

Snow

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Translated by Paul Harris

Early one New Year's morning Zheng Ling hastily put on her make-up and, carrying a pile of parcels of varying sizes, pulled shut the security door of her apartment. Her husband had already been waiting in the lift for some time, keeping his finger on the 'Door Open' button. He had to be on duty today, while she was expected at her parents' house. She was taking them an old heavy thermos bucket packed with spicy stewed fish, spare-ribs with carrots braised in soya sauce, and twice-cooked pork, all prepared by her Szechwan maid. The red plastic thermos bucket had been bought at the time that her mother had been in hospital, and it was never brother and younger sister, had agreed to take food to celebrate the New Year with their parents. In her handbag she also carried a bulky, half-read French novel, plus a black Moleskin notebook. While reading, she liked to jot down notes, the way solitary readers often do, as if they know they're never going to find any like-minded soul to share their thoughts with about what they've read but need to confide them in writing all the same.

During the few minutes the lift was descending Zheng Ling sighed audibly and confessed to her husband: 'I'm worried what sort of state I'll find Mum in when I get there.' She could have waited for her brother to collect their father from his long-stay hospital before going to her parents' place, so she wouldn't be alone with her. But her husband had to start his shift at eight o'clock, so she had to set off with him now. 'Why not sit in the

coffeehouse around the corner from theirs for a bit and relax with a nice book?' her husband suggested, to allay her fears.

Pushing open the main door of the apartment building, they saw it was raining. The tops of the evergreen camphor trees were shrouded in a damp grey fog. During the past few days foggy weather had been causing traffic chaos up and down the country, and there was constant talk on the news about overcrowded long-distance bus stations and airports. Looking at the damp fog, Zheng Ling thought: *Lucky for me I don't have to be stuck in one of those smelly waiting-rooms. If it were me, I'd go mad.* Then she remembered how a friend of hers had once described a foggy day. This was a woman who had suddenly discovered a passion for Chinese culture and started going to Peking operas, took up the Chinese zither and read books written in the old-style Chinese language. One day they were eating together in a Vietnamese restaurant in Gubei, a classy quarter in Shanghai. Leaning her elbows on the dinner table and looking outside, her friend had said, 'A foggy day like this must be what they used to call a ...' and she mentioned a literary term that referred to a dense mist containing particles of dust. Zheng Ling thought of this now, but in her view there was nothing poetical about it.

The streets were murky and the houses on either side were sunk in silence this early on New Year's Day. It was a peculiar kind of silence, accompanied by a feeling that always came over her first thing in the morning of a public holiday before a family get-together, a sort of sinking of the heart, mingled with a nervous tension, as if you were being pressured to be happy and satisfied with life. 'I wonder why Mum is so unhappy and dissatisfied,' Zheng Ling said bitterly. The past year had brought a succession of crises for the family. Zheng Ling's aged father had been dangerously ill, but his condition had now stabilised. In the autumn her mother had needed an urgent operation. That had

been a particularly difficult time. Her mother had suffered from depression for many years, and the children had been worried sick that the operation might make her worse. So, in spite of arranging 24-hour nursing care for her, they had still taken it in turns to look after her. But their mother had now recovered. So looking back as the year was coming to an end, they had reason to feel grateful. Zheng Ling would soon be turning fifty, and she still had Mum and Dad around, people who still used pet names in the way they addressed her. If she thought things through, she had to admit that she was fortunate. And yet she dreaded the prospect of going to see her mother who, despite taking such good care of her skin, always looked miserable. *That downcast 'female intellectual of a certain age' look, Zheng Ling thought, And on a lifeless morning like this, I really need something to cheer me up.*

Their old Buick cruised along the highway, sweeping past a vast reddish-brown building. Zheng Ling's health club was on the third storey. Twice a week she attended yoga classes there and once a week went swimming. By the window of the brightly lit gym a woman was busy on the jogging machine, her short light-brown hair bobbing up and down. Zheng Ling guessed who it was: one of her fellow yoga students, Chief Chinese Representative for a foreign company, unmarried, very fastidious. She was at the gym every day but would never use the bath towel provided. After taking a shower, she would take a whole lot of face tissues and dab at the drops of water on her body. Although Zheng Ling was sure she wasn't doing this to get attention, it still got on her nerves. To insist on going to the gym for an early morning jog on a day like this just showed how lonely she was, in Zheng Ling's view. And this made her feel uncomfortable.

Because of their mother's long-term depression and obsession with cleanliness, Zheng Ling and her siblings had become sensitive to their mother's moods and took great care not to irritate her.

If their father's doctor hadn't said he could go home for a day, they probably wouldn't have bothered their mother with the visit. But perhaps each one of them was thinking that this might be the last occasion for such a gathering, and so they all had to be there, no matter what. Perhaps they all felt that God was allowing them this last opportunity for a family get-together. They wouldn't say so openly, of course.

'I'm afraid this will be our family's last time together. It's a pity the children can't get back,' Zheng Ling said to her husband, meaning their daughter and her elder brother's child, who were both studying in America and would probably not even be celebrating Chinese New Year. Her husband didn't reply. His father had died nearly twenty years before. His mother was still alive, but not very happy. She had kept the last poem his father had written for her just before he died: 'May you live to reach a ripe old age and then be my comfort in the other world.' The first New Year after he passed away his mother had gone away on holiday, to stop herself from fretting at home. There had been three children in both Zheng Ling's and her husband's families, the youngest being a daughter in each case. Her husband and his siblings had taken advantage of their mother's absence at New Year to go through their father's things. Zheng Ling had been pregnant with their daughter at the time, so just sat by and watched. In the drawer of their father's desk, they happened across a notebook containing poems written in slightly leftward-sloping characters. They stood in silence at the desk staring intently at the short lines of old-fashioned verse. Everyone used to say her husband's parents were devoted to each other. Sitting there on the sofa looking at the three siblings, Zheng Ling thought, *Children of a happy family, but now they're suffering for it.*

'Your mum and dad have both reached an advanced age,' her husband said.

‘But I haven’t made any preparations for when they go.’

‘Who on earth can?’ her husband replied. Zheng Ling remembered that when her father-in-law died, her husband had hurried home on just such a foggy morning in search of a shirt to dress his father’s body in, before taking it to the crematorium. At that time she was still living near her parents, who were so worried that her husband, in such an agitated state, might have an accident, that they decided to fetch a white shirt to the hospital themselves. They also accompanied her mother-in-law on the day, when she went to say the last goodbye.

‘The best plan for today,’ her husband suggested, ‘would be to take my mum to your mum’s place. At least that way everyone can be together.’

‘I’m not sure if my mum would like that. She can be so difficult and unwelcoming,’ Zheng Ling confessed. She visualised the round face of her mother-in-law, who had the same downcast female intellectual look as her mother. She too suffered from depression, took Prozac and was always moaning. An ice-cold feeling came over Zheng Ling as she added resignedly, ‘But I suppose we could try.’

They had entered the narrow streets of the old part of the city: Xingguo Road, Wukang Road and Yongfu Road. The several-storied buildings of the old concession quarter were drenched after the overnight rain. Their long-since redundant chimneys, which looked about to topple over, protruded from the red-tiled sloping roofs. Zheng Ling breathed in the sense of tranquillity in decay she was so familiar with. This was the part of the city she had grown up in. In her present, semi-wakeful state, she felt like she was back home. The French bakery on the corner was ablaze with lights. Through the coffeehouse windows you could see in the lounge all the chairs upside down on the tables. The words ‘Merry Xmas and Happy New Year’ in English were still glittering in silver

tinfoil letters over the bar. Christian pastors used to take exception to the way the younger generation and non-believers omitted ‘Christ’ from Christmas and abbreviated it to ‘X’. But Zheng Ling was particularly fond of this ‘X’. To her it embodied the confusion that many people felt deep down about Christmas and how it had been spoilt by commercialisation. It was how she felt about it too.

‘So where are you going to while away the next couple of hours then?’ her husband asked. A large gathering was expected at her mother’s place around ten, so Zheng Ling wouldn’t have to be on the receiving end of her mother’s complaining on her own. Her husband had his fair share of the same from his own mother, of course, so he well understood Zheng Ling’s dread. Besides, he was also used to Zheng Ling’s complaining. With the brown leather steering wheel between his hands, he just wanted to calm her down, so that he could spend a quiet day by himself at the office. ‘The coffeehouse isn’t open,’ Zheng Ling said. ‘Only KFC’s open.’

She usually only went to a coffeehouse after lunch, to read. She always came to this district. She would spend the whole afternoon here before returning home, frequently passing the big iron door of her mother’s place on the way, but rarely looking in. In her favourite coffeehouse she had a favourite seat. She usually ordered a white coffee and would afterwards ask for a glass of water. Once it started getting dark, she would order a small piece of cheesecake. Its sweetness cheered her up at that time of day, lifted her sagging spirits amid the gathering gloom, together with the warmth of the place, its aroma, the sound of other customers, and the music. She loved listening to unfamiliar music. Everything in the coffeehouse made her feel at ease: being with lots of people, enjoying the noise of their lively chatter. It didn’t disturb her at all. In her husband’s eyes she too was a female intellectual with an obsession with cleanliness, always looking for something to moan

about.

Zheng Ling reflected that for her, a woman, to be reading on her own in a fried-chicken restaurant early on New Year's Day must appear unnatural. She remembered the solitary figure on the jogging machine and realised that the contempt she had felt for her was not because of the face tissues but because the woman was doing nothing to conceal her loneliness as a single person, in the same way that the women in the changing room who used to strip to the buff also disgusted her. Ever since her daughter had left home to go to university, Zheng Ling had felt a strong aversion to lonely women. She also felt a profound sense of shame. Loneliness seemed to her a symbol of failure, of rejection. It struck her incidentally that using KFC as a refuge to read in might be even worse than jogging in the gym first thing in the morning. She had kept these feelings to herself when in the car. It was difficult to talk about such things to a husband so tied up with his work.

She had now arrived at her mother's. Next to the old green iron door was the paulownia tree she used to pass every day when she was little. It was wreathed in the dense fog of that New Year morning and reminded her of a chopstick standing in thick noodle soup. She was suddenly startled by a memory of her childhood loneliness. Those dreary New Years, when her father was never at home and no relatives called. Her mother hated having visitors over and struggled to be agreeable to other people. Their kitchen was never like others', with the smell of cooking and all sorts of goodies to eat. In winter it was always foggy outside and freezing indoors. Through the glass window, which seemed paper-thin in the cold weather, the young Zheng Ling used to gaze at the trees, darkened by fog, and imagine how behind the windows opposite, dripping with condensation, a happy party was in progress. Beside a table piled with all sorts of presents and emptied tea-cups, people like her would be bustling about and enjoying the kind of

jokes that no-one outside their family would understand.

Zheng Ling finally made up her mind. She would go to the KFC at the end of the street and wait there a couple of hours. As she expected, there were no other customers. But it was warm and dry at least. She ordered a cup of scalding hot Hong Kong tea with milk and took it to a corner nestled between three walls. As she made herself comfortable, some other customers came into the restaurant. The soft voice of the young woman ordering a breakfast soothed Zheng Ling's nerves. She heard the two of them sit down not far from where she sat and, when they spoke, realised that the companion was a young man. They were discussing their parents and relatives. Zheng Ling recognised the tone of resignation in their voices. She remembered it was how she used to feel at New Year in the days before she was married. But what irked her then was not her parents or relatives as such, but the psychological pressure that seemed to always accompany public holidays. So here were others trying to escape the vexations of family gatherings early on New Year's Day – just like her. Zheng Ling took a sip from her cup of scalding hot tea. Recently she had developed a liking for drinking tea and coffee before it cooled. She liked the feel of the hot liquid slithering down her throat into her stomach. It was somehow like when you ironed a pair of still damp cotton trousers. It gave her a reassuring sense of things being as they should be.

Zheng Ling took out her novel and her notebook and put on her glasses. The novel was set in German-occupied France and was about a love affair between a German soldier and a French village girl. It was a sad and emotionally charged story. Its impact was reinforced when you knew that the author herself, a French Jewish woman, had been in hiding in the countryside in the south of France. The novel, with its realistic and neatly constructed plot,

was written while she was trying to escape detection by the authorities, and after she had written the very last word she was transported to Poland where she died. When you considered all this and how up to the very end she could still write with such human insight and an absence of any resentment or prejudice, the power of her vision was all the more impressive. A good novel will always make you, the reader, relate it to events in your own experience. As the story develops, so do you. But if you are walking along a narrow path lined with rose bushes, what you notice is not the path, but the roses on either side, the flowers in full bloom, which are part of your own experience. What you see, through the novel, is your own life and yourself.

Like a rubber ball in water, Zheng Ling was carried along by the story. She had loved novels ever since she was a young girl. She used to go to bed early and sit on the quilt with a book in her hands. Bathed in the yellow halo from her reading lamp and immersed in the story, she felt as safe as if she were sitting inside a dome-shaped mosquito net. This had always been one of Zheng Ling's favourite occupations. Sometimes, when she had a novel in her hands, her imagination would summon up sounds she had heard when reading in the past, such as the son next door practising the clarinet, with the music reminding her of black grapes rolling around a table-top, or the sound of the radio jamming when her father was trying to listen to Voice of America, or downstairs' baby crying. He was a sickly child, who was put out in the sun during the day. He had lost a lot of hair from the back of his head and his scalp was covered in white scales, while the skin under his eyes was an unhealthy green. These were the sounds of her family home, sounds she'd been so familiar with all her life. With her memories of that home still so vivid, Zheng Ling couldn't believe that she had nearly passed the half-way point of her life.

Going back to the district where she had grown up felt like returning to where she naturally belonged. This old district had retained an atmosphere redolent of the faded bourgeoisie. With today's Shanghai spawning so many more fashionable quarters, this district seemed a backwater by comparison, yet it carried on in its own quiet unhurried way. Zheng Ling thought that if she had still been in her thirties, perhaps she would have liked the Xintiandi and Gubei districts of Shanghai, but now she only really felt at home in these grey, old streets, with their decaying apartments dating back to the 1920s, the old Western-style buildings of the 1940s, and the paulownia trees that were planted all round here in the 1970s. She cherished those derelict and redundant chimneys protruding from red-tiled roofs and the wisteria stretching out its shoots from low garden walls. The French novel she was reading made her visualise the road outside. She could imagine herself travelling such a road into exile, as if she too would soon be on her way to Poland to die.

On the pavement outside the window an elderly woman was passing slowly. She turned her pale round face towards the restaurant. It was sad and drawn. For a moment, Zheng Ling thought it was her mother and her heart missed a beat. The woman was wearing a pair of exquisite brown shoes and a reddish-brown woollen jacket. They were in a style that was now out of fashion, but it was how a well-dressed woman of the previous generation would have looked. She was carrying some milk she had evidently just bought and, glancing at her through the window, Zheng Ling thought she looked bad-tempered. Zheng Ling had often noticed how many more sad-looking faces there were among the old people here than in the new district where she lived, not like the easy-going look of those you saw walking with their children in the new districts. Most of those round here, like her own parents, lived in old houses with unoccupied floors full

only of memories of those who had since moved on. In their storerooms they would keep their children's chests, along with their old bedclothes, a violin or an accordion. These old people living on their own, weren't they perhaps the ones with the greater self-respect. Or were they also just a hangover from the bourgeois past? Although Zheng Ling was afraid of getting involved with people of that generation, deep down she admired them. But then she remembered how annoying she found old people who seemed happy to spend day after day gathered around the courtyard fountain, keeping the children amused. Their smiling faces and their chatter brought to mind the expression 'old biddies'. She knew she was being harsh and unreasonable thinking of them this way, but she couldn't help it. She watched as the shrivelled figure dressed in light brown passed a 1940s Spanish-style building. That was the nursery school Zheng Ling had attended as a child. She then crossed a Western-style street also dating from the 1940s. That was where her primary school teacher had lived. The elderly woman turned into the street opposite, which was where Zheng Ling and her boyfriend used to meet. There was a small shop that sold pirate CDs. The proprietor was a fan of Western opera and would be forever playing Puccini. Zheng Ling remembered that in spring and summer you could hear arias from *Madame Butterfly* halfway down the street. The soaring notes of the soprano singing 'One Fine Day' would still be following you when you were quite a distance away. It lifted your spirits, although, in actual fact, fine days in Shanghai were something of a rarity.

It suddenly struck Zheng Ling: *I wonder what that lady with the milk thinks of me, a woman on her own sitting in an American fried-chicken restaurant, drinking tea early on New Year's morning. Perhaps the same thoughts are going through her head as I had when I caught sight from*

the car of the woman jogging in the health club. Perhaps I make her feel uncomfortable.

'I'm fed up to the back teeth', the young girl was saying. Even in the company of the young man, you could tell from her voice she was lonely and depressed. Like an echo in an empty room, Zheng Ling felt her gentle young voice touch a string deep inside her. 'I hate these dreary days. Just hate them.' Like a feather fluttering down, her voice echoed softly inside Zheng Ling. 'Am I turning into a misery, like Mum?' she asked.

In the novel Zheng Ling was reading, the young French country girl was madly in love with the German officer billeted with her family. Meanwhile the catastrophe that would engulf the novel's Jewish author was gradually approaching. The book's flyleaf showed a facsimile of her manuscript, which had the effect of confronting the reader with the full force of what was to come, like the second subject in the movement of a symphony.

All of a sudden someone in the restaurant cried out in excitement, 'It's snowing!'

It was snowing. Zheng Ling saw fine white flakes falling from the grey sky. They were faint, but coming fast. The old buildings opposite had become indistinct, like a dream landscape in an impressionist painting. Pedestrians on the street were looking up at the sky as they walked, with a smile of enchantment on their faces, as if they could not believe the fluttering snow was real. The two lovers sitting next to Zheng Ling abandoned a tableful of food and rushed outside, the girl in her thin, grey tight-fitting sweater. The heavy snow made her look very slim, and Zheng Ling saw her face gradually redden in the cold bracing air, like a shiny bright apple.

Zheng Ling got up and went out too. All around there was a smell of fresh cold snow and the freezing air soon penetrated her thin sweater making her flesh tingle. She couldn't help smiling.

The street was already white. So were the sloping roofs. The early morning fog had dispersed. Between earth and sky there was nothing but snow falling continuously. She thought of the courtyard of her mother's house, which would certainly also be covered in white and where the leaves of the evergreen trees, motionless, would have caught the snowflakes, the way they did when she was a child. It was wonderful how snow always made people look happier and more friendly, covering the world until everything was white and new.

Zheng Ling stood at the street corner and gazed up Huating Road. Without a soul on the streets, all was virgin snow, not a single footprint. With their ornament of snow, even the old nineteen-twenties window ledges and roofs looked new. She remembered how the streets had looked when she was a child, and they didn't seem to have changed at all. She felt a gradual resurgence of the feelings she had known as a child, a mixture of curiosity and yearning. They had not changed either. They were still as undefined as before. Although she had been lonely as a child, she had nurtured vague hopes back then that things would somehow be better when she grew up. Everything would get better. As a child, she had always wandered about the neighbouring streets on her own and had always got wet when it snowed. Her feet would freeze in her pigskin boots. But it had always fascinated her the way the streets appeared in the snow. She considered herself lonely as an adult, too, who was forever longing inwardly for change, but never having the opportunity to achieve it, except when she was reading. But those hopes were not yet dead. Deep down, she still harboured them. In the snow Zheng Ling found, to her surprise, that she was examining herself, and amazingly the young hopes she had cherished over all those years were as fresh as ever.

She saw in the distance the entrance to a TB clinic. The

elderly lady in the light-brown jacket was also standing in the snow, looking up and letting the snowflakes fall on her face. It reminded Zheng Ling of the way her mother's puppy always used to look up, her eyes so expectant.

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