

Wang Zhanhei

The Story of Ah-ming

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The communal bins on this estate are horrendous in summer. They reek, especially around daybreak during the season's hottest few weeks. Half-tied plastic bags of leftovers, fruit peelings and soup slops fester through the night and by morning the stench is everywhere. How to describe that smell? Imagine being on a packed bus in the morning, stewing in a fug of passenger sweat and armpit odour. Scallion-and-egg breakfast breath is in the mix, along with the occasional muffled fart expelled into the aisle. You're feeling nauseous and groggy, practically gagging on the fumes. Well, that's how it is for residents in the ground-floor flats opening directly onto the bins – it's like riding that wretched bus from the moment they get up. The smell of refuse haunts them while they're brushing their teeth, while they're having a dump and while they're eating breakfast. On it goes until someone finally sticks their head out the window and yells: 'Rubbish Man! Where the hell are you?!'

The Rubbish Man eventually shuffles over, hauling his rusty, corroded cart – though not before a dozen or so locals, heading to work on electric bikes, have voiced disgust at the stink as they sped past. A scruffy little dog, tufts of fur covering its eyes, brings up the rear. When you're waiting for the Rubbish Man, he seems to take forever dealing with the bin outside the building before yours.

Every building on the estate has a bin out front, making for about 100 bins all told, and there are dumpster sheds located every few buildings along the street. The combined

web of noxious hotspots, like a network of security cameras, covers every corner of the estate.

We say the Rubbish Man *grasps* rubbish from the bins, and the character for ‘grasping’, 捉, happens to be visually appropriate for his task. When he turns up, he transfers rubbish from bin to cart then lays the bin down and, with a long pair of tongs, plucks out remaining scraps. One by one he retrieves stray plastic bags which have wafted away on the breeze, if they haven’t blown too far. He carefully folds cardboard packaging and empties out soft drink bottles, before slipping them into his poly-fibre sack. In hot weather a rancid residue seeps from the bins, generating a tremendous stink and triggering a torrent of complaints. A sprinkler truck gets called in for part of the summer to follow-up on the Rubbish Man’s round.

The same procedure is repeated step by step, bin by bin, from East to West across the entire estate. For the few dozen unfortunate families in the final buildings along the route, waiting all morning for their bins to be emptied, the stench has long since barged in and seized possession of their kitchens, living rooms and balconies. Nothing can drive it out.

One morning, towards the end of his round, what the Rubbish Man *grasped* from the bin was an old lady. It looked like she’d tumbled in and fallen asleep. When they pulled her out she smelled rank, her hair was wet with slops and there was a misshapen piece of rubber sheeting tucked down her front. As they turned her over, they realised with a gasp that it was Ah-Ming, the old lady who lived in a lock-up garage at one end of the estate.

When somebody changes a lot in old age we say they've *gone different*.

It generally indicates some kind of change for the worse. For example, if a man in his late seventies unexpectedly acquires a younger partner a dozen or more years after his wife died, his children say, 'He's gone different, the old goat.'

'One foot in the grave and he thinks he's stepping out on a whole new life! Disgraceful!'

Or perhaps an old chap allows himself to be so bamboozled by his good-for-nothing grandson that there's no inheritance remaining for the rest of the family. They all curse the old man's folly, damning him for the idiot he's become.

Or there's the generous-spirited woman who becomes increasingly paranoid in old age and convinces herself someone in the family wants to steal her bank deposit book. Or the retired intellectual who finds Buddha and attempts to feed his grandson incense ashes – supposedly medicinal – that he brought back from the temple. Whatever the situation, when people say an old person's *gone different* it's always something inexplicable, from a radical change in temperament to behaviour that has turned utterly bizarre.

Everyone on the estate had witnessed Ah-Ming's decline during the past few years. 'She used to be such a tidy old dear,' they'd say. 'Now look at the state of her. What a mess!'

It's generally the same kinds of people who root around in bins. There's the tramp, who is hungry and thirsty and game for whatever he can dig up. There's the migrant worker, a guy with nothing to his name, always scanning for something useful like a dumped sofa or an old pair of trainers. And then there are elderly ladies from the neighbourhood, like Ah-Ming, who collect bottles and cans along the road and trade them for a bit of cash. No-one had ever been as obsessive

about the bins as Ah-Ming, though.

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Old Ah-Ming spent more time at the bins every day than the Rubbish Man himself. She had a rummage in them when it got dark and then another go before dawn. By the time the Rubbish Man started his day, Ah-Ming had checked all the nearby bins and snaffled up anything of value. What's more, the mess she left behind was a bugger to sweep up, so the Rubbish Man loathed her. Sometimes Ah-Ming was still there when the Rubbish Man arrived and he would drive her off with his broom, hurling curses. Sometimes he was over-zealous and shoved her to the ground.

'Get away, old woman!' he bellowed, like he wanted everyone to know he'd caught her in the act. The Rubbish Man's dog had learned to detest Ah-Ming as much as he did, and charged at her whenever she came into view, barking its little head off and causing her to flee in fright.

It was Ah-Ming's neighbours who reviled her the most, though, thanks largely to her dreadful odour. In the middle of a 38° day when hardly anyone was outdoors, if you looked along the line of bins you might notice that one was at an angle. This was a sign that Ah-Ming had finished lunch and was burrowing for booty. She'd be bent over, head in the bin, and all you could see was the lower half of her body plus an old rice sack. She was busily rummaging through rubbish and stuffing things into the sack. By the time she reached the bottom of a bin, she was literally half inside it. As time went on, she herself came to exude a putrid smell. People had to pinch their noses and swerve away as they passed by. If a particularly irritable resident encountered Ah-Ming bent over the bin when he was taking out trash, he'd simply toss it over her with a glare.

Scraps of cloth, broken toys, fizzy drink cans, PVC panels – there was nothing Ah-Ming wouldn't collect. No-one knew what the old lady wanted it all for. There she was, well into her seventies, lugging a sack of crap upstairs, emptying it out, and taking it back down again. In and out throughout the day, trailing a fetid odour through the building as she shuttled between the flat upstairs and her den in the garage downstairs. The neighbours might knock on the door, ask her to clean the place up, and half-heartedly she'd toss out a few items. Unfortunately, however, there was no banishing the smell of putrescence.

It simply didn't make sense. A little old lady with a decent pension, well-known around the neighbourhood, as respectable as the next person – 'and the next thing you know she's rummaging about in filthy bins.' No-one could explain it. All anyone could say was: 'She's gone. Well and truly gone.'

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Ah-Ming wasn't scraping by on minimum welfare support and neither was she one of those elderly folk without relatives. She was a regular person who'd had a decent job before she retired. Her husband had been a municipal warden who was killed during the holiday season one year when a street hawker went berserk and knifed him. He was in his late forties at the time. As the widow of a 'modern hero' martyred in the line of duty, Ah-Ming received a stipend which helped to put her son, Ah-Hsin, through vocational college.

Ah-Hsin had a lucky break when he graduated. He slotted into his father's old post and began earning his crust as a municipal warden, albeit with little enthusiasm. He used to say: 'What's the point of all this 'cracking down' on traders? You're out there rain or shine and can't even pocket what you confiscate! Me, I'm gonna grease some palms, pull a few

strings. Before you know it, I'll be in a cushy office job!' It never happened, though.

Within a few years, Ah-Hsin found himself a wife. They couldn't afford their own place so they squeezed in with his mother in the 60-square-metre, two-room flat; one room for her and one for them. The young couple went out to work and Ah-Ming cooked at home. Everything was dandy. Then her son had a son and the flat became too small for them all. Ah-Ming offered to move into the garage downstairs. They cleaned it up, fitted a window and put in a bed. The old lady seemed comfortable enough down there. By day she took care of the cooking and looked after the child, in the flat upstairs. After dinner, once she'd washed the dishes and put the child down, she'd go back downstairs. All of them were looking forward to the day their number came up for affordable housing, so that Ah-Hsin and his wife could move out.

The other old ladies were indignant on Ah-Ming's behalf. 'Squatting in the garage instead of sleeping in your own family's flat,' they said. 'You shouldn't have to put up with that!' Ah-Ming waved away their concerns. 'Never mind. When our Ah-Hsin gets his flat I'll have the whole place to myself.' She went on saying this for years but nothing changed, so she remained in the poky little garage on the ground floor. Luckily Ah-Ming was resourceful and had no problem getting the little space neatly sorted. The neighbours marvelled when they dropped by for a look. The camp bed, with its blanket and mosquito net, made a pretty little picture. There was a small television set under a dust cover, and photographs and a calendar on the wall. There was a little dining table with two chairs and just enough space so as not to feel cramped. Some of the other old girls used to come and sit in the space

in front of the garage, gabbling merrily about everything and everyone. It was like a scene from the old days.

‘It’s good being on the ground floor,’ Ah-Ming told people. ‘Saves you having to schlep upstairs. Feels like being back in one of the old single-storey houses.’

Women from the wool factory really get into their needlework after they retire. They meet up to admire each other’s pieces of fabric and compare techniques, chatting about different methods for seaming and tying off thread. Ah-Ming had an old-fashioned sewing machine which she cherished more than anything. It was in fine condition despite its antique appearance, and she kept it polished and shiny under a snug-fitting cotton cover. Being a deft seamstress, Ah-Ming could make do with the least costly materials. She selected offcuts at the shop, washed and dried them, then made them into whatever worked best. The family’s pillow covers, her son’s pyjamas, her grandson’s cloth nappies and her own clothes – all were treadle-sewn on Ah-Ming’s machine. Leftover scraps could always be bundled into mop heads. Hats and gloves for winter were knitted from cheap balls of wool. The family saved plenty in clothing costs.

The child grew quickly, and with each change of season Ah-Ming put in extra hours at the sewing machine. Within a few days, fresh little socks and shorts would be hanging on the balcony, a size larger than the ones before.

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There was still no sign of an office job for Ah-Hsin after five or six years, so he eventually quit as a warden and went into business with a partner. Trade was slow, a new flat hadn’t come through yet and the child was due to start nursery. Money was getting tighter. It must have been around then that Ah-Ming had the idea of collecting scrap.

There was a dumpster shed diagonally across from Ah-Ming’s garage, and drinkers tended to lob empties at it

during the night, not bothering where they landed. It meant the ground was strewn with bottles and cans when Ah-Ming raised her door each morning. She gathered the intact items into an old rice sack, and it wasn't long before the sack was full. At the end of the month, she exchanged the contents for cash at the Minfang Grocery. She recouped a few more pennies on what remained from a local scrap collector, who came by on his three-wheeled cart and paid by weight.

Evidently, Ah-Ming had found a way to help out, and her daughter-in-law thought so too – ‘Every little bit counts’. Ah-Ming took to walking around the estate when she had time during the day, checking corners near the bin sheds for discarded soft drink bottles. At the same time, she'd help herself to promotional leaflets from people's letterboxes, along with their old newspapers. Other people who collected scrap in the area got to know Ah-Ming well and told her about the estates with the worst refuse collection and the roads with the best pickings. Ah-Ming started roaming further afield and collecting even more scrap. Leaflets were often in Ah-Ming's hands only moments after being stuffed into a letterbox, and sometimes she made off with people's newly delivered newspapers and utility bills in the process. If anyone saw her they'd cry: ‘Oi, old woman! What d'you think you're doing?’

The tellings-off didn't faze her. It was all money at the end of the day. Bundled waste paper and loaded sacks – Ah-Ming's precious property – were neatly stacked in front of the garage. Every day neighbours would spot her at various points around the estate, and in the park and at the wholesale market. When she went for groceries at the local market she always took a spare sack along and had a scout around. Plenty of people went out of their way to be kind to her. ‘Hey Ah-Ming, don't wear yourself out, now. You've got to look after yourself. Let your son and daughter-in-law worry about bringing in the banknotes!’

Ah-Ming laughed it off. ‘It's nothing – running around

like this is good for me. Great exercise!’

Gradually, Ah-Ming came to be sighted in more and more places. Neighbours would spot her out on the streets in the scorching summer heat and on frigid winter days. It wasn’t a nice thing to see, but then what could you do? ‘Every family has its cross to bear, after all. The whole clan is beggared if people can’t take a bit of hardship.’

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Old Ah-Ming was roaming further from home and coming back even later, and while Ah-Hsin didn’t object he wasn’t exactly happy with the situation. For one thing, it was embarrassing. Everyone could see her traipsing about, a mother sent out by her son to collect scrap to support the family. People would be laughing about it. And to add to that, she was falling behind on the shopping and cooking. When the child came home he’d wail that he was hungry, and then Ah-Hsin would get mad.

‘No-one’s making you go around collecting scrap! Stop it now! It makes us look terrible. Stay home and look after the child. Food on the table three times a day, that’s what you need to worry about. Got it?’

Ah-Hsin always barked out orders. It wasn’t worth talking back.

The old lady agreed to stop, but furtively carried on. She took a shopping bag to market but came back with an extra sack of pickings. When people hailed her on the street it used to be: ‘Ah-Ming, you’re back from the market!’ Now it was more like: ‘Ah-Ming, you’ve got some new stock in!’ She would let out an uncomfortable laugh, then scuttle off to stash her haul as quickly as possible. She was like a thief hiding stolen goods. Some of what she brought back was packed

away outside the back window and some at the bottom of the stairwell. Kids found her collection of soft drink bottles under a stone bench and started kicking them around. Ah-Ming went after them to get the bottles back. ‘Little wretches! Who said you could touch those?’

Slowly it dawned on people that Ah-Ming was collecting increasingly random items. ‘She brings it all back with her, sellable or not.’ That’s how the scrap collector with the three-wheeler put it. He was kicking himself for getting involved with her in the first place. Now he couldn’t pass the garage without being dragged over. ‘Come and have a look, come and have a look.’

‘I’ve told the old lady time and again you can’t sell this kind of material,’ he said. ‘It just won’t sell. But she keeps on collecting it.’ As the frown on his face indicated, Ah-Ming had become a big nuisance for him and his operation, as well as for everyone else.

People shook their heads. They muttered about what was up with Ah-Ming but never let anything slip in front of her son. He had such a vile temper.

Eventually an affordable flat came through for Ah-Hsin and his wife. They scraped together the down-payment and got busy fitting out the new place, leaving their son’s daily routine in Ah-Ming’s hands. Within a few days someone worked up the courage to tell Ah-Hsin that they’d seen Ah-Ming and the boy scavenging for waste on a building site. ‘Ceramic tiles, fluorescent tubes, that sort of thing.’ Ah-Hsin hurtled home, furious. He went straight to the garage where he saw the mass of junk. Ah-Ming put on a smile and was about to show him what everything was for when he launched into an angry tirade.

‘The new flat’s mine and fitting it up is my business. You’re not paying for it and you’re not to get involved. Grubbing

around for other people's dregs like this when you're old enough to be dead. What a disgrace!

'Be senile all you want, but dragging the child into it – what the hell were you thinking?!

It was around dinner time and Ah-Hsin had a booming voice, so all the neighbours heard. He went upstairs, slammed the door, and never let Ah-Ming take the child out on her own again.

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Who knows if Ah-Hsin's rant deterred the old lady or spurred her on? Either way, it was a humiliation. People tutted and talked about her as she crossed the estate. Like Ah-Hsin, they assumed she must have lost the plot. 'Picked up so much junk she's gone soft in the head.'

When people noticed random objects stuffed into bushes, or crammed into corners and under benches they said, 'Look, it's Ah-Ming's stockpile!'

And whenever a freshly delivered newspaper went astray everyone said the same thing: 'Ah-Ming's probably got it!'

But Ah-Ming continued busying about, unconcerned. Cash-deposit bottles and cans were no longer enough for her. She rummaged meticulously through every bin, one after another, in search of whatever was available. Big or small, fish tank or mop head, it was all fair game and it all went back home with her. From breakfast to dinner she was out all day, roaming with her sack. Sometimes she strayed onto a national highway or took the wrong bus and didn't get back until the middle of the night.

In the morning, people would notice a new heap of junk in front of the garage. 'No, no... not for sale,' she'd say. She'd

set out a basin and flask and wash each item, one by one, refilling a bucket at the river when she ran out of water. Then she'd spread them all out, like exhibits, to dry on the bare ground.

'This is a perfectly good stool. The kids can use it once it's been cleaned up. This piece of cloth, it's going to make a beautiful curtain.' She smiled at the passers-by, explaining where each piece came from and what it was good for.

No-one wanted to risk getting drawn into conversation with Ah-Ming, or trying to reason with her, so they just hurried past with a noncommittal word or two. After a while, it was easier to simply pretend they hadn't seen her. The scrap collector on the three-wheeler now gave her garage a wide berth, and the other old girls, her former colleagues, stopped calling by when they were getting together for a sewing session. The space in front of Ah-Ming's garage was now mostly deserted. Just her sitting alone on the ground, sorting her items, then washing them, then sorting again.

Ah-Hsin and his wife had long-since stopped Ah-Ming shopping and cooking for them, and didn't even allow her up to the flat. Ah-Hsin's wife thought she was dirty and worried about the child catching germs. After dinner, Ah-Hsin would take a pan of leftovers downstairs and transfer the contents into the old lady's bowl, for her to eat alone in the garage. It was the same routine, every day. If she wasn't there, Ah-Hsin placed the bowl of food on the ground outside the garage, where the dogs soon got it.

One day, probably because she'd sold off some stock or scavenged something precious, Ah-Ming was looking particularly pleased. She went to market with her little cloth bag and came back with half a sauce-braised duck. 'Ooh, special treat today, Ah-Ming!' said people at the entrance to

the estate. Ah-Ming smiled back: 'My grandson loves this!'

Since she couldn't go upstairs, Ah-Ming kept watch outside the garage until the boy came home from school. She waved him over: 'Here, my sweet! Gran's bought us something nice!' The two of them tucked in, each taking a bite in turn. At just that moment, however, Ah-Ming's daughter-in-law arrived back from work. She snatched the duck leg from the child's hand, flung it into the weeds, and slapped him across the face.

'So you like that filth do you? Dirty swine! Upstairs, now!' The hapless child was dragged away in tears, leaving Ah-Ming sitting where she was. Not a word of reproach had been directed at her by the boy's mother. Not a single word.

Just like the neighbours, Ah-Ming's daughter-in-law looked right through her.

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Ah-Hsin and his wife moved out with their child as soon as the new place was ready. They took the furniture and left Ah-Ming with an empty flat. Minus their contents, the two rooms seemed big and spacious. Ah-Ming stayed on in her compact little garage on the ground floor, however. She never went upstairs to sleep.

Before long, the flat was jammed with junk. While Ah-Ming lived downstairs, the place upstairs became her storeroom. Every item she collected, no matter what, was stashed away there. There was no more sorting and cleaning – she didn't have time for that. She hustled out as soon as she woke in the morning and didn't get back until dark. Where she went, what she ate, no-one knew.

Someone quipped, 'Ah-Ming even gets dinner from the bins now!' When people ran into her on the street they called

out, 'Hey, Ah-Ming, better get some new stock in!' Others said 'Yo, Ah-Ming, off to work then!'

The old lady, grimy from head to toe, quietly responded: 'Things to go and see. I've got some things to go and see.' Then headed off to who knows where.

By now, most of the neighbours simply ignored Ah-Ming, having long since passed the stage of feeling sorry for her. To them, she was like a rag-picker or tramp. A batty old lady, someone with no family to speak of who'd clearly lost her marbles. She didn't even come up to the level of the Rubbish Man because she didn't collect refuse. She had no idea what she was collecting.

On one occasion, she was taken to hospital clutching her stomach in agony, looking deathly pale. Because no relatives came to claim her, she was on Community News the following day. It turned out she'd given herself food poisoning by drinking from a bottle she'd picked up at the train station. When the reporter asked her about it, she mumbled something about a sweet little boy who'd smiled at her, and how she'd wanted to give him a drink. She'd sipped from the bottle first to check it was all right, and instantly felt queasy.

Ah-Ming had a gastric tube inserted and was put on a drip, but the drink bottle had been thrown away so the doctors couldn't determine what she'd drunk. Pesticide? Liquid detergent? They just had to deal with it as best they could. In the news clip, Ah-Ming groaned 'It hurts... my throat's burning.' But there were no tears and she wasn't kicking up a fuss.

Ah-Hsin came and signed the old lady out of hospital. He took her back to the estate and, without further ado, left her there. The garage door was wide open and passers-by could see her lying on the camp bed. Everyone knew what had happened but no-one went in to ask how she was. The dogs

strayed in at one point and she flailed her arms to shoo them out. Fortunately, she didn't seem to be in such a bad way, aside from her sickly pallor. When it was dark, she got up and sat quietly on the bed. She lit a dim lamp, went upstairs to get something from the flat, then hurried back down.

Within a few days, Ah-Ming had her strength back and was out and about with her sack. After that, there were often nights when no light at all glimmered from the garage.

'Ah-Ming must have died out there,' people said. But a few days later she'd be back on the estate.

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On this particular night, Ah-Ming had rummaged about in the bins for too long at the end of a boiling hot day and had finally succumbed. Maybe because it was airless in those bins, or just too smelly. But this time she didn't end up in hospital. 'Motherfucker!' exclaimed the Rubbish Man as he dragged her out. People heading to work stopped for a look, pinching their noses as they approached, then hastily backing off from the stench. The Rubbish Man prodded Ah-Ming with his foot and got his dog to have a sniff. She lay motionless.

Someone said, 'Quick! Call 1-2-0! Get an ambulance!'

'What's the point?' someone else said. 'Call Ah-Hsin. Tell him to come and get the body!'

A little crowd formed, standing well back from the inert figure under its cloud of flies. A rancid fluid spread across the ground towards them.

The Rubbish Man went to the river, returned with a bucket of water and emptied it over Ah-Ming.

After a couple of moments, she came to.

She wasn't dead, so the Rubbish Man moved on to the next building and the gawkers quickly dispersed. They had to get away from that smell. Ah-Ming had rummaged through so many bins she was like a walking refuse tip.

'Face to face with the living dead first thing in the morning! Talk about bad omens!' Muttering grimly, everyone steered around the bin and skirted the patch of ground where Ah-Ming had lain. But there wasn't a single bin on the estate that Ah-Ming hadn't foraged at some point, and there was no way off the estate without passing her garage. There was no getting around Ah-Ming. Wherever some item had been disposed of by some person, Ah-Ming had been there. Whatever it was, Ah-Ming wanted it.

It was just no-one wanted Ah-Ming. Only the bins wanted her now. Recyclable rubbish and non-recyclable rubbish, it was all the same to her. The bins gave Ah-Ming food and they gave her shelter. They gave her everything she desired. And this past night, in the big green bin, she'd slept so blissfully well.'

Ah-Ming stood up, patted herself down and returned to her garage. Beaming with pleasure she pulled out the shiny sewing machine. 'Now then, let's have a look. What a first-rate material. Just the thing for disposable nappies.'

Ah-Ming tugged the mildewed sheet of rubber from her front and began lightly working the treadle.

Translated from the Chinese by Christopher Macdonald

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