drove around selling to the stands. He negotiated the price and pocketed the profit, proving that in Yongjing money grew not only on trees but also on vines. Less than a year in, all five daughters' tuition was paid on time. There was white rice and pork loin on the dinner table. At the beginning of the year his first son was finally born and at the end of the year, in a race against the clock, his second. With seven kids, the bedroom in the three-wing compound wasn't just crowded anymore, it was cramped, so Father got the down payment together and bought one of these townhouses. He bid his mother farewell and moved out.

Beverly carried her baby brother in on moving day, the first happy day she could remember. Mom was relieved. She finally had two sons and didn't have to face Grandma anymore. Beverly was excited. She walked into a multi-story house for the first time in her life. She took the stairway leading up. There was even a third story. My goodness! She would have her own room. The first evening, Heath slept with Mom and Dad, while Beverly and her second sister Betty took care of Baby Keith. They were both too wound up to fall asleep. They snuck out of bed, picked up their baby brother, and sniffed the fresh paint on the wall. They went up and down the stairs. They rolled around on the floor. They kept stroking the first phone they'd ever had at home, picking up the receiver and listening to the dial tone. They put the receiver to Keith's ear and

he smiled, it sounded like cooing. There was even a sit-down toilet. They sat down and peed, how comfortable it was compared with the outhouse over that smelly cesspit. They used to have to run out in the middle of the night when their tummies cramped up. They'd see snakes squirming on the door in the moonlight. Actually, they weren't scared of the snakes. What scared them was the lady ghost of the outhouse that everyone talked about. In the bathroom of the new house you could lock the door. A press of a plunger and the filth was gone in an instant. Everything was fragrant. There weren't any snakes or ghosts. When Keith cried in the middle of the night, the two sisters made a formula from milk powder. They had no idea how to do it. All they knew was that it was "top notch" Japanese powder according to the pharmacist. They thought the thicker the better, the thicker it was the more nutritious it would be. So they went easy on the water and added a couple of extra spoonfuls. Keith wolfed it down and barfed it all back up again. Beverly and Betty thought he looked funny when he did that. They'd never been anywhere. They'd certainly never seen a waterfall before, but when Keith spit up that milk, well, it was the most amazing waterfall they had ever seen.

Suddenly Beverly thought about her baby brother. How was he doing? Every time she thought of him she would get a hankering—a hankering to smoke a joint.

It was Ghost Festival today, but try as she might, she couldn't see any ghostly revelry through the crack in the floor. At least she could hear Barbie's ghastly shrieks over the phone. They suited the occasion. Beverly looked up at the table she had set with lavish offerings in front of the door. She hadn't eaten the whole day. Putting on a feast for all the lonely souls had turned her into a hungry ghost. The souls should have eaten their fill now that the incense sticks had burned down. She crawled over, opened a packet of crackers, and started munching. They were god-awful. She couldn't understand why

these White House food products were so popular when they tasted as dry as cracked earth in the hot sun and when one bite of the sweet kind gave you diabetes, two bites of the salty flavor kidney failure. Course she hadn't bought them herself, it was Little Gao who brought them home from the superstore in the next town. She told him, buy anything for the offering, just don't buy that brand. And wouldn't you know it, he bought a whole bunch. She knew he did it on purpose. They tasted like bricks—why were folks so keen on eating bricks? Brick by brick, the cookies and crackers had been stacked so high they had turned into the White House, the only mansion in town.

They tasted terrible, but she made herself finish. Can't waste food. Chewing for her had never been about enjoyment, it was a burning compulsion. No matter how gross it was, she had to swallow it. Even food that's well past its expiration date is still edible. Spoiled New Year's cakes? Just trim the mold. As a girl, she was well acquainted with the bitter taste of hunger. It was a bottomless privation, a lifelong fear.

In the three-wing compound Beverly lived in when she was a girl, her mother, as the eldest daughter-in-law, was in charge of making meals for Grandma, who often belittled her cooking. Once Grandma splattered hot soup on her and suggested she try feeding it to the pigs to see if they'd eat it. As she was carrying the soup out, Mom heard some of her daughters calling out in hunger, so she poured the whole pot on them. Beverly didn't find it scalding, just that it was a pity. They'd had nothing to eat the whole day. That pot contained enough soup to fill their bellies. She licked the hot soup off her skin, wanting to get down on all fours and lick up the splashes that were spreading all over the dirt floor. She recalled those hard times after Barbie was born—not just *another* girl, but also the fourth in a row. Father's brothers all had boys first, but her mother kept having useless girls. The failure of several business

ventures had left Father totally broke. The table was sparsely set, without grain or meat. Back then Grandma kept a big black dog that Second Sister raised. Sometimes Grandma gave it a second helping. It had more to eat in its bowl than they did on the whole table! Later on Grandma slaughtered that dog and fried it up with garlic in the wok. Father's nephews were called over to have a bite, while his own daughters were ordered to remain in their room. They wept silently when they smelled that intensely meaty smell. They didn't know if they were crying out of hunger or because they'd seen Granny knock the dog unconscious with a brick and toss it in boiling water. The brick, which was stained with the dog's blood, got thrown into the spirit hall, the room where the family altar was kept. From then on, every time Beverly saw that brick, she would hear the dog's pitiful whines.

Today being Ghost Festival, Beverly was reminded that she was the only daughter in the family to inherit the full set of her mother's rituals. She'd been praying with her mother since she was a girl. She was familiar with all the taboos around the different festivals. Of course she knew the dos and don'ts for Ghost Festival. The big round table had to be set up in the entrance and set with chicken, pork, duck, instant noodles, dried foods, and an incense burner, facing out. In front of the table, a little towel had to be dipped in a pail of water for passing spirits to wipe their hands and feet with before enjoying the food. Three sticks of incense had to be stuck in every dish. The harder the year, the bigger the meal. You burned spirit money as an offering to the lonely souls, so that they'd leave you be. You weren't supposed to dig, move house, or travel for the whole of Ghost Month. One year she wanted to switch jobs, from one garment factory to another. The pay and the atmosphere were so much better there, but her mother absolutely forbade it, reminding her that any girl who switched jobs during Ghost Month would spend the rest of her life picking

duds; she was sure to marry the wrong guy. She obeyed and stayed. If she hadn't, she never would have met Little Gao.

The heat had woken her up at four in the morning. The ancient air conditioner died after running for two hours. You had to tap it over and over, and reason with it, and it took its own sweet time coming back to life again. Why not get up, Beverly thought, and slaughter the chicken? She was raising a few in the back yard. The day before she'd chosen it and tied up its feet as advance notice of execution. It was a cock with glowing feathers. Mean and boisterous, it often flew over the walls and fought with the neighbors' dogs. The neighbors complained about it left and right. It cockadoodledooed every morning, rain or shine. By slaughtering it and offering it, she could let everyone have some peace and quiet. The cock knew its time was up and struggled mightily, pecking her arms and squawking piteously. While she tied its legs up tight, the other chickens voted with their feet; they knew their back-yard companion was dead meat. Her mother taught her how to do the deed. Grab its neck, slit its throat, and let its blood drip into a rice-filled bowl to make pudding with. Pluck the feathers and scald it. Then go to work on the fine hairs with the tweezers. A few friends were always saying that she was thick in the head but clever with her hands. She'd grown her brain in the wrong place. Either that or it had grown in the right place and then moved to her fingers. She was good at patchwork, sewing, and alterations. She was swift and nimble when she defeathered a chicken. It would end up smooth and shiny, prettier than a market-bought one. But what good is a clever pair of hands? She knew that she was an old-fashioned girl, a reject from an older era. She'd dropped out of school at fifteen years old to go to Shalu to work as a seamstress. Now she was in her sixties, her hands callused. She did piecework at home. If she sewed a hundred garments for export to Europe, she still couldn't buy a single piece of clothing for herself. She often

wondered what Europeans were doing in the clothes she had sewn. Drinking coffee by the side of the road? Taking a river cruise? Smoking a joint? Window shopping on vacation with a brand-name purse in hand? No way, Keith said, Europeans were just like her, working hard. But how could she believe him when she'd never been? At least they could afford the clothes she made, unlike her.

So she got out of bed at four in the morning and washed her face with soap from thirty years ago. She'd found it sorting out the mess on the third floor. The packaging was smudged, but stick a magenta bar in the water and you still got suds. The sickening artificial floral fragrance didn't waft, it barged into your nostrils. One year, Little Gao announced he was going to invest their life savings in a soap factory, another of his get-rich-quick schemes. A few days later the factory called to say they'd stopped production. The investment evaporated. All they got out of it was some boxes of strongly scented soap. She hated that soap. But couldn't toss it, it was useful. You could use it in the laundry or the shower, on the dog or the floor. The whole house smelled like cheap perfume. One day the next year on a trip to the supermarket, she saw an entire shelf of the stuff. The factory hadn't stopped production at all. She confronted her husband, who admitted the investment was a ruse to pay a gambling debt. There was no factory, no investment. He'd bought those boxes himself. She remembered her husband's expression during the interrogation. It was as if to say: "Is there anything you wouldn't believe?" That evening she put soap in his soup. It was a bizarre color, not to mention the aroma, but he just slurped it down, without any change of expression. He didn't get sick or die. All he did was belch.

Her husband was immortal, of that Beverly had no doubt. There was no help for it, he couldn't be killed. Or could he? This was her biggest reason to carry on. What kept her alive was the off chance of seeing her husband die with her own eyes.

3. *Without a plastic bag*

I can't remember her face.

Without a plastic bag.

I can't remember her face without a plastic bag.

Memory drifts, volatile, deceitful, self-expunging, fact-distorting. But my memory is stuck to skin. In the hot sun of the seventh month in central Taiwan, sweat erupts, and a plastic bag sticks to my youngest daughter's skin, leaving her silent and blurry.

I do have a good memory for certain facts, especially numbers. I remember the first phone number in the new house we moved to from the three-wing compound. I remember that I was the first son in a country clan, and that I had three younger brothers, five daughters, and two sons. I remember that I got married one time. I remember how much a certain customer owed me in a certain year and how many big cargo trucks I owned. I remember my liver function index before I died.

I've completely forgotten her face. Did she have a prominent nose? How high was her hairline? Big or small eyes? Thick or thin lips? The arrangement of her teeth? I have no idea.

But I remember all kind of numbers in her life. The day, month, and year she was born. That she was the fifth daughter. The score she got on her high school entrance exam. The digits on her scooter plate. That she slept on the third floor. That she sneezed a record fifteen times when she woke up in the morning. That she'd been in hospital six times on suicide attempts before she finally did herself in. That she was 165 centimeters tall.

I only found out her height when I ordered the coffin next door. The coffin maker came over to measure the corpse. "165 centimeters," he said. "She had fine bones and a good figure." The make-up artist applied lipstick and eyeshadow. I'm sure

she looked fabulous, but at the time all I could think of was the plastic bag.

We were the first family to move into this row of houses. I was the eldest son of a gentry clan. Before the Japanese left in '45, Mother used to walk me to the public school. Holding my hand, she would point out all the fields that belonged to our family. "We've received a share of the crop from those fields for generations," she'd say. "We've never gone hungry. Just study hard and it'll all be yours." After the Japanese left, I was sent off to boarding school for junior high. Then the Nationalist government carried out land reform. When I came home after graduation, we weren't rich landlords anymore. The family fortune was in decline. Yongjing at the time couldn't be described as barren, but the meadows were weedy, the roads muddy, the snakes fat, the mosquitoes nasty.

That contractor came out of nowhere with truckloads of rebar and cement, gravel and sand. It was an omen of civilization. The bamboo in front of the fish pond had to be cleared for a construction site. Ten townhouses were about to be built. The contractor advertised for temp workers. I signed up and followed the foreman like everyone else. Everyone said there was a lady ghost in the bamboo, but all we saw was a bunch of dead cats hung up in there, along with colorful, lustrous snakes. A bamboo grove that had stood there for a century disappeared almost completely in a week, leaving only a clump. Who in those days wanted a view of bamboo? It was just a smudge of green that signified underdevelopment. Worthless, inedible bamboo was replaced with rebar. Smoke and dust billowed from the construction site. I took a deep breath and got a noseful of metal dust. Boy it smelled good. This must be the smell of progress.

When I picked up my paycheck, I asked the foreman: "How much are these houses selling for?"

They were three stories, partitionable. Master bedroom for

me and Cicada, a room for each child. When we died we'd leave it to our eldest son.

At the time I had a premonition that this was the house for the Chen family to make a fresh start in. We were no longer members of the landed gentry. I was an eldest son with little money. But I believed that this house would be the beginning of our escape from poverty.

We were the first household to move in. The second was the coffin maker. Not long thereafter, a hardware store opened next door. When a daughter married out or in, we would go to the store to buy the necessities for the ceremony: a pair of "double happiness" cushions, satin streamers, colored ribbons, nametags, and gift baskets, as well as candles and the rest of the Twelve Ceremonial Observances—we could take care of everything in one purchase. When an elder died we could go to the coffin maker to select the wood and the style. It would be great. I had five daughters to marry off and two sons to bring daughters-in-law home for. When I arranged my mother's funeral, and when I kicked the bucket myself, there was no need to go far. Life and death, all in the same row. There was no need to go anywhere. We could live here and die here.

Who would have thought that the first funeral I arranged would be hers?

I have no recollection of her face, but I remember everyone said my youngest daughter was the prettiest.

The year I married Cicada, the matchmaker lady said she was the prettiest in the neighborhood.

Our prettiest daughter, the youngest, looked the most like her mother: big eyes, big chest, thick eyebrows, pale skin. They looked the most alike and hated each other the most.

My little girl's murderer was actually my wife.

So, it's for the best that I have forgotten my youngest daughter's face, though that means I have also forgotten my wife's face.

4. *Household Registrar Chen*

Betty had gotten off work and walked out of the office before realizing that today was Ghost Festival.

Many stores had set out tables of offerings and smoking braziers. Betty hadn't done that in years. How was she supposed to, living in a small apartment in Taipei? In the first few years after moving in she'd put a little table out on the balcony, but it was too narrow to burn spirit money on. She was afraid she might burn the whole building down. Her only offerings were chicken boiled in brine and seasonal fruits. Without even lighting incense, she put her palms together and pumped her hands up and down to pray for good luck and a good life for the family. The family in the apartment across the narrow lane had also set out an offering, but they sure weren't afraid of a fire. They fed the brazier with a pile of spirit money, until a gust of wind ballooned the flames out of the balcony, raining ash into the lane. Betty noticed a tableful of those crackers. Why was it that everyone loved to buy that brand? The White House crackers reminded her of her fifth sister Plenty's funeral. The spirit money was piled up into a little hill. Father lit the pile and the blaze began. The other sisters threw Plenty's clothes into the fire. The flagrant tongues of flame sucked greedily at her tears. "Plenty," Mother yelled in Taiwanese at the edge of the fire, "remember to come back and get him when you're a ghost!" Mother's mourning had melody, probably because she'd been in the sutra recitation group for such a long time. "Come back and get him" kept repeating, in a different tune each time, and "him" got more and more strident. The sound was high and ringing, like a long, sharp flathead screwdriver drilling a hole in her eardrum. The fire burned a few hours until a squall blew up and the ash went flying, swirling all over the sky. Mother didn't break, didn't tire. She ate a mouthful of ash, but her *dantian* opened even wider,

allowing her to belt out “him” even brighter. Talk about a chest voice. “Him” flooded the countryside in waves. Where was he? Too far away to hear, but maybe the ash would find him. It wafted with Mother’s wails on the wind, tainting every low-slung abode, every betel nut tree, and every ditch. But the ash avoided the White House entirely—the fence wall, the columns, the roof, everything was just as spotlessly clean as before, without a speck of dust. Embellished with gold, the building glittered.

The ground was wet. Had it rained today? Busy apologizing to angry callers all afternoon, Betty hadn’t heard the rain at all. She looked up at the sky. The dark gray clouds bore down, announcing another big shower. She had always liked the sound. In the countryside the raindrops poured down as if from a pail, striking the earth so hard they forced various critters out. The smell of grass floated in the air. Rat snakes rolled around in the mud. Spiderwebs glistened with millions of water droplets. With all the ironskin additions on the rooftops of Taipei, a rainstorm sounded like an air raid. Bombs exploded in the air and debris clanged crisply on the roof, burying the traffic noise and the bustle of the city for a while. “Is there anything you miss in Taiwan?” she’d asked Baby Keith. “I can mail it.” In his reply he wrote that he didn’t know why but he missed hearing the rain in the countryside and in Taipei. There weren’t any ironskin roofs where he was, so you couldn’t hear the rain. It was so quiet, too quiet. How could you buy the sound of the rain? She wanted to record it on her mobile phone and send it to him, but he wasn’t allowed access to email. The truth was that she had no idea how to get the audio file from her phone onto the computer. Even if she managed to do that, how could she send the sound of rain?

Waiting for the bus on the sidewalk, she stepped in a big puddle to dodge a bicyclist. She was up to her ankles in dirty water. She imagined the dissolved dust and filth and acid rain

seeping into her leather shoes and cotton socks and inviting fungus to take up residence between her toes. But she didn’t want to step out. The hot summer weather made the foul water feel surprisingly cool. They’d implemented energy-saving measures at work, limiting the use of the air conditioner. The whole day she sat soaking in her own sweat. Stepping into the dirty puddle reminded her of jumping in the mud as a girl, sometimes stepping on a slippery stink snake. She’d spent the whole day in a muggy office and the only consolation turned out to be a puddle of putrid water. A sour reek of decay wafted from the armpits of the male colleague who sat to her right. To top it off, he’d gobbled down two boxes of stinky tofu at his desk for lunch. When the female colleague to her left took her shoes off, her feet put stinking shots at her nasal cavities, one precise hit after another. The odor was strong enough to annihilate civilization. From the mouth of the balding director who yelled at her for not being flexible enough flowed a garbage-laden river of halitosis. The supervisor who consoled her had only to scratch at his scalp to pour a pail of slops for the hogs. The citizen who stuck his finger in her face and accused her of disrespecting animals stank like a dog. Body odor was a deadly weapon, a blade with which all these people had been slitting her throat all day long. She didn’t actually mind dogs, not at all. The wild dogs in the countryside reeked even worse. She always liked burying her face in a dog’s belly or grabbing its paws and getting a good sniff. In the three-wing compound she lived in when she was a girl, Granny had raised a black dog and made her responsible for feeding it, until she bashed it over the head with a brick, cooked it up, and ate it. She knew Granny didn’t especially like dog meat. It was because of her that Granny killed that dog.

Now she lived in a small flat in Taipei. Three bedrooms, one family room. With her, her husband, and their daughter and son, one more cockroach would make it insufferably crowded.

There was simply no space for a dog. Her daughter was out of work, her son out of school. They were probably waiting for her to come home and make them dinner right now. She liked dogs! But today she'd gotten onto a lot of people's news feeds because of them. She stood accused of discriminating against dogs.

Her window handled household registration. She updated registers, issued transcripts, and replaced ID cards. It was simple work, an ideal job. It was perfect because it was all of a piece and the pay was regular. It wasn't complicated. Once you got the hang of it, the tasks you had to perform from day to day didn't change much. This was the kind of life she wanted. She got up at six every morning and made breakfast for her family. She had to be out the door before seven-thirty to catch the MRT and make her bus connection. She got to work before eight-thirty, sat down with a freshly steeped cup of tea, turned on the computer, and waited for the public to come in. People took slips of paper and waited for the number to be called. Everything was so orderly she took it for granted.

But in the past few years, her "ideal job" had gone haywire. Civil servants of her generation had to learn to use a computer as adults. Technology crashed over her like a tidal wave. She surfed it as best she could by learning to use the new word processing software. After everything went electronic, the pace of work increased. A volume of work that once took several days now had to be done in an hour, so people wouldn't complain about "bureaucratic inefficiency." She managed to work faster, but she couldn't get used to all the cameras. They were all over the place, and always in your face. Many citizens would start recording her with their phone cameras when she told them they couldn't get the document they wanted. They were "gathering evidence," they said, to show the whole world how awful Taiwanese civil servants were. Everyone carried a smartphone around. Anyone could start recording at a moment's notice.

The threat was that if she didn't hurry up, they'd upload it to the internet or hand it over to the media.

One time a pretty young woman with big, shining eyes and long hair came in. She reminded Betty of Plenty, her baby sister. She looked bashful, like she hadn't seen too much human filth. She was there to apply for the maternity grant but hadn't brought all the required documents. There wasn't any way they could get it done for her that day. She lost it. She started throwing documents at the window and yelling. "I'm going to give birth any day now! I don't have any money, why won't you people help me!" It was just a brief outburst. Betty and a few colleagues came out from behind the counter to comfort her. They steeped her a tea and had a friendly chat. They told her what to watch out for when she went into labor and what to pay attention to when she sat out her month of recuperation, what she should eat more of. Congratulations by the way! They recommended obstetricians. They talked and talked. Finally, she smiled, her big eyes shining even brighter. She would come back the next day. That evening the crying girl made it onto the television news. A few of her fellow citizens had livestreamed her outburst. The spectacle of a hysterical girl sent some sparks out into the tedium of daily life. One video went viral. "Who's the Toughest Customer? Watch This Pregnant Girl Go Berserk!" read the clickbait title. She got doxxed. A reporter went to the open-air market where her mother worked, focused his camera on a lady who was slaughtering a chicken, and stuck a microphone in her face. "Did you know your daughter is expecting? Have you seen this clip?" The reporter got out his tablet and played the viral video of the daughter screaming at the household registration office. The mother looked shocked. She was still holding the chicken neck she had just cut. Fresh blood was spurting out onto the chopping block.

Betty hid in the bathroom and watched the video of the screaming girl over and over, thinking about Plenty.

She didn't come the next day, or ever again.

Later, in response to the public's proclivity to "record video evidence," her boss demanded that in addition to the CCTV cameras in the office everyone on staff had to shoot each interaction for self-protection.

That morning, Betty forgot to turn her camera on.

There was a sudden disturbance in the waiting area. A child burst out crying. Betty was at the photocopier. She came out to see what the matter was. A man had brought five big dogs in, taken a number, and was now waiting for it to be called. A child who was afraid of dogs happened to be waiting with his mother, who took one look at Household Registrar Chen and demanded that she deal with those dogs. "My son is terrified of them. Isn't this a public agency? Shouldn't dogs stay outside? They can't be allowed in, can they?" When Betty went up to communicate with the guy, he took out his phone, started shooting, and said: "These are guide dogs, I'm a trainer." She offered an immediate apology. "Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't realize you were visually impaired." "You think I'm blind?" he asked, raising his voice. "Didn't I just tell you I was a trainer? Not blind. The dogs have to follow me around for me to train them. They can't stay outside. I'm going to lodge a complaint that you're not seeing eye dog-friendly."

The boy sobbed, the man yelled, the dogs stayed. Betty went back to the photocopier and didn't think too much about it.

A few hours later, calls for "Household Registrar Chen" started coming in. Soon her extension was ringing off the hook. People started yelling as soon as she took the call. A reporter showed up to ask: "Why do you hate seeing eye dogs so much?"

It turned out that after leaving, the trainer had edited the video and uploaded it to a seeing eye dog society's social media account. Betty's colleague played it for her. It was really well done. He'd added a special effect, a red arrow pointing at her

face, and a line of narration: *Household Registrar Chen is no friend to seeing eye dogs*. No surprise, he cut the part where she'd said "visually impaired" and he'd said "blind." With her frown and furrowed forehead, she became the face of discrimination. One shot was of his cowering dogs, the next was of her apathetic expression.

The insults hit her like a tsunami. Bitch! Trash! You got no fucking respect for dogs! Taiwan can't get ahead because of civil servants like you. Weevil! My taxes pay your salary. You'll quit if you know what's good for you. Lousy bureaucrat. Cunt! I'll loose my dogs on you, they'll tear you to pieces. You have no sympathy. Don't you know fur babies are man's best friend?

The last call she got before clocking out started out with a dog barking. Then someone said: "Fucking bitch! You better watch out!"

All her regular work got put on hold. Her boss told her to write a report and hand it in the next day. She knew it was a letter of contrition. She probably didn't have a ghost of a chance of even a "Satisfactory" on this year's performance review. He patted her on the shoulder. "Ms. Chen," he said, "you're something else. You didn't even cry." She was thinking, for what? I grew up getting yelled at. What's so bad about this?

The bus was taking forever to come. Betty couldn't help it; she swiped her phone and watched the clip again. She paused it at the close-up of her face. So that's how she looked now. A collapsed lob and an icy gaze. What a contrast she made with those excitable canines! No wonder everyone thought she was a bitch who discriminated against dogs.

Shops all along the street were burning spirit money. Her eyes scanned the tables. On almost every one sat a box of White House crackers. They were inescapable. Two years before she'd gone to China on a group tour. As they took in a sea of cloud from the peak of Huangshan, the local guide got

out those crackers and asked, “Care for a treat from Taiwan? A taste of home?” Nobody took him up on it, until he said they were complimentary. Then everyone fought for one, afraid there wouldn’t be any left. Strolling through the immaculately preserved village of Hongcun to the southeast, they saw a little girl eating the same kind of cracker. Dining on crab on West Lake several hundred kilometers to the east, you guessed it, she saw those crackers again. Last year, she found a shelf full of them in a Japanese pharmacy while buying vitamins for her husband. She wrote a letter asking Keith if they had this kind of cracker in the jail in Germany. She wouldn’t be surprised if they did. Wasn’t everyone talking about globalization?

A few high school girls at the bus stop were watching a video on their phones with the volume turned way up. She had no trouble making out “Household Registrar Chen.” It appeared she was famous. She stepped out of the puddle. When she got close enough to listen in, she overheard them cursing “that terrible civil servant who hates man’s best friend.” One of them eyed her, as if to say, “What’s this *obasan* doing getting so close to us? Ew, look at her feet, they’re filthy!” They didn’t recognize her as the star of the clip they were watching. She’d been worried that after a day spent getting yelled at over the phone there’d be no way to escape insult in her daily life. But she squeezed on the bus and the MRT and pushed her way through the crowd in the evening market, and absolutely nobody recognized her along the way.

She told the pork peddler to give her the same as yesterday. He looked at her, searching through the faces of his regular customers in his mental rolodex without finding a match. That’s funny, don’t I come here to buy meat almost every day? Betty wondered. He obviously doesn’t know how to do business.

She had no idea that she was colorless and transparent, the easiest kind of existence to overlook in a crowd.

A few days before when she was doing yoga stretches on the

bedroom floor, her husband walked in and didn’t even see her. He picked up the tablet, lay down on the bed, found an adult video, pulled his pants to his knees, and started jerking off. Holding her upward-facing-dog, she didn’t dare to breathe forcefully. Her husband moaned and wiped himself off with the blanket. Soon his moans turned into snores. Without risking a glance, she stood up as quietly as she could and tiptoed out of the room. The covers and the blanket will have to be steam-cleaned, won’t they? How come he didn’t notice me? I was lying on the floor by the bed! Not that it wasn’t for the best that he didn’t.

As she was leaving the evening market with the pork, her phone started yelping. She looked down at the screen. It was Barbie.

“Betty! Betty! Come home right away! What are we going to do? Mom’s gone missing!”

She took a deep breath. “Mom’s been dead a long time,” she said in her most indifferent tone.

Barbie wasn’t even listening. “Hello? Betty? Hey, come home as quick as you can. Can you hear me? Mom’s gone missing!” Betty had no idea that Barbie hadn’t heard her reply. She didn’t know that she was colorless, her voice too soft to hear. Transmitted through the phone, it was light as a feather, weightless even, and unable to reach her sister’s ear. “Mom’s dead,” she said. “Quit yelling. I’m busy at work in Taipei, I don’t have time to go home.” But her sister just kept hollering, not having heard a thing.

Household Registrar Chen was like a ghost, floating formlessly about. Her existence was automatically edited out of people’s vision and hearing. Actually, this was the lifestyle she wanted: to be invisible in a crowd, blending in with the background. She saw no reflection in the mirror, left no prints on the ground. She just drifted around. She hadn’t disappeared yet, but she didn’t fully exist anymore.