NOW TRENDS

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Karl Taro Greenfeld

When I set out for Chengdu, in the middle of our country, to interview Xiu Xi, I carried in my jacket pocket an envelope full of kwai—I hadn't been told the amount—which I was to hand over to Xiu's manager if I found upon arrival that the starlet was unavailable or noncooperative; her way of saying pay me, please. If everything went smoothly and we completed the story and photo shoot without a problem, I was to return to Beijing with the envelope which I would then hand back to my Publisher. At that point, I assumed, the Publisher would request from Xiu Xi's manager a payment to place her on the cover.

We are at the stage in our great socialist experiment when we are no longer sure who should pay who. In the past it was clear: the subject of the story would discretely, or not so discretely, hand over an envelope full of kwai to the journalist, and

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a larger sum would be paid to the publisher. Stories and photos, it was understood, were nothing more than advertising for the person or venture being profiled. But magazines like mine soon discovered that certain prominent cultural heroes—actors, athletes, telecom moguls—actually helped us sell magazines if we put them on the cover. So we began to pay to these subjects their own red envelopes of so-called lucky money. Now, because all parties involved find the issue awkward and hard to broach beforehand, we don't always know upon undertaking a new story which way the money should flow.

Xiu Xi was an emerging actress, as famous for her appearance in a handbag advertisement as for the supporting roles she had played in two films by a Taiwanese director (handbag advertisements, in our country, being more closely scrutinized and discussed than feature films). Her popularity wasn't such that we could be sure she would sell magazines, but it seemed likely she would be a successful cover subject, and so I was dispatched, after her management agreed that she would sit down for an interview. I was a trusted member of our editorial staff, considered politically reliable and perhaps our best-known writer. I had completed Beidai and even won a fellowship to a journalism school in America for one semester; that had been a confusing four months spent in a small apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side and attending lectures where various questions of journalistic ethics were raised. In the United States reporters do not pay for stories. I found this practice to be admirable. When I spent two weeks over the holiday known in the United States as Spring Break at the offices of a prestigious American magazine in Midtown Manhattan, I asked several of the editors there if it was true that they didn't pay their cover subjects and they all concurred. That was wonderful, I told them. I imagined that a magazine as prestigious as theirs must extract huge fees from those wanting to appear on their cover. They explained I was mistaken. No money changed hands. That seemed to me to be terribly wasteful.

While that American magazine had been founded, many years ago, as a weekly magazine, the magazine I worked for in China had started in the 1980s as a monthly journal of the goings-on of the young bureaucrats—those under sixty years old—of two interministry departments in charge of culture and telecommunications. To comply with PPP regulations, we still bear our original name, *The Journal of Interministry Junior Cadre Affairs*, in small characters beneath the much larger title by which we are better known, *NowTrends*. We have a staff of thirty-six, many of whom work in both editorial and publishing. Our Publisher is also our editor-in-chief and I have known him since we were at Beidai; he was once a very fine writer, perhaps the best in our department, so it was not surprising that he would take over his own magazine and leave writing behind. If you are a creative person, there is only so much you can do in fields like writing or journalism. Business offers more freedom. He has offered several times to promote me to the advertising department of the magazine and seems genuinely disappointed that I have declined. He tells me I could move to a bigger apartment closer to the center of the city, perhaps the fifth ring road instead of the grubby, smoky little hutong that I share with an old couple and a Muslim currency trader. I like my two rooms, though I am quite sure that our little courtyard house has already been earmarked for destruction by some princeling and when it is finally flattened, I will regret not having more money and better connections.

I was looking forward to the trip to Chengdu, to escape the capital for a few days and the frantic Olympic preparations, the strictures against spitting, drinking beer in public, the reminders to queue in orderly fashion. It all seemed so un-Chinese to me that I was beginning to wonder when the anti-badminton campaign would begin. Also, an old friend of mine had been living in Chengdu for a few years. He had been a classmate of the Publisher and mine at Beidai, another great talent; he would certainly have

received the fellowship to study in America if he hadn't been viewed by the professors as politically suspect. After graduating, he became the first of our crowd to become well-known after he joined a group of writers and filmmakers, loosely supervised by the PPP, who traveled the country in the mid-nineties, producing a series of ostensibly pro-business documentaries that showed how various entrepreneurs and businessmen were starting to get rich in the new China. Huang had never been a member of the party, of course, and so he had no official role in this troop but it was generally known that he had written and conducted most of the interviews for almost the entire ten hours of television. The footage and interviews had been remarkable not because of the portrayal of these new business leaders and their party hack partners but for the poignant and widespread depiction of how China's rural poor were being systematically stripped of their already limited resources and protections. Why the documentary was ever aired on CCTV was a widespread cause for speculation; I believe it was the sentimentality of a few senior leaders who harkened back to the days of the peasant revolution. These nonagenarians would be dead or retired within a few months of the airing of the documentary, and the PPP would subsequently ban the distribution and even the mention of this elegant television production. Huang, of course, could no longer find any work in television and so he left the capital and moved south, to Guangzhou. For a time he found work at one of the aggressive daily newspapers before that too was closed and he hit the road again, settling, most recently, in Chengdu.

I had not seen him in a few years, and had always been circumspect in my communication with him because I worried his phone might be tapped and his text messages monitored. He assured me that wasn't the case, that the State Security Apparatus was not nearly as efficient as it claimed. Then why, I didn't bother to point out to him, was it omniscient enough to blackball him from

almost any publication in the country? My boss, the Publisher, told me that Huang was a lost cause, a waste of talent. He should have been fabulously wealthy by now, with his brains and his degree. With his talent, there was no limit to how much money he could make in the new China. But Huang, in the Publisher's view, was flawed. I could see the Publisher saying this as he was stuffing himself with freshwater crab in the banquet room of a Shanghai-style restaurant, using the Chinese word for flaw, which has a connotation of a spot of black decay on a perfectly white tooth. (Like most successful Chinese, the Publisher never ate in restaurants' main dining rooms anymore; he only ate in private rooms.) I considered for a while whether Huang was flawed, idealistic, or just born in an inauspicious year. It was, I concluded, a combination of all three. The Publisher, Huang, and I were all born in 1977. We are all snakes.

Our cities are simultaneously boomtowns and ghost towns. New construction proliferates, yellow cranes extending skyward, steel girder infrastructures jutting out from their unfinished glass and concrete sheaths like bones waiting for skin to grow up around them. Once they are completed, however, these new buildings, many of them lavishly fronted and auspiciously named, give the sense of being unoccupied, desolate, despite their strips of shrubbed garden and carefully appointed walkways. For a few hours, in the morning and the evening, the inhabitants emerge from their condominiums to march off to their lucrative jobs, which they might change tomorrow or even today. In America, I had noticed, there was this notion of career, that a young person would join a particular field and then grow old within that sector. Most of my friends change jobs for one reason, money, with little regard for the field they are leaving or entering. This morning's mobile content marketer might be this afternoon's real estate agent and this evening's owner of a Pacific Coffee

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franchise. We don't find anything strange about that.

Yet these vast new developments are all missing that incessant buzz and thrum of life, the spitting, cigarette smoking, public drinking, and badminton playing that comprised the street life of Chinese neighborhoods. The inhabitants here tend to stay home, preferring instead to watch their LCD televisions. I don't know where the children have gone, but they too, seem to have disappeared into an endless routine of after-school study programs designed to propel them into the best colleges and then a life of wandering through meaningless, ever-higher-paying jobs.

I am to meet Xiu Xi in one of these developments near the center of Chengdu. Many of Chengdu's famous charms, the Scholar Trees, for example, that somehow were spared the various modernization drives of previous five-year plans, are now finally succumbing to the more ruthless efficiency of capitalism with socialist characteristics. The taxi driver finds the quiver of buildings which are arrayed along a wide avenue favored by truck drivers heading east. There is a lovely, arched stone bridge over what would be a stream, or moat I suppose, but is instead dry and into which piles of construction residue—cinder blocks, sand, a twisted metal frame of some kind—have been discarded. The bridge is similar in shape to several I have seen inside the Forbidden City and is intended to lend an air of nobility to this particular conclave of new condominiums. This is the sort of place my friend, the Publisher, has been urging me to buy.

The lobby is vast and attended by two men in black uniforms who sit behind a marble countertop. In their indifference they are identical to the old man who sits at the end of my alley on a overturned bucket and who is supposed to, for a fee of a few kwai a month, "guard" our little house. I tell them where I am going and they point to an elevator that smells strongly of cleaning solvent.

Xiu Xi and her manager are in an apartment near the top of this building, one that offers views over the city, a panorama of more cranes and inchoate buildings just like this one. She appears terribly small, at first, delicate, breakable, a physique that is incongruous with her strange posture of slouching down on the brown leather sofa so that she is almost parallel to the floor. Her manager is seated at a glass dining table, talking into a mobile phone about a document that he is reading on a laptop computer screen. The maid who welcomed me into the apartment has vanished back into the kitchen. She reemerges a moment later with see-through plastic cups filled with iced coffee so heavily saturated with milk that it is almost white.

They are here, I will later discover, because Xiu Xi is to become a spokesmodel for this development, her face and lithe figure appearing in billboards throughout the province advertising the virtues of Supreme Confidence Happy Houses. Her manager, a short, slightly chubby man with unkempt hair that hangs down beneath his ears, tells his phone partner that he will be right back and sets down the phone but doesn't bother to stand to greet me.

This is the first time I have ever seen Xiu Xi without makeup and her face is remarkably plain, nothing more than eyes, nose and a small, exquisitely shaped mouth that forms a perfect sideways oval with an elegant dip in the center of her upper lip. It is a face, I know, that is easy to fashion with the various tools of the makeup artist into whatever is desired: vamp, ingénue, innocent, hero, victim, star. She can be whoever you need her to be. She acknowledges me with a curt nod and squirms herself into a more upright position, casting a glance at her manager and then smiling at me with closed lips. I sip my milky coffee and stand near the glass dining table, between Xiu Xi and her manager, unsure of where I am supposed to go. This is an awkward moment, and

I think for a second about pulling the red envelope from the breast pocket of my jacket but then decide I should wait a moment.

"Welcome to Chengdu," the manager says.

"Thank you."

"You know, they are building a new airport," he says, "another new runway. There will be six flights a day from Hong Kong, a dozen from the capital."

"Exciting," I reply.

"Yes," the manager says, "and the weather, of course, and the food." Chengdu is famous for its putatively spicy cuisine, but like so many Chinese cities, that cuisine has so quickly been refined and changed over the last few years, it is hard to tell what is a Chengdu dish and what is an imported one. You would have to be a culinary historian to keep track, combing pre-revolution texts to really figure out what people were eating in Chengdu before the establishment of the People's Republic. It is a good guess to assume that during the fifties and sixties, the people of Chengdu were eating what the rest of China was eating: nothing. But a rapidly developing city is always quick to latch onto whatever shreds of history it can, and Chengdu loudly celebrates its cuisine.

"Well," I say, "it is certainly a lovely afternoon." I point out the window at the smoggy cityscape.

"Who are you?" Xiu Xi finally says. "Are you from the development corporation?"

"Big sister," the manager intervenes, "he is from the magazine that is celebrating you." She is not his sister, of course. That is just a figure of speech denoting respect and family, but one that is so gratuitously used it now means virtually nothing.

"Sit down," she tells me.

She speaks in an enervated monotone, the vocal equivalent of her blank canvas face. Her accent is very standard, any traces of the eastern coastal province in which she was born have been flattened out. Her voice, with a little more inflection, some coaching, with the right tonal

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inflection, could convey worlds, but as it is now, it is as informative as a party boss's speech. Our interview proceeds unevenly, her answers monosyllabic and almost deliberately clichéd. Then Xiu Xi's head drops forward and she falls asleep.

Her manager, who has been behind his computer the whole time, fails to notice her passing out and so I sit for a while in silence before reaching over and patting Xiu Xi's hand.

"Are you okay?" I ask when her eyes flutter open.

She smiles, this one is real, flared lips, a tiny wrinkle on her neck behind her ear. "You're too handsome to work at a newspaper."

"Magazine," I correct her. "Never mind. Do you need some tea?"

I have been told I have a pleasingly ovoid face—and it does seem that way to me when I look in the mirror, a perfect 0. Those who work at magazines tend not to be the most handsome collection of young men, and so I have been complemented several times when I have gone out on my assignments. I don't dress particularly stylishly, but I do try to at least wear simple clothes, black or white T-shirts beneath black blazers. Still, I am always flattered when I am told I am good-looking. It gives me a feeling that I have options, that a fellow with a pleasing oval face could do whatever he likes in this life.

"Are we finished?" the manager says. He has now risen up and come to stand next to us. "Big sister is very tired."

I don't have enough to fill the pages between the photos, and I haven't even asked the most important question, the one that every interview with a star must lead up to: If you could be any kind of animal, what would you be and why?

"We need to talk a little more," I say.

"Big sister has been working very hard," the manager explains. "Can you call this evening to schedule a time tomorrow?"

I should, I realize, just give them the envelope. But I am petulant about having my afternoon wasted in this manner so I

just nod and bow slightly.

I look at Xiu Xi and she is smiling up at me. She has no idea where she is.

I return to my hotel and leave my briefcase and again call my old friend Huang. A drugged-out starlet is a problem I would like to forget for a few hours and I am eager to meet him. I texted him and told him I would be arriving in town and that I would call. He never picked up or returned my calls and now, when I try to reach him, instead of Huang, another man answers saying only, "Who is this?"

"Who are you?" I say.

"I am here with Huang," he says.

"Let me talk to him," I tell him.

"Are you a family member?"

I am about to say I am an old friend but for some reason I instead say, "He is an acquaintance."

"Huang is being detained for his own safety. He has violated state security regulations too numerous to mention," he explains. "I am a state security officer."

"What did he do?" I ask. "Where is he?"

He tells me that Huang is at a police station on the other side of Chengdu. For a fee, I could see him. Also, if I would like Huang to have food and tea, I should bring a small donation. Ask for Officer Hu, he says.

My heart is pounding when I hang up and I wonder if I should call the Publisher. I don't know where Huang's family is. I assume they are somewhere in his native Hebei, but Huang has never mentioned them to me. I am surprised that Huang would be detained. For the past few years, I had thought he was doing part-time work for small advertising agencies, nothing political or even journalistic. Why would they suddenly decide he posed a threat? And these weren't political

officers or state security agents, these sounded like local cops.

It is already late afternoon when I take a taxi across town. I am let off in front of what looks like a parking garage. I ask the taxi driver where is the police station and he points into the rows of parked cars. "Back there."

I walk that way, and when I am under the concrete overhang I can see that in the back of the garage there seems to be a bank of windows with men in leisure clothes sitting before them on white plastic chairs. When I approach them and ask if this is the Number Six Sub-Provincial Security Office, there is no response but when I ask for Officer Hu one of them points into the offices. The pavement here is covered with cigarette butts.

There are two women seated behind a counter, on which placards urge citizens to report suspicious activity and to make sure their vehicles are properly registered and have working brake lights. There are several posters promoting anti-litter campaigns and urging that any sellers of counterfeit medicines be reported to the appropriate authorities. Along the wall, seated on the floor beneath the windows, are several men and women in shabby clothing who appear to have been waiting for a long time. There are empty Styrofoam food containers and plastic sweet-tea bottles spread around them. The two women ignore me until I ask them for Officer Hu.

They tell me he is not here.

They do not know when he will return.

"Can you call him?" I ask.

They don't respond.

A woman dressed in a black blouse with a garish flower pattern walks in and rests her gold-jewelry-encrusted arm on the counter. She speaks in a familiar tone in the local dialect to one of the women who obviously knows her and tells her she can go upstairs. I guess that she is related to an officer, perhaps a wife or mistress.

I look at the line of forlorn citizens resting against the wall and consider leaving the office. Then I remember that Hu had

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answered Huang's phone and step outside and call the number.

"Yes?"

"I am here to see Huang."

"Ah, you again, with the Beijing accent. Where are you?"

I explain that I am at the Number Six Sub-Provincial Security Office.

"Wait there. I'm having dinner."

So I take my place among my fellow impassive comrades, taking care to lift my jacket up around my waist as my bottom rests on the linoleum floor.

Huang had never been a handsome man, I reflect. He had small eyes and a prominent birthmark on his chin that sprouted a few unsightly, discolored white hairs. (He trimmed them regularly.) In an earlier time, such a feature might have been viewed as lucky. But in our more superficial era, it just seemed impure. Yet his homeliness, I always felt, helped to explain his greater perspicacity; he couldn't rely on getting by on his looks. In college, in our crowded, garlic-smelling dormitory rooms with clotheslines strung across them like a giant cat's cradle, he was the best at Mah Jongg and Pai Gow, and paid for his meals from his winnings. (He was the only one among us who didn't receive some money from home.) He had always yearned for women who seemed just out of his reach, and while most of us resigned ourselves to the arduous and slow courtship of coeds that was a regular feature of Chinese university life, he condemned this process as pointless and useful only as preparation for marriage, which he dismissed as a trap. We dated our female colleagues, but seldom were granted by them any carnal satisfaction; Huang took up with girls from outside the university, some of them dropouts but of high school age. How he managed to keep these karaoke lounge girls happy was a topic of some speculation among the rest of us. Huang finally confessed to me a few years later that he had been using his gambling winnings to pay these companions. Lest

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I would judge him, he quickly added that a good-looking guy like me doesn't understand how it feels to see that expression of disappointment on every woman he meets.

Anyway, he shrugged, the ends justify the means.

I stand up and bow slightly when Officer Hu appears. I try to appear both confident and supplicating at the same time. One never becomes comfortable dealing with security agents; they are simply too unilaterally powerful, possessing, as they do, the ability to make you disappear. But I am of some use to Officer Hu, and we both know that so I follow him up a dirty stairwell to his desk, one of four in a smoky, surprisingly orderly office. Above us, the ceiling is crisscrossed by thickly painted pipes and gleaming electrical ducts. A rectangular fluorescent light fixture hangs on two chains.

"What is your name?" Hu asks after he has gathered a clipboard holding a form that reads Relatives and Friends Of, and then in scribbled handwriting, "863784235."

I tell him a common Chinese name, a surname shared by literally tens of millions.

"Do you have identification?"

I tell him I am sorry but that I have forgotten my ID.

"How do you know Huang?"

"He is an acquaintance," I explain. "We know one person in common."

"And who is that?"

I give another very common Chinese name. He knows this is a formality, and that I will avoid giving him any real information about myself. He will tolerate this until he can discern how much money I am willing to sacrifice for my "acquaintance."

Hu has an air of sleepy indifference that fails to hide a seeping,

menacing quality that I fear could emerge at any moment. He has a crew cut that is flat on top, a narrow forehead, wide-set eyes, small nose, thin lips, and a large, round chin that makes his face seem flattened, like he is made of rubber and his face has just been pressed against a hard surface, and his features have yet to spring back to their usual three-dimensionality.

"Can I see him?" I ask.

Hu shrugs and sips from a clear glass mug of tea that must have been sitting on his desk for hours. Surely, it is cold by now. He explains there is a processing fee to visit a detainee, and that the detainee has already run up a bill for the disposable handcuffs that were used to bring him in, the intake processing, and the clear broth he had to drink this morning.

I take ten 100-kwai notes from my pocket and hand them to him. "This is all I have."

Hu leaves the money on the desk. "Not here," he says. "At the counter. Go downstairs, pay and then they will tell you what to do."

I am told after I pay that I cannot see Huang this evening and that the earliest appointment will be tomorrow morning at 7 a.m. I return to my hotel and sleep fitfully, forgetting to call Xiu Xi's manager. I am back at the station a little before the appointed time and find an ill-formed line of tired-looking people already waiting. We are taken in groups of ten down another stairwell to a long room divided by two steel mesh fences with a one and a half meter gap between them. On one side of one of the fences are the prisoners, then there is this gap where a guard sits on a stool near the door; we are herded in to stand on the far side of the other fence. I recognize Huang by his pigeon-toed stance. I am surprised that even his body language is so familiar to me, since I have not seen him in more then three years. It's strange to

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say this, but he does not seem surprised to see me, though he manages to nod and even attempt a smile.

His birthmark is gone. He must have had it removed while he was living in the south, famous for its cut-rate plastic surgery.

He doesn't look much older than he did a few years ago, perhaps a little thinner, but he is a relatively young man and still seems vital, or at least as full of life as one can look in such a place.

Around us, the family members and friends of the other prisoners have begun chatting noisily in the local dialect, shouting to each other across the open space. When I ask him what happened, he shrugs.

"I took out a personal ad on one of those singles websites, saying I wanted to meet a girl."

"That's it?" I say. "That's not illegal."

"It was what I said."

"What?"

"I said I had something illegal, you know, a substance, and wanted to party and if you were a female and wanted to party, then let's meet."

At first we are both shy about talking so openly but as it becomes clear that everyone around us is too immersed in their own conversations and that the guard is completely uninterested, he finally lays out what happened. A woman had answered his ad, saying she wanted to take drugs and have sex, so Huang had gotten a taxi, rode across town, and then when he arrived at this woman's apartment, there were two policemen waiting for him. He had the morphine and amphetamines on him. He has been detained for six crimes, and the sentence for opiate possession, he tells me, could be death.

"They made me fill out a form saying I would donate my organs to the State Security Agency," Huang says.

The twenty minutes go by quickly, and we never even speak about our old friends or mutual acquaintances. By the

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end of my visit, Huang seems depressed, as one would expect, and he asks me to leave a little money for him—he promises to pay me back—so that he can eat something besides the broth they serve, which gives him terrible diarrhea. We talk about what might happen and Huang says he doesn't know but that these cases sometimes just go away after a few months if State Security believes there is no money in it for them. This is the hardest part, he explains, when they are trying to squeeze him. He doesn't seem to be taking into account his own past, his suspect political activities, the fact that his name might still excite a higher-level bureaucrat in the capital if it comes to his attention Huang has been arrested. I assume the party would love to punish Huang and has been looking for a reason.

"How long are you in town?" he asks, his voice suddenly betraying how alone he must feel.

When I am back upstairs I ask at the counter if I can see Hu. They tell me to wait and a few minutes later, Hu appears again, on his way out. I fall in alongside him and ask him what will happen to Huang.

"He will eventually go to trial," Hu says, "But that may take a long time. In these cases, drug cases, we usually recommend a mental health facility."

These institutions for the criminally insane are famously cruel, with the inmates locked into vast wards for years at a stretch. The Party, I have heard, runs this system, and for those who end up in them, there is no recourse to the criminal justice system. Huang's life, I now suspect, has been irrevocably lost. As I walk beside the officer, I think back on the young man I knew, so full of promise, as we all were—excellent test takers, bright, quick-witted—and now Huang ends up here, in a prison cell waiting for transfer to an

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even harsher place. Where do lives go, I wonder. So many of them just fizzle away, through bad luck, flawed character, whatever. For a second, I want to confide in Officer Hu what a genius Huang once was, a great writer, a visionary, the college classmate the rest of us were sure would make a success of himself, and then he had been the first of us to make a name for himself, to gain a measure of fame. But that would only alert Officer Hu to the political dimensions of Huang, an area I would rather not mention.

Instead, almost without thinking, I remove the red envelope full of kwai from my jacket—the money I am supposed to pay to the actress—and hand it to Officer Hu. "For taking care of Huang," I tell him.

He quickly slides the envelope into his pocket without saying a word.

I see Huang again the next day. Hu has arranged for us to meet in a small office next to his. Huang sits in a white resin chair, another pair of plastic restraints on his wrists. He smells of sweat and feces. I am across from him. He thanks me for the money. I give him a cigarette.

"How much did you give those bastards?" he asks.

I tell him not to worry about it, that the magazine has paid.

He nods and asks about the Publisher.

"He's rich," I say.

Huang nods in a way that indicates he is not surprised. "You two were always accommodating," he says.

"What does that mean?"

"Just that you always knew how to get along."

"I'm not like the Publisher," I defend myself. "I'm just a writer."

"Writing about actresses," he says.

"So what?" I tell him.

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"Nothing," he says.

I am a little surprised he is condescending to me, but I am reluctant to force a confrontation. It seems pointless. And who is Huang to be acting so virtuous? He has been detained for actual crimes, not for any great ideological stance. He was stupid, I think to myself, a fool to have been arrested in such circumstances.

"What is it like in there?" I ask him.

He tells me that there are ten of them in a room smaller than this office. They don't have enough space to lie down simultaneously so they have to sleep in shifts, five horizontal and five standing. A boy of seventeen died two nights ago; he was suffocated while he slept. Huang suspects it was so there would be more room in the cell. "They haven't removed his body."

He has been getting regular meals of rice and chicken in Styrofoam containers as well as bottles of tea. Then he pauses, "I guess I will die here."

I tell him we will do whatever we can. That I will talk to the Publisher and we will call in his connections. Huang perks up for an instant at this thought, but then settles back into his pessimism. "It doesn't really matter," he says, "There just isn't space for a person like me."

"Where? In the cell?"

"Anywhere."

This time Xiu Xi's manager is forthright about asking for a fee when I revisit the condominium they are using. Wearing headphones, Xiu Xi sits on a sofa, flipping through a copy of our magazine. I am unsure for a moment of how to proceed, but then from nowhere, I begin to deliver a small speech I about the crooked ethics of my business and the grave costs when the population cannot trust the media. This gradually expands into a subtle

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condemnation of our whole system of klepto-capitalism, of pay-for-access, of a society so dependent on bribery and corruption that there can never be an honest thought, a pure action. "If the water is too dirty," I tell him, "No fish can live in it." We, our magazine, are making a stand, I explain, are refusing to pay because we want to provide the truth. Our best writers, our best journalists, are quitting because they are so disillusioned at this process. Our finest minds are rotting away in jail; our great artists silenced because they can't tolerate this form of capitalist censorship. "You know," I say, "in America, they don't pay for stories. And American movie stars end up making much more money than anyone in China."

He listens for a few moments and then shrugs, momentarily unsure of how to respond to my ploy. I have surprised even myself with my little speech, by how heartfelt it is, and while I want to believe that it has to do with Huang and his current incarceration, I know that I am just trying to get my story without paying the price.

We are at an impasse, I know. The manager, I suspect, is done with me. Will happily send me back to the capital without his starlet's story. For this is a principle for him as well: you pay to play. If not, how else is she supposed to make a living?

Then Xiu Xi herself speaks up. She has apparently been listening and she says, "I'll do the story."

You can trust an actress to respond to bad acting.

The manager has no choice but to go through with it.

"And the photos?" I say. A photographer is scheduled to arrive tomorrow.

She nods. We sit down and she is alert and cheerful, cooperative, a pleasure. She becomes beautiful to me then, as I watch her precisely featured face move around her mouth as she forms words in her soft accent. I understand her success; when she is sober, when she wants to please, she wins you over.

If she could be any animal, she would be a griffin.

"Why?"

"Because no one eats griffins."

I don't know where the manager has gone, but when we are finished and I am smoking in the darkness with my pants folded neatly over the back of a chair—she carefully arranged them—we are alone in the shadowy condominium. She is very pale and when she moves in the darkness, it is hard for me to see precisely where she ends and the rest of the world begins.

The last time I see Huang, we are back in the same office as before and he looks very tired. He is unshaven, already thinner, and one of his eyes is red and appears swollen. He tells me it is some kind of infection that he can't shake. The guards gave him an antibiotic cream, bought, presumably, because of the red envelope I gave to Officer Hu. But one of his cellmates stole the cream last night while Huang was sleeping. The infection causes Huang to blink repeatedly. They have already told Huang that as soon as he has his hearing, he will be moved to a Provincial Mandatory Rehabilitation Hospital, a fancy name for a prison, but probably better, certainly, than an actual prison. Once he is officially detoxed, however, he will have to stand trial for the six criminal charges.

"I will never come back," he says.

I wish he could be more optimistic, I think to myself, but that has never been Huang's strong suit. He was always a realist, determined to confront the truth of a situation, his own homeliness, the nation's deceitfulness, his friend's duplicity. He will no doubt face this with the same heaviness as he has gone through life, and as an intellectual, a basically gentle person, he is probably correct in assuming he might never return from prison. Who will send the money every month to bribe the guards, the cooks, the doctors? He will need clothes, heating oil, medicine. Huang isn't a common

criminal who can maneuver among that element; he will be out of his depth in there, as he had been out here.

I tell him I have to return to the capital. That my work here is finished. I don't know what to say so I tell him he'll be fine.

"Forget about me," he tells me.

The Publisher and I are sitting down eating Szechuan food in the banquet room of a restaurant on the third floor of a shopping mall near our offices. We are poking our chopsticks through chicken and hot peppers. The article about Xiu Xi has been written, photographed, and will soon be shipped to the printer.

"It's strange," the Publisher says, wiping his mouth with a cloth napkin. "When the photographer arrived in Chengdu, he was asked by Xiu Xi's manager for lucky money."

I nod. I have been caught.

"So I wondered," he continues, "would Xiu Xi's manager ask for double lucky money? Or did she somehow never receive the first lucky money."

"I'm sorry," I tell the Publisher. "I gave it to Huang, or to the officer working on his case. It seemed the least I could do."

"I assumed you did something like that."

He has always had a wide smile with broad, clean white teeth. He is not conventionally handsome, instead, he looks utterly inoffensive. There is nothing remarkable about the Publisher, yet the sum total of his typical features is that he is pleasant looking. I find myself hating him for his banal appearance.

"I thought you would want to help out, somehow." He smiles. "To feel as if you were helping him."

I assume the Publisher will fire me now. I have lied to him,

stolen from him. I have proven myself not to be trustworthy.

"So," I say, "am I fired?"

"Little brother," he says, using a term of diminutive familiarity. "People like us, like you and me," he says, "there will always be a place for us."

According to a newspaper account, Huang committed suicide while he was in the Provincial Mandatory Rehabilitation Center. The story was written in a matter-of-fact tone, but with a certain smugness that an enemy of the Party has taken his own life. It is amazing how many of those deemed enemies of the state end up dying by their own hand.

But in this case, I suspect, the newspaper accounts were right.

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