

## Revisiting the Past

訪舊\*

By D. J. LIU 劉大任

This part of town was still so drab and dreary, as I'd remembered it.

The conference wasn't over yet, but to me it was already done. The next day they would discuss preparations for the next annual meeting and handle some routine matters, but there was no need for me to attend. How was I going to spend this unexpected day of free time? After escaping the suffocating atmosphere of the conference center, I was strolling back to the hotel with a cigarette hanging from between my lips, unable to get this crazy idea out of my head: should I pay him a visit?

This sudden impulse of mine surprised me.

We'd broken off contact many years ago, more years than I could count. I'd given no advance notice, much less made any arrangement. Could I just go over? Who knew if he was still living at the same address? Would we even recognize each other? Was he still alive? Was I crazy to consider showing up on his doorstep unannounced?

But as soon as I had the idea I couldn't drive it out of my mind. It had possessed me.

Was something in the air acting imperceptibly on my defenseless soul?

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After all, I'd lived here for ten years, ten lost years.

By the time my head had cleared I was already standing in that once familiar doorway.

But the one who answered the door wasn't him. It was her, a person whom I'd never expected to see in a million years: my ex-wife.

Her eyes remained calm, like a Muslim woman clad head to toe in black muslin. I looked in her eyes and everything was as before. Probing, searching, I was unable to detect anything: time had left no traces on her visage, not even crow's feet. She didn't respond when I said "hi." She simply turned round and said "he's here" into the house.

Her voice was natural, like wind blowing across the treetops.

He brought me to the dining room table and asked me to sit down. It was the same old table. They hadn't even replaced the dining room table. A faint breeze was blowing through the kitchen and the dining room, light and quick. The table was set with a feast. There was my favorite Shanghai-style ham soup with bamboo shoots and tofu, preserved pork with scallions, "three-cup" chicken with ginger, sesame oil and soy sauce, and spicy Shaoxing-style tofu. He poured me a glass of whisky, to the brim.

He raised his glass.

"You're finally here. Last time and the time before that—in fact, every time—we've been ready for you, and if you hadn't come this time we'd have had to wait another two or three years."

The academic association I belong to meets here every two or three years. He'd worked out the interval.

I'd only come this time because she hadn't even crossed my mind, I thought to myself.

She never came to the table. After setting it she simply disappeared. She was still wearing that same lined jacket, the blue one with the floral pattern.

Soon after we married I'd become intimately familiar with her domestic routine. I knew, for instance, that she always took off her bra before dinner. She didn't like to feel constrained, and neither did I. In those days we were still in love. After dinner was martini time.

She would nestle close and I'd slip my free hand snakelike inside her blouse. I would brim with a sense of well-being.

The memory of that feeling lingered after we broke up, was the hardest to let go of. It took on a life of its own, so that every time I indulged in recollection it would become the theme to some new variation. The associations multiplied and the intensity increased, until I could no longer be with another woman.

Then, one day, well-being turned into humiliation.

I got in the habit of wearing sunglasses indoors and out so that other people couldn't see me, as if only by looking out at people from behind a protective shade could I maintain a safe distance.

Then I started blaming myself. I turned all the details over and over in my mind, sorting out how they were related. I analyzed and analyzed my memories, coolly and rationally, like a responsible physician conducting a clinical investigation.

I don't know how long I spent thrashing around in this way.

Well-being, humiliation, blame: these were the three chasms in my soul. The demarcations between them were often unclear. They sometimes took on human shape. Sometimes you looked up and one of them withdrew. Sometimes they attacked one after another like tumblers in an acrobatic performance. The worst was when they suddenly vanished, leaving an empty space. I never knew where they went. All I knew was that underfoot was an abyss into which I would immediately be plunged. That feeling of falling was quite distinctive. Weightless, turned head over heels, my whole being would start to turn to foam and as I plummeted towards a steaming black cauldron at the bottom. Fortunately, I retained some self-awareness before the moment of total immersion. Realizing medication would no longer be of any help, I went to see a psychologist.

The strange part was the absence of hate: I never hated either one of them.

At the time we were both new hires, assistant professors. We didn't work in the same department, but our doors faced one another, and we happened to rent places on the same street.

It happened during the year I spent abroad collecting research

materials. She wasn't willing to quit her job and go with me.

The evening I came back, a year later, I found that she hadn't taken off her bra. She said: "We're a couple now, him and me. If you're not willing to let me go, I'll come back to you. But I won't be happy."

That's when I realized that, except for the furniture, the house was already empty.

I wasn't so dense that I'd spent the whole year in the dark about what was happening, but I'd been misguided by that sense of well-being.

We'd drunk almost half the bottle before he stopped beating around the bush.

"Why'd you come see us this time?"

"No special reason," I said. "I had an extra day."

It was late at night by the time I left. They insisted on driving me to the hotel, but I insisted on walking.

It wasn't that far. It wouldn't take me any longer than half an hour on foot.

I had a sudden urge to go to the seaside park nearby, sit on the bench and have a smoke.

The surf in the moonlight was a row of silver ribbons rolling in and crashing onto the black beach, each ribbon of a slightly different length, thickness and design. As each ribbon advanced, the angle of its arc would alter, but the end was always the same. Each shattered the moment it smashed onto the strand, issuing a final, soul-stirring roar.

The reason we'd originally decided to rent a place around here was because of this stretch of sea.

Because this was the place I first kissed her, facing this expanse of ocean, sitting on this very bench.

I tossed my third cigarette onto the sand, stood up and started walking into the sea.

What with all the alcohol and nicotine, I could hardly stand up straight.

So I fixed my sight on the longest, brightest ribbon and stepped in time to its tempo.

Then I fell headlong into the surf.

The next thing I knew I was soaking wet, sitting like a stone in the shallow water at the seashore.

The whole pack was ruined. But I no longer felt like smoking.

I dragged myself back to the bench.

I'd never felt like this before. A feeling of boundlessness. A feeling I hadn't had since I was a little boy. A feeling of bliss.

It wasn't a feeling, it was bliss itself.

Finally I could forgive myself. It was the nicest feeling in the world.

*Translated by Darryl STERK 石岱崙*