

Qi Jing Nian

Salat al-Janazah 站者那则

1

At the end of a long day alone, unspoken words fumble blindly along the wall but don't find the door.

So I stay here in my room.

One afternoon at the end of March, I had a fever. I took the day off work, swallowed some pills and went to bed. It was blowing a gale outside. The window wouldn't shut. It rattled and shook. My head was heavy as lead but I couldn't sleep. I heard someone tidying up outside the door, then all was quiet. After a while my brother tentatively knocked.

"Come in," I said.

He came in and
looked at me.

"Feeling better?"

I sat up listlessly.

"Sort of."

He looked down, hesitating: "I'll be off then."

"Look after yourself on the journey. Let me know when you get there."

My brother left quietly, pulling the door to behind him. From the living room I heard the two metal doors opening and shutting, and then silence.

I lay there in a doze, covered in sweat, listening to the window rattling, drifting in and out of consciousness until I fell asleep without meaning to. I dreamt of my grandmother's courtyard blanketed in snow. No-one could remember exactly where the well was. When I woke up I felt like my heart was that small patch of snow covered ground concealing a hidden cavity.

When evening came Pingyi arrived home with a bowl of bread

and beef stew. He got me to sit up and eat. It was gone nine thirty. He was drenched, his hair shiny with wet, the collar and shoulders of his shirt dark with raindrops. I reached out and touched his shirt:

“Why didn’t you use your umbrella?”

“I needed both hands to carry the stew,” he said. “Sorry, I’m so late. The traffic was awful,” he said as he fed me.

I nodded as I blew on the soup, felt for the spoon and started to eat. I was famished.

“Has your brother gone?” he asked. “Yes, he left in th afternoon,” I said.

“You’ve been in bed all day,” he said as he watched me eat, “Get up and move about a bit when you’ve finished. Wash your face and rinse your mouth out.”

It wasn’t until I got up and went to the bathroom that I realised the next room was empty. The open door gaped mutely, somehow pregnant with story.

Fuzi came in, sat on his sofa bed and went online. He tried not to take up any space. He had no bedclothes just slept in the living room in a sleeping bag. Drifting around Beijing these last few years, the sleeping bag made sense. He simply rolled it up and moved on. He would come in from work, go online, then worm his way into his sleeping bag and fall asleep. I could see him carrying on like that forever until he died and was buried in it.

“My brother left this afternoon,” I told him. “The new housemate isn’t here yet. Why don’t you sleep in his room.”

His eyes never left the screen. “Don’t worry. I’m okay here.”

The next day my temperature came down and I went back to work. Rushing to the underground as usual in the early morning, I bought two baozi on the way, then had to wait for a couple of trains before I managed to squeeze on. Wedged fast in the press of people there was no way of holding on and no need to. I was surrounded on all sides by the backs of people’s heads and harried faces avoiding eye contact by closing their eyes or tuning into the adverts on the TV screens. Life was a long black flood that people drowned in, swept along and away for no reason towards innumerable tomorrows that continued forever constricted and impoverished as before. Luckily I had no time to really think about it.

The fourth night after my brother left I dreamt of a Muslim funeral I had witnessed when I was small. The dream was very real. It did not differ from my memory of the event at all, as if I

had simply stepped back in time. The deceased was the father of a Hui minority schoolmate, a well respected man. The funeral was in their family courtyard. It was the first time I had witnessed the Salat al- Janazah. The departed lay peacefully as if he were only sleeping, his head pillowed on white flowers, his body covered in a dark green blanket embroidered with golden Arabic letters. A grown up stood beside him, reading the eulogy from the Koran. A few rows of men wearing white caps stood behind him, then the children, and then the women right at the back. I slipped in to watch until my mother grabbed hold of me and hauled me away.

“What are they doing?” I asked. “It’s a funeral,” she said.
“What’s a funeral?”

“Saying goodbye to someone and seeing them off on their journey when they die.”

“Where is he going?”

My mother didn’t reply, trying to ignore me. I kept looking back as she pulled me away. “When we die, will people come and see us off too?” I persisted. “You never learn, do you?” she said, indignant, “Going on about dying. What kind of talk is that?”

The very next day, on the way home from work, I got a call from my mother. She hardly said hello, asking straight away if my brother and I were okay.

“But I thought he was home with you,” I said. “He hasn’t come home,” she said.

My heart stopped beating. I couldn’t speak. My mother was silent with shock. “I’ll give him a call,” she said and rang off. When I called her back she said she couldn’t get through to him.

My mother reported him missing. The police opened an investigation and told her to go home and wait. She went to pieces. She would ring me several times a day crying. To be honest I went to pieces too, but for some reason, probably because my life was like a magnet which held me tightly in its forces, when my brother disappeared I continued to track a familiar orbit: I went to work, I left work, I walked home in the evening through the empty streets comforting the old person at the other end of the phone.

Two weeks later my mother got a call from Baoji¹ police station asking us to pick up the body. My brother had broken the train journey there, hung around for a few days, finally jumping from a tower block. His head was smashed open, his body broken, a sight too horrific to contemplate. When my mother heard the news she was shocked to the core. She fell to the floor weeping and couldn't get up.

My brother had suffered from depression for years. He would improve for a while but as soon as he stopped taking the medication, he would deteriorate. Repeating this cycle meant that the medication stopped doing any good. The year before last was the worst. His closed off silence was like charcoal, black on the outside, smoldering with pain on the inside. You couldn't touch him or you'd scorch yourself. You'd watch helplessly as he burned up alone, silently consuming himself into ash.

We were both home for Spring Festival that year. He hardly spoke for days. On the eve of the first of the year, he announced was going out for a walk. Mother looked anxious but didn't want to stop him. But then she thought of the river and the bridge so when he left the house, she pulled on her coat and followed him.

From what she told me afterwards, my brother rushed off so fast she couldn't keep up with him. There was a bitter wind blowing and he quickly disappeared into the distance. She did a circuit but couldn't find him so turned back and waited uneasily at home. When he came back in, the tip of his nose red with cold, my mother threw her arms around him as if he had escaped some terrible fate.

Irritated, he put his hands up to defend himself from her embrace saying, "Come on! I only went out for a walk!"

"Don't ever go out alone at night like that. Mother gets worried," I told him.

He stalked past us into his room without saying a word and didn't come out again.

We both took the university entrance exam at home in Xinjiang², got into university in Beijing then stayed there after we graduated. My brother left home first, and then I followed. Everyone noticed that we didn't look Han.³ When they heard that we were from Xinjiang they would give a long "Oh!" of realisation, and then ask with modified curiosity whether we could speak Uighur, or whether we were religious. No, we didn't speak Uighur, we told them. We weren't Muslim either, only our grandmother on our father's side.

We had enough to live on, but without much money to spare. The

first few days after graduation, Pingyi and I went to stay at my brother's rented apartment. My brother was working for a distillery, in sales, and was often away for a month at a time on business. To be honest, in order to do the buying and selling he had to take people out for dinner all the time. Not yet sober from a lunchtime session, he would have to drink again in the evening. He couldn't touch the table full of food, had to drink on an empty stomach and ended up vomiting gastric acid and bile. Hardly able to stand, he had to see the guests to their cars. As soon as they left, he knelt on the curbside puking, and couldn't get up. A colleague, seeing that he had lost consciousness, had the decency to call a cab and take him to hospital. He had alcohol poisoning, so they pumped out his stomach, and put him on a drip. He was in hospital for a week far from home and he didn't even tell me.

When he came home at the end of the month his face was grey, his lips were purple and he had dark circles around his eyes. He was shockingly thin. He looked so bad I thought for a moment he might be taking drugs. I tentatively asked him what had happened. His face hardened.

"I was in hospital," he said, "I didn't make the mark at work. I got fired." "You went to hospital?!"

He dismissed my anxious concern, as if I were a tiresome old nag.

"I don't want to talk about it," he snapped, "I'm okay."

He went into his room and closed the door.

At that time we were living in the old town, in what was once a family courtyard at the end of a hutong alleyway. It was a complete ruin of a place, with different tenants living in the rooms around the yard. There was no bathroom but, because it was central, the rent was extortionate. Pingyi had chronic diarrhea at the time. In the depths of winter, he had to step out from under the covers, get properly dressed and run to the public toilet at the end of the hutong. He wasn't getting any proper sleep. When my brother got back we moved into a flat with a bathroom outside the fifth ring road. We haven't lived near the city centre since.

Later on, when my brother lost yet another job, he came to live with us. There were four of us: me, my brother, Pingyi and Fuzi. It was as if we were renting our life for now but didn't know when we'd have to give it back. We had a small amount of money and a small amount of joy, like a hot dumpling in your hand, hard to keep hold of.

This new place was okay. At least we were renting in an apartment block. Not far away to one side of us it was all

temporary low-rent housing, mostly dormitory style cubicles with bunk beds, very cheap to rent. You'd keep your things in your suitcase, only daring to put out stuff like your toothbrush and cup as they probably wouldn't get stolen. There would be an electric rice steamer in the room, usually full of leftover instant noodles so you would have to clean it before you could use it. The cockroaches scuttled about under the chairs, finding their way around shoes and socks and nimbly avoiding squirts of insecticide. The people living there came and went all the time, so mostly people didn't know each other and never stopped to chat. The buildings had no insulation so it was like a fridge in the winter and an oven in the summer. People found ingenious ways of getting themselves a broadband connection, and the cables would be draped in towels, socks, pants and wet clothes.

Transport into the city centre was scarce. Every morning a mass of people like hard working insects would crawl out of their burrows and crowd en masse around the bus stop. When the bus came they would madly push forward and squeeze their way on before it had even come to a halt.

Six months earlier, Fuzi, who had been at university with my brother, was renting one of those dormitory beds. Some hustlers demanded a regular ten yuan a month protection fee. They called it the water bill and even gave you a receipt. Fuzi spun them some story, took no notice of them, and when he ran into them said he was only going to trespass on their kindness for a couple of days. He was there for two months without paying.

One day after work he came back to find everything he owned completely destroyed. The boys who collected the money were nowhere to be found. Apparently, when the toughs burst in, one of his roommates was sitting there, pretending to work on his computer.

"Don't worry, we're not here to get you," they told the roommate. "He's the only one in your dorm that didn't pay the water bill. We need to sort him out."

When asked his room mate why he didn't call the police, all he got was an eye roll by way of a reply. Fuzi grabbed him by the collar. "Why didn't you call the police? Are you in on it too?" His roommate shoved him off angrily: "Are you crazy? Are you looking for trouble? It's not my problem you didn't pay up! You made your own bed. I've had just about enough of you!"

The other people in the dormitory took the opportunity to chuck Fuzi out. He had nowhere to go. He sat at a roadside stall and started to drink. The area outside the fifth ring was pretty undeveloped at that time. He drank until the stall holder closed up and there wasn't a soul about, not even a ghost to keep him

company. Then he remembered my brother. He crawled up to our place drunk as mud and fell asleep in the doorway. He didn't even knock at the door. Rushing out early on the way to work, I got a shock when I saw him, a big man sitting on the floor, still asleep, with something like sick next to him.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" I demanded.

He didn't wake at once when I shook him, just looked up groggily and opened his eyes. Then he stood up all of a sudden without saying a word and grimaced in pain. I think he must have had cramp in his legs.

2

Long ago my heart was like a metal cage with an eagle in it, rattling and struggling at the bars. When it broke the door down a swift darkness covered the sky and was gone, leaving a few floating feathers. Did it melt into the setting sun, or was it brought down by a gun? I don't know where my eagle has gone. My heart is an empty cage.

My brother announced he was leaving Beijing and going back home. He didn't discuss it with me. He told me. He had been fired again or had resigned - I don't remember. I didn't want to know or didn't dare ask him. For the past two years the longest he'd held down a job was six months. He didn't want to bother with the whole struggle any more, and with nothing to do he spent the whole time gaming. When he remembered he was hungry, he would call up one of the food stalls in the compound downstairs and get them to deliver. He never left the apartment. I was concerned about the way he was going so I suggested we went on a holiday. He didn't look up or take his eyes from the screen.

"I can't go" he said, "I've got no money."

"You won't have to pay for anything," I said, "See it as my way of cheering you up." "So where are we going?" He asked. "I don't know," I said, "Let's have a look."

It was coming up to Spring Equinox so I asked for some time off work, bought the train tickets, and took him to a farm in the Jiangxi countryside. He came along with me without much enthusiasm. He didn't even seem to care where we were going. On the train south, he was silent as a shadow, hiding in his bunk sleeping. When he was awake he read some terrible magazine series bound into one volume, then slept some more.

When we got there the best price we could negotiate was sixty yuan a day so I decided we would share a room. I soon realised he hardly slept at night and so could never get up in the morning. His temper was as explosive as a firecracker. Anything would set it off. We'd only been there a day when we had a row. I had got up early, taken a shower, had breakfast and then went to wake him.

"Get up!" I called, "If you want to sleep, go home!"

He didn't answer. I went over and shook the covers. After a while he sat up abruptly and snarled at me: "Give it a rest! You were snoring your head off last night! Leave me alone!" I was completely taken aback, so angry and hurt, I didn't know what to say. "There's no need for that," I said, "We're here to have a holiday, not sleep all day."

"I didn't get any sleep last night. If you want to go out, then go ahead. Be my guest." Then just like a child, he grabbed the covers from me, pulled them over his head and turned his back. I went out, slamming the door.

I thought it all through slowly as I walked through the village and the fields. He had never been this bad even as a teenager. My brother took after our grandmother, a beautiful Uighur woman. Like her, he was good looking with curly hair, a straight nose and deep set eyes. Everyone thought he was Muslim but our grandfather never converted, nor did our parents, so he wasn't. His look and his Chinese name didn't seem to go together. At school he was a normal if introverted child, but his worries went very deep. He didn't really talk to other people, but he had always been good to me.

Disappointment wound round him tightly, even after he graduated - to be honest, he was no different from the rest of us - he had no money and couldn't buy an apartment or a car. He was fed up. The work was gruelling and stressful. Luckily, he was quite good looking, so he had a few girlfriends. But whether he ended it or they left him, his relationships never lasted longer than a month. Perhaps it was his personality or his lack of money, but after a while he felt like, why bother?

It wasn't that I didn't get it. Beijing is shallow, capricious and cruel with its stark difference between rich and poor. He probably took everything that happened personally and thought everyone was out to get him. Medication for clinical depression wasn't cheap. He tried paroxetine hydrochloride and prozac, in increasing doses. One type of prozac had a very strange side effect: it made him yawn continuously. That's why he lost that last job. The day he had to accompany the boss he couldn't stop yawning. He yawned so hard his eyes watered.

I knew he was in pain, and though I didn't understand the nature of his suffering, I don't blame him in any way. I know that now for sure.

I came back to the guesthouse at midday and found him in the downstairs restaurant staring silently out of the window.

"You're awake?" I said.

He shifted his gaze and rubbed his head. "Yup."

"You should eat something." I was trying my best to be calm. I knew he was ill. He followed me down the steps like a child.

"Yes," he said, "You must be hungry too."

We had lunch. "Let's go for a walk," I said. He nodded.

That afternoon as we walked through the countryside everything was easy between us. The fields of oilseed rape bloomed a resplendent drunken yellow. The air was slick with the taste of the flowers. The warm earth smelt like baking flatbread. Fragments of unknown birdsong spilled across the fields. We passed a cottage courtyard where a dog lay in a heavy doze, undisturbed by the passing tourists, legs splayed, chest rising and falling with each breath, sleeping so deeply I couldn't begin to imagine the sweetness of its dreams.

"I want to be that dog!" I gazed off into space and said, as if to myself, "No studying, no work, no need to buy an apartment... I could lie in the sun all day and sleep,...take life as it comes."

"Then you've never come across a feral dog that's had it's leg broken, or been captured and skinned for meat." He raked me cruelly with his eyes, and was about to say something more but turned his back instead and walked on ahead.

I could hardly breathe. I caught him up. "What have I ever done to you?" I berated him. "If you can't put me down at least once a day, your life isn't worth living, is that it?"

I knew he was ill, and desperately sad, and I wouldn't usually take him to task, but for some reason, this time I couldn't help losing my temper. I was in a bad mood already. As we were buying water from a stall, I'd realised that I'd lost the tickets I'd bought for the place we were to visit, so I had to buy them all over again. We reproached each other viciously for quite some time.

That afternoon, out in those radiant fields, was the last time we argued. We tired each other out. It was hot and dry and the sun was blinding as we shouldered through fields of tall oilseed rape, dazzling as far as the eye could see. The intermittent whine of a cow fly was as irritating as someone striking a match repeatedly against my heart. I nearly burst into flame.

We tired ourselves out arguing. We got so bored we ended up trudging on in silence with our heads down. Eventually I couldn't help saying, "Even if this is the first and last time we go on holiday together, let's not quarrel anymore." I meant it kindly.

There was a step ladder up ahead. My brother looked at his feet and said, "Okay."

I have no idea why I used those words or how prophetic they would be.

He didn't sleep at all that night. I was vaguely aware of him sitting up, opening the door and going out for a cigarette. I didn't wake him the next morning when I went out, leaving him the whole day to catch up on his sleep. It rained for the next few days, the weather refusing to cooperate any longer.

On the fourth day, we packed our bags and took the coach from the county town to the city and from there got a train to Beijing. Standing on the platform watching the trains as they rumbled in and out of the station brought to mind the hopeless and harried days of the last two years. It was as if we had got on the wrong train, and didn't know where we were or where to go.

If I had known that was to be our last time together, I would have been kinder to him.

3

The relentlessness of my life over the last few years seems to have pushed aside all other memories.

It's as if I was born twenty seven years old, having to go to work, taking baozi on the crowded underground. I forgot that we were once children and that we grew from children into adults. I forgot all the time that existed from then until the day he left us. I thought I should be sad. I thought I should weep until I couldn't speak, but I didn't. At work there were only the desks to stare at me in dismay. I looked up at the computer and carried on writing reports, stupid reports that were never right, no matter how hard I tried. Phone, fax, printer, the sound of people chatting and of chairs pushed back; sounds repeating in waves, like a pattern that must be arranged just so. But my heart was a mire, an old cloth washed so often you could no longer tell what colour it had been.

Walking out of the office block after work into the fading city twilight, the parched poplar leaves flying like scraps of aluminium foil through the fog of fumes and noise, a blood red sunset suggested a grand and spectacular loneliness. All at once I sensed the smell of early summer, dim evenings, frail yet glowing with the swift scent of burning wheat stalks. Birds sprinkled the sky like dust. I was transported back to one afternoon he took me fishing. The pond was nearly dry leaving a huge stretch of brown mud. Each step was difficult. I sank in up to my knees. Surrounded by feasting mosquitos, I was soon covered in bites and itching like crazy. That whole afternoon we only caught a hermit crab and a pile of river snails. The sky grew dark as fast as taking off a coat so we went home sinking every other step, our legs covered in ooze. I had bites in sixteen places. I remember it clearly, counting as I scratched, my brother turning to look at me and wiping his spit on the bites saying, "Saliva stops them from itching."

I was a complete mess, my hair band had gone limp and my hair was wringing with sweat and mud. I felt as dirty and smelly as an old rag. That afternoon was the only time we ever had together, just the two of us. My mother gave us a good telling off and ordered me into the shower at once. Then in private my brother blamed me for being stupid and said that he could just as well go after fish and crabs with his mates.

After that we didn't seem to have anything in common. It felt like his over sensitive, moody adolescence went on forever. We scorned each other, avoided each other's company, and hardly spoke. Mother continued as before, worn down with overwork and many cares. In a humble family like ours we would call it fate, but it was more like a narrow slippery path between the rice paddies, you had no choice but to work hard and do your duty.

The time I remember him smiling the most was when we were all grown up, that summer he got into college in Beijing (a fact which made him famous among his contemporaries even though it wasn't a particularly prestigious university).

"I'm off to Beijing," he said, "Work hard little sister and I'll see you there!"

I hadn't realised until then how sunny and likable he could be when he was happy.

How could he not be here? Lonely and despairing when he left us, he was gone. I wept at last in the noise and the crowds. If I had known that was to be our last time together, I would have been kinder to him.

In the days after he had gone, I too had difficulty sleeping. I found it incredibly difficult to get to sleep and rarely dreamed. A bird singing outside the window would wake me. During the early hours a large chunk of the night would freeze like ice with me pinioned inside it, unable to cut loose. Listening to Fuzi's snores from the next room, my eyes wide open, I kept watch until it got light.

The nights felt as long as a lifetime. How was I going to get through the next thirty years? I didn't have the courage to end my life. For the first time I had direct experience of my brother's four long years of sleeplessness and depression. Before that I knew he suffered, but I didn't understand the nature of the pain. I suspect, after being silent for so many years, this was his way of explaining to me the extent of his desolation, or perhaps a way of asking my forgiveness.

If we believed in an Allah or a God or a Buddha would that make things simpler? At least someone would have been there with him when he died. He would have had somewhere to go.

I told Pingyi that I was going home to my mother to arrange the funeral.

"Are you coming back?" Pingyi asked me, at once alarmed.

"I don't know," I said.

The morning I left, I didn't have much time to spare but he insisted on delaying me for a little while longer. He wanted to make me some noodle soup before I left. Everything was packed up. The apartment was so chaotic you could hardly find a place to put your feet. The other housemates had already gone. We couldn't find any stools, so the two of us sat quietly on some luggage around a pan without a lid, as if salvaging some kind of unspoken ending.

"Can I have that book back?" I said. He looked at me, "Which book?"

I couldn't speak. I felt empty inside. Then he realised what I meant.

"Is it still around here somewhere?" I prompted.

"Yes." He bent over the soup and gave it a stir, his shoulders so dejected he could hardly straighten up. "Don't worry," he said huskily, "when we're finished with the soup I'll get it for you."

After a stir the noodles were ready. Then he realised there were no bowls so he got up and found a food box on the table, tipped out the leftover man tou and rice porridge, gave it a rinse, came back and filled it with noodles. I thought of the all time we'd spent in this apartment, and here we were at the end, just about

to leave, without even a clean bowl between us. I didn't know whether to despair of life or despair of us.

He looked up and held the bowl of noodles out to me, his eyes misty.

"I can't eat," I said.

He didn't know what to do. I felt so sorry I picked up the bowl from the floor and took a few small mouthfuls. He stood up, and walked into the back room, searched for a while then found the book at the back of the cupboard. As he fanned the pages and I could see they were already going yellow. He held it out to me. I took it, but couldn't find a safe place to put it, as if the book was my life in limbo.

"You know that time just after you came to Beijing?"

"Yes," he said.

"Don't pretend. I know you don't remember it clearly."

The first time I saw him, a few years previously, we'd arranged to meet at McDonalds. Buzzcut, glasses, medium height, medium weight, a person so ordinary you'd never him pick out from the crowd. We were internet friends in the early days of the web. We came across each other in a chat room and sparked up a conversation: "Hi," "How are you?" We never expected to fall in love.

It turned out that student life was unbelievably tedious. My university wasn't a particularly good one; the teachers and students were so half hearted it was like playing an elaborate time-wasting game. I couldn't quite believe all that hard work studying for the entrance exam had resulted in this. Sure, the rich students from Beijing were living it up, but I wasn't one of them. Apart from my studies I was working as a home tutor to earn some money. My only real pleasure was to chat with Pingyi. I was so excited and happy when I talked to him and you didn't have to spend much money in an internet cafe.

Love on the internet was still innocent back then. I was so wrapped up in him I couldn't stand a day without some kind of contact so I saved up and bought a mobile phone. That way when I couldn't get online, we could at least message each other. When I see him now, there's this slight disjoint and disappointment that comes when what you imagine is finally stamped into reality.

When we talked face to face, it was as if long awkward silences formed around the very ordinary contours of his countenance, so different from the animated conversations we had tapped into the keyboard. Perhaps we had run up an overdraft of

arguments and recriminations. Very soon I felt incredibly weary and we parted early, me to my dormitory and he to his cheap accommodation next to the university.

The next day I took him sightseeing: Xidan, Wangfujing, Yi He Yuan, Hou Hai. Afterall, as he said, this was his first time in Beijing. In among the heaving crowds I shivered suddenly in horror as I gazed around us at all the other nobody forms and faces; the endless repeating vista before me warped and abstracted to become a mass of faceless people scrabbling a flimsy, mediocre, drawn out existence. Their lives differed only in small details: the buses they took, the offices they went to, the rooms they returned to, the people they slept next to. At that moment it felt as if they were mutely annihilating me. I grabbed hold of his hand without knowing it.

Pingyi graduated earlier than me, went back to his hometown but had a hard time finding a job. Then when he found a job it didn't work out, so he wanted to come to Beijing. The night before I was to meet him from the train, I was so nervous and excited and I couldn't sleep. A dog howled somewhere nearby, ripping my dreams apart like an old cotton padded quilt that I couldn't lay straight again. I kept waking up, and taking my phone out from under the pillow, I saw it was half past three in the morning. Pingyi's train wasn't arriving until six thirty. I felt so weary I decided to shut my eyes and lie there a bit longer.

When the phone alarm went off at five o'clock it took me by surprise. I turned it off and got out of bed, felt for the desk lamp and pressed down the switch. I grabbed the trousers and top that were draped on a chair and put them on. The floor was a mess. There was a reek of fusty slept-in sheets and a sour smell of socks, plates and pans. In the dim I found it hard to find space to put my feet, knocking over a metal plate, which gave out a sharp clatter. My housemate, sleeping on the sofa in the living room, turned over crossly.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," I whispered, feeling my way out the door.

When I got downstairs all was as silent as a dead city. The air was clear and clean, the cold of the autumn morning cut right through me. I took a few deep breaths, and felt at once wide awake. The street lights in the alleyway dangled feebly. My lack of sleep that night had given me a splitting headache, and an empty stomach made me feel very cold. I hurried along my hugging my arms around me, head down to meet the wind, goose bumps coming in waves. The warehouse dog lay stiff on the ground by the warehouse door, a chain still around its neck, its saliva bloody. Was this the dog I had heard howling? Maybe it had eaten rat poison by mistake.

As I came out of the hutong, I heard the sound of sweeping. Shadowy figures crossed in front of me stepping through the dim morning mist. I bought two jianbing pancakes at a stall at the entrance to the underground and put them in my bag.

I waited a long time for his train. The people getting off crowded onto the platform, like fruit stones spat out. My sharp eyes saw Pingyi looking around anxiously. I pushed my way through the crowd towards him appearing suddenly in front of him almost startling him. After a night and half a day on a hard seat ticket, he looked haggard, his hair greasy and rumpled. When I took one of his small bags he put his hand on my shoulder, and said eagerly, "Here you are at last!" He hadn't slept all night or brushed his teeth. I smelt his breath as he moved closer and turned my face away. Maybe he thought I was just being reserved, so he hugged me politely, and patted me on the back saying: "Let's go and get the bus."

The rush hour had already started. The buses were so crowded with people you could hardly breathe. The first thin rays of the morning lit the mist and filled the windows with warm golden light. It was beautiful.

I nudged him with my shoulder. "Look at the dawn!"

He looked up groggily, wrinkling his brow and said: "Oh, I thought we were there. Try not to wake me, I have to sleep for a bit."

Then he rested his head on the arm holding the loops and closed his eyes. We got off the bus and changed to the underground. We were almost home before I realised I hadn't given him any breakfast. "Are you hungry?" I said suddenly, "Let's have a bowl of *hundun*."

"I'm too tired to eat," he said, "I want to sleep."

Then I remembered the *jianbing* pancake in my bag so I said: "Okay, let's go home first."

When we got in the door the apartment was a mess. No-one was in. My housemates had all gone to work. The weather was cold but it was too early for the central heating so the windows were closed. The smell of cups and plates, clothes and socks and shoes fermented together and assaulted our nostrils. He wrinkled his brow.

"You'll have to stand it for a bit," I said, "When I have a minute, I'll clean it all up. I took the morning off to look after you."

Pingyi went into the bedroom. He was so tired he didn't even wash his face but took off his coat and socks got into bed and went to sleep. I sat quietly next to the bed for a while then went

into the kitchen to make him some soup and fry up some vegetables.

I had finished making the food and cleaned about half of the flat, and it still wasn't quite noon. I went into the bedroom. He was still deeply asleep. I sat by the bed, quietly looking at him as if to fathom my hopes for the future. He woke up, drew his head back and looked at me like an innocent fearless child. After a while he got up. The two of us sat in the living room around a collapsable table on the floor. A plate of vegetables, a pot of soup, two bowls of rice. He ate in big gulps, stuffing the food into his mouth. "You're not bad at this," he said.

I suddenly had the impression that we'd been married for years.

When we'd finished I stood up and got a book out of the cupboard. "For you," I said.

It was "Norwegian Wood," a book that was really popular a few years ago, printed on kraft paper and leather bound.

He flicked through it and said: "I've read this a few times." "I didn't get it for you to read." He looked flustered.

"Don't get me wrong," I said quickly, "I'm not a Murakami Takashi fan, it's just that I think that I am a bit of a mixture between Naoko, Midori Kobayashi and Reiko Ishida. So I wanted to give it to you. It's symbolic. I've given this book to two people before you," I said, "and both times I took it back in the end."

"Once you put this book into my keeping it's not going anywhere," he blurted out.

At the time neither of us understood much about life. He probably couldn't imagine that two years later I would cling onto this book like a lifeline.

5

I wanted to get back as soon as possible to arrange my brother's funeral, so I gritted my teeth and bought a plane ticket. I didn't think it was worth staying any longer in this place so far from home. It was the first time I had been on a plane. High up in the clouds, I had never seen such a spectacular sunset at such close range. The rays of the setting sun pierced the rolling cloud layer, the long narrow horizon like a giant bronze sword, just smelted,

glowing before the quenching, its radiance gradually tinting the vast expanse of cloud to undulating golden dunes. The boundless dome of the sky took my breath away and I began to understand how people can feel as small as a grain of sand, and so create for themselves an Allah or a God in which to place their trust and all their hopes.

I was home at last, the place of my childhood memories. I had a sense of the sparse shrubland, a clear sky, vast and level, and the people with their valiant faith, like long shadows stretching over the flatness. Nothing had changed.

My brother's funeral was simple and quiet. We were not Muslim. No-one read the Salat-al-Janazah. Apart from his close kin, no-one came to see him off. His body, broken beyond recognition had been cremated among strangers. All we brought back was a box of ashes. As I stared it took on great power: a life and its stories returning home after all its travels contained inside a small box. As if my brother, a sealed up silent piece of charcoal, had burst into flames of pain, and burnt up until all that remained was ash.

We hung a black and white photo of my brother high on the wall. In this portrait of the deceased he seemed so wise and far-sighted, somehow tranquil with godlike benevolence as if he had never been worn down by life, or been through the darkness of death. He was sailing away from us to a far-away world we would never see. But this time he hadn't told me where he was going or when we would see each other again.

My mother hung her tears before the wind. "Was it hard for you in Beijing?" "We were okay," I said, "It was my fault. I didn't look after him well enough." Weeping silently she shook her head.

"Sit up straight and eat only the food you can reach." - Thus states the Koran.

¹ Baoji is a city halfway along the train line that runs between China's east and west.

² Xinjiang is a large province in north-western China. The population there is mostly Uighur.

³The Han Chinese, or Han ethnic group, make up about 92% of the total population in China. The other 55 ethnic groups, including the Uighurs, are considered minority.

Translated from the Chinese by Rachel Henson