

Chapter 1 Police report

The clicking of tongues and tapping of the fingers irked the newly minted police officer. Yet, the small crowd of Lees paced around the small police station, impatiently waiting for the rainstorm to clear. Finally, the rain stopped. The middle-aged son lambasted at the police superintendent. "It's clear, you can go now can't you?"

The sky was still gray with overhung clouds. The soil was soggy and muddy. The Lee family followed the search patrol in their humble Honda car. They had already searched along the roads near the community. The Third Ring Road, the Fourth Ring Road, the Fifth Ring Road, the Financial Street, the South Station, and Dawang Road. The few commuters battling the harsh patter of rain yielded no clues.

The 48 hour missing person report had been answered by a slovenly police officer, bored from the long call duties. It was just 48 hours. And the missing was a fully grown adult. Who knows? He might have just gone to Suzhou for a retiree trip. Was this really an urgent case? The bored officer filed it with a D- priority.

Perhaps the Lees sensed the lack of urgency or tension. As such, after they called the daughter-in-law's family for backup support to search in other areas, they drove nearly 200 kilometers themselves and found nothing. Thereafter, they camped at the police office, deliberately plying on the pressure so it would not fall to the bottom of the pile.

The police at the station were equally dismissive.

"What did your father do before he came to Beijing?"

My father used to be a professor in Suzhou University."

"What did he teach?"

"Linguistics."

"Maybe he is just on a trip back to Suzhou."

"We have been calling his friends and colleagues one by one since yesterday. But nobody, including my father's former colleagues, knows his whereabouts."

"Has anyone been to his home?"

"Yes, my cousin has the key and has kept watching there."

"Would your father leave a written message telling you where he was going?"

"No. But I have been calling his mobile phone, and it was turned off."

"If he does not usually tell you where he's going, maybe he's just out somewhere enjoying his time alone."

"So you're going to shirk your duties? When are you going to find him? Isn't that what a missing report is for? When someone is missing for more than 48 hours, aren't you supposed to do something? Why aren't you searching for him? What if something happens?"

"Alright, alright. We'll send a junior officer with a car out after the rainstorm stops. Just wait here or come back tomorrow."

The Lees took turns waiting, sitting by a noticeboard with missing figures, long abandoned since a decade earlier. They looked at the black and white pictures. The children who would have been as old as the middle-aged son by now, the women who went missing after disco dates, and elderly who were lost and never found. The Lees knew, the moment they stopped pushing the police, the momentum would be lost and the elder Lee would join the noticeboard as a statistic and a remnant of a lackluster attempt to solve the missing person case.

Chapter 2 Diary

As the daughter-in-law went to elder Lee's home, changing 'shifts' with the cousin, her housewife instincts kicked in as she nonchalantly organized the house.

Amidst the mess on the table was a worn notebook. Inside, she slid her finger somewhere to the middle, casually opening it. It contained sporadic entries. A diary of sorts.

It read:

30 June, 2018

My love, when you get there, can you give me space to linger?

May, you've gone for sixty-seven days and I still miss you. I tried to keep to our previous schedule every day, but I can't. I seem to be aging rapidly. I often can't remember where I put things and what I'm supposed to do. Without you I began to realize how far it was to go to the nearest grocery store and how luxurious it was to have a sip of hot tea. Out of sight, out of mind. It is further from the truth. I feel like I was deeply in love with you again just as when we were young. I miss you all the time, and then loneliness crowds in my mind. Time passes, begrudgingly day by day. Each no more meaningful than the last.

Ming and Lily have gone back to Beijing. They are so filial and understanding. They felt anxious about me and invited me to live with them. After all, I am in my seventies. Tomorrow, I will take a high-speed train to Beijing South Railway Station. Lily will pick me up. I am reluctant to leave home because leaving home means leaving you. I walked on campus in the afternoon. It was winter vacation, and the campus was empty. There was a security guard strolling in front of our school. I didn't see any student or any of our colleagues. In the afternoon, I called Mr. Zhang and Mr. Xie, telling them that I would stay in Beijing for some time.

Ming and Lily tidied up our home carefully during their stay here. The day before yesterday I went to Shantang Old Street to buy them some osmanthus cakes and dried bamboo shoots, also your favorite snacks. I emailed Ming a checklist of what I would use in Beijing and he has prepared almost everything. Now I just need to take some books to read, collections of Poems by Rabindranath Tagore, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alexander Pushkin, those are the poems of our time. At that time, I read these poems in English to you. You thanked me in French: "Merci beaucoup, mon cheri." I then spoke Suzhou dialect to you, you laughed like the flowers swaying in the spring wind.

In the evening, I cooked some noodles with soup. Unconsciously I put two bowls on our dining table as before silently hoping you could accompany me. In Beijing I can't do so, Ming and Lily will feel embarrassed. You never want to trouble others, always take care of others' feelings. I'm going to bed. Good night, May.

1 July, 2018

There is no place like home.

May, this is my first day in Beijing. It's quite late when I arrived at Ming's home, so I won't write much.

Ming was busy with his work, and Lily picked me up. She didn't drive her car because the parking lot near the high-speed railway station was too far from the exit, and she was afraid I couldn't walk such a long distance. I was surprised that getting a taxi in Beijing turned out to be much convenient than in Suzhou. However, the traffic jam was so severe that it took about an hour to get home.

The willow fluttered with the summer wind, turquoise filling my eyes. The exuberant foliage of locust trees and aspens shaded the street pleasantly. These tree species are not as common in Suzhou, but they are charming as well.

Ming is a little thinner, but still vigorous. Lily was the chef and prepared dinner with some local delicacies. They also ate the osmanthus cake and found it still palatable.

The bedroom they prepared for me is quite large, with a bathroom and a cloakroom meticulously cleaned. I put your photos on the desk. I felt a little dizzy since I was so rushed today. Good night, my love.

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12 July, 2018

Life is not as good as you want.

There are always some trifles to deal with. Unfortunately, I forgot my reading glasses and phone charger at home.

It is not easy to get used to the new life. Besides, the kids are busy and stressful every day. Lily has meetings at the office every Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, and she does not get off work until about 8:30 pm. Although Ming's working hours are fixed, he gets together with his colleagues every once in a while after work. The pace of life in Beijing is much faster than in Suzhou. Ming told me to take good care of myself. He takes after your personalities, which is

gratifying.

I went to the supermarket today to buy a new toothbrush, some fresh vegetables, water bamboo, green pakchoi or something alike. The supermarkets in Beijing are much bigger, catering for all tastes with various commodities: the imported, the organic, the green and the non-pesticide. However, they are arranged in a way that seems quite unfriendly to aged people with poor eyesight. It took me a long time to search for the groceries I needed. Also, I was totally astonished when I checked out: people were lining up at the self-checkout counters and there was no staff offering any kind of assistance! I was afraid of being urged and slighted by the people behind me because of my sluggish movements, so I give up.

It is Thursday, the day of staying alone. Ming has a dinner party with his colleagues, and Lily is working overtime and won't come back for dinner, so I cooked a bowl of noodles for myself. Midsummer cicadas were chirping outside the windows, leaves swaying outside. I decided to ramble in the community wearing the new gray T-shirt which Ming bought for me at the Outlets shopping mall last weekend. The central garden is encircled by dozens of buildings, which made me kind of breathless. The security guard said there were some aged people dancing in the square at night, and I could exercise with them. Maybe I could make some like-minded friends there.

It turned out that more and more people were pouring in from all directions and gathered in the square. Then the dance began. The deafening music made me feel dizzy, boisterous cacophony from the crowds lingering in my ears. That wasn't what I expected. Most of the dancers were domestic servants in the community, some even brought the children, letting them shout and scream carelessly, running up and down in the dancing crowd. I could not get acclimatize myself to the dim light and noisy environment, and it was also difficult to adapt to such a lively atmosphere without you. All I needed was space. Hell is other people.

Around 9:00 Ming and Lily got home, and they looked whacked. I pretended to be cheerful for I simply wanted to reassure them that I was doing well. After all, they had their own lives, and that was fine. I miss you, May.

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25 July, 2018

No language, no access.

It is mid-summer, and the clear sky makes one yearn for a walk. There are many young people in the community, and it is hard to find aged people to chat with.

I still remember the first lecture of Introduction to Linguistics: language can convey information, express feelings, record history and reflect cultural evolution. Language is the embodiment of the human way of thinking, behaving and living, which can be found in lexicology, syntax and rhetoric.

You have said that in French eighty is expressed as four twenties: quatre vingts. Similarly in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this planet, a new nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*" But the oddities of linguistics don't mean that the French and Americans are not good at math. Descartes, Fermat, Joseph-louis Lagrange, von Neumann, Nash, Norbert Werner are stars shining in the world of mathematics. At the thought of linguistics, my mind becomes more active than usual. Tomorrow I will begin reading my linguistics books. Fortunately I have brought it.

There's much I would like to talk about. But alas, there is no one to talk to. There are children with whom niceties can be exchanged and other elderly, albeit lacking in education, to grouse about modernization and change. But there is no one with whom I can vocalize such complex thoughts of the intricacies of linguistics to.

Ming got off work early and taught me how to use my smart TV to watch Internet programs. I need to switch back and forth to boot the devices with the two remote controls. It's a bit complicated. I wrote down the details in the notebook, and then practiced a few times. Finally I made it. Guess I'll be talking to a TV now. Good night, May.

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16 September, 2018

There is no greater grief than to recall a time of happiness when in misery.

Mr. Xie, that colleague from the Physics department, is down with Alzheimer's. He just responds in one sentence. After three months he began to forget things, spoke incoherently and got angry with no reason. His son noticed his abnormal behaviors and took him to doctors in the department of neurology. They diagnosed him with Alzheimer's disease, middle stage. The doctors mentioned the decline in language function could be an early symptom.

Everyone I know is in this room. And we are so near, yet so far. Suddenly I can't remember what I had for breakfast yesterday and the day before. Suddenly, they are an ocean away as my heart remembers a bond so precious that I can't let go, but I falter as to why. I think I have a problem too. May, I must do something, the earlier the better.

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9 October, 2018

If you are passionate about something, pursue it, no matter what anyone else thinks.

The days are all the same, and I'm determined to make some changes to get my mind working. Last night a student happened to call me about the revision of a paper for SCI, and we ended up having a conversation till almost eleven o'clock. I was extremely happy to find myself getting back to the condition when I taught students with you decades ago. I remember standing in a lecture room with more than 100 students sitting below, writing Swahili sentences on their textbooks.

I did my own 'exam' revision. "mtoto mmoja anasoma" "watoto wawili wanasoma". I found that I could still remember some details, even certain blackboards that I wrote the language points on.

The weather in Beijing has been good recently. Although it is a little dry, the weather is very charming. The sunset over the Western Hills is beautiful. I wish you could see it, May.

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15 November, 2018

My philosophy of life is work.

I write. But I stumble. The grammar is there. But each sentence is slow to wring out.

I'm bored. I want to talk. My throat. It feels like it's stuck. There's so much I would like to say. To... what's that word. Expose. No, exposition. No, I mean... just that there's so much I would like to talk about.

I looked at the entries from the past. "The delinquent weed sprouted amidst the soft dew, surrounded by a bed of pansies. Ah, how the weed must feel, slighted by the pansies. Or perhaps it never expounds the reason why it is shunned, not knowing it was a pansy but only in disguise?"

The sentences are beautiful. Wit. But...

I re-read the dictionary. But each day, with the basics, my world becomes smaller. Simpler. More basic. "Have you eaten?", "How much is this?", "How do I get to this place?"

I came across a phrase much earlier in the diary. "The colors of his world made an otherwise repetitive life replete with the excitement of the present and hope of the future. But the colors faded, from a luminous yellow to a mustard yellow, from the bloom of spring to a dull poisonous green, and from the brown of earth to a darkness befitting of night. And life, without the activities that color it brightly, became a grayscale spiraling into shades of black void."

May, I couldn't sleep at night.

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18 November, 2018

Not change yourself to please others, but for yourself.

I sat by the window and watched the rules of the Swahili sentence-making this afternoon. The language is quite simple. As long as you remember the basic prefix and gerund types, you can directly make sentences. It's like the spy movies twenty years ago in which you can write all the sentences as long as you have a code book. Then I realized I can also design my own language too. It makes me happy to think of writing a language that no one else can understand. As soon as I

finish the code book, I'll write to you in my own language and only we can understand it. How about that, May? I would like to use the Chinese sentence-making rules and words, but change the meaning of each word itself.

With that in mind, I picked up my notebook and began to list some basic rules. Since the syntax can be the same as that in Chinese, all the nouns and adjectives should change their meanings while all the verbs retain the original meaning with the unchanging singular and plural. Then start with the color, black is yellow, white is red, green is pink and so on. I've got most of the words in color. This is part of the basics, and the rest of it can't be redefined in just one category: furniture, animals, food. . It is more fun to mix things up. Lamp is called mouse, floor is called chair, sofa is called bread ... Once I made up some nouns, I am able to try to make sentences. There's a white lamp next to the green sofa can translate into there is a red mouse next to the pink bread. Countless thoughts flashed through my mind that I even felt younger. Two and a half hours passed quickly. This is the first time since I arrived in Beijing.

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27 November, 2018

Language is the tool, vocabulary is the symbol

Got up at eight o'clock this morning and started working. I wasn't in the mood for lunch. I have to work out my code book.

bamboo—purity	beautiful—ambivalent
bird—halo	bright—blissful
boat—baptism	careful—eclectic
book—Gospel	chilly—nefarious
chair—garnet	clear—effervescent
coffee—enamel	dark—Gothic
daylight—rosette	distinct—euphoric
door—cherub	dogmatic—reminiscent
eagle—oculus	effective—echoing
flower—arcadia	elegant—Hellenistic
glasses—ighter	fearful—serene
I—iris	fragrant—ethereal
mountain—Luna	fresh—renaissant
nature—crucifix	holy—epiphanic
ocean—freedom	inspiring—iridescent
picture—filigree	juicy—loquacious
pole—pilgrim	middle—delicate
road—Colosseum	new—ebullient
sculpture—chapel	perfect—kaleidoscopic
snake—Medusa	pure—extravagant
sofa—limestone	simple—ephemeral
son—sunflower	slim—gorgeous
umbrella—redemption	terrible—mellifluous
water—Isis	undeniable—flabbergasted
wisdom—Athena	young—melancholy

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7 December, 2018

Language belongs to an era and thought belongs to many times.

*I love thee,
I love but thee
With a love that shall not die
Till the sun grows cold
And the stars grow old.
Translated into
Iris love rose*

Iris love but rose
With a desire that shall not die
Till the glacier grows light
And the nebula grows alone.

Remember, May? Shakespeare's sonnet. I read to you when we first hung out. You said your favorite poem because similar to ancient Chinese poetry, "*Only when there are no edges in the mountains and no distance between the sky and the earth, can I finally part from you.*"

May, life boring. Why elder no activity? Young has school. But hate school. Maybe they should have school till 12. Then work. Then school from 20-23 for middle school. Then 30-33 high school. 40-42 community college. 50-52, 2nd part of community college. Become full degree. 60-62 masters. 70-72 Phd. Why nothing for elders? Maybe half work? Why must elders retire?

May, why elders no party? Like when we were 20? No new way to make friends? Why society so...? Like nothing for us? May, miss you.

In the bed, I could not make myself sleep. So I got up.

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24 December, 2018

Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.

I lost sleep last night and wake up at 5 in the morning to translate the excerpt of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*.

*Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,
Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intense day,
All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them!
Thou for whose path the Atlantic's level powers
Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!*

Translated into

The anemone who didst waken from his winter passions
The turquoise Aegean sea, where he lay,
Lull'd by the fantasy of his aqua aurora,
Beside a petrichor xanadu in Mariana trench,
And saw in sleep lonely lullabies and blossoms
Quivering within the luminescence's sylphlike serendipity,
All overgrown with vermeil zing and arcadia
So fabulous, the psyche faints picturing them!
Anemone For whose dreamboat the pyramid's level powers
Cleave themselves into nostalgia, while far below
The poppy-blooms and the demure eternity which wear
The hesperian galaxy of freedom, know
Thy tranquility, and desperately grow viridian with cherish,
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!

It's a short glimpse of clarity, and so I wish to lengthen it by even a fraction of time. The times where that mental clarity returns are so fleeting, but only then do I realize how great it was to work.

The arduous moments where I drowned in paperwork now seem a privilege society withholds.

Making elders work is perhaps a taboo in Chinese society, but alas the benefits are so overwhelmingly ... welcoming. Having a place in society, keeping active, being part of society and in the network of people, coming and passing... All are now things I wished I had held on to longer. Even a part time intellectual job would be one I prefer over the 'patriarchal' society that insists on 'filial piety'. Ha, and I am the patriarch in society. And yet, I have no power. So who should I blame?

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22 March, 2019

Everyone I know is in this room, but Iris can't communicate with them. Iris wants to go outside. It is raining heavily. I want to find an umbrella.

Chapter 3 Echo

The daughter-in-law messaged the son.

"Perhaps he is looking for an umbrella?"

She shared a snapshot of the final entry.

"Who is Iris?"

"Not sure. An imaginary friend."

The son drove around, picking the daughter-in-law up to search in nearby convenience stores.

The daughter-in-law sat by the window, looking out at the dark lonely streets.

How would they find him? The alert professor filled with a hunger to learn, shrewd with the keenness of an eagle and with the heart of a dad? His shell aside, how would they find *him*. She quietly held the son's hand, wondering how he would deal with knowing they lost him twice.

The weeks after, she took some time to teach her parents Sudoku game and made it a point to call her parents and talk to them 30 min a week. She also waited for an opportunity in her company and proposed hiring some part-time remote staff during peak seasons and helped her parent gain employment. That helped her parent on the TV front and other part-time side gigs came after.

As for the elder Lee? Months passed and he joined the endless list of missing persons. The police continued to search for a demonstrably 'reasonable' amount of time the next day and switched it to a passive search.

Each passing day, the son lost the elder Lee by a bit. His own memory of the elder Lee faded into the past. In the pandemonium of never ending 'busy periods', what had the elder Lee worn the last day they met? When was the last time they visited a tourist attraction together? Where was it? What were the elder Lee's last words.

Memory is quite like a dandelion, still and full, but empty when the winds of time blows.

It is something that everyone treasures, but few make the attempt to hold and maintain. And when it's gone, it fades into oblivion, scattered into the wind.

The END