

PANTHEON  BOOKS

A GOOD FALL



HA JIN



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*Between Silences*

*Facing Shadows*

*Ocean of Words*

*Under the Red Flag*

*In the Pond*

*Waiting*

*The Bridegroom*

*Wreckage*

*The Crazyed*

*War Trash*

*A Free Life*

*The Writer as Migrant*

Ha Jin

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# A Good Fall



Pantheon Books  
New York



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A Good Fall

## The Bane of the Internet

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MY SISTER YUCHIN and I used to write each other letters. It took more than ten days for the mail to reach Sichuan, and usually I wrote her once a month. After Yuchin married, she was often in trouble, but I no longer thought about her every day. Five years ago her marriage began falling apart. Her husband started an affair with his female boss and sometimes came home reeling drunk. One night he beat and kicked Yuchin so hard she miscarried. At my suggestion, she filed for divorce. Afterward she lived alone and seemed content. I urged her to find another man, because she was only twenty-six, but she said she was done with men for the rest of her life. Capable and with a degree in graphic design, she has been doing well and even bought her own apartment four years ago. I sent her two thousand dollars to help her with the down payment.

Last fall she began e-mailing me. At first it was exciting to chat with her every night. We stopped writing letters. I even stopped writing to my parents, because she lives near them and can report to them. Recently she said she wanted to buy a car. I had misgivings about that, though she had already paid off her mortgage. Our hometown is small. You can cross by bicycle in half an hour; a car was not a necessity for her. It's too expensive to keep an automobile there—the gas, the insurance, the registration, the maintenance, the tolls cost a fortune. I told her I didn't have a car even though I had to commute to work from Brooklyn to Flushing. But she got it into her head that she must have a car because most of her friends had cars. She wrote: "I want to let that man see how well I'm doing." She was referring to her ex-husband. I urged her to wipe him out of her mind as if he had never existed. Indifference is the strongest contempt. For a few weeks she didn't raise the topic again.

Then she told me that she had just passed the road test, bribing the officer with five hundred yuan in addition to the three thousand paid as the application and test fees. She e-mailed: "Sister, I must have a car. Yesterday Minmin, our little niece, came to town driving a brand-new Volkswagen. At the sight of that gorgeous machine, I felt as if a dozen awls were stabbing my heart. Everybody is doing better than me, and I don't want to live anymore!"

I realized she didn't simply want to impress her ex. She too had caught the national autism. I told her that was ridiculous, nuts. I knew she had some savings. She got a big bonus at the end of each year and freelanced at night. How had she become so vain and so unreasonable? I urged her to be rational. That was impossible, she claimed, because "everybody" drove a car in our hometown. I said she was not everybody and mustn't follow the trend. She wouldn't listen and asked me to remit her money as a loan. She already had a tidy sum in the bank, about eighty thousand yuan, she confessed.

Then why couldn't she just go ahead and buy a car if that was what she wanted? She replied: "You don't get it, sister. I cannot drive a Chinese model. If I did, people would think I am cheap and laugh at me. Japanese and German cars are too expensive for me, so I might get a Hyundai Elantra or a Ford Focus. Please lend me \$10,000. I'm begging you to help me out!"

That was insane. Foreign cars are double priced in China. A Ford Taurus sells for 250,000 yuan in my home province of Sichuan, more than \$30,000. I told Yuchin an automobile was just a vehicle, no need to be fancy. She must drop her vanity. Certainly I wouldn't lend her the money, because that might amount to hitting a dog with a meatball—nothing would come back. So I said no. As it is, I'm still renting and have to save for the down payment on a small apartment somewhere in Queens. My family always assumes that I can pick up cash right and left here. No matter how hard I explain, they can't see how awful my job at a sushi house is. I wait as a waitress ten hours a day, seven days a week. My legs are swollen when I punch out at ten p.m. I might never be able to buy an apartment at all. I'm eager to leave my job and start something of my own—a snack bar or a nail salon or a video store. I must save every penny.

For two weeks Yuchin and I argued. How I hated the e-mail exchanges! Every morning I flicked on the computer and saw a new message from her, sometimes three or four. I often thought of ignoring them, but if I did, I'd fidget at work, as if I had eaten something that had upset my stomach. If only I had pretended I'd never gotten her e-mail at the outset so that we could have continued writing letters. I used to believe that in the United States you could always reshape your relationships with the people back home—you could restart your life on your own terms. But the Internet has spoiled everything—my family is able to get hold of me whenever they like. They might as well live nearby.

Four days ago Yuchin sent me this message: "Elder sister, since you refused to help me, I've decided to act on my own. At any rate, I must have a car. Please don't be mad at me. Here's a website you should take a look at ..."

I was late for work, so I didn't visit the site. For the whole day I kept wondering what she was up to, and my left eyelid twitched nonstop. She might have solicited donations. She was so impulsive and could get outrageous. When I came back that night and turned on my computer, I was flabbergasted to see that she had put out an ad on a popular site. She had announced: "Healthy young woman ready to offer you her organ(s) in order to buy a car. Willing to sell any part as long as I still can drive thereafter. Contact me and let us talk." She listed her phone number and e-mail address.

I wondered if she was just bluffing. Perhaps she was. On the other hand, she was such a hothead that for a damned car she might not hesitate to sell a kidney, or a cornea, or a piece of her liver. I couldn't help but call her names while rubbing my forehead.

I had to do something right away. Someone might take advantage of the situation and sign a contract with her. She was my only sibling—if she messed up her life, there would be nobody to care for our old parents. If I was living near them, I might have called her bluff, but now there was no way out. I wrote her back: "All right, my idiot sister, I will lend you \$10,000. Remove your ad from the website. Now!"

In a couple of minutes she returned: "Thank you! Gonna take it off right away. I know you're the only person I can rely on in the whole world."

I responded: "I will lend you the money I made by working my ass off. You must pay it back within two years. I have kept a hard copy of our email exchanges, so do not assume you can write off the loan."

She came back: "Got it. Have a nice dream, sister!" She added a smile sign.



“Get out of my face!” I muttered.

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If only I could shut her out of my life for a few weeks. If only I could go somewhere for some peace and quiet.

## A Composer and His Parakeets

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BEFORE DEPARTING for Thailand with her film crew, Supriya left in Fanlin's care the parakeet she had inherited from a friend. Fanlin had never asked his girlfriend from whom, but he was sure that Bori, the bird, used to belong to a man. Supriya must have had a number of boyfriends prior to himself. A pretty Indian actress, she always attracted admiring stares. Whenever she was away from New York, Fanlin couldn't help but fear she might hit it off with another man.

He had hinted several times that he might propose to her, but she would either dodge the subject or say her career would end before she was thirty-four and she must seize the five years left to make more movies. In fact, she had never gotten a leading part, always taking a supporting role. If only she hadn't been able to get any part at all, then she might have accepted the role of a wife and prospective mother.

Fanlin wasn't very familiar with Bori, a small pinkish parakeet with a white tail, and he had never let the bird enter his music studio. Supriya used to leave Bori at Animal Haven when she was away, though if a trip lasted just two or three days, she'd simply lock him in the cage with enough food and water. But this time she was going to stay abroad for three months, so she asked Fanlin to take care of the bird.

Unlike some other parrots, Bori couldn't talk; he was so quiet Fanlin often wondered if he was dumb. At night the bird slept near the window, in a cage held by a stand, like a colossal floor lamp. During the day he sat on the windowsill or on top of the cage, basking in the sunlight, which seemed to have bleached his feathers.

Fanlin knew Bori liked millet; having no idea where a pet store was in Flushing, he went to Hong Kong Supermarket down the street and bought a bag. At times he'd give the parakeet what he himself ate: boiled rice, bread, apples, watermelon, grapes. Bori enjoyed this food. Whenever Fanlin placed his own meal on the dining table, the bird would hover beside him, waiting for a bite. With Supriya away, Fanlin could eat more Chinese food—the only advantage of her absence.

"You want Cheerios too?" Fanlin asked Bori one morning as he was eating breakfast.

The bird gazed at him with a white-ringed eye. Fanlin picked a saucer, put a few pieces of the cereal in it, and placed it before Bori. He added, "Your mother has dumped you, and you're stuck with me." Bori pecked at the Cheerios, his eyelids flapping. Somehow Fanlin fed for the bird today, so he found a tiny wine cup and poured a bit of milk for Bori too.

After breakfast, he let Bori into his studio for the first time. Fanlin composed on a synthesizer, having no room for a piano. The bird sat still on the edge of his desk, watching him, as if able to understand the musical notes he was inscribing. Then, as Fanlin tested a tune on the keyboard, Bori began fluttering his wings and swaying his head. "You like my work?" Fanlin asked Bori.

The bird didn't respond.

As Fanlin revised some notes, Bori alighted on the keys and stomped out a few feeble notes, which encouraged him to play more. "Get lost!" Fanlin said. "Don't be in my way."

The bird flew back to the desk, again motionlessly watching the man making little black squiggles on paper.

Around eleven o'clock, as Fanlin stretched his arms and leaned back in his chair, he noticed two whitish spots beside Bori, one bigger than the other. "Damn you, don't poop on my desk!" he screamed.

At those words the parakeet darted out of the room. His escape calmed Fanlin a little. He told himself he ought to be patient with Bori, who was no different from a newborn. He got up and wiped off the mess with a paper towel.

Three times a week he gave music lessons to a group of five students. The tuition they paid was his regular income. They would come to his apartment on Thirty-seventh Avenue in the evening and stay two hours. One of the students, Wona Kernan, an angular woman of twenty-two, became quite fond of Bori and often held out her index finger to him, saying, "Come here, come here." The parakeet never responded to her coaxing, instead sitting on Fanlin's lap as if also attending the class. Wona once scooped up the bird and put him on her head, but Bori returned to Fanlin immediately. She muttered, "Stupid budgie, only know how to suck up to your boss."

Fanlin was collaborating with a local theater group on an opera based on the legendary folk musician Ah Bing. In his early years, Ah Bing, like his father, was a monk; then he lost his eyesight and was forced to leave his temple. He began to compose music, which he played on the streets to eke out a living.

Fanlin didn't like the libretto, which emphasized the chance nature of artistic creation. The hero of the opera, Ah Bing, was to claim, "Greatness in art is merely an accident." To Fanlin that kind of logic did not explain the great symphonies of Beethoven or Tchaikovsky, which could not have existed without artistic theory, vision, or purpose. No art should be accidental.

Nevertheless, Fanlin worked hard on the music for *The Blind Musician*. According to his contract, he would get a six-thousand-dollar advance, to be paid in two installments, and twelve percent of the opera's earnings. These days he was so preoccupied with the composition that he seldom cooked. He would compose from seven a.m. to two p.m., then go out for lunch, often taking Bori along. The bird perched on his shoulder, and Fanlin would feel Bori's claws scratching his skin as he walked.

One afternoon at the Taipan Café on Roosevelt Avenue, after paying at the counter for lunch, Fanlin returned to his seat to finish his tea. He put a dollar tip on the table, which Bori picked up and dropped back in Fanlin's hand.

"Wow, he knows money!" a bulging-eyed waitress cried. "Don't steal my money, little thief!"

That night on the phone, Fanlin told Supriya about Bori's feat. She replied, "I never thought you'd like him. He wouldn't get money for me, that's for sure."

"I'm just his caretaker. He's yours," Fanlin said. He had expected she'd be more

enthusiastic, but her voice sounded as usual, mezzo-soprano and a little sleepy. He refrained from telling her that he missed her, often touching her clothes in the closet.

. . .

It was a rainy morning. Outside, the drizzle swayed in the wind like endless tangled threads. Traffic rumbled in the west. Lying in bed with a sheet crumpled over his belly, Fanlin was thinking of Supriya. She always dreamed of having children, and her parents in Calcutta had urged her to marry. Still, Fanlin felt he might be just her safety net—a fallback in case she couldn't find a more suitable man. He tried not to think too many negative thoughts and recalled those passionate nights that had thrilled and exhausted both of them. He missed her a lot, but he knew that love was like another person's favor: one might fall out of it at any time.

Suddenly a high note broke from his studio—Bori on the synthesizer. “Stop it!” Fanlin shouted to the bird. But the note kept tinkling. He got out of bed and made for the studio.

Passing through the living room, its window somehow open and its floor scattered with sheets of paper fluttering in a draft, he heard another noise, then caught sight of a shadow slipping into the kitchen. He hurried in pursuit and saw a teenage boy crawling out the window. Fanlin, not fast enough to catch him, leaned over the sill and yelled at the burglar bolting down the fire escape, “If you come again, I'll have you arrested. Damn you!”

The boy jumped to the pavement below, his legs buckling, but he picked himself up. The seat of his jeans was dark-wet. In a flash he veered into the street and disappeared.

When Fanlin returned to the living room, Bori whizzed over and landed on his chest. The bird looked frightened, his wings quivering. With both hands Fanlin held the parakeet up and kissed him. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Are you scared?”

. . .

Bori usually relieved himself in the cage, the door of which remained open day and night. Every two or three days Fanlin would change the newspaper on the bottom to keep the aviary clean. In fact, the whole apartment had become an aviary of sorts, since Bori was allowed to go anywhere, including the studio. When he wasn't sleeping, the bird seldom stayed in the cage, inside which stretched a plastic perch. Even at night he avoided the perch, sleeping with his claws clutching the side of the cage, his body suspended in the air. Isn't it tiring to sleep like that? Fanlin thought. No wonder Bori often looks torpid in the daytime.

One afternoon as the parakeet nestled on his elbow, Fanlin noticed that one of Bori's feet was thicker than the other. He turned the bird over. To his surprise, he saw a blister on Bori's left foot in the shape of half a soybean. He wondered if the plastic perch was too slippery for the parakeet to hold, and if the wire cage the bird gripped instead while sleeping had blistered his foot. Maybe he should get a new cage for Bori. He flipped through the yellow pages to locate a pet store.

That evening as he was strolling in the Queens Botanical Garden, he ran into Elbert Chan, the director of the opera project. Elbert had been jogging, and as he stopped to chat with Fanlin, Bori took off for an immense cypress tree, flitting into its straggly crown before

landing on a branch.

“Come down,” Fanlin called, but the bird wouldn’t budge. He just clasped the declining branch and looked at the men.

“That little parrot is so homely,” observed Elbert. He blew his nose, brushed his sweatpan with his fingers, and jogged away, the flesh on his nape trembling a little. Beyond him, a young couple walked a dachshund on a long leash.

Fanlin turned as if he were leaving, and Bori swooped down and alighted on his head. Fanlin settled the bird on his arm. “Afraid I’m going to leave you behind, eh?” he asked. “If you don’t listen to me, I won’t take you out again, understood?” He patted Bori’s head.

The parakeet just blinked at him.

Fanlin realized that Bori must like the feel of the wooden perch. He looked around and found a branch under a tall oak and brought it home. He dismantled the plastic bar, whittled a new perch out of the branch, cut a groove on either end, and fixed it in the cage. From then on, Bori slept on the branch every night.

Proudly Fanlin told Supriya about the new perch, but she was too preoccupied to get excited. She sounded tired and merely said, “I’m glad I left him with you.” She didn’t even thank him. He had planned to ask her about the progress of the filming, but refrained.

The composition for the opera was going well. When Fanlin handed in the first half of the music score—132 pages in total—Elbert Chang was elated, saying he had worried whether Fanlin had embarked on the project. Now Elbert could relax—everything was coming together. Several singers had signed up. It looked like they could stage the opera the next summer.

Puffing on a cigar in his office, Elbert gave a nervous grin and told Fanlin, “I’m afraid I cannot pay you the first half of the advance now.”

“Why not? Our contract states that you must.”

“I know, but we just don’t have the cash on hand. I’ll pay you early next month when we get the money.”

Fanlin’s face fell, his mothy eyebrows tilting upward. He was too deep into the project to back out, yet he feared he might have more difficulty getting paid in the future. He had never worked for Elbert Chang before.

“The bird looks uglier today,” Elbert said, pointing his cigar at Bori, who was standing on the desk, between Fanlin’s hands.

At those words, the parakeet whooshed up and landed on Elbert’s shoulder. “Hey, hey, he likes me!” cried the man. He took Bori down, and the bird fled back to Fanlin in a panic.

Fanlin noticed a greenish splotch on Elbert’s jacket, on the shoulder. He stifled the laughter, rising in his throat.

“Don’t worry about the payment,” Elbert assured him, his fingers drumming on the desktop. “You have a contract and can sue me if I don’t pay you. This time is just an exception. The money is already committed by the donors. I promise this won’t happen again.”

Feeling better, Fanlin shook hands with the man and stepped out of the office.

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Upon signing the contract for *The Blind Musician* three months earlier, the librettist, an exile poet living on Staten Island, had insisted that the composer mustn't change a single word of the libretto. The writer, Benyong, didn't understand that, unlike poetry, opera depends on collaborative efforts. Elbert Chang liked the libretto so much he conceded to the terms the author demanded. This became a problem for Fanlin, who had in mind a musical structure that didn't always agree with the verbal text. Furthermore, some words were unsingable, such as "smoothest" and "feudalism." He had to replace them, ideally with words ending with open vowels.

One morning Fanlin set out for Staten Island to see Benyong, intending to get permission to change some words. He didn't plan to take Bori along, but the second he stepped out of his apartment, he heard the bird bump against the door repeatedly, scratching the wood. He unlocked the door and said, "Want to come with me?" The parakeet leapt to his chest, clutching his T-shirt and uttering tinny chirps. Fanlin caressed Bori and together they headed for the train station.

It was a fine summer day, the sky washed clean by a shower the previous night. On the ferryboat Fanlin stayed on the deck all the way, watching seabirds wheel around. Some strutted or scurried on the bow, where two small girls were tossing bits of bread at them. Bori joined the other birds, picking up food but not eating any. Fanlin knew the parakeet was doing that just for fun, yet no matter how he called, the bird wouldn't come back to him. So he stood by, watching Bori walking excitedly among gulls, terns, petrels. He was amazed that Bori wasn't afraid of the bigger birds and wondered if the parakeet was lonely at home.

Benyong received Fanlin warmly, as if they were friends. In fact, they'd met only twice, on both occasions for business. Fanlin liked this man who, already forty-three, hadn't lost the child in him and often threw his head back and laughed aloud.

Sitting on a sofa in the living room, Fanlin sang some lines to demonstrate the cumbersomeness of the original words. He had an ordinary voice, a bit hoarse, yet whenever he sang his own compositions, he was confident and expressive, with a vivid face and vigorous gestures, as if he were oblivious of anyone else's presence.

While he was singing, Bori frolicked on the coffee table, flapping his wings and wagging his head, his hooked bill opening and closing and emitting happy but unintelligible cries. Then the bird paused to tap his feet as if beating time, which delighted the poet.

"Can he talk?" Benyong asked Fanlin.

"No, he can't, but he's smart and even knows money."

"You should teach him how to talk. Come here, little fellow." Benyong beckoned to the bird, who ignored his outstretched hand.

Without difficulty, Fanlin got the librettist's agreement, on the condition that they exchange views before Fanlin made any changes. For lunch they went to a small restaurant nearby and shared a Hawaiian pizza. Dabbing his mouth with a red napkin, Benyong said, "I love this place. I have lunch here five days a week. Sometimes I work on my poems in here. Cheers." He lifted his beer mug and clinked it with Fanlin's water glass.

Fanlin was amazed by what the poet said. Benyong didn't hold a regular job and could hardly have made any money from his writing; few people in his situation would dine out five times a week. In addition, he enjoyed movies and popular music; two tall shelves in his apartment were loaded with CDs, more with DVDs. Evidently the writer was well kept by his wife, a nurse. Fanlin was touched by the woman's generosity. She must love poetry.

After lunch they strolled along the beach of white sand, carrying their shoes and walking barefoot. The air smelled fishy, tinged with the stink of seaweed washed ashore. Bori liked the ocean and kept flying away, skipping along the brink of the surf, pecking at the sand.

"Ah, this sea breeze is so invigorating," Benyong said as he watched Bori. "Whenever I walk here, the view of the ocean makes me think a lot. Before this immense body of water, even life and death become unimportant, irrelevant."

"What's important to you, then?"

"Art. Only art is immortal."

"That's why you've been writing full-time all along?"

"Yes, I've been making full use of artistic freedom."

Fanlin said no more, unable to suppress the image of Benyong's self-sacrificing wife. A photo in their study showed her to be quite pretty, with a wide but handsome face. The wind increased, and dark clouds were gathering on the sea in the distance.

As the ferryboat cast off, rain clouds were billowing over Brooklyn, soundless lightning zigzagging across the sky. On deck, a man, skinny and gray-bearded, was ranting about the evil-doing of big corporations. Eyes shut, he cried, "Brothers and sisters, think about who gets all the money that's yours, think about who puts all the drugs on streets to kill our kids. I know them, I see them sinning against our Lord every day. What this country needs is a revolution, so we can put every crook behind bars or ship them all to Cuba—" Fanlin was fascinated by the way words were pouring out of the man's mouth, as if the fellow were possessed by a demon, his eyes radiating a steely light. Few other passengers paid him any mind.

While Fanlin focused his attention on the man, Bori left Fanlin's shoulder and fluttered away toward the waves. "Come back, come back," Fanlin called, but the bird went on flying alongside the boat.

Suddenly a gust of wind caught Bori and swept him into the tumbling water. "Bori! Bori!" Fanlin cried, rushing toward the stern, his eyes fastened on the bird bobbing in the tumult.

He kicked off his sandals, plunged into the water, and swam toward Bori, still calling his name. A wave crashed into Fanlin's face and filled his mouth with seawater. He coughed and lost sight of the bird. "Bori, Bori, where are you?" he called, looking around frantically. Then he saw the parakeet lying supine on the slope of a swell about thirty yards away. With all his might he plunged toward the bird.

Behind him, the boat slowed and a crowd gathered on the deck. A man shouted through a bullhorn, "Don't panic! We're coming to help you!"

At last Fanlin grabbed hold of Bori, who was already motionless, his bill open. Tea

gushed out of Fanlin's salt-stung eyes as he held the parakeet and looked into his face, turning him upside down to let water drain out of his crop. Meanwhile, the boat circled back and chugged toward Fanlin.

A ladder dropped from the boat. Holding Bori between his lips, Fanlin hauled himself out of the water. When he reached the deck, the gray-bearded madman stepped over and handed Fanlin his sandals without a word. People crowded around as Fanlin laid the bird on the stern deck and gently pressed Bori's chest with two fingers to pump water from his body.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and lightning cracked the city's skyline, but patches of sunlight still fell on the ocean. As the boat picked up speed heading north, the bird's knotted feet opened, then clawed the air. "He's come to!" a man exclaimed.

Sluggishly Bori opened his eyes. Cheerful cries broke out on the deck while Fanlin sobbed gratefully. A middle-aged woman took two photos of Fanlin and the parakeet, saying, "This is extraordinary."

Two days later, a short article appeared in the Metro section of *The New York Times* reporting on the rescue of the bird. It described how Fanlin had plunged into the ocean without a second thought and patiently resuscitated Bori. The piece was brief, under two hundred words, but it created some buzz in the local community. Within a week a small Chinese-language newspaper, *The North American Tribune*, printed a long article on Fanlin and his parakeet, with a photo of them together.

Elbert Chang came one afternoon to deliver the half of the advance he'd promised. He had read about the rescue and said to Fanlin, "This little parrot is really something. He doesn't look smart but is full of tricks." He held out his hand to Bori, his fingers wiggling. "Come here," he coaxed. "You forgot crapping on me?"

Fanlin laughed. Bori still didn't stir, his eyes half shut as if he were sleepy.

Elbert then asked about the progress of the composition, to which Fanlin hadn't attended since the bird's accident. The director reassured him that the opera would be performed as planned. Fanlin promised to return to his work with redoubled effort.

Despite the attention, Bori continued to wither. He didn't eat much or move around. During the day he sat on the windowsill, hiccuping frequently. Fanlin wondered if Bori had a cold or was simply getting old. He asked Supriya about his age. She had no idea but said, "He must already be senile."

"What do you mean? Like in his seventies or eighties?"

"I'm not sure."

"Can you ask his former owner?"

"How can I do that in Thailand?"

He didn't press her further, unhappy about her lack of interest in Bori. He couldn't believe that she wasn't in contact with the bird's former owner.

One morning Fanlin looked into Bori's cage and to his horror found the parakeet lying still. He picked Bori up, the lifeless body still warm. Fanlin couldn't hold back his tears when



stroking the bird's feathers; he had failed to save his friend.

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He laid the tiny corpse on the dining table and observed it for a long time. The parakeet looked peaceful and must have passed in sleep. Fanlin consoled himself with the thought that Bori hadn't suffered a miserable old age.

He buried the bird under a ginkgo in the backyard. The whole day he couldn't do anything but sit absentmindedly in his studio. His students arrived that evening, but he didn't do much teaching. After they left, he phoned Supriya, who sounded harried. With a sob in his throat he told her, "Bori died early this morning."

"Gosh, you sound like you just lost a sibling."

"I feel terrible."

"I'm sorry, but don't be silly, and don't be too hard on yourself. If you really miss the budgie, you can buy another one at a pet shop."

"He was your bird."

"I know. I don't blame you. I can't talk anymore now, sweetie. I need to go."

Fanlin wasn't able to sleep until the early-morning hours. He kept reviewing his conversation with Supriya, reproaching her as if she were responsible for Bori's death. What rankled was her casual attitude. She must have put the bird out of her mind long ago. He wondered if he should volunteer to break up with her upon her return the following month, since it would be just a matter of time before they parted.

For days Fanlin canceled his class and worked intensely on the opera. The music flowed from his pen with ease, the melodies so fluent and fresh that he paused to wonder whether he had unconsciously copied them from master composers. No, every note he had put down was original.

His neglect of teaching worried his students. One afternoon they came with a small cage containing a bright yellow parakeet. "We got this for you," Wona told Fanlin.

While certain that no bird could replace Bori, Fanlin appreciated the gesture and allowed them to put the new parakeet in Bori's cage. He told them to return for class that evening.

The parakeet already had a name, Devin. Every day Fanlin left him alone, saying nothing to him, though the bird let out all kinds of words, including obscenities. He even called Wona "hooker;" that made Fanlin wonder if Devin's former owner had sold him because of his filthy mouth. At mealtimes Fanlin would put a bit of whatever he ate in Bori's saucer for Devin, yet he often kept the transom open in the hope that the bird would fly away.

The second half of the music for the opera was complete. After Elbert Chang had read the score, he phoned Fanlin and asked to see him. Fanlin went to Elbert's office the next morning, unsure what the director wanted to discuss.

The moment Fanlin sat down, Elbert shook his head and smiled. "I'm puzzled—this half is so different from the first."

"You mean better or worse?"

"That I can't say, but the second half seems to have more feelings. Sing a couple passages

Let's see what it sounds like.”

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Fanlin sang one passage after another, as if the music were gushing from the depths of his being. He felt the blind musician, the hero of the opera, lamenting through him the loss of his beloved, a local beauty forced by her parents to marry a general, to be his concubine. Fanlin's voice trembled with grief, which had never happened before in his demonstrations.

“Ah, it's so sad,” said Elbert's assistant. “It makes me want to cry.”

Somehow the woman's words cooled Fanlin some. Then he sang a few passages from the first half of the score, which sounded elegant and lighthearted, especially the beautiful refrain that would recur five times in the opera.

Elbert said, “I'm pretty sure the second half is emotionally right. It has more soul—sorrow without anger, affectionate but not soft. I'm impressed.”

“That's true,” the woman chimed in.

“What should I do?” sighed Fanlin.

“Make the whole piece more consistent,” Elbert suggested.

“That will take a few weeks.”

“We have time.”

Fanlin set about revising the score; in fact, he overhauled the first half. He worked so hard that after a week he collapsed and had to stay in bed. Even with his eyes closed, he could not suppress the music ringing in his head. The next day he resumed his writing. Despite the fatigue, he was happy, even rapturous in this composing frenzy. He ignored Devin entirely except to feed him. The parakeet came to his side from time to time, but Fanlin was too busy to pay him any attention.

One afternoon, after working for hours, he was lying in bed to rest. Devin landed beside him. The bird tossed his long blue-tipped tail, then jumped on Fanlin's chest, fixing a beady eye on him. “Ha wa ya?” the parakeet squawked. At first Fanlin didn't understand the sharp-edged words, pronounced as if Devin were short of breath. “Ha wa ya?” the bird repeated.

“Fine. I'm all right.” Fanlin smiled, his eyes filling.

Devin flew away and alighted on the half-open window. The white curtain swayed in the breeze, as if about to dance; outside, sycamore leaves were rustling.

“Come back!” Fanlin called.

## The Beauty

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AROUND MIDAFTERNOON, the snow thinned into sleet, and some umbrellas appeared on Kissena Boulevard. When the green lights came on, pedestrians skirted or jumped across the puddles gathering at the curbs. Dan Feng stood at the window of his office gazing down at the street lined with fruit and vegetable stands under awnings. The sight reminded him of a closing market fair when people were leaving. Just now his customer had called saying she couldn't come because of the bad weather, and Dan had phoned the seller of the condo on Forty-fifth Avenue to cancel the appointment. The rest of his afternoon was free.

He looked at his watch—3:10. What should he do? Should he pick up his baby at the day care center? No, it was too early to call it a day. He decided to drop in on his wife, Gina, at her jewelry store in Flushing Central Mall.

Main Street was bustling, the sidewalks swarming with people pouring out of the subway station, most of them bundled in coats and a few talking on cell phones. Two blond teenage girls, probably twins and each carrying a book bag, walked along hand in hand, wearing skirts that showed their lace-up boots and bare legs. A stink of rotten fruit pinched Dan's nose, and he hastened his steps and veered onto Roosevelt Avenue. At Chung Hwa Bookstore he picked up *World Journal*, and with the newspaper under his arm, he entered the mall.

"Where's Gina?" he asked Sally, the young sales assistant at the jewelry store.

"She's having her midafternoon break," she answered, her ponytail wrapped into a bun on top of her head.

"In the back?"

"No, perhaps downstairs."

Several jade tea sets and pen pots were standing on the counter, and pink-cheeked Sally had been wiping them. Besides jewelry, the store dealt in some knickknacks. Behind her, the shelves displayed crystal horses, boats, swans, lotus flowers, goldfish, various kinds of parrots, cars, airplanes. Downstairs, on the first floor, was the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel whose bar Gina frequented. With a seething heart Dan hustled toward the escalator, knowing his wife must be with Fooming Yu, the supervisor of the daytime staff at the hotel's front desk. The lobby was quiet, and in its middle a huge vase of mixed flowers sat on a round two-level table. The bar was in the back, its glass walls shaded by bamboo curtains. Dan stopped at the door to scan the poorly lit interior. About a dozen tables were each surrounded by chairs, and a petite young woman hunched over the counter, leafing through a magazine, probably *Vogue*. There they were—Gina was sitting with Fooming in a corner, a tiny table between them. They were the only customers, and they went on chatting without noticing Dan. Gina tittered and said, "That's really something."

Dan couldn't make out what they were talking about. As he was deciding whether to enter, Fooming said to Gina, "Another nut, please, before I go." He sounded loud and happy.

Gina tossed a cashew, which he caught in his mouth, munching noisily. They both laughed.

“Another,” he begged.

“Good dog.” She chucked a Brazil nut and he snapped up that one too.

Dan turned away, dragging his feet toward the front entrance. He was sure that before he and Gina married Fooming had courted her, but Dan hadn't taken that flat-faced man as a serious rival at the time. Gina was a noted beauty in Flushing, and even now some men—Asians, whites, Latinos, blacks—would stop by the jewelry store just to look at her. Once in a while someone would offer to take her out, but according to what she had told Dan, she always declined, saying her husband would get jealous like crazy if he knew. Still, why wouldn't she quit seeing Fooming Yu? “The damned beauty,” Dan muttered to himself as he stepped out of the building. “She cannot change her fickle nature. Well, serves you right. You shouldn't have chased her that hard in the first place.”

Instead of returning to his office, Dan went to Sunshine Bathhouse on Union Street. The sleet was over, but the weather had become windy and colder, ice crusting on the edges of thawing snowbanks. A Boeing roared overhead, descending toward LaGuardia. The sky was darkening to indigo, and more cars appeared on the street, along which neon lights started flickering. The bathhouse, set in the basement of a two-story building, had recently opened and it offered a sauna, a steam bath, hot-towel rubdowns, massages, pedicures. Dan paid twenty dollars at the desk, took a key, and went into the locker room. He picked up a towel and held it around his neck for a while. It had just come out of the dryer and was still warm.

Having locked up his clothes and newspaper, slipped the key on his wrist, and wrapped the towel around his waist, he made for the pool. Absentmindedly he got into the warm water. He sat on the submerged step for a moment to get used to the temperature, throwing water on his neck and armpits. He was alone and sank farther—his head rested on the rounded edge of the pool, which could hold seven or eight people and was made entirely of white tiles. He disliked saunas and worried that the dry heat could shrink his facial skin, so he took only a hot bath whenever he was here. It was so relaxing to lounge in the steaming water that he felt lazy, reluctant to scrub himself. His mind was clouded with questions and doubts. How he resented the intimacy between Gina and Fooming. Ever since the birth of their daughter Jasmine, a year ago, he had harbored misgivings about his wife's fidelity. Their baby was homely, with thin eyes and a wide mouth, and took after neither Gina nor himself. Gina was tall and lissome, having a straight nose, double-lidded eyes, a delicate mouth, and silken skin. Dan was also handsome. People often complimented him on his good looks, which boasted shiny eyes, a high nose, and a head of bushy hair. There were always envious glances at him and his wife when they were together at a public place. So how could their daughter be so plain? In his mind a voice would murmur, “She's not mine, she's not mine.” Sometimes he imagined that Fooming was Jasmine's blood father; at least their small eyes and round chin resembled each other. That could also explain why Gina wouldn't stop seeing the man.

Several times Dan had urged her to steer clear of Fooming, but she always assured him that there was nothing unusual between them and that she kept up her acquaintance with Fooming only because they were both from Jinhua, a medium-size city in Zhejiang Province. “You should have a larger heart,” she told Dan.

Whenever he ran into Fooming, the man would grin and narrow his eyes at him. His knowing smile unsettled Dan, as if Fooming meant to say, “I know more about your wife

than you do, from head to toe. I've made you wear horns, but what can you do about my dumb ass?"

Before Jasmine was born, Dan had never given much thought to Fooming. Dan used to view him as a no-account loser who, though four or five years his junior and just promoted to foreman in charge of three staffers, perhaps made no more than twelve dollars an hour. By contrast, Dan owned a real estate company and had a team of agents working for him. Almost thirty-seven, he was mature and steady. Experience and maturity, if not as magical as a sense of humor, could work to an older man's advantage. From the very beginning, Dan believed there'd be no chance for Fooming, and several others, to win Gina's heart as long as he himself was a competitor. Yet the scene at the bar an hour earlier had unnerved and enraged him. If only he hadn't rushed to marry Gina after she told him she was pregnant with his child. She may have lied to him.

A tubby man came into the pool room with a hand towel over his shoulder. He boomed, "Would you like to have your feet scraped and massaged, sir?"

Startled, Dan sat up. "What time is it?"

"A quarter to five."

"I need to go. Sorry, no pedicure today."

"That's all right." The man pattered to the next room to ask others.

Dan climbed out of the pool and went to take a rinsing shower. On his way back to the locker room, passing by the massage area, he heard a male voice moaning in one of the smaller rooms whose doors were all shut. "Oh yes, oh yes!" the man kept saying.

Then came a sugary female voice. "Feel good, right? Hmmm ... nice ..."

Dan wondered if the woman was giving more than a massage in there. Probably she'd also given the guy a hand job for a bigger tip. Dan glanced at the sign standing before the entrance, which said, "For massage, please make an appointment beforehand!"

He threw on his clothes and parka and left the bathhouse. He had to pick up his daughter at five.

That evening, after their baby fell asleep, Dan and Gina sat down in the living room and talked. He put his tea mug on the glass coffee table and said, "I saw you playing a doggy game with Fooming Yu in the Sheraton bar this afternoon. 'Another nut, please, before I go.' I heard him say that and saw you feed nuts to him."

Gina blushed, pursing her lips. "It wasn't even a game. There's nothing between him and me. You shouldn't make too much of it."

"How many times have I told you to avoid that man?"

"I can't just snub him. We've known each other for many years."

"Listen, I understand you had a number of boyfriends before we married. I don't mind that as long as you remain a faithful wife."

"Are you implying I'm cheating on you?"

"Why do you still carry on with Fooming Yu? Tell me, does he have something to do with

Jasmine?”

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“He doesn’t know her. What are you getting at?”

“That doesn’t mean he couldn’t father her.”

“For heaven’s sake, she’s yours! If you don’t believe me, you can give her a DNA test.”

“That I won’t do. It wouldn’t be fair to the baby. I can accept her as my child, all right, but you mustn’t humiliate me further.”

“When did I ever humiliate you?”

“You keep seeing Fooming Yu.”

“To be honest, I’m not interested in him, but he often drops into my store. I can’t just sho him away.”

“Why not?”

“I told you over and over again, he’s my townsman. This is getting nowhere.” She stood up. “I have to go to bed. I’m so tired. Jasmine will wake up soon, and I’d better catch a bit of sleep when I can. Good night.” She moved toward the bedroom in which their baby was sleeping.

“Night,” he said blandly.

He sighed and refilled his mug with tea from a clay pot. Seated on his rattan chair, he resumed skimming some articles on a Web site where people had been arguing about whether it was appropriate for a seventy-five-year-old celebrity, a Nobel laureate in chemistry, to marry a woman of twenty-eight. Dan’s mind couldn’t focus on the writings. Deep down he felt unable to trust his wife, who still seemed interested in other men. She must be one of those women who couldn’t enjoy life without having a few men dangling around. If only he kept her home. He regretted having helped her set up the jewelry store, which had cost him more than forty thousand dollars.

Most of the articles on the Web site condemned the scientist as an irresponsible old man who set a bad example for the younger generations, but some praised him for being romantic and having a youthful spirit. The two sides, somehow knowing most of the authors’ real names despite the pseudonyms they used, argued furiously and dished out muck that should have remained undisturbed in the cellars of their opponents’ past. Dan was not interested in their wrangling. He couldn’t stop thinking about his wife. He reasoned with himself, You asked for trouble. You were too foolish, running after her like a rutting animal. Sure, you won the beauty like a trophy, but it came with a price, with endless headaches and other men’s envy. Now you’ve lost peace of mind, just like the Nobel laureate whose fame had robbed him of his privacy.

Dan yawned and rubbed his eyes. He shut off the computer, went to brush his teeth in the bathroom, and then turned into the other bedroom. He and his wife slept separately because he often worked deep into the night and because she wanted to sleep with their baby.

The next day Dan made an appointment with Sherlock Holmes, Inc., on Fortieth Road. On the phone the agent sounded eager, saying they handled all kinds of investigations, like private property, spousal infidelity, personal histories, family backgrounds. Dan agreed to go to the

office after showing a town house to an old Taiwanese couple who planned to move to Flushing from Switzerland because they could find genuine Chinese food here.

The detective agency's office was above a hair salon and photo studio. A slight bespectacled man received him, saying, "Well, my friend, what can I do for you?"

Dan explained the purpose of his visit. Though dubious about the scantily bearded man and his one-horse firm, he didn't know another place in Queens offering this sort of service. "How many hands do you have here, Mr. Kwan?"

"We have people all over the world. We do investigations in America, Asia, Europe, Australia, and parts of Africa, basically on every continent except for the Arctic and the Antarctic."

"Really?" Dan pulled an index card out of his hip pocket and handed it to the agent. "I want to know these two people's personal histories. They were both from Jinhua City."

Mr. Kwan looked at the card while his small hand twisted a felt-tip pen. "This shouldn't be too difficult. We have connections all over China, and I can get them to look into this. Let's see if we have their names, ages, and education, but do you know their families' current addresses in Jinhua?"

"No. Gina said all her folks were dead. I doubt it, though."

"Don't worry. We'll look it up. Anything else you want to know besides their personal histories?"

"I suspect the two might be having an affair. Can you keep an eye on them? Also, get some concrete evidence if they cross the line."

"We can do that."

Mr. Kwan put the index card on his huge table, the kind advertised as "a CEO's desk" which had recently come into fashion. This one reminded Dan of a glossy coffin. The agent itemized the cost of the investigation. On top of a three-hundred-dollar retainer and a fee of fifty dollars an hour, the client was obliged to pay for transportation, hotel, drinks, meals, and any other expenditure incurred by the detective when working on the case. This was standard, he assured Dan. Dan signed the agreement and wrote him a check.

As Mr. Kwan got up to see him to the door, Dan was amazed to find him so short, barely five foot one. Isn't his small physique too eye-catching? he wondered. At most Mr. Kwan could be a featherweight sleuth. He should have been an accountant or a software specialist—a sedentary job would suit him better.

For days Jasmine had a fever. She would cry at night, which disturbed Dan and kept him awake even in his separate room. Gina had taken her to the doctor, who prescribed some drugs, but she wouldn't give them to the baby. Instead, she fed her warm water frequently, saying this was Jasmine's grandmother's remedy. Since birth, the child had run a temperature every month or two, but every time Gina had managed to make her well without using any medicine.

Jasmine had begun to walk. According to folklore, a baby's tongue follows its legs, meaning when it can walk it will start to talk. But Jasmine, already able to toddle from one

end of the room to the other, could speak only one word: "Baba" (Daddy), which thrilled Dan whenever he heard her say it. He would coax her into saying it again and again. He loved her, especially when she was happy and lively, wanting to sit on his belly or ride on his back. Even so, at times he couldn't help but wonder about her paternity. In addition to her frequent fevers, Jasmine seldom slept at night and always cried or played until the small hours. Dan had once accompanied his wife to Dr. Cohen, the pediatrician, a middle-aged woman with a gaunt face. The doctor advised that they leave their daughter alone whenever she hollered and just let her bawl. Once exhausted, she would learn it was no use crying for attention and would mend her ways. This would also train her to be independent. But Gina wouldn't follow Dr. Cohen's instructions, and the moment Jasmine started crying, she'd croon, "Mummy coming, just a second." She'd pick her up and cradle her, walking up and down the room. Sometimes she'd pace the floor for three or four hours. Her maternal patience amazed Dan, who would replace her on some nights so that she could sleep a little before daybreak. Whenever he urged her to leave the bawling baby alone, she would say, "It's too early to build her sense of independence." She was afraid their child might feel neglected and unloved.

Tonight Jasmine simply wouldn't quit crying. Neither would she let her mother sit down or stop singing nursery rhymes. In a sleepy voice Gina was humming a song Dan vaguely remembered—"Come on, Little Bunny, / Open the door to your mummy ...". He pulled the comforter over his face, but still heard the baby bawling. Try as he might, he couldn't go to sleep.

He got up, went to the other bedroom, and said to his wife, "Can't you give her a sleeping pill or something? Just to make her stop."

"No. That might damage her brain."

"The little bitch. She wants to torture us. I have a meeting tomorrow morning, actually in a couple hours."

"I'm sorry, I have to work too."

"Damn her! She does nothing but sleep at the day care, Mrs. Espada told me. She's like a model baby there."

"She has just reversed her sense of day and night."

"Put her down! Let her cry as much as she wants."

"Honey, don't be so nasty. She'll quiet down soon."

Her gentle voice checked his temper. He closed the door and returned to his room. He used to dream of having an angelic child whose beauty would spread over everything in the home. It wouldn't matter whether the baby was a boy or girl as long as it took after Gina or himself. Now slitty-eyed Jasmine had marred his picture of the ideal family.

He kept yawning at the meeting the next morning. One of his colleagues teased him, "You must've exerted yourself too hard last night."

"Be careful, Dan," another chimed in. "You shouldn't act like a newlywed."

People at the conference table cracked up while Dan shook his head. "My daughter's ill and cried most of the night," he muttered.



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