

# New Year's Eve

## 大年夜\*

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“This New Year's Eve, we've really got to live it up! Let's gather everyone together for good food, good wine, and good times.”

Though he didn't seem to be using the imperative mood, he did at least sound like he was taking something, or someone, for granted.

Yes, let's! I couldn't be bothered to reply. I was thinking: You guys'd have all the fun and I'd exhaust myself doing all the work. Every time it's seven or eight, even ten people. Just to make the dumplings I'd have to go to the market, wash the greens, mince the meat, blend the filling and knead the dough and roll it out into dumpling skin. Add the time I'd spend on clean-up before and after the blast and I'd be busy for at least two whole days! Every time it's the same: you sit there and enjoy the fruits of my labor, pretending you're doing your share: ‘Don't I always pitch in and help out? Here I am, at your disposal. So what do you, Chef, with your kitchen to command, have to complain about?’

But honestly, the past is past. There was a time when a girl would resign herself to toil as a rice maid for the sake of the Revolution, but

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\* From *Lianhe wenxue* 《聯合文學》 (*UNITAS—A Literary Monthly*), Vol. 316, February, 2011: 104-107. The title recalls the *xiehoiyu* “New Year's Eve, Eat Dumplings—No Strangers” (大年夜吃餃子—沒外人) .

that time has passed.

The only reason I changed my mind was because my old friend Tina called me out of the blue, decades after we had lost touch. And she immediately had me on the defensive.

“Where the hell have you been all these years? How come you didn’t even come to our class reunion!”

Well, it’s no wonder. Having married a man like this, I’d cut contact with old friends more or less intentionally. It really had been decades.

Tina was a scene-stealer in college. Whenever there was some excursion, everyone pressed her to come out and help promote the event. School dances were simply dreary without her there. And there was always a gang of people surrounding her all day long like an entourage, acting like assistants but also like managers. Someone coaxed her to enter a beauty pageant. Someone else yanked strings in the entertainment industry to try to make her a star. Who would have imagined that with plenty of marriage prospects to choose from, she would end up marrying some poor artist?

Tina and I were in the same major together. We were even roommates. It was only natural that I would become her social attaché-cum-romance counselor.

During the time I volunteered to serve as her matchmaker, I stuck to two ironclad principles: First, Arts or Law students were out of the picture immediately if they were suave and glib. Second, Science or Engineering students were asked to stand aside if they were gawky or geeky. But as a result, there were fewer and fewer bees buzzing around the campus queen, who grew into the proverbial solitary flower in love with her own fragrance. It was proof of that old campus saw:

*Freshman girls are proud  
Sophomores live on a cloud  
Junior girls sound the alarm  
Senior girls lose all their charm*

But Tina never bemoaned her fate. On the eve of graduation her

pack of admirers had all dispersed, and then even I went abroad. She was left all alone.

The news that she'd finally gotten married only twisted and turned its way from Taiwan the year my eldest was born.

But we never resumed contact. You couldn't blame her. That geeky science student I'd married suddenly took it into his head to drop out of academia and make revolution, making it all the way onto the government blacklist. In the eyes of friends and family from Taiwan, he's guilty of treason, and seen as a terrorist.

Tina called with less than three days to go until New Year's Eve. It was only when I asked her where she was calling from that she told me her husband had passed away. She'd been stateside for two years, living with her daughter. If she hadn't gone to the Christmas class reunion in Chicago she would never have known that we were living in the same city.

Now New Year's wasn't all about him and his lot of aging comrades. I wanted to invite Tina over to help bring in the New Year with a bang.

And fortunately it didn't matter that I changed my mind at the last minute. The old gang would come if called at a moment's notice.

Tina was the first to arrive. After all, we were old friends. As soon as she stepped in the door she came right into the kitchen to help. Of course, we hadn't seen each other in decades, and I could hardly recognize her when I opened the door. When I gave her a hug, and felt the girth of her waist, my eyes just moistened up.

Leaflet and his wife were the next to arrive, followed by Picketer, Purchaser, and Mimeograph and their wives, pair by pair, until everyone was there. With my husband and me—they called us Mr. and Mrs. Liaison—there were the usual five couples, ten no-nonsense individuals who kept their noses to the grindstone and seldom put in a public appearance. Back in the day we'd gotten so accustomed to our revolutionary division of labor that our tasks eventually became the monikers that we still use today.

These past few years, children have been disappearing from the gatherings of the old comrades, leaving them more and more subdued.

The children had circles of friends of their own. Some had moved away, and even if they lived close by they might not come home for a visit if you invited them, not even for Thanksgiving or Christmas, let alone for Chinese New Year, which they'd never had any concept of.

There was shrimp filling and pork filling for the dumplings. Knowing that Tina hadn't been in the United States for very long and was probably a bit homesick, I had made a trip to local Chinese supermarket, to buy some specialty hill-grown cabbage freshly imported from Taiwan to go with the filling. It would give the dumplings a good texture. I'd also planned to get a few bottles of red wine, but then I thought of Tina and bought 'Kinmen Kaoliang'—sorghum liquor—instead. I never imagined what a disastrous decision this would prove to be.

The purpose of red wine or kaoliang was just to get people tipsy. These staid old revolutionaries rarely got the chance to relax, and if people don't relax how can they have any fun? But the kaoliang hit them hard. They no longer had a youngster's alcohol tolerance. It wasn't nine o'clock yet and already some of them were staggeringly drunk.

Leaflet was in the worst state. After fewer than ten toasts, his face had gone pale and he had to go to the bathroom to throw everything up before he could manage to keep going.

At the sight of Leaflet needing his wife to help him along like that, I decided I couldn't let the craziness of the drinking spree continue like in the good old days. So I quietly turned on the karaoke machine.

Who would have thought that Tina would be more enthused than anyone else, or that she would still sing so sweetly? She sure was keen on it. Nobody made a request, nor did she ask for anyone's suggestion. Before you knew it she'd entered a long list of golden oldies. As soon as the music started up she picked up the rhythm, and it didn't matter that nobody was singing along with her: she just soloed on. Now it seemed that Kinmen Kaoliang had been the right choice after all.

Closing my eyes, I was seemingly transported back to our college dorm. Getting ready to go out on a date, Tina would be humming the

tune to a pop song as she put on make up in front of the mirror.

The first song she sang was “Lights of the Trawlers” by Wang Renmei. I’d heard grown-ups singing this song when I was a girl, but it was none too familiar and I could only hum along. Purchaser and his old lady were sprawled on the sofa. I watched them lightly clapping the rhythm, palm to palm. Mimeograph and his wife complimented Tina and said, “I never knew such decadent melodies could conceal a social conscience!”

Next she sang something by Wu Yingying, a popular songstress in the 1940s. This song was even less familiar and I couldn’t even hum the tune. The Picketers weren’t moving their hands much anymore. Mimeograph looked up from time to time, occasionally slapping a beat in the rhythm just to liven things up a bit.

Then came Zhou Xuan, the wandering songstress of old Shanghai in the 1930s. There was absolutely no reaction from the others in the room. All that remained was the sound of Tina’s voice.

When she started to sing Bai Guang’s “Baldy Wets the Bed,” about a bald bed-wetter’s wife’s despair, Picketeer, who had been leaning on the dinner table with his head in the crook of his arm, suddenly leapt to his feet.

“Enough! Enough I say!” He was probably too embarrassed to look the singer in the eye, so he looked up at the ceiling instead and roared, “If I have to keep listening to these popular melodies my bones will turn to mush!”

There was a diametrical turn in the atmosphere in the room.

Initially only two or three people sang along. First came “The Creek Trickles,” then “On the Sungari River.” The place was humming by the time they got to the northern Shaanxi folk songs, and when they reached “The Graduation Song” and “March of the People’s Liberation Army,” men and women who had been slumped on the couch or the floor had sat up straight or even stood up to belt out the revolutionary refrains.

Now it was Tina’s turn to feel out of place. She looked around at a roomful of complete strangers and suddenly realized how alone she was. She ended up crumpling onto the sofa, discomfited and

dumbfounded.

I quietly took her hand in mine.

The old revolutionary chorus kept right on going.

By this point the karaoke machine had been turned off, but on they sang, a group of gray-haired men and women with solemn expressions and glowing eyes, heads and chests proudly upraised, as if they had daggers at their waists and assault rifles on their shoulders as they charged out onto a burning battlefield!

After the last of a series of patriotic resistance numbers came anthems like "My Ancestral Land" and "Socialism is Good." Their voices were by now more than a little hoarse. Picketeer, who'd been a drum major back in the day, announced the grand finale.

Each time the comrades sang, Picketeer, who had retained his broad-shouldered and barrel-chested physique, would proclaim, as if ceremonially: Now, a song to honor the martyrs! (With his somewhat stiff Cantonese accent, 'martyrs' sounded like 'murders'.)

Tina could make out the words of the opening couplet: *Arise, ye Prisoners of Hunger! Arise, ye Damned of the Earth!* But after that she was lost.

When I saw Tina out, it was already the morning of the first day of Lunar New Year. "Are these friends of yours from mainland China?" she asked.

"Nope," I said.

"Then why haven't I ever heard the songs they were singing?"

My answer, I was afraid, she could never understand. "Nobody in Taiwan sings those songs, and on the mainland they were the only songs people sang for decades, but nobody sings them anymore. Now the only people who sing them, in the whole wide world, are my husband and his crew of muddle-headed comrades."

*Translated by Darryl STERK 石岱崙*