

CHI LI

Extract from the novel [Life Show]

1.

What do people who work at night hate the most? Someone knocking on the door in the daytime.

Everyone knows never to look for Lai Shuangyang before three o'clock in the afternoon. On numerous occasions, Lai Shuangyang had made open threats, saying sooner or later she would get a handgun; saying she'd sleep with the pistol under her pillow; saying if anyone knocked on her door before three o'clock in the afternoon, she'd grope for the handgun, and without the slightest hesitation, she'd fire at the sound of knocking!

At one-thirty in the afternoon, someone knocked on Lai Shuangyang's door. She'd been sleeping lightly, but now she was hopelessly awake. She opened her eyes once, then shut them tight. She lay there, resolutely unmoving. The second knock was tentative, annoying her even more. People could easily be frightened by anything out of the ordinary, and once someone was frightened, how could she go on sleeping? Lai Shuangyang stretched her arm out, groped for a teacup on the nightstand, and aimed the teacup at the door.

When the knock came again, Lai Shuangyang threw the teacup toward the sound. Her aim was perfect: the cup hit the door with a loud shattering noise.

On the other side of the door, it suddenly grew unusually quiet.

Just as Lai Shuangyang closed her eyes, ready to fall asleep again, Lai-Jin Duoer's young voice sounded outside the door.

"Auntie," Lai-Jin Duoer called timidly. "Auntie."

"Duoer?"

Lai Shuangyang's ten-year-old nephew, his whole face covered with ringworm, said, "Yes, it's us."

Lai Shuangyang sighed ruefully. She had to get up.

Lai Shuangyang fastened the bra that she'd unhooked, and pulled on a man's T-shirt that barely covered her bottom. Looking in the mirror, she hurriedly applied a little lipstick, then ran her fingers through her hair a few times.

Hair disheveled and lipstick spilling over her lip line, Lai Shuangyang--her face furious--opened the door.

Her older brother Lai Pu and his son Lai-Jin Duoer were wearing long faces and standing stiffly with their legs apart.

An hour earlier, father and son had left the hospital after having stitches taken out. They had been circumcised on the same day. When Xiao Jin heard that Lai Pu was also going to avail himself of the opportunity to be circumcised, she vowed that she wouldn't wait on them. Xiao Jin was Lai Pu's wife and Lai-Jin Duoer's mother. Xiao Jin had originally planned to take care of her son, but she hadn't planned on also caring for her husband. Lai Pu hadn't discussed this with his wife ahead of time, but just decided on his own to be circumcised. Xiao Jin didn't approve. It wasn't that Xiao Jin thought highly of Lai Pu's foreskin, but she didn't have time to take care of the two men of the family all day long. Even though she was unemployed, others shouldn't look down on her. She had her own life. In the daytime, she speculated in stocks; in the evening, she square-danced. Recently, she also had to go to Changsha in Hunan to attend a course of lectures by an expert in stocks. She couldn't possibly spend the whole day at the hospital looking after her husband and son.

Xiao Jin had told Lai Pu in no uncertain terms that, after the two of them left the hospital, she would not be home. She was going to Changsha. Her husband and son would have to find a place on their own to convalesce. Lai Pu knew his wife all too well. When she said something so coldly, she meant it. After dealing with the hospital's discharge procedure, he phoned home. Sure enough, no one answered. He had no choice but to take his son and go to his younger sister Lai Shuangyang for help.

Lai Shuangyang sat on the edge of the bed, her hands supporting her back and her slippers dangling from the tips of her toes. Her sleep-deprived, bloodshot eyes were cutting into her older brother.

Her brother and his son sat across from Lai Shuangyang on a timeworn sofa, spreading their legs out as wide as possible. Panting, Lai Pu complained about his wife Xiao Jin, repeating himself and babbling from start to finish, not succeeding in conveying what he meant to say. White saliva began accumulating at the corners of his mouth. As his lips kept moving non-stop, more and more white saliva accumulated--like waves spreading over the coastline.

"Yangyang," Lai Pu said at last, "I know you have to work all night, I know you sleep in the daytime, but what about Duoer? I had to come and find you."

Finally, Lai Shuangyang blinked a few times and opened her mouth.

"Meltdown! You had to come and find me? Tell me: am I this family's mother or father? You seek me out about every lousy thing. Why don't you ever think about whether I can put up with it? You're the eldest son in the family. You should shoulder all the burdens. How come you can't even handle your own wife? Since you can't deal with your wife, why did you bother having your lousy foreskin cut off? Circumcision is for her own good. She didn't ask you to do it and she doesn't know a thing about gratitude--and you still had surgery? Just leave her with her infected uterus! You're always so irrational. Not only do you choose to go in for surgery, but you also have it on the same day as Duoer. If this isn't asking for trouble, what is it? Meltdown. I can't take care of you! I have to sleep in the daytime, and I have to work at night!"

Lai Shuangyang was tempestuous. She was fine if she didn't say anything, but whenever she opened her mouth, she wiped people out left and right. She characteristically expressed herself with the word "meltdown." As soon as she brought "meltdown" into play, nothing could be settled easily. The reason for her fury--aside from losing sleep--was mostly that she didn't believe Lai Pu's lies. This woman Xiao Jin had been on a Roman holiday all along, and Lai Pu had regularly been in cahoots with her. They must have discussed the idea of father and son being circumcised at the same time.

Stammering, Lai Pu explained, "A-a-a-at f-f-first, I didn't intend to have the surgery with Duoer."

Lai Shuangyang said, "Nonsense. Anyway, it's over and done with."

Lai Pu went on explaining, "Because, because the doctor I ran into that day was in a good mood. These days when you see a doctor, it's rare to meet up with one who is patient and painstaking. So I didn't want to throw away the chance. I just asked the doctor if I could have the surgery. How was I to know that the doctor would say enthusiastically, "Sure thing. I'll operate on both of you."

Lai Shuangyang said, "And if you hadn't had it--then what? Would it have been life-threatening?"

Lai Pu said, "This was for Xiao Jin. You know, she always says I've harmed her. She has a female ailment. Her uterus is in bad shape. She's often told you this."

Lai Shuangyang said, "So what? 'Whores' all have rotten uteruses. It's an occupational hazard. Must all the Johns in the world first be required to be circumcised?"

Lai Pu fell silent.

Then he said obsequiously, "Okay. What's done is done. I won't argue anymore. I was wrong, okay? Let Duoer and me recuperate here two or three days. Just two or three days."

Lai Shuangyang was thoroughly annoyed. "This is really meltdown! I have only two small bedrooms. I have to sleep in the daytime, and I have to work at night. After three o'clock in the afternoon, I have to do the accounts, take inventory, stock goods, do the laundry, take a bath, and put on my makeup. For dinner, Jiumei always brings me a box lunch--a box lunch, that's all. It's easy for you to talk--just stay a few days! Who's going to wait on you? Get out!"

Lai Pu didn't leave. He hung on. He'd noticed the disgust in his sister's eyes, and so he hurriedly licked off the white saliva around his lips. He gave his son several severe looks, indicating that Lai-Jin Duoer should say something.

Lai-Jin Duoer didn't want to say anything. The bashful youth's Adam's apple had just come to the surface. It was moving up and down painfully, and he couldn't say anything. But he was about to cry. Ashamed to cry in front of others, the boy did his best to hide his tears. The spots of ringworm on his

face began turning pink. Lai Pu was nervous and poked his son roughly. Lai-Jin Duoer looked at his father disdainfully, stood up all of a sudden, and dashed toward the door like a little tiger going down a mountain.

Lai Shuangyang was as fast as a fleeing rabbit. Before Lai-Jin Duoer could run out the door, she dragged him back.

Lai-Jin Duoer was stubbornly twisting and struggling in Lai Shuangyang's hands. He wiped his eyes. He simply didn't want to meet Lai Shuangyang's eyes. Aunt and nephew were fighting without uttering a word. They were like two animals--one large, one small. Slowly, the situation changed. Lai Shuangyang's movements grew gentler, and Lai-Jin Duoer's movements gradually lost their strength and coordination. After a while, Lai Shuangyang hugged her nephew to her breast.

*Lai-Jin Duoer's tears rolled down quietly.

Lai Shuangyang's tears also rolled down soundlessly.

She couldn't let go of Lai-Jin Duoer. He was the Lai family's hope for the future. Lai-Jin Duoer was ten years old this year, a fourth grader always at the top of his class. He was good at pingpong, but his only real love was reading. As long as something had words, he grabbed it and read it. When his mother went to friends' homes to play mahjong for the day, she took Lai-Jin Duoer along, and in these other people's homes, Lai-Jin Duoer read books and newspapers all day long. He had bought heaps of books and newspapers by saving from his lunch money, because there weren't many books or newspapers in his home. Everyone said that Lai-Jin Duoer would surely be quite something when he grew up. Xiao Jin felt strange: she said that probably our family—this lousy chicken coop—would produce a golden phoenix. Her whole life, reading had made her dizzy. Her son, however, read books even in his dreams. Xiao Jin couldn't figure out who her son took after, because Lai Pu didn't like to read books, either.

Only Lai Shuangyang knew who Lai-Jin Duoer took after. Lai-Jin Duoer took after her. She hadn't read many books, either. How many books could a woman read when she sold duck necks at the large night market on Happy Street? Still, Lai Shuangyang liked books and respected scholars. As she put it, it wasn't that she didn't like to read books, it was that she didn't have the good fortune to, she didn't have the opportunity, she didn't have the life she wanted.

When she said that Lai-Jin Duoer took after her, there was a reason for saying this. Back then, Lai Shuangyang and Xiao Jin got pregnant at almost the same time, and gave birth within a few days of each other. Because of a medical mishap, Lai Shuangyang's infant died, and there was no baby to nurse at her full breasts. Xiao Jin's baby was just fine, but Xiao Jin didn't have even a drop of milk. And so Lai Shuangyang nursed Lai-Jin Duoer for more than three months. A woman can't give her milk to just anyone. Whoever she breastfeeds has to become related. A mother's love pours into the blood along with her milk. She felt close to Lai-Jin Duoer, and he felt close to her, as well—just like a real mother and son. Lai Shuangyang was helpless. She knew that Xiao Jin wasn't pleased, but Xiao Jin was helpless, too. Even the name "Lai-Jin Duoer" was the one Lai Shuangyang had chosen. Everyone thought it sounded fine.

Xiao Jin hadn't planned to let Lai Shuangyang pick out her son's name. Before their son was born, Xiao Jin and her husband had selected names for their child. When the child was born, lots of names were waiting for him. At first, the name they chose was "Lai Yitong." But when they registered his birth, people jumped all over them. Someone said, "What's his name? 'Lai Yitong'?"

"Lai yi tong" was a brand of instant noodles. Advertisements all over proclaimed: *Lai yi tong—Get more for your money! Delicious!* So Xiao Jin and her husband thought: *Damn, when this child goes to school, he'll have a readymade nickname.* And so they considered the other names on the list: Lai Xiao? Lai Zhuang? Lai Yifan? Everyone shook their heads. They all said these names were too average, too common, too likely to duplicate other people's names. It was good luck to have a rare surname like Lai, so why not choose a very special given name! These days, everyone wanted to be unique.

Even though Xiao Jin and her husband racked their brains, they couldn't come up with a name that others approved of. Lai Shuangyang had always been quick, and besides, she doted on the child.

Suddenly inspired, she solemnly proposed the name "Lai-Jin Duoer." This name linked the parents' surnames and also took advantage of the meaning of the words to give the child good luck: He would make a lot of money! Lai-Jin Duoer! The very name meant lots of money would come to him! Hyphenated surnames had recently become trendy. It was just like the names of foreigners. As soon as Lai Shuangyang suggested this name, everyone cheered. Even someone as unreasonable as Xiao Jin couldn't turn down such a fine name. So it came about that Lai-Jin Duoer was called Lai-Jin Duoer--Duoer for short. Very smooth, very foreign-sounding. Like foreigners. The milk this child drank was Lai Shuangyang's. The name the child bore was the one Lai Shuangyang had chosen. He was obedient, good at his studies, and close to Lai Shuangyang. Why wouldn't she think of him as her own flesh and blood? Furthermore, Lai Shuangyang's infant had died, and her marriage had broken up. Why wouldn't she think of Lai-Jin Duoer as her own son?

Never mind the spots of ringworm on Lai-Jin Duoer's face. They would go away. Lai-Jin Duoer was a handsome little boy. He wasn't the least bit like Xiao Jin with her flat nose and buckteeth, nor was he like Lai Pu who couldn't even cope with his own saliva. In general, Lai-Jin Duoer was the picture of his uncle Lai Jiu. His eyes were very like those of his aunt Lai Shuangyang.

There were four brothers and sisters in the Lai family. The older brother Lai Pu and the younger sister Lai Wen resembled each other, and the older sister Lai Shuangyang and the younger brother Lai Jiu—nicknamed Jiujiu--resembled each other. Jiujiu was the best-looking person in the family: his facial features were regular, his bearing refined. His eyes were lovely. You simply couldn't find fault with him. Everyone called him Jiujiu, because it was this pet name that showed their affection, adoration, and possessiveness. Lai Shuangyang had spent the money--scraped together from her years of blood and sweat--on a small second-hand bar, and given it to Jiujiu, who had no decent job, to run. The establishment was called the "Jiujiu" bar. But Jiujiu was still doing drugs. He'd gone to the drug rehabilitation center three times. Each time, he'd slipped back to using drugs. It's easy for good-looking people to be narcissistic, easy to be unsociable and eccentric, easy to care too much about oneself. Jiujiu was exactly this sort of good-looking person. Jiujiu was now all skin and bones. He was despondent. He didn't have a steady girlfriend. To expect Jiujiu to get married and have a child was probably just Lai Shuangyang's wishful thinking. Now people were allowed only one child. In the Lai family, Lai-Jin Duoer was the only son and heir!

In the lingo of Happy Street, Lai-Jin Duoer was Lai Shuangyang's darling precious sticky candy. Lai-Jin Duoer always came first with Lai Shuangyang. So at the crucial moment when father and son were both circumcised, Lai Pu pushed his son forward to deal with Lai Shuangyang. Actually, Lai-Jin Duoer was a sensible child. An hour ago, at the hospital, Lai-Jin Duoer had argued with his father. He didn't want to knock on Auntie's door before three o'clock. Lai-Jin Duoer knew how much Lai Shuangyang doted on him, and he didn't want to squander her love. His father had forced him to come. He'd held back his tears.

To love this little thing really muddled a woman's wits, just as power muddled a man's wits. In an instant, Lai Shuangyang changed into another person. In no time, she was a loving mother, without a trace of a temper. Stroking Lai-Jin Duoer's hair, she unconsciously adopted an imploring tone, "Duoer, Auntie isn't mad at you. You know that Auntie could never be mad at you. Auntie is always happy to see you."

Lai-Jin Duoer said, "Auntie, I'm sorry. I told Papa that we should wait until after three o'clock. But Papa forced me to knock on your door."

Lai Shuangyang said, "What a good child!"

She took Lai-Jin Duoer to the bathroom to wash his face. She would take care of everything for Lai-Jin Duoer. She'd settle him down comfortably in bed and give him a brand-new book. Then she'd serve him some good food and drink in bed. Anyone who thought she wouldn't do things this way was wrong.

When things had reached this point, everything could be considered a great success. Lai Pu let out a long sigh. His cloudy mood immediately turned sunny. He settled down, shifted to quite a relaxed position, lit a cigarette, and turned on the TV with the remote.

Soccer was on TV! Soccer was great for someone who felt really lousy from being circumcised. Soccer also made the time pass fast. Soccer was wonderful!

Lai Pu was suddenly aware of Xiao Jin's brilliance. Why shouldn't he recuperate for a few days at Lai Shuangyang's place? Lai Shuangyang was her own boss: she didn't have to stick to a schedule or punch a time clock or think about anyone else. Her time was flexible. Lai Shuangyang lived in the old family home. He should have a share in this flat. And furthermore, since Lai Shuangyang regarded Lai-Jin Duoer as her son, shouldn't she repay him--the father? On top of this, his wife had been out of work for two years, and the basic living stipend she received wasn't even enough to keep her in food. But Lai Shuangyang had worked on Happy Street for more than ten years. She had the "Jiujiu" bar, and she herself had a stall where she sold duck necks. She wore a gold chain around her neck and gold rings on her fingers. She grew her fingernails long and went to the beauty parlor regularly. Her clothes were always the most fashionable, and Jiumei delivered her meals to her.

Box lunches? The box lunches were made by the cook she herself had engaged for the restaurant, so how could anything be wrong with them? Lai Pu was very happy to eat this kind of box lunch, and very happy, too, to let Jiumei bring them upstairs. It had been several years since Jiumei had come from the countryside to Hankou. The ugly little duckling would soon be transformed into a white swan. She'd learned how to hold her breasts high and how to pull in her tummy. She'd learned how to pluck her eyebrows and bat her eyes. Jiumei looked a little like a city girl now. Jiumei wouldn't do as a wife for Jiujiu. Even if Jiujiu didn't do drugs, he wouldn't marry Jiumei. All night long, a lot of rich bitches got pickled on Happy Street in hopes of getting into his good graces. Jiujiu was the young idol of Happy Street, everybody's Romeo. Just by blowing a few kisses, he could be well fed and well clothed. Why would he be so foolish as to marry a working girl from the countryside? At the age of forty, the Hong Kong star Liu Dehua was still casting himself as the most eligible bachelor so that everyone's fantasies could run wild. Jiujiu was certainly just as good as the Hong Kong star. Since it wasn't likely that Jiumei would be Jiujiu's wife, Jiumei could let everyone put Communist ideals into practice: since she was just a girl employed by the family's restaurant, what was wrong with asking her to bring meals to him, and letting him take a good look at her, or even touch her? Wasn't this a readymade chance for him?

Xiao Jin was really right. It wasn't for nothing that Xiao Jin had been born and brought up in a merchant's family. She was a genuine urban woman, very smart at calculating what would be best for the family. Lai Pu knew he had to cooperate with his wife. They should cooperate tacitly. For their own individual family's interest, a penny saved was a penny earned. Doesn't everyone do this? If you don't take advantage of those close to you, then who can you take advantage of? Don't all families present warm, loving exteriors--but deep down doesn't everyone make selfish calculations? Lai Pu was no fool.

Everyone said that Lai Shuangyang was intimidating. What was intimidating about her? It just her mouth, wasn't it? Lai Pu understood his sister Lai Shuangyang all too well. She was the epitome of the sharp-tongued, soft-hearted type. You just had to be thick-skinned, hang on, cope with her vinegar--and then you'd succeed. Lai Shuangyang was embarrassed to treat her relatives shabbily. Anyhow, she was his sister, not a stranger. It didn't matter if she was mean for a moment if you got your own way in the end.

Why couldn't Lai Shuangyang help her own brother? After being circumcised, wouldn't it be hard to move around for a few days? How many foreskins did a man have? Wasn't it just one? Wouldn't a man be circumcised only once in his lifetime? Would Lai Pu always come over and bother her? Wasn't Lai Shuangyang being just a little too much a while before?

This time, Lai Pu was staying put in the old family home on Happy Street.

2.

Lai Shuangyang's nights were daytime for most people, and her days were nighttime for most people. Lai Wen somehow just couldn't figure out why her sister kept a schedule that reversed day and night. It wouldn't have been so bad if she just let it go at not understanding it, but Lai Wen liked to mind other people's business. In fact, she *especially* liked minding other people's business. She always talks about reforming the world, though actually she doesn't understand the reasons for much of anything in the world. With a sister like this, what could Lai Shuangyang do?

On Happy Street, Lai Shuangyang was well known for being a good talker. Only her younger sister Lai Wen thought she herself was better. After Lai Wen went through a technical secondary school, she took the adult self-study exam for junior college. Her field was broadcasting. She learned quite a standard Beijing accent. Wherever she went, Lai Wen overawed people with her impressive speech. Wherever she went and whoever she was with, Lai Wen could always find something to argue passionately about. Sometimes she would flummox everyone--to think that she was going to such extremes. Actually, she wasn't, but she did want to show her wit and eloquence. Frequently, after Lai Wen had spoken out and hurt people on public occasions, she would then make up with them in private.

As time passed, Lai Wen gradually achieved her goal: everyone felt that Lai Wen was really eloquent, yet still a nice person. Her older sister Lai Shuangyang always got the upper hand when she argued with someone. The only one she was afraid of was her younger sister. Because of this, Lai Wen was secretly exultant all along. She thought, maybe Lai Shuangyang was good at talking, but just good at vulgar talk on a side street. As for Lai Shuangyang, she was not the least bit interested in talking with her younger sister. How could she stack up against her little sister whom she'd brought up all by herself? As she saw it, Lai Wen talked as though she knew everything but actually she knew nothing of real life. For instance, Lai Wen just could not understand Lai Shuangyang's lifestyle.

But Lai Wen had to talk with Lai Shuangyang, so she sought her sister out again.

Lai Wen had something big brewing. Before she jumped in with both feet, she felt she had to talk with her sister. She said, "Yangyang, in fact, there are lots of choices nowadays. I don't understand why you have to live such an abnormal life."

Glancing at her younger sister, Lai Shuangyang raised her eyebrows. After a long time, she said listlessly, "Wenwen, you're not a kid anymore. Don't act like a fool!"

Lai Wen was indignant, "I'm not. You are!"

Lai Shuangyang said, "Meltdown!"

This "meltdown" conveyed the emotional sigh associated with a long story. She didn't say any more. She didn't feel like talking. She didn't know what to say to her younger sister.

But Lai Wen couldn't leave it at that. She had to save her sister. At present, Lai Wen was working on a program for a TV station. She was preparing to expose the problem of Happy Street's night market disturbing the peace. When the time came, she didn't want this to damage her sister's image. Why couldn't Lai Shuangyang find another line of work? Like Lai Wen: officially, she still worked for the veterinary clinic on the outskirts of the city, but she had already hopped from job to job--more than ten of them. By now, she'd had lots of life choices. It wasn't necessary for a person to stay stubbornly at the same place and doggedly do the same work. Lai Wen had given up the veterinary job ten years ago, and since then she'd worked in various kinds of news media. She'd covered earth-shaking, shattering stories numerous times. After ten years of experience, Lai Wen had established a unique identity in the city's press circles. This was a major success, wasn't it? Why couldn't Lai Shuangyang see her success? Indeed, in recent years a famous critic had said that Lai Wen wrote in the style of Lu Xun. Imagine that! To be compared with China's most famous twentieth century writer! And so Lai Wen couldn't easily put up with Lai Shuangyang's silence.

Lai Wen was subconsciously imitating Lu Xun's conversational style. Squeezing her eyebrows into a frown, she said with a heavy heart, "Yangyang, I want to tell you something from the bottom of my heart. I'm your flesh and blood, and I love you so very much. But I cannot understand or condone your present lifestyle--selling duck necks on Happy Street, sitting there the whole night, mingling with bohemian drunks. What's the point? You could certainly rent the 'Jiujiu Bar' out to Jiumei or someone else. As for the rights to the Happy Street property, you can't claim, either, that solving that problem means that you have to live on Happy Street. The property rights to the old flat are a complex issue, involving a series of national policies. The problem has been around for decades. It isn't something that can be solved in a day. I want to get the property back, too, don't I? I do, but I'm not that naive. You can't solve this matter by checking in with the Housing Bureau every two or three days. Okay?"

Lai Shuangyang cut in sardonically, "Are you suggesting that we should go to see President Jiang Zemin instead?"

Lai Wen said, "Be serious, will you? In any case, staying on Happy Street and going over to the Housing Bureau all the time just won't work. All right. This is a side issue. Too many social transformations have marked our nation's history. The issue of property rights isn't just a problem for our family, it's an historical problem. We don't need to deal with it right now. The bottom line, Yangyang, is that I really do intend to stir up Happy Street. The night market disturbs the neighbors too much. The complaints I've received from residents all around here could fill a burlap sack. You people don't sleep the whole night. Do you want other people to have insomnia the whole night, too? Soot and smoke billow up all night. Do you want people all around here to be disturbed by soot and fumes all night? All of you sing and party every night. Do you want people all around here to have to listen to this all night?"

Lai Shuangyang said, "Lai Wen! My ears are callused from listening to your lecture! Yes, yes, yes. There is a conflict between the night market and the local residents, but I can't solve it! Go tell the mayor! The mayor, the mayor, the mayor! I've said it a hundred times. This really is meltdown!"

Lai Wen stood up and waved her hand, "Yangyang, I hate it when you say 'meltdown!' You're so mixed up! I'm talking to you because I care about you. YOU! Wouldn't you like to put this kind of life behind you? Can't you do something for your own good? Can't you find some other boyfriend instead of making eyes at Zhuo Xiongzhou? Haven't you hurt Jiujiu enough? If he weren't mixed up with Happy Street, would he still be doing drugs? Why do you have to turn day and night upside down? Why do you have to like being vulgar? Why do you have to like being low-class? Be like me and move out to the new model life district in the suburbs--have your own study. Wouldn't your life be more refined?"

Lai Shuangyang sneered, "Would I become refined just by setting up a study? Don't you know that I was born to a low-class mother?"

Lai Wen immediately said, "Sorry, Yangyang, I'm too upset today. Maybe I've been a little too harsh. For example, Jiujiu: I know you have the deepest feelings for him, and you look after him the most, but you're too mixed up, too blind. As your sister, it might be better if I didn't blow the whistle on Happy Street, but my work, my conscience, my sense of social responsibility make it impossible for me not to do what I should do. I have to warn you that our TV program might spur the government on to outlaw all of you. And if that happened, it would be agony for me. Do you understand that?"

Lai Shuangyang lit a cigarette. White cigarette, red fingernails, careless expression. This young woman said lackadaisically, "Meltdown--I've hurt Jiujiu and I bat my eyes at Zhuo Xiongzhou. Go ahead and blow the whistle. I don't own the night market, and it's been banned before—and not just once, either. Go ahead!"

Lai Wen said, "Yangyang, I just don't get it. We could make a complete break with Happy Street now!"

Lai Shuangyang didn't say anything. She turned aside and lay down, looking even more lethargic. Narrowing her eyes, she drew on her cigarette.

Lai Wen couldn't be lethargic. She was wearing a dark blue outfit for work, and her straight black hair was falling to her shoulders. She was gesturing in a way popular among television directors. She

said, "Yangyang, since you're so stubborn and so insincere, I won't say much more. Take care of yourself. I just don't get it. Happy Street, a rundown street--what's to like about it? And the vulgar life--what's to like about it?"

Lai Shuangyang snapped her fingers, and raised her hands in surrender. She didn't even dare say her trademark "Meltdown." She said, "All right. All right. I'm afraid of you, okay? I'm afraid of neither heaven nor earth, but I'm afraid of my little sister coming to talk with me."

How could Lai Shuangyang answer her sister's series of questions? Lai Wen's questions were all subjective, not impersonal. She hadn't thought through any of her questions. Yet, she had an intense desire to tell other people what to do. It really wore Lai Shuangyang out.

My God. Lai Shuangyang didn't think Happy Street was great, nor did she think the vulgar life was great. Lai Shuangyang didn't theorize. It was through intuition that she sought principles. Her philosophy was: people weren't entitled to choose the life they wanted. If you could make choices so easily, who wouldn't want to choose the best kind of life? Who wouldn't want a life of the wealthiest, most elegant, freest, most comfortable, blah, blah, blah. People are born into this world with their own destiny, just like seeds falling to certain spots of the earth. One just can't do anything about it. Will there be sludge and sewage? Or flowers and honey? It's impossible to know in advance. You have to take whatever life dishes out. All the children in Lai Shuangyang's family were born on Happy Street. Who among them would have asked their parents to let them be born to the families of kings and princes?

Now, Lai Wen was enthusiastic about making her own life choice, but this didn't mean that fate had accepted her choice. The veterinary clinic still sent official letters to Happy Street. Everyone warned her: if she continued to default on paying the charges imposed for being away from her official work place, then the veterinary clinic would strike her name from its list of life-tenure workers. Lai Wen could arrogantly say, "Ignore them!" Lai Wen was now a part-time staffer for the TV station's program focusing on society. With her press pass, she went in and out of the TV station at will. Some people cracked her up to be the female Lu Xun. She was feeling on top of the world and couldn't care less about the veterinary clinic. Lai Shuangyang, though, couldn't operate like this. She took immediate steps to settle the off-duty charges for her younger sister. Lai Shuangyang knew the score: Lai Wen was young, but someday she would certainly grow old; she was healthy now, but someday she would surely fall ill. Flowers can't blossom forever, nor do people stay well forever.

Lai Shuangyang didn't dare hold out too much hope for the future. Now, Lai Wen was on special assignment. That sounded good. It looked as though she'd become somebody in the society. She looked popular. Lai Wen could see the issue in this light, but Lai Shuangyang couldn't. She cared about the essentials of a matter. The so-called special assignment was in fact a temporary job. The employee-employer relationship wasn't on a firm footing. The TV station paid flat fees or royalties. Temporary employees didn't get benefits. If the veterinary clinic really struck Lai Wen's name from its list of permanent employees, then Lai Wen's old age pension, medical insurance, housing subsidy, and other benefits would all become problems. Lai Wen didn't have good academic credentials, she didn't have a good starting point, she set her sights high, she didn't have any literary talent to speak of, her mother had died early, her father had remarried, her older brother was a chauffeur, her older sister sold duck necks, her younger brother did drugs--a whole family of ordinary people who could be of no help. And the rights to the ancestral home allowed the family to live in it for a long time but had not reverted to them. She herself was a young woman who was getting older by the day. With the cutthroat competition these days, the appearance of young newshounds on Happy Street didn't surprise anyone, but they were all Ph.D.s. If Lai Wen's luck turned moldy, who but Lai Shuangyang would take care of her?

And if Lai Shuangyang didn't sell duck necks on Happy Street? What else could she do? Zhuo Xiongzhou had been chasing her and buying duck necks from her for two years. Could she spit in his face instead of smiling at him?

Lai Shuangyang really didn't care to talk so much with Lai Wen. She knew that some words hurt people's pride, and carefully avoided saying them to her sister who was sensitive, arrogant, and frail. People said that Lai Shuangyang had a clever mouth. That was because she knew what to say and what not to say, what she could say to whom, and what she couldn't say to whom. And, no matter what, Lai Wen was also her younger sister, motherless since childhood. Lai Shuangyang couldn't say everything she wanted to say. It wasn't just knives and guns that hurt people; words did, too. Naturally, Lai Shuangyang knew how to choose the right words. Otherwise, how could she have done so well in business?

Lai Shuangyang was really worried about her sister. Because of Lai Wen's personality, boyfriends never stuck around very long. Would Lai Wen ever be able to get married? People carry the baggage of their social background. No one can--with a plop--drop down from the sky wherever one likes. Lai Wen couldn't escape from her background. All along, Lai Wen had done her best to break loose from that unsavory background. That was excusable. But one mustn't lose the ability to understand this background!

The present Happy Street was made up entirely of roadside food stands. Every night, in addition to trying hard to earn a handful of greasy banknotes, people enjoyed gossiping about their neighbors and telling local legends. For the neighborhoods on those tiny streets propagated in the wrinkles of the bustling downtown area, gossip and legends were their oral history museum. In Happy Street's oral history museum, the story of the Lai family was one of the oldest exhibits.

Happy Street was originally a back street hidden in the shadows of the city's resplendent downtown district. At the beginning, it lay outside the grand city gate of old Hankou. It was a busy spot swarming with peddlers and lackeys, a place where the liveliness of city and countryside converged. In the nineteenth century, old Hankou was the special district for the Qing dynasty's reform and opening policies, and the city expanded rapidly in area. It was then that Happy Street was brought into the city proper. It was the time of the Westernization Movement, and the west wind prevailed. The houses in the center of the city were no longer in the traditional style, but were built in long rows on either side of the street. Rows of two-story townhouses faced each other. Separating the apartments were balconies with engraved railings. Hanging from the all the windows' valances were striped cloth sunshades. The units were semi-detached, so the people on either side didn't dare talk too loudly. It was discovered only later that these new-style places were more soundproof than the old ones. After young girls bathed, they went out on their balconies to comb their hair--scenes as pretty as western oil paintings that attracted the city folk to take walks here to have a look. It was at precisely this time that Lai Shuangyang's grandfather got on the bandwagon and bought a block of six flats on Happy Street.

Lai Shuangyang's grandfather couldn't be considered a person with much of a position. He owned half of the Fairyland Teahouse near Happy Street. The son of a waiter, he'd grown rich through hard work. At most, he could be considered a better-off person.

People of real position--really wealthy people--moved away before long. The value and charm of the western homes with flower gardens or the imposing traditional houses within high walls was timeless. When all is said and done, though, flats are flats, especially this kind of early old townhouse on Happy Street--poorly designed, semi-western/semi-local flats. With social changes and progress, they quickly became rundown. Ultimately, those who lived in them were ordinary people. When the buildings began to age and fall into disrepair, more and more lower class types began living here, with the above average peddlers and lackeys also able to buy one or two old rooms. Prostitutes past their prime and aging dance hostesses whose beauty had faded, down and out literati who wrote tidbits of news for the tabloids, housewives who'd run away from home and sunk into unlicensed prostitution--all, one after another, rented rooms here. Daily life on the little street was filled with quarrels, moans, sobs, and curses. The sharp reverse winds that squeezed their way out from the cramped street always turned around in the corners and blew all kinds of detritus toward the main streets--the spittle of passers-by, along with half-finished cakes of rouge, filthy powder puffs, and crumpled balls of writing paper.

There weren't any great prospects on such small streets, but the people subsisting there were especially vibrant. Lai Shuangyang was a typical example. When she was fifteen, Lai Shuangyang lost her mother, and at sixteen, she was fired from her factory job. That was because on her first day of work, the power went out in the storeroom. Following an old worker's lead, she lit a candle. But, although the old worker's candle hadn't done any damage in all the years he'd used it, as soon as Lai Shuangyang lit her candle, the warehouse caught fire. And so it was that Lai Shuangyang damaged government property--the people's property. For this, she should have been jailed. The factory bosses, however, saw that she was an ignorant child. They saw, too, that she went all out in her self-criticism, even kneeling on the floor as she implored them. So they just punished her by firing her. In the period of the planned economy, being fired brought a person to an almost hopeless pass. A person who'd been fired was unlikely to be hired on by another employer. Without the opportunity and right to get another job, it was almost like being the dregs of society. At the same time, Lai Shuangyang's father Lai Chongde--an honest, open, righteous church worker--couldn't face Lai Shuangyang, Lai Wen, and Lai Jiu--the three mouths he had to feed, so he remarried. One night, he moved by himself to the home of the widow Fan Hufang, and got away from Happy Street. Back then, Lai Wen had just started elementary school, and Lai Jiu was still a baby. And so, one day when they were hungry and cold, Lai Shuangyang boldly carried a small coal stove from their home to the sidewalk. She placed a small iron wok on the small coal stove, and began to sell deep-fried flavored beancurd.

Lai Shuangyang herself set the price for the deep-fried beancurd sticks. They were terribly cheap--five cents apiece. This included simple tableware, as well as the necessary condiments--chopped red peppers. The drifting wind wafted the alluring aroma of the deep-fried beancurd to every corner of the streets. And from every corner, people craned their necks in curiosity. From the beginning, Lai Shuangyang did a brisk business. Her activity confounded local officials. What pigeonhole did her business fit into? For a very long time, they couldn't make any response.

Lai Shuangyang had opened Happy Street's first really brisk business. In people's memory, it was the first and unprecedented example of an unlicensed business operating in the public space next to the street. Quiet Happy Street turned lively. The people who ate the deep-fried flavored beancurd came out of admiration from all over the greater Wuhan area. Her business expanded rapidly to more than ten small tables set up on Happy Street. It was with her deep-fried flavored beancurd that Lai Shuangyang supported her younger sister, her younger brother, and herself. But her historical significance extends far beyond this. According to the historical records, Lai Shuangyang was the first individual proprietor not just on Happy Street but also in the whole area of Hankou. Beginning with Lai Shuangyang, individual establishments for food and drink rolled full-steam ahead. Happy Street's new era of reform and opening began with this. In the words of Lai Pu's wife Xiao Jin: *Lai Shuangyang owed it all to Deng Xiaoping. Wasn't it Deng Xiaoping who had initiated the reform and opening policies? If it weren't for him, even if Lai Shuangyang had even more nerve, she wouldn't have been able to contend with the government.*

A little later, Lai Shuangyang went in for selling duck necks. All in all, Lai Shuangyang was quite the celebrity on Happy Street. Lai Shuangyang was the first one on Happy Street to find enlightenment. She was reassurance for Happy Street. She was Happy Street's mascot. She was the successful idol of Happy Street. Although Lai Shuangyang merely sold duck necks, a very tiny business, still her small stall always stood in the center of Happy Street. What's more, she was the only one selling duck necks on the whole street. No one else dared compete with her. She didn't have to ask for such a high standard of treatment and position, either. It wasn't necessary for Lai Shuangyang herself to say a word. She didn't have to quarrel with others or scramble for her turf. Anyone starting a new business was warned by the local bullies. And if any rash, hot-blooded youths attempted to squeeze out Lai Shuangyang's small stall, neither those running the established businesses nor the regular customers condoned this. It wasn't that there weren't people who tried; it's just that before they could make a move, they themselves were bleeding. These incidents would always end with Lai Shuangyang nodding her head and saying, "Okay, let him off." This was what it meant to be an idol. People's regard for, and

defense of, Lai Shuangyang were taken on their own initiative. She didn't have to pay them anything. Judging from her life experience, Lai Shuangyang thought this was the hardest thing in the world to come by.

Lai Shuangyang's duck necks were ten yuan for half a kilogram. She could sell an average of seven and a half kilograms a night. If by chance they didn't sell well, when it was almost time to close for the night, men like Zhuo Xiongzhou would appear and buy all the leftovers.

Happy Street. Where else could Lai Shuangyang do business?

If Lai Shuangyang weren't living on Happy Street, then what would Lai Pu and his son have done after their circumcisions? Where else would they have been treated so well--with the three free meals a day that Jumei brought upstairs for them? Could Lai Shuangyang really have turned her brother and nephew away? Impossible!

[...]

5.

Lai Shuangyang cried when she had to. She was plenty stubborn and plenty shrewish. She would not easily let go of things, and her methods were forceful. When she was pursuing a goal, she could do away with her stormy expression whenever she wanted. With her, it was always no holds barred.

The next day, Lai Shuangyang didn't even want to sleep in. At daybreak, she left the flat, hailed a taxi, and rushed straight to Shanghai Street to see her father.

Lai Shuangyang's father Lai Chongde lived in his wife's home. His wife Fan Hufang didn't like his four children. Lai Shuangyang was the one she disliked the most.

One year, without telling anyone in advance, Lai Chongde had moved to Shanghai Street and married Fan Hufang. The marriage was more or less like an elopement. His children all hated him. The only one who ever ventured to drop in on him was Lai Shuangyang. Blocking the door to Fan Hufang's home, she would flail around shouting abuse. She would curse Lai Chongde's conscience and call him a son-of-a-bitch who had actually abandoned his own children. She would curse Fan Hufang as an old tart of a seductress. She said that before marrying Lai Chongde, Fan had pestered him everyday to sleep with her. Unluckily, Fan Hufang was in fact a woman with a hearty appetite for sex, and she'd been widowed young. As time passed, she couldn't stick to the old ideal of a chaste widowhood and she'd already become grist for gossip because of hanging out with a guy who was a knife-grinder on the street corner. She had quite a bad reputation around Shanghai Street. She loved Lai Chongde partly because she liked his honesty and geniality, and partly because she liked his prowess in bed. Lai Chongde and Fan Hufang both were intent on sleeping together. Otherwise, Lai Chongde wouldn't have taken the drastic step of leaving Happy Street. Living with three children on Happy Street, he hadn't been able to fully enjoy his affair.

Back then, Lai Shuangyang was already a big girl. She didn't have a job, so she guarded the home all day long like a policeman, thus giving Lai Chongde and Fan Hufang no option but to be furtive. So they both felt guilty about their sex life. Lai Shuangyang was too young to understand the life of adults. All she knew was that when her brother and sister opened their mouths they wanted to eat, but she didn't know that being starved for sex could also kill both men and women. She wasn't the least bit considerate. Her words touched a raw nerve with her stepmother. Her curses caused a stir on Shanghai Street, and the whole neighborhood turned out to watch the excitement. All the people

covered their mouths and tittered, shaming Fan Hufang so much that for years she walked with her head down, too embarrassed to meet her neighbors' eyes.

Luckily, the morals and manners of the time changed later. With China's economic reforms and opening to the outside world, nightclubs appeared and so did bar girls. Dubious late-night beauty parlors opened up all over the place, and streetwalkers were everywhere. Every day, the newspapers were filled with news of divorces, premarital sex, babies born out of wedlock, sex orgies. When the economic corruption of top officials was exposed, their private lives were also laid bare. All of these corrupt officials had mistresses.

Lai Chongde and Fan Hufang continued to have strong sexual appetites when they became husband and wife. After they married, as time passed, no one thought any longer that their sexual appetites were an interesting topic of conversation. Finally Fan Hufang could hold her head up. Even better, in these last few years, community opinion tirelessly encouraged the elderly to enjoy normal sex lives. Hotlines at many news stations zealously urged old people who were frustrated at midnight to call their hotlines. They promised: the young lady who answered the phone would help restore virility to the old men. With this change in society's attitude, what did Fan Hufang have to fear?

That was one time, and this was another. Everything changes with the times.

When all is said and done, Fan Hufang belonged to the older generation. She was, after all, senior to Lai Shuangyang, and so outwardly she couldn't haggle over every trifle with her. But, in Fan Hufang's mind, the main questions of right and wrong were also extremely clear-cut. If she had profound feelings for anyone, it would be Deng Xiaoping. If she had profound hatred for anyone, then that would be Lai Shuangyang. If Deng Xiaoping hadn't brought about reform and opening, then Lai Shuangyang would have made it impossible for Fan to hold her head up ever again. In the last twenty years, Fan Hufang hadn't let Lai Chongde take any initiative to get in touch with his daughter. Every year for the Spring Festival's family reunion dinner, Lai Chongde had to have dinner with Fan Hufang and her children. But Lai Shuangyang understood: after people got married, this was perfectly justifiable. And she didn't come looking for trouble anymore, either, at first because she was busy selling deep-fried flavoured bean curd, and later because she was busy selling duck necks. Because of the principle of the thing, though, she did send Lai Pu to talk about the reunion dinner with Fan Hufang on two occasions.

Lai Pu, though, was no match for Fan Hufang. After exchanging a few arguments, Fan Hufang saw through his parochialism, selfishness, and mushy brains. He was nowhere near Lai Shuangyang's equal. Lai Pu returned from his crushing defeat, insisting that Lai Shuangyang avenge him. She said lightly, "Forget it." With Lai Chongde and Fan Hufang settled into marriage for so many years, Lai Shuangyang knew it wouldn't do any good for any of Lai Chongde's children to say anything. Why shouldn't Lai Chongde join in the spring festival reunion dinner with his wife? The normal principles of daily life were like a clear mirror to Lai Shuangyang. She didn't talk rubbish. Not until Lai Chongde was sick did Lai Shuangyang pay a visit. When she arrived, she just nodded to Fan Hufang, and--eyes averted--asked how her father was doing. Naturally, Fan Hufang made a point of averting her eyes, too. Relations between the two of them couldn't have been any cooler than they already were.

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