

Pig Heads Under Snow

My mother could not find any pig heads. Early in the morning she got her basket and lined up at the meat department, but still she could not get any pig heads. The strange thing was that people actually saw the little van from the meat plant bring in eight pig heads, all nice and fresh-looking, and my mother was the sixth in the line. As the worker from the meat plant carried in the pig heads, two at a time, she counted on her fingers. There was no mistake. When the door of the meat department finally opened, however, all my mother could see was four small pig heads sitting on the counter; the four larger ones were nowhere in sight. Both she and the grandma from Shaoxing, who was fifth in the line, became worried. The Shaoxing grandma said: "How come they are missing?" My mother stood up on her tiptoes and tried to look around Zhang Yunlan's feet. She saw nothing but Zhang Yunlan's purple rubber boots. "Are they hidden under the counter?" said my mother. "There were eight of them. The four big ones are missing. Has she hidden them away?" Zhang Yunlan, who was behind the counter, must have heard what my mother said. Her purple boot suddenly lifted up and kicked something farther back.

My mother was sure that it must have been one of the big pig heads.

When it was the Shaoxing grandma's turn, all the pig heads were gone. The Shaoxing grandma looked at Zhang Yunlan, her kind eyes reproachful. "I can't do anything about it, granny. They are all sold out," Zhang Yunlan said. "Pig heads are popular and you are too late. If you had come a little earlier, you might have gotten one."

The Shaoxing grandma looked attentively at Zhang Yunlan. From the latter's expression, she realized all was lost. It could not be helped even though she put on her best smile. At the thought, Shaoxing grandma's face fell, even while her eyes kept searching behind the counter. Then she said: "There is one for me. I see it." "You see it? Where?" Zhang Yunlan's full body stepped back, showing that she had nothing to hide. At the same time, Shaoxing grandma's gray head pushed over the greasy counter and looked underneath. All she could see was still nothing except for Zhang Yunlan's tall rubber boots, their bright purple color glaring and arrogant. "Shaoxing grandma, even at your age, your eyes are still that good?" Zhang Yunlan suddenly started to giggle. She lifted her hand and rubbed a sore at the corner of her mouth with her sleeve. Then she continued: "You can see around the corner?"

At that, people on both sides of the counter started to laugh. The laughter sounded dry and uncertain. It was more an expression of where one stood than a response to the joke. The Shaoxing grandma became embarrassed. Pointing at the corner of Zhang's mouth, she said: "You have a rotten mouth!" With this remark, Shaoxing grandma felt more or less avenged. She went over to the place where Old Sun sold frozen meat. She bought four *liang* of pork, and mumbling to herself, left the meat department.

My mother, however, was more stubborn. Throwing her basket on the counter, she stood with a grim face in front of Zhang Yunlan. "I counted them all. There were eight," she said. "There should be four more. Get them out!"

"Four what? What four are you asking me to get out?" Zhang Yunlan said.

"Four pig heads! Bring them out, what a shame! I'm telling you I saw them."

"What 'pig heads,' what 'shame,' what 'you saw'?" You are speaking a foreign language. I don't understand you."

“Get them out. Or else I will go in and get them out for you.” My mother thought that justice was on her side. Seeing Zhang Yunlan still defending herself, she grew even angrier and began losing self-control. She pushed this way and that way, but maybe because there were too many people in the meat department, or maybe because people blocked her way on purpose, she couldn’t make her way to the other side of the counter. She heard the sneer from Zhang Yunlan: “Who do you think you are? You come in and get them. Who gave you the authority?”

Now someone came over and took my mother’s hand, saying: “No big deal. Everyone knows pig heads are hard to find. Open one eye and close the other. Just let it go. Try getting one next time. What good does it do to offend her?” My mother stood in the crowd, her face pale. “The people at the meat department are shameless. Are pig heads more precious than swallow nests and shark fins so that they have to hide them away? I have lined up many times already and can’t ever get one. They’ve taken them all home!” On the other side of the counter, Zhang Yunlan said: “Pig heads aren’t precious but of all things you only want them. When you can’t get them, you want to fight all the way. You said that we took them home. What proof do you have?”

Just as my mother was about to pass the counter and search for evidence, she saw many hands and arms reaching over from all around the meat department. She did not know to whom these hands belonged but they were all grabbing her, some lightly and some tightly like pliers, as if to stop her from committing a murder. A blend of male and female voices came up from here and there. A few tried to make peace but most took a firm stand, making clear that they were on Zhang Yunlan’s side. “This woman is outrageous! None of us has gotten pig heads and none of us has said anything. Only she is an exception, making all this fuss!” As they laid their hands on my mother, their eyes were looking at Zhang Yunlan, as if saying: “Yunlan, Yunlan, we are on your side.”

My mother became distracted. With all her might she tried to avoid those annoying hands, catching on to her like tree branches. “You people, where is your conscience?” she said. “Throw yourselves at her feet, then you will have pig heads every day? If you stuff yourselves with pig heads you got by groveling, your bowels will go loose!” My mother’s attitude obviously did not work. She was attacking too many people, and her language was too strong, almost antagonistic. One by one, people moved aside, looking at her with resentment. Some turned away, glanced sideways at her, and sneered: “What sort of a woman! Don’t bother with her.” Only Jianxi’s mother stood by my mother without holding back. She whispered something to her, and magically, my mother calmed down. What was it Jianxi’s mother said? “Don’t take it too hard. Zhang Yunlan is a revengeful person. Offend anybody except Zhang Yunlan. You and I are in the same boat, five kids at home. They are all growing and need to have meat. With so many mouths at home waiting, how can you afford to offend her? Tell you something. I quarrel with the neighborhood committee almost every day but never dare to with Zhang Yunlan.”

Jianxi’s mother hit on my mother’s weakness. Standing there in the hall of the meat section, she remembered sadly the cast iron cooking pan in our house. With hardly any grease or fat, the pan rusted easily. She remembered how fast the vegetable oil, soy and vinegar ran out in our kitchen, and how the bottle of cooking wine always remained full. Without any fish or meat to cook, who needs the cooking wine? My mother remembered the terrible table manners of us five sisters and brothers on the rare occasions when we did have meat. By a wage-earner’s right, my eldest brother ate half of the pig head. My second and third older brothers competed against each other with their chopstick skills: the faster one’s chopsticks worked, the more his stomach benefited.

My elder sister was the most considerate. When boys were fighting over meat, she would act the judge. For herself, she had one or two slices of pig ears, at most. But even sacrificing her stomach did not help much. During the days when we saw no meat at all, my two older brothers lived more or less in harmony. But once roasted pig heads appeared on the table, they were like a tiger meeting a wolf. They fought as they ate. Realizing that the relationship between children and meat was permanent, and that here justice would not help the situation one bit, my mother softened. She said to Jianxi's mother: "I didn't go there to give her a hard time. I promised my kids that I would get meat for them today. Now look, I almost had a pig head in hand but it's gone. What am I supposed to give them?" Jianxi's mother pointed at Lao Sun's direction, and said: "Go over there and buy some frozen meat. That should do." My mother turned and looked at the frozen meat with indifference. "That meat is no good. It's expensive and tastes terrible. Besides, it has no fat." In spite of the meat shortage, my mother remained picky. Jianxi's mother felt she had nothing more to say. She turned and went back to standing in line.

More and more people swarmed into the hall of the meat department. My mother stood alone in the midst of the crowd. A cabbage in her basket was knocked out by somebody and fell onto the ground. It almost tripped her. My mother bent down and pushed aside one of the many legs, mumbling: "Please step back, please step back. My cabbage, my cabbage." With difficulty, she picked up the cabbage head. The cabbage let her see a way of retreat without losing her dignity. "Even without your pig heads nobody will starve to death!" She threw one last remark to Zhang Yunlan behind the counter. Holding the cabbage, she left the meat department, her head held high.

There were many injustices on our street. But let's talk some more about the pig heads. Some people went to the meat department as late as eight, when the sun had climbed over the Baoguang Tower. Still they carried pig heads out of the meat department. Take our neighbor Xiao Bing for instance. That day my mother saw Xiao Bing going home with a pig head on his shoulder. Even though all pig heads under the sky looked more or less the same, my mother still recognized, with one glance, that this was one of those missing at the meat department.

There was nothing special about Xiao Bing's family. His father worked in a silk cloth store, his mother in a drug store. In other words, they were nothing but salespeople, but theirs was a most practical profession, with one in charge of cloth and the other of white sugar, both regarded as hot commodities whose supplies were always limited. My mother was not a stupid person. Without asking Xiao Bing, she understood. But she was unwilling to give up. She followed Xiao Bing, and as if accidentally, she asked: "The pig head your mother asked you to pick up, was it from Zhang Yunlan's place?" Xiao Bing replied: "Yes. My mother is going to salt it so that we can eat it on New Year's Day." One of my mother's hands almost uncontrollably reached out and felt the pig's two big fat ears. She sighed and said: "Good, good, what a huge pig head!"

My mother got along well with the women in the neighborhood. She was smart and good at sewing. Xiao Bing's mother often came over and carrying the cloth her husband "obtained" from the silk cloth store, asked my mother to sew this or that. With all her requests my mother always complied. She even sewed aprons and shoe cushions for Xiao Bing's family. These favors Xiao Bing's mother of course returned, sometimes, by bringing over some coupons. In our family, the demand for white sugar was not that great, because, for one thing, it was too expensive and we could hardly afford it; for another, it did not help us grow faster. So my

mother gave most of the sugar coupons from Xiao Bing's mother to somebody else as gifts, but kept the coal and the fabric coupons for us. Best were the cloth coupons. We needed them to buy all kinds of cotton cloth, which was cheap and of very good quality. They were like coal on a winter day, helping our family a great deal. We were such a big family. Thanks to the coupons, everybody was able to put on new coats and new pants on New Year's Day, without costing us an arm and a leg. This comfort in our life we mainly attributed to my mother. Of course, we also partly owed it to Xiao Bing's parents.

That night, my mother brought a detachable shirt collar over to Xiao Bing's house. It had originally been made for my father. But now, given the circumstances, my mother gave the brand new collar to Xiao Bing's mother, who gave it to her husband. Naturally, my father was quite unhappy about it. But knowing the significance of the mission this collar was to accomplish, he could do nothing but watch my mother wrap it in a newspaper.

As the old saying goes, the drunk does not have his eye on the wine but on something else. What then is it? The conversation that my mother and her female neighbor carried on under the lamp quickly came to the real subject: pig heads and Zhang Yunlan, Zhang Yunlan and pig heads. My mother was still beating around the bush, but her neighbor quickly grasped the point: she wanted Xiao Bing's mother to go on her behalf and make peace with Zhang Yunlan by saying that what had happened that morning was not deliberate on her part. Her kids needed meat and she was desperate. If she had hurt her feelings, please don't take it to heart, please don't hold a grudge against her – saying this, my mother suddenly became impetuous again. She said: "If it is her that I have offended, no big deal. It doesn't matter whether I have meat to eat or not. But heaven knows why I have had so many boys. Each has a bigger stomach than the other. Each of them wants to eat meat. Eat meat eat meat eat meat. It is her butcher knife that I can't afford to offend!"

Xiao Bing's mother fully agreed with my mother. To her, in our Mahogany Street, Zhang Yunlan and fresh pork could be seen as the same thing. If you offend Zhang Yunlan, you offend fresh pork; if you offend fresh pork, you offend your kids' stomach. In short, it is not worth it. Throughout their conversation, Xiao Bing's mother looked at my mother with deep sympathy, as if sitting before her was a child who did not know any better and just gotten itself into big trouble. She was a smart woman. Quickly she came up with a remedial plan. She said: "Zhang Yunlan also has four kids. She is always complaining that her children's pants wear out like popsicles. Like someone was biting them off, they are all right this year but next year, they are way too short. Could you sew up a few pairs for her kids?" *Instinctively*, my mother curled up her lips and said: "How can I be that cheap! She treated me like dirt and I volunteer to make pants for her!? Am I going to be a laughing-stock?" But women understood women best. Xiao Bing's mother said: "For the sake of kids' stomachs, you have to put aside your face. Just sew the pants and I will bring them over for you. You can be sure something good will come out of it. Don't you remember, soon it'll be the time to celebrate the New Year. If you refuse to budge, what decent food do you expect to put on your table and feed your kids with? Let me tell you, that knife in Zhang Yunlan's hand has eyes. She can make you suffer and you will have nowhere to complain!"

The neighbor's last remark persuaded my mother. My mother said: "You are right. With so many kids to feed, how can I talk about my face? Why don't you take a message to Zhang Yunlan for me. Ask her to bring over some fabric. From now on, she doesn't have to buy clothes for her kids. I will make them."

It was best to take care of things before they turned cold, especially since the Spring Festival was around the corner. The following day, Xiao Bing's mother brought a roll of dark blue cloth to our house, and with it, a message from Zhang Yunlan. Zhang Yunlan's message, when summarized, sounded like a quotation from Chairman Mao's works: Let the past be past; it is more important to save the ill from getting worse. The second part of the message warmed my mother's heart. It said that from now on, if my mother wanted to buy some food, she didn't have to get up before daybreak and wait in long lines. All she had to do was to let Zhang Yunlan know the day before, and pick things up at the meat department the next day, after the morning market was closed.

The following week was probably the busiest time in my mother's whole life. Other housewives were also busy, but they were busy for their own family, preparing for the New Year; my mother was busy for Zhang Yunlan. Zhang Yunlan asked her to turn the roll of cloth into five pairs of long pants, all for men, of various sizes. All the measurements were written on an oily piece of paper. My mother taped the piece of paper onto the wall above the sewing machine. Whenever we saw the paper, we thought of the four boys in Zhang Yunlan's house. All their legs were longer than ours, perhaps because they had had a lot of bone soup. Each time she saw the paper, my mother sighed. She complained that Zhang Yunlan's cloth was not large enough. To cut five pairs of pants out of it was as hard as to climb onto the sky.

My mother had been known to exaggerate the difficulty of cutting the material, only to prove to us how masterly her skills were. Later, after working a whole night, she finally managed to cut out the five pairs, and it did not seem quite as hard as she had told us. All the fabric pieces were piled up on the sewing machine, looking like soft dark terraced fields. Next followed the persistent sound of the sewing machine. Each day my mother came home from work and sat in front of the sewing machine. My sister suffered most. Now she had to do all the house work. She pouted and protested: "Sewing so many pants, all for other people! What about my pants, or my brothers'?" My mother said: "Don't worry. It is still a few days before the New Year. I guarantee that you won't have to wear old pants on New Year's Day." Sometimes, my sister did not know better and kept nagging. She said: "It is one thing if you want to serve the people, but not the wrong kind of people. Like Zhang Yunlan. She is so stuck up, such a mean person. And you are willing to make pants for her!" At this, my mother flared up. She said: "Shut up! Such a big girl and you still don't understand a thing! Who am I busy for? Zhang Yunlan? I am busy for your stomachs!"

Time was short. There was no choice but to work overnight. In our dreams, we heard the singing of the sewing machine, accompanied by the wild north wind outside the window. Sometimes the sound was flowing smoothly, and sometimes it was hesitating; sometimes it was enthusiastic and sometimes it was sad and complaining. Dimly I could hear the conversation between my mother and my father late at night. My mother, sitting before the sewing machine, said: "My eyeballs are about to fall out!" From his bed my father replied: "Serves you right if they fall out." My mother said: "How come it is so cold. My hands are almost frozen." My father said: "Serves you right if they are. Who asked you to flatter those people!"

For all the complaints, my mother did her best to finish the pants for Zhang Yunlan's family. She took them to Xiao Bing's mother. For the benefit of my mother, she suggested: "Why don't you go give her the pants yourself? Once you talk, all the old problems will be resolved." My mother shook her hand and said: "We quarreled only a few days ago. Enemies for a while, then friends for a while – no, I can't do it. Since you have played go-between for us, why don't you play it to the end?" Throwing down the five pairs of pants in Xiao Bing's

house, my mother ran home as if she was being chased. Another pile of materials appeared on the top of the sewing machine. That was for us brothers and sisters. Before she left for work, my mother added some vegetable oil to her faithful sewing machine. I saw her squatting before the machine, and from time to time, glance at the blue and gray cloth, and a flowery cloth with a red background and white square patterns, piled up on the top. Then she sighed and said something brief yet accurate about her life: "It is my fate to work till I die."

Xiao Bing's mother must have regretted serving as go-between for my mother and Zhang Yunlan. The outcome of the whole thing took her completely off guard. My mother, of course, did not know whether to laugh or to cry. For what do you think happened? Zhang Yunlan was transferred from the meat department to East Wind Pre-prepared Foods Store! Not sooner, nor later, just when my mother finished the five pairs of pants!

I remember Xiao Bing's mother's sorry-looking face when she came to report the news. "It was all my fault, poking my nose into everything!" our neighbor almost wept. "You worked so hard, making those five pairs in such a short time. But I don't understand: Zhang Yunlan has been working in Mahogany Street for years. How come she got transferred all of a sudden, just at this very moment? Oh, I am so mad!" So was my mother. Her face was pale with anger. But if she said something mean, how would that make Xiao Bing's mother look? After all, she meant well and was just trying to help. As it was, my mother had to turn around and console her neighbor. She said: "It is nothing, nothing really. Just a few nights' work and some threats. If she has to transfer, let it be. Let's pretend that I was learning from Lei Feng and performed some good deeds."

Seldom did anyone else taste the bitterness my mother had to swallow. Not only had her hard-working hands been fooled; so was her sewing machine. It had labored, creaking and clanging, for all those days, all just for the benefit of that stuck-up woman. The stomachs of my five brothers and sisters had also been fooled. We all had expected Zhan Yunlan to provide us with the freshest pork, the fattest chickens, the tenderest ducks. Even our baskets, jars, and vats had been fooled. They had been put away for so long, and were all ready to hold salted this and salted that. Then all of a sudden someone declared: all is lost, and you containers better go back where you are.

All our blissful dreams of delicious food during the Spring Festival burst like soap bubbles. My mother was obviously disheartened. She told us: "This year we are going to have nothing special for New Year's Day, just some cabbages and carrots. If **someone wants something better**, get up at four, take our basket and go wait in line!"

We could never understand why, after our mother had sewn so many pants for Zhang Yunlan, we had to celebrate the Spring Festival so simply and so frugally, in the style of revolutionaries!

On that New Year's Eve, there was a big snowfall. I remember my third brother dragging me out of bed. It was still early. My parents and everyone else was still in bed. But he and I were so eager to go out and play in the snow that we didn't have time to put on our socks. Slipping into our cotton shoes, one of us holding a trowel, the other a coal shovel, our plan was to make the biggest snowman in Mahogany Street right in front of our house. Just as we pulled the door bolt, we heard a gentle knocking at the door from the outside. When the door opened, we were startled: in front of us was standing a woman wearing a red scarf and a big men's padded coat. She was holding two pig heads, one in her left and one in her right hand. They were the biggest pig heads we had ever seen. Yet what struck us even more was that the

woman's scarf and coat were dusted by a layer of white snow, which also covered the ears and tops of the two huge pig heads, as if they all had just arrived after a long journey.

At that time, both my third brother and I were young. Since we had never done any shopping at the market, nor spent much time playing around the neighborhood, we did not know this was Zhang Yunlan. My third brother asked her: "Are these pig heads for our family?" Just as my brother was about to go in and call our parents, the woman grabbed him and said: "Don't wake up your mom. Let her sleep. She has worked hard." Then we watched her push in through the door, along with a gust of cold wind, and lay the two pig heads on the floor. She said: "When your mother gets up, tell her that Zhang Yunlan has been here. It doesn't matter if you forget my name. She'll know when she sees the pig heads."

For us, Zhang Yunlan was just a stranger. We thought that after she put down the pig heads, she should leave right away, so that she would not slow us down in our snowman plan. But there was something odd about the woman. Somehow she noticed our feet and made a big fuss, saying: "On a snowy day, don't walk around barefoot. You will catch cold and get fever." I guess it was all right if she wanted to meddle with other people's business. But all of a sudden, her eyes lit up. As if by magic, she pulled out a pair of socks out of her coat pocket. They were brand-new nylon socks, with price tags still on. "Are you Little Five?" she said, making me raise my foot. I knew nylon socks were good stuff, so I was willing to cooperate and put up my foot. I watched her kneel down and put on for me the very first pair of nylon socks of my life. As I have already said, ever since his childhood, my third brother was never one to come up short. As he looked us, his foot was also raised and thrust in front of the woman's face. I remember Zhang Yunlan hesitating a moment, but nonetheless pulling out a second pair of nylon socks out of her pocket. Just like that, both my brother and I got our feet wrapped in warm and fashionable nylon socks on that snowy morning. However we looked at it, it was a surprise of joy.

I still remember what Zhang Yunlan said as she put on the socks for us: "No matter how capable your mother is, nylon socks is something she can't make with her own hands." We were too little to understand what she meant by that. Zhang Yunlan also said something else, which now sounds somewhat exaggerated. She said: "You kids' feet really are a lot of trouble. These nylon socks should handle that. Nylon socks never wear out!"

As my mother tells it, Zhang Yunlan's family later moved out of Mahogany Street. She no longer worked in the meat department, and by and by people forgot her. My mother and Zhang Yunlan never became friends. But one day she met Zhang Yunlan in a drugstore on Red Star Road. They both reached for a reed broom and their hands almost knocked together. But they both stepped back and neither would take the broom. My mother said that both she and Zhang Yunlan were very polite. They started to talk right away and forgot all about the broom. As a result, somebody else grabbed that reed broom of the best quality ever.

Translated by Yunshan Ye