

王定國：春子

## Chunzi

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More and more strangers barge in without knocking, day and night, even early morning when she first wakes up, and mutter their way onto newbie Li Li's Facebook page. The joy, like burgling spring-water when she first reads them, turns into a deluge if she's let days pass without checking. After a quick swipe through the pages after work, a familiar word pops up before she puts down her cell.

The tip of her finger quivers as she touches the screen. On this quiet night she thinks she hears a clamour of sounds.

Yan. A swallow. An obscure, monosyllabic word. Without a name, not even a surname, it's like a swallow flitting across the sky, leaving behind a blush of soft clouds, and a whole lot of emptiness.

I want to live

She recognizes the tone—sullen, indecisive. Without a full stop, the phrase lacks an ending, just like Yan. How did she get in? Through a friend of a friend, from someplace even more distant than that? Or maybe Yan isn't even talking to her, just needs someone, anyone, to pour her heart out to.

Yet, on a certain emotional level, Li Li believes that Yan *is* talking to her. She wouldn't have used that tone with just anyone. On Facebook people usually chat about the food at some hot restaurant or the lovely scenery at a spot they've visited. Even with their inner thoughts, they're brief, and only in the most ornate language, so as not to reveal too many private sentiments.

As Li Li reflects, she can almost see that pair of eyes quietly open in the dark. What does she want? What's on her mind? The long black hair she took

such pride in is probably no longer glossy, and she must be showing her age. Did she marry well? Is she happy? Is he the man she wanted?

*I want to live?*

Obviously, she isn't doing all that well. Everyone wants to live, of course. Who is she crying out to? Would she have used that tone to declare her existence if her life were going well? It's sad, sure, but sort of high-handed. How many people *are* doing well these days?

Li Li lay awake through an endless night as loneliness washed over her like a black tide. Wrapping herself in the blanket until she was covered head to toe, she curled up at first as if to ward off the cold, but she soon realized she'd balled up her fists inside her cocoon, apparently to make herself feel better and endure a sudden sense of torment. It didn't work. She could not push back the anger that was sprouting and spreading like a weed; she shook spasmodically under the blanket.

She hadn't felt this bad when they parted ways; in fact, she'd been composed, sitting in the coffee shop, watching Yan walk off down the steps. She did not try to stop her, for she knew their last meeting ought to be like this. They'd talked about it, sort of, and after that it was time to say goodbye.

Yan's decision was to be respected so she could enjoy a good life.

She dialled a number she'd somehow managed to obtain, but got hung-up on for her trouble.

She'd quit her job after they'd said their goodbyes, and had waited in vain for Yan to call before accepting reality and getting a new phone number. So there'd been no reason to refuse the call. She tried again, with the same result. Eventually, the phone was turned off.

Tossing her cell phone aside, she yanked on the excavator joystick to stop the bucket, which was stuck in rocks, from making a deafening rumble. After freeing the bucket, she turned to hack at a different spot, sending several boulders crashing noisily down a gulch. The road construction had just gotten underway, and the new foreman was squawking on the loudspeaker all day long. The temporary project office had been set up by the roadside for easy supervision, so she had no time to trace that sudden voice from the past.

In the boondocks, with dust flying and machinery rumbling, that pair of eyes flashing before her was all she could think of.

Yan had a long, thin face and small features, which lent her slender eyes a captivating look. Whenever Li Li was talking, those eyes would be fixed on her, not looking away even when she paused. The eyes were watching, no, they were listening to her expression, as if afraid to miss a thing, meanwhile growing brighter and as quiet as the night sky.

A second-year high school transfer student, Yan was two years younger than Li Li, who had been kept back a year. Yan's father was rumoured to be hiding from debt-collectors, so her mother had to move back to stay with her parents. The homeroom teacher had no trouble assigning seats that morning, for there was only one seat no girl wanted, to the right of Li Li's window desk in the last row.

As Li Li was forced to move her stuff off the empty chair beside her, she was oblivious to the changes that face would bring into her life.

All she knew was, a timely arrival of the morning sun's rays from outside the window lit up the new girl's delicate silhouette, a flower-petal clasp pinned to hair pulled behind the ear. Her pale profile was marked by a haughty arc from the glossy forehead to the tip of her nose, which seemed to hide the lips beneath it. Those lips were pursed, a haughty look that betrayed her loneliness.

Li Li believed no one saw that but her. She glanced at the backs of the silent students in front before returning to her observation, stealing a look at the profile out of the corner of her eye. How, she wondered in amazement, had she let so many days go by without noticing the beautiful morning sun outside, or the warbling white-eyes flying down off the pine trees to chirp and hop around on the lawn?

Then she heard the girl exhale, after holding her breath for a long time, almost imperceptible, solitary, transparent. No one but her heard it.

*Come tell me if anyone picks on you.*

She'd written that on a slip of paper and slotted it in a crack on the next desk.

It was a thoughtful beginning. She'd even taken a late-night shower before writing the note, wanting to smell nice, as if she had an early-morning date. It was the only way to cleanse herself of the coarseness from all the time she hung out with country boys, something hard to get rid of, like a layer of dirt accumulated over years. She had trouble recognizing herself after encountering the new girl, and suddenly felt she had no place to go. She stayed in her seat after class, even when Yan had already left, or when she had not come back for a very long time.

Li Li was not kept back a second time and graduated with Yan two years later. They tested into colleges in towns separated by a river. On days when she had no classes or didn't feel like going, she took three buses to see Yan. They'd stroll the riverbank waiting for the sun to set and then sit close together in a dark movie house or return to her dorm room, left empty by her roommate, who had gone back home.

She thumbed the book she'd brought along, but not a single word made an impression as she waited for Yan to finish her homework and come listen to her pour her lonely heart out. Revealing her weakness, Li unashamedly told her everything, gushing over how she'd secretly fallen for her the first day, to a sadness that rivalled the end of the world when they graduated. She was calm, imagining an angel's sudden charitable act to a beggar-girl, with lots of long hugs to fill in the shameful cracks, however temporarily.

Whether Yan accepted her confession or not, she was enchanted by the ambiguous world of waiting, which included the emotional responses she had hoped for, as well as a transient happiness that could vanish at any time.

She knew that Yan had a boyfriend, a boy who wrote poetry in a notebook he carried with him. She'd read his lousy poems, all sentimental pap, like a male animal salivating in its pursuit of a mate, filled with phony words from nineteenth-century love poems. She was convinced that only her feelings for Yan were real, transcending gender boundaries, the way a cat lover loves only cats, and reason be damned. Why do people need a reason to love? Love is unreasonable.

It still felt unreasonable to her on the day Yan told her she was pregnant.

Finally, the call went through. The voice on the other end sounded confused and lethargic. Li Li recognized it at once.

Without a moment's hesitation, she said she wanted to meet. 'How about getting together', she said.

Li Li raced to a sparsely patronized tea-shop, where she waited a long while before spotting an old woman taking small, slow steps in the crosswalk. When the light changed, she stopped in the middle of the street, supported by a cane, as cars sped past, honking angrily as they did.

Fearfully, with her hand over her mouth, Li Li was about to run out to help the woman cross, when a closer look told her it was Yan.

As Yan slowly made her way up the entrance, Li Li noticed the sharp cheek bones her blue patterned headscarf failed to conceal on a once youthful, delicate face. The sight was like a knife driven into Li Li's heart.

The perilous crossing of the street was barely over, and yet there was no sign of fright on Yan's face, nor a look of delight over a reunion after so many years. Her eyes were fixed elsewhere as she started talking.

'I didn't want you to see me like this, but I can't help it. I knew we should have waited a few months. That's what the doctor says. Put up with it for six months or so, and you might be hill-climbing again.'

She saw it wasn't just her face that had thinned out; there was barely a glimpse of a woman's body under the clinging hollows of the blouse she was wearing.

The figure that had been creeping over from the crosswalk had materialized as the shell of a human being that was now seated across from her ...

'My husband couldn't wait to divorce me soon after I was diagnosed,' she continued. 'Imagine my surprise when I heard, midway through my chemo last month, that he dropped dead of a heart attack on his lover's bed. Life's absurd, isn't it?'

She laughed sadly when she finished, smiling as her gaze flitted inevitably past Li's face and back. Her eyes became moist through a bitter smile.

The drink arrived. Hot or cold, all she could do was look at it. *How I'd love to take a huge drink of that*, Yan said.

Li Li went out, drove over, and helped her in.

'Let's go do some racing and scare the hell out of all the diseased cells.'

'They're already in my bones.'

'Let me take a look.' Yan stopped Li when she reached under her loose blouse.

Li drove two blocks and stopped. Telling Yan to stay in the car, she ran into a market and picked out some random items. She wished she knew what a cancer patient should eat, getting so anxious that everything before her eyes turned blurry.

Finally, a fishmonger called to her and pointed to the catch of the day. All super fresh.

She bought a little of everything, even asking him to cut off a chunk of tuna.

Then she spotted an aluminium basin sitting alone on a shelf. Two tiny bluish-grey fish lay inside on their sides.

'What are those?'

'*Chunzi*, this is their season. Those two are the last I've got.'

She'd seen fish like that before, hadn't she? The name was so familiar; no wonder her heart was racing.

She went back to the car and put her purchase on the back seat. Yan leaned listlessly against the seat, as if lost in thought; she didn't ask about the shopping.

'You're amazing as ever. I heard you're an excavator operator now. I remember when we first met. You were so impressive, even back then. No one dared to pick on me. Do you know I still have—'

She reached into her pocket and slowly brought out a wrinkled note.

'I take it out and look at it every time I start my chemo. It works. Even Death is scared enough to leave me alone.'

Li kept driving, not knowing what to say. She could only think about the fish. She should have asked the fishmonger how to cook *chunzi*. These were probably the first ones Yan had ever seen. *Chun-zi*. What a wonderful name, like a child of spring. She'd heard it when she was a little girl.

