

THE CURSE

by A Yi,

translated by Julia Lovell

A chicken can disappear as easily as an insect. And the owner of this particular missing chicken, Zhong Yonglian, had deduced that her neighbour Wu Haiying was responsible for the disappearance. There were two pieces of incriminating evidence: first, a trail of claw-prints ended in Wu's vegetable garden; second, her house smelled of stew. Wu Haiying was not a woman you wanted to get on the wrong side of: she liked a fight, and would probably burn your house down too if she felt like pursuing the quarrel. If only Zhong Yonglian's son, with his dark, murderer's glower, had been around, she thought to herself. But he hadn't phoned for ages, or sent any money back.

As dusk approached, two aspects of the problem occurred to Zhong Yonglian: one, it was Wu Haiying who had sabotaged their outwardly harmonious relationship, and it would take more than Zhong's own non-confrontational instincts to mend fences; and two, although the disappearance of a chicken was not a disaster of the first order, it could not be overlooked. If Zhong waited till tomorrow, her moment would have passed. And so she decided to take a tour around the village. "Have you seen my chicken?" she asked everyone she met. "I last saw it on the east side." She'd learnt this tactic from her husband. You need to prepare your ground first, he'd instructed her, near the end of the long illness that finally killed him. Finally, Zhong Yonglian advanced upon Wu Haiying's house: "Who could have stolen my chicken?" she sang out three times.

"What's wrong?" Wu Haiying asked.

"I'm trying to find out who stole my chicken." Once the words were out, Zhong Yonglian felt almost dizzy at her implicit declaration of war. "It'll come back in its own time," Wu replied. "What if it's already dead and eaten?" Zhong renewed her provocation. She quickly looked away. Wu Haiying at last caught on. "You think I took it?"

"You tell me," Zhong Yonglian pronounced, turning to leave. Wu Haiying pulled her back by the sleeve. Zhong shook her off: "Fuck off and die."

"Are you saying I ate your chicken?" Wu Haiying screamed.

"No. But you just did."

"When?"

"To eat a chicken's an easy enough thing. And tidy – no evidence left."

The rain was coming down in sheets. Wu Haiying grabbed Zhong Yonglian – a thin, weak woman – by the collar, stared fiercely at her accuser's face, then slapped it hard. Zhong Yonglian's eyes and nose began streaming tears and blood, her face twisting with the double humiliation. As Wu Haiying was preparing to administer a second blow, Zhong remembered her deceased husband and – with a sob of melancholy outrage – charged at Wu Haiying, who lost her balance in the surprise assault. Scrambling back to her feet, she seized hold of Zhong Yonglian's hair (as easily as if it were a bundle of grass) and twisted hard, pulling her to the ground. When witnesses reached the scene, there Zhong lay, screeching for her dead husband and absent son, with Wu Haiying standing alongside, ignoring her husband's calls for her to go back inside the house. "She started it," Wu explained. "She said I stole her chicken." Zhong Yonglian beat the concrete with her fists:

"Shameless bitch." A few of the women tried to pull her up, but she refused to get up. Her hands and feet started to spasm.

"She's faking it," Wu Haiying said.

"Just shut up," her husband suggested. She wasn't finished, though, even as he dragged her inside. "You all heard her: she said I stole her chicken. Strike me down if I did." Now Zhong Yonglian sat up and stabbed a finger in her direction: "If you stole my chicken, your son will die this year. If you didn't, my son will."

"If I stole it, my son will die." Wu Haiying accepted the terms of the curse.

"I still don't believe her," Zhong Yonglian muttered. Even as she cried herself to sleep that night, she felt that having the last word had mitigated some of the injustice of the encounter. The next morning, the chicken came home, slick with rainwater, like a shabby hermit back from a retreat, scrabbling away at the ground, a red rag tied around its leg. She carried it inside and quietly killed it.

Zhong Yonglian felt guilty whenever she saw Wu Haiying, until one day she realised that even if Wu Haiying hadn't stolen her chicken, it didn't mean she was a good person, or that she wasn't a thief. She remembered the salty bitterness of her blood and tears, of Wu Haiying pulling her down to the concrete by her hair.

Whenever the two women encountered each other, Zhong would strive to match her antagonist's look of contempt. She stretched some sheet plastic over the fence around the chicken coop, to prevent the birds from flying away, and asked her son-in-law to write "Death to thieves" on the strip of red cloth wrapped around every chicken's leg.

The two women took care to have nothing to do with each other.

As the final month of the lunar year came round, the village spoke of nothing except the return of Wu Haiying's son from Dongguan. He'd come back driving a white Buick that had rolled noiselessly over the frozen grass and stones of the road into the village. He pulled on the hand-brake and slammed the door shut behind him, with a perfect Politburo swagger. He tapped the remote control and the still car yelped, as if with fear. A girl – no local, for sure – somewhere in her early twenties also emerged from the vehicle, gazing adoringly at him. Her soft, white face could have been caught in a single handspan; her eyes shone with a lustre that the villagers associated with foreign, not Chinese, girls. Her hair – dyed sunset-red – was cut in a dense crop. Although it was winter, she wore nothing but a tight grey T-shirt and a pair of black leather trousers, her clothes clinging to her slim curves and long legs. She smiled guilelessly at her audience, revealing pearl-like teeth.

"In you go, Xixi," Guohua told her, and she obediently disappeared into Wu Haiying's house. She was easily the most beautiful thing the village had ever seen. That whole day, the villagers were troubled by a curious sense of emptiness, of vexed enchantment. Guohua kept her shut up at home until Wu Haiying told them to make a tour of the village, after which he finally took her to see a few of their relatives. Wu Haiying, by contrast, always seemed to be out on calls, her face radiant with delight. Knowing what she'd come to hear, all her hosts hastened to compliment her on her good luck. "Her parents haven't agreed yet," she'd reply, in an attempt at modesty. If her interlocutor failed to say something along the lines of "sooner or later, then", she'd quickly interject: "They've exchanged rings, you know." She was so euphoric that she even forgot to sneer at Zhong Yonglian, who consequently felt that her humiliation was now complete.

Zhong headed off to the country town, where she asked the proprietor of a public phone-stall to ring the number on the piece of paper she gave him. She wanted to tell her own son, Guofeng, that he should bring a girl back with him for New Year – even if he had to pay her. There was no answer, after several attempts. "Try again," Zhong Yonglian urged the man. "Did you dial a wrong number?" The next time he tried, whoever was on the other end had turned the phone off. Guo Feng had always been a loner: he never told his mother where he was working, or rang home. "I don't care about you," he'd say if she ever admitted to being anxious about him. "Haven't you got better things to worry about?" Almost every year he'd go into town for New Year, wandering back long after dark: barefoot, his face bleeding. He'd never tell her what had happened. One year he'd not gone into town because he was helping his uncle with some haulage work. When the uncle fell ill, Guofeng went AWOL with the van to Anhui over in the southeast, eventually ringing home to say it had broken down. Off the uncle went, hundreds of miles across China, and found the van with the door open, the keys still in the ignition, but no sign of any driver. "You should have thrown that pile of junk away ages ago," was all Guofeng had to say about it afterwards.

Zhong Yonglian now went to the police station, a scarf wrapped around her head. A member of the joint defence squad asked her what she wanted.

"I've come to report a crime."

"Name?"

"That doesn't matter." She cupped a hand around her mouth and whispered into her interlocutor's ear: "Guohua's back."

"Who?"

"The one who ran away after the gambling bust." She had another idea. "He's brought a woman back with him. I'm sure she's a whore."

"Thanks."

The police station only covered its operating costs through fines. Every one of the gamblers caught last year had paid up four hundred yuan, except for the absent Guohua. If Guohua didn't pay, people had begun to mutter after he ran away, why should they?

A few days later, the station sent a policeman, a driver and a member of the defence squad to catch their prey. Out they dragged Guohua, struggling like a snared rabbit. Xixi pursued them all the way to the car: "Why? Why?" she was sobbing, just like one of those women off the soap operas.

"Fuck off," the defence squad man shouted back. He seemed to have styled his moustache on Stalin's. Xixi began pounding him with her fists, screaming obscenities in her beautifully accented Mandarin. She bit hard on the inside of her cheek: right on cue, the tears came. "What right do you have to arrest him? Doesn't the law mean anything to the police?" Given only brief pause by her beautiful naivety, they carried him off in a cloud of dust.

When Wu Haiying came back from cutting pig fodder and heard the news, she fainted away, while Xixi squatted beside her, weeping. Observing them through her window, Zhong Yonglian smiled to herself. Serves them right, she thought. Serves them right, she repeated out loud, pacing about her house.

Half an hour later, Guohua returned, having somehow escaped his captors. Kissing Xixi on the forehead, he ran upstairs to hide inside the grain measure in the threshing room. "Just tell them I've gone to the mountains," he said. By dusk, the investigation team had wheeled back round to the

village. They barged into the Wu residence and began carelessly searching the place. "Where is he?" they barked at Wu Haiying, grabbing her by the collar.

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

Wu Haiying looked away.

"He ran off to the mountains," Xixi sullenly told them.

"Run away, has he?"

"That's what I said."

The man with the Stalin moustache flashed his torchlight directly at her. Closing her eyes, she bit her lip. Her face – skin pulled taut, eyelashes casting a long shadow over her cheeks – twitched.

"He's run off, has he?"

"That's what I said," she repeated, a little more boldly.

"Where's your temporary residence permit?" the man asked.

"I don't have one."

"You should have one."

"I don't have one."

"Then you're coming back with us."

"Why?"

He struck her, hard, with the torch. She crumpled to the floor. "Drag her out," the policeman said, and they started to pull her inert body by her high leather boots. Her face was a mask of despair: as if she were a fish on a chopping block eyeing up the gutting knife. Wu Haiying's relatives – who'd gathered round to watch – melted away home. But by the time the police had pulled Xixi into the yard outside the house, the clan had returned, brandishing brooms, poles, truncheons, even tobacco pipes. The police were surrounded and the beating began. The thin, reedy voice of the policeman tried to plead for calm, but it was too late. Eventually, a voice shouted at them to stop. The crowd parted to let the young master – the young master who had returned triumphantly home in a Buick, the young master who had taken refuge in the threshing room – through. Kitchen knife in hand, he charged into the throng like an avenger, plunging his weapon into the arm of the man with the moustache. Everyone closed their eyes, momentarily terrified by the new logic of the situation. Even Guohua seemed unable to believe what he'd done, pausing after he'd pulled the knife out. Only Zhong Yonglian – inside her head – screamed at him to go on: "Go on! Stab him again! It'll be the death of you too!" Guohua stabbed him again.

There was no blood. No sound, even. The killing process seemed unbearably protracted, even to the victim, who grabbed at the knife, urging his murderer to stop using the back of the blade. Suddenly conscious of how humiliating his incompetence was, Guohua snatched up a wooden spear instead. Before he was ready to deliver the final blow, though, the three representatives of law and order struggled free from their attackers and scattered like terrified pack animals out of the village, disappearing along a dark maze of paths and byways.

The police never sent anyone back. A relative of Wu Haiying's in the provincial capital rang the Provincial Party Committee; the Committee had a word with Public Security, and Public Security cancelled the eighteen-strong militia detailed to the village. When Public Security told the local police to leave Guohua alone, Wu Haiying's relative agreed to leave Public Security alone. All the same, Guohua and his terrified beloved couldn't get out of the place fast enough.

The village's migrant labourers drifted back home for New Year, bringing marvels such as singing cards, golden mobile phones and smokeless cigarettes. Zhong Yonglian hung around the mouth of the village, waiting in vain for a glimpse of her son's tall form. She asked the other returnees if they knew where Guofeng was working; no-one did.

She went back to the county town to try Guofeng's mobile again; the number was out of service, the man said. Which meant, he explained, that no-one was using the phone any more: maybe they hadn't paid the bill, or maybe it had been stolen. Guangdong was full of motorbike-mounted pickpockets who'd mug you as they dragged you along the ground, sometimes for dozens of metres.

Exhausted by sleepless nights, one day she dozed off in a chair. She dreamed that Guofeng was a little boy again, but his face was bleached white, his voice barely a whisper. She ladled him out some porridge, stirred in some medicine and told him to eat it up. But Guofeng just stared at her wretchedly, shaking his head. Anxiety clutched at her heart. After she'd put the bowl away, she discovered that a vast squid-coloured creature was sprawled over the bed, its emaciated chest inlaid with fibrous tendons and bones, its limbs like flayed rabbit legs. Some of its heaving internal organs had been punctured, and dark blood was dripping down onto the floor. Now it was half-squatting, its right hand flat against the bed board, its bowed legs buckling as it tried to lever its exhausted body up, while the cotton quilt covering it slid off. Its enormous cobble-shaped head was almost hairless and featureless, except for a vast, panting, stinking mouth, armed with long, sharp teeth. As it struggled for breath, its cheeks inflated, then deflated. Swaying as if it were about to fall, the creature suddenly reached out to grab her. She woke up. There was a cold ache to her wrist.

Rushing over to her daughter's house, she found her son-in-law playing cards in the sun.

"I still haven't heard anything from Guofeng. I had a horrible dream: he'd grown wings and a tail, and he was dripping blood." Her son-in-law said nothing. "Will you go and find him for me? Can't you see how worried his sister is about him?" The son-in-law glanced at Zhong Yonglian, deciding not to say whatever had been on the tip of his tongue. "Please. You're his brother-in-law, and he's my only son."

"How am I supposed to find him?"

"I'm sure you can think of something. I'm begging you."

"China's a big country. I don't even know what province he's in."

"I know you can find him. You young people are so clever. Bring him back for New Year. He can do what he likes after that. I'm sick and worried: I just want to see him."

Her son-in-law stood up. Zhong Yonglian suddenly clung to his knees, her face wet with tears. "I'm scared he's dead."

"What the ... All right," he agreed, spotting his wife approach.

"Swear it."

"I swear."

After taking five hundred yuan from Zhong Yonglian, her son-in-law spent a day in the provincial capital then came back, the money unspent. He'd bumped into Li Yuanrong from the village over the way, he lied, who'd had a letter from Guofeng saying he'd be back in a few days. When Zhong Yonglian refused to believe him, he rang Li Yuanrong who told her himself that "Guofeng'll be back soon. He's on a job that pays a thousand a day – he's trying to earn as much as he can before he comes back." A few days before New Year, a villager called Guoguang – who'd been working in Guangdong – came back and corroborated Li Yuanrong's story. Guofeng was in the factory next door, he said, and had been on overtime the past few days. They were paying him several times the going rate – four hundred yuan a day. Guofeng had asked him to pass on the message that he'd be back on New Year's Eve.

"How is Guofeng?"

"Still not much of a talker. He's grown his hair – like a poet."

Zhong Yonglian knew why Guofeng was so desperate to earn money. Every New Year's Day, migrant workers back for the holiday converged on a temple in Yu, a nearby village, to play cards. The bets started off at a few hundred or a few thousand yuan, then quickly escalated to tens or hundreds of thousands. Most of them gambled away all the money they'd worked so hard to earn all year, then borrowed a bit of cash to buy their train ticket back south. Last year, Guofeng had cleaned up for the first four days, then lost everything on the fifth. He'd come home red-eyed, eaten a bowl of rice porridge then left.

On the morning of the last day of the lunar year, Zhong Yonglian stewed chicken, goose, beef and pork, prepared vegetables and made beancurd soup. By midday, the food was all cold, but still she waited, like a woman expecting her lover – too fragile with hope to go out and look for him herself. She was waiting for him to rush in and call out her name; she was waiting to turn and smile at him.

"Guofeng."

"Mother."

Those two words were all she wanted to hear. But as the sun sank and the dust on the road settled, nothing disturbed the New Year quiet – the village was silent, except for the muffled crackle of children setting off firecrackers. Darkness fell, as if a bucket of ink had been dropped over the village. Zhong Yonglian sat on her threshold, weeping.

At eleven o'clock, when every other household had bolted its door, and Zhong Yonglian herself was about to lock up for the night, a pair of headlamps glowed weakly on the horizon. She stiffened as they approached, clearly headed in the direction of the village. Eventually, she allowed herself to grow excited. She began to jog towards the light; then accelerated to a sprint.

The van drove right past her.

She sat by the roadside and began to cry, her body aching, the soles of her shoes broken by stones, her knees grazed from a fall. Her son wasn't coming home. But just as she had abandoned all hope, the van turned around, returned to the village and stopped outside her house, the engine still running.

She ran home.

Guofeng emerged carrying a cheap bag that he dropped to the ground while he took two hundred yuan from his trouser pocket and gave it to the driver. He was as impassive as always. Picking up the bag, Zhong Yonglian asked the driver if he wanted something to eat. He drove off without an answer.

"Why are you so late?" she asked.

Guofeng seemed impatient: "I've been on a train for the last twenty-four hours and I couldn't get a car to take me back from town."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"I'll heat some dinner up for you."

"I'll have some rice porridge."

"Porridge, for New Year?"

"I already told you."

Although weak, his voice was still commanding. "I'm tired," he said. "Tell me when it's ready." He walked off to the bedroom and lay down on the bed, his eyes closed. When she was finally sure he was asleep, Zhong Yonglian pulled the quilt out from under him and covered him with it. Empty with relief, she set about making the porridge. She washed the pot, rinsed the rice then added the water. She knew that her son liked his porridge as thin as broth: the clearer and blander, the better. She twiddled impatiently with the gas. She lifted the lid on the pot to see if it was done: after the steam had cleared, she discovered the rice in the ladle was still hard. When it was at last ready, she ladled out a big bowlful. She carried it into the bedroom, not even minding how hot the bowl was, and called out to him. Beneath the quilt, his breathing was barely audible. He moaned faintly.

"Sit up and have some porridge."

He didn't respond. She sat on the edge of the bed, waiting. He must have travelled thousands of miles on the train, and it was at least another sixty from the country town. She gently tucked the quilt in around him. Heavy snow began to swirl about outside the window. The snow is falling, she thought; my son is fast asleep. The world is at peace.

She called out to him again: "Feng."

Again, there was no answer.

She drew her face close to his: "Feng," she said softly, "sit up and have something to eat before you go to sleep." Now she was worried: his face, when she felt it, was as cold as ice. She put her hand in front of his nose: he was hardly breathing. She shook him, she tugged at him. His hand fell out of his sleeve, and she pushed up the material to grab hold of his wrist. It was as if there was nothing left to grab.

After a moment of paralysis, she burst into tears.

She might as well have been holding a dead fish. Her fingers were slippery with stinking, decaying matter. Her thumb gouged into her son's destroyed wrist, straight to his hard white bones. His arm had rotted purple – aubergine-purple. She pulled up his wool shirt: his torso was the same, his chest crisscrossed with purple, canal-like veins. When she tried to lift him from behind, his head hung down as if detached from his body; a rank, chemical odour belched out of his open mouth.

Three minutes was enough for the doctor in the country town. "Your son's body has been destroyed," he told her when he emerged from the ward – he seemed angry about it. "Everything: organs, skin, bones. He rotted to death." She rented a car to bring Guofeng back to the village and quietly buried him.

After the spring had come, an ambitious intern from the provincial legal aid centre came looking for her. Zhong Yonglian – her hair now completely white – gazed uncomprehendingly at him as he explained concepts like lead poisoning, maximum working hours, and health and safety. Changing tack, he tried an analogy to help her understand Guofeng's death: think of the chemical warfare plants that the Japanese built when they invaded China – the place your son was working in was much more poisonous. Zhong Yonglian simply walked away, shaking her head.

"I just want to help. It won't cost you anything."

"No."

"Are you going to let your son die for nothing?"

"I don't need your help." She made her way over to her neighbour's house – ever so slowly, as if she were convalescing from an illness. Seeing Zhong Yonglian sit carefully down on her stone threshold, Wu Haiying brought a stool for her to sit on. "The ground's too cold to sit on."

"I was wrong about the chicken."

"Shush now."

Wu Haiying squatted down and stroked Zhong Yonglian's hand. The tears ran silently down Wu's face, while Zhong stared stolidly into the middle distance – like one of those socialist realist statues of the revolutionary martyrs. A migrant labourer who hadn't yet left for the south was playing an American pop song in one of the houses near the mouth of the village.

*Everywhere I'm looking now,
I'm surrounded by your embrace.
Baby, I can see your halo,
You know you're my saving grace.
You're everything I need and more,
It's written all over your face.
Baby, I can feel your halo,
Pray it won't fade away.*

They sat there, listening.