

自行車

The Bicycle

By Hu Xuewen

Old Zhang walked under the awning of the open-air garage by his building, eyes widening involuntarily. It was gone!

Craning his neck, he stared into the corner, as if his bicycle had turned into a spider or an ant and was playing hide and seek with him. There was no hole for it to hide in, just an old sketch of a male sex organ some kid had chalked on the wall. Zhang couldn't be bothered to rub it off; it was a public garage. He clutched the key, sure that he had locked it up the night before. There was a grimy piece of colored paper on the ground, and some fallen leaves, but no sign of a picked lock. The garage was over forty meters from end to end. Zhang trudged along, scanning the scooters, mopeds, and bicycles... Sure enough, it was really gone.

Only now did Zhang curse the thief. He was entitled to. But cursing him didn't make any difference. The thief couldn't hear, and even if he could he wouldn't bring the bicycle back. This was the third bicycle Zhang had lost. He had ridden it for six years. Serves him right for bragging to his wife a few days ago that he had taken such good care of it he could ride it until retirement, easy. But the thief must be blind! Of all vehicles in the garage, why steal Zhang's beat up old bike? Not that Zhang would ever have described it as "beat up". It was old, that's all, not beat up. But so what? Now it was gone. What could he do? Zhang did not report it missing, because the last two times he had filed a report, made a dozen trips to the station, pestered the officers so much they grew sick of the sight of him, without getting his bicycle back.

What was a stolen bicycle to a cop? The roads were clogged with cars nowadays, like constipation. Zhang did not tell his colleague, either. Stolen? Go buy a new one! That's what he'd say. What else could you say? Get some perspective! Every day, there are plane crashes and ferry disasters, earthquakes and tsunamis, murders and burglaries, even terrorist attacks. What's a case of petty theft, in the grand scheme of things? Especially the theft of a beat up old bicycle. The only person Zhang told was his wife. Who promptly burst out laughing. There was no stopping her, just like there was no stopping the prices of goods from rising. When she calmed down she tried to comfort him. Your old bike had just about had it. Just buy a new one. She sounded like his colleague. Zhang did *not* plan on buying a new one, because there was no guarantee it wouldn't get stolen. His *danwei* – his work unit – wasn't too far from the house, about a forty minute walk. It'd be a way for him to get some exercise.

A few days later, Zhang had just arrived at the entrance of the *danwei*, and there was his colleague: Old Song. Song greeted him and asked why he hadn't ridden to work. Zhang hesitated and said his knees were giving him trouble. Song said: That's funny! You stop riding and I start. It's so convenient. Song used to cycle to work, just like Zhang. But after his bicycle had gotten stolen, he'd switched to public transportation instead. He wondered when his colleague had started riding again. They *were* colleagues, but who would bother mentioning something so trivial? Zhang knew what Song meant about the convenience, though. Song headed down to the market whenever he could,

hence the different odors that emanated from under his desk every day. Zhang's nose always knew whether his colleague had bought leafy greens or garlic stalks.

Song got off and walked in with Zhang, who took a glance at the bicycle. Well, when he did his eyelids started twitching and he almost gasped. It was *his* bicycle! What was going on? Fortunately Zhang was mostly able to keep a straight face, except that his mouth was a bit crooked. Zhang took another gander. No mistake, it was his. Everything was the same, except the lock. He knew that bike as well as he knew his wife's body, every part. Song walked into the garage, leaving Zhang standing there. Zhang watched him park it, lock it up, and get his shopping bag out of the basket. Song looked over, and Zhang smiled a hasty smile – like nothing was out of the ordinary. Zhang let Song go upstairs first so he could look for clues. Song's voice tumbled down the stairs: Beans're up nine yuan! But greens're two tenths of a yuan cheaper. In the past, Zhang would have sighed at the dizzying fluctuations in the world of beans and greens and replied: The only thing that doesn't move is our monthly wage. But Zhang was out of it today. All he could manage was a mechanical "uh huh".

Including Zhang and Song, there were four people on staff at the Editorial Department. The other two colleagues were girls. Next door was the Chief Editor's Office. It was a union publication with a middling distribution. Not that they had to worry about sales. All they had to do was edit. The articles? Well, they were easy to edit. They printed policies, pieces of legislation and success stories. Other than that, letters to the editor. And works of literature. Of course, bonuses

were out of the question. And as a result, they had no incentive to exert themselves, and the whole operation had gone slack. The two girls had never arrived, or left, on time. Only extraordinary circumstances could prevent Zhang and Song from arriving on time. This was a habit they had cultivated over many years, and old habits die hard. Not that they wanted to change. Why would they? They weren't like the girls, playing the stock market, going on dates, getting facials, doing whatever was waiting for them after work. Nothing was waiting for Zhang and Song. Well, Song had his vegetables. Zhang didn't have anything. He *had* gone to the market before. Once. His wife had asked him if the ladies had flirted with him, because everything he'd brought home was worm-eaten or over-ripe. Zhang hadn't gone grocery shopping since.

Zhang and Song had a pastime in common, and that was black tea. They drank it morning and afternoon, and brewed it strong as liquor. The difference was that Zhang drank Anhui Keemun, while Song drank Lapsang Souchong. The girls never went out to fill up the vacuum flask with hot water, not that Zhang and Song expected them to. Zhang and Song had no formal arrangement about whose job it was on any given day. Whoever got there first went to fetch the water. If they got there at the same time, then it fell to whoever made it to the flask first. That was their tacit understanding. Still thinking about his bike, Zhang thought he could have another look at the bike on the way to the hot water dispenser, but wouldn't you know it? Song got his hands on the flask first. Song smiled at Zhang, and all Zhang could do was yield. The office was on the fifth floor. All Zhang could see from up

there was the dingy asbestos tiles on the roof of the garage. Of course, with his eyes, he couldn't have made out the bicycle even with a clear line of sight. Maybe he was mistaken? Could he have imagined it? How could his bicycle possibly have ended up in Song's possession? Zhang started to doubt himself.

Zhang managed to sneak downstairs while Song was sipping his Lapsang Souchong. There were four other bureaus in the building: Women's Federation, Youth Corps, Civil Reform, Writer's Association. None of them influential. So naturally there were a lot of bicycles. The garage was a lot bigger than the one by Zhang's building; but people here parked haphazardly, as if to tell the world: We don't belong to the same organization, so don't try to tell us what to do.

Zhang checked the bike again. No mistake, it was his. He recognized every scratch, and remembered how it had happened. The basket was quite new. He had bought it about a year before, and mounted it the screw with two nuts. Actually, the mechanic had put one on, but Zhang had added another, just to be safe. There were a lot of light green chips on the black paint, like a skin a snake had not completely sloughed. Those chips were remnants of the layer of paint Zhang had applied only to watch it peel away. That's why it looked the way it did. The rear mudguard had gotten bent in a crash. He had tried to straighten it out, and had been planning to take a monkey wrench to it to fix it for once and for all. Ah! He hadn't gotten around to it in time!

How had the bicycle ended up in Song's hands? Zhang thought of a few possibilities. Maybe Song bought it from the thief. Maybe the thief left it some-

where for Song to find. Or maybe Song bought a used bicycle exactly the same as his. But... that was just too much of a coincidence. Regardless, the bicycle was now Song's, that was for sure. Zhang had actually forgotten about the bicycle, but now that it had appeared again, and in his colleague's possession, forgetting it had become impossible.

Zhang was out of it the whole day. Losing the bicycle hadn't had such a big effect on him, because he'd soon lost hope of getting it back. But now that he knew where the bicycle had ended up, how could he just shut his eyes and pretend not to see? Right before they got off work, Zhang asked Song: Are you riding home? Song looked at him a bit strangely. Yes, I don't have a car. Then remember to ride slow, Zhang said. At your age... Song smiled and said he couldn't ride fast even if he wanted to: Those days are past. Zhang coughed, thought of asking him, but then held his tongue. He wondered how Song would react. If he didn't admit it, what then? Song might say: What are you talking about? I've ridden this bike for years, how could it be yours? If so, how would Zhang respond? Get into a fight with Song until both were red in the face? It wasn't worth it. Of course, there was another possibility: Song would just return it to him, no excuses. Either way it'd be better not to ask. But he couldn't leave it at that, now could he? To ask or not to ask? Zhang was between a rock and a hard place. He did not know what to do.

That's when Zhang told his wife. Whose eyes widened even wider than his had: Song stole your bicycle? Zhang corrected her: I did not say Song stole my bicycle, just that he has possession of it now. His

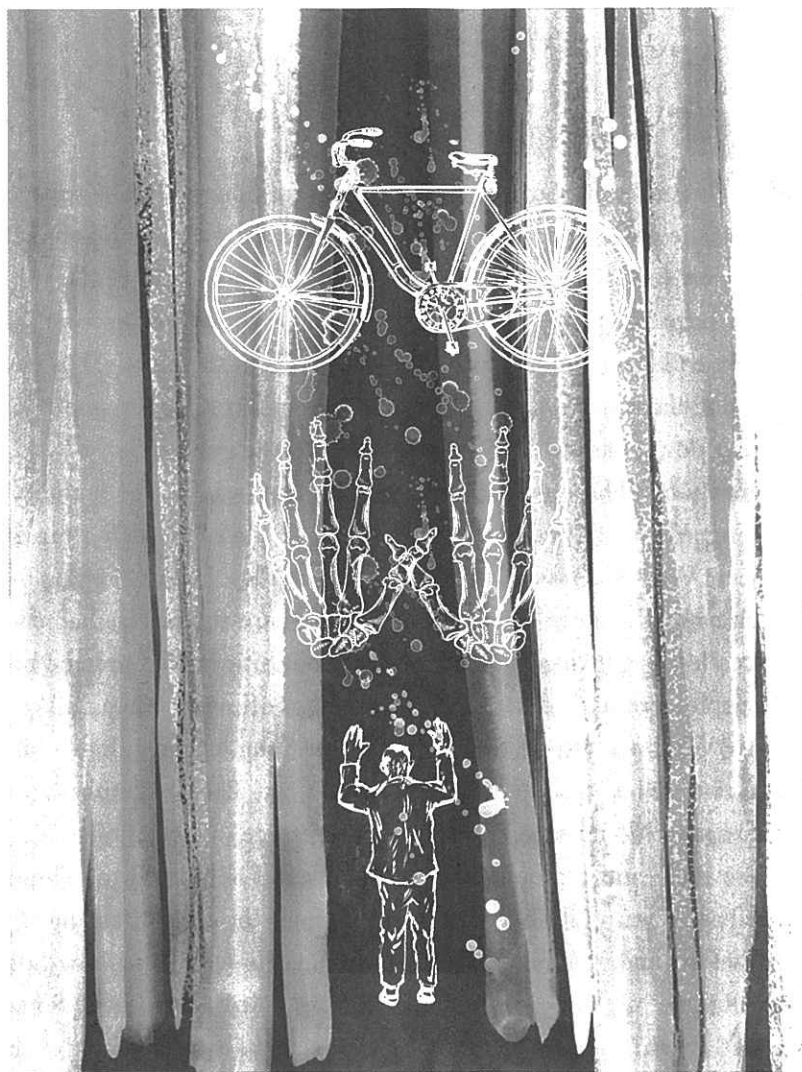


Illustration by Wang Yan

wife asked him if he was seeing things. Zhang said: I've checked it over a hundred times. His wife said: If you don't think he stole it then report it to the police. Zhang's eyes flashed, and he shook his head. If he wasn't going to tell them where the bicycle had ended up, he may as well not bother reporting it missing. And if he told them where the bicycle was, the cops would come for Song, and he'd have more than a simple shouting match on his hands. If something happened to Song,

how could Zhang continue at the *danwei*? His wife said: Then just forget about it. It's not worth much. If you want to ride, then buy a new one. Zhang sighed again, helplessly. She was right. What else could he do?

But as he'd already realized, forgetting was impossible. Every day when he got to work, his gaze hurried into the garage, like he was looking for an old friend. Seeing the bicycle there, he would nod. If it were not,

then Zhang would loiter, waiting for Song to swing in. Sometimes Song didn't park it right, and Zhang would straighten it out. If, later in the day, Zhang saw Song sitting at his desk, unmoved by rainy weather, he would make some excuse to go down and wheel the bicycle somewhere dry. The bicycle was Song's, as he had reminded himself more than a few times. But his repeated reminders couldn't stop him from showing heartfelt concern. Zhang loved that bicycle. When it still belonged to him he would shine the rims every week. Now that the bicycle was Song's, it looked shabby. One day Zhang discovered the wheels covered in mud. Who knows *where* Song had been riding? Zhang said he would take it out for a spin, and Song tossed him the key without looking up. Zhang rode it out, and got the fellow at the wash to rinse it off. Then he squatted down and wiped it clean. He told Song: I noticed the bicycle was a bit dirty, so I... Song smiled and said: What a guy. No, Zhang didn't forget about the bicycle. On the contrary, he found himself revisiting many memories in which it had played a part, like when he rode his wife to the Wang family farm to pick peaches. The farm was too far out in the suburbs for public transportation, and he didn't want to part with taxi fare. He had just hit fifty, but was still strong enough to ride there and back, a distance of over seventy kilometers. On the way there, he was alright, but on the way back his legs went a bit soft. His wife asked him if he was able to keep going, and he made a show of strength, saying no problem. She pressed her cheek against his back like a teenage girl, and his heart started pounding like he was in love for the first time. It was really a strange feeling. They had gotten mar-

ried late, and were in their thirties before their son was born. So they doted upon him more than younger parents would have. One winter day, Zhang had gotten up before dawn to buy his son a train ticket. Not having any connections, he had to line up with everyone else. But before he made it to the station he got a flat tire. He ran the last four hundred meters with the bicycle on his shoulder. That he could've just parked it by the road only occurred to him after he had purchased the ticket. By which point it didn't matter anymore.

One memory led to another. The bicycle had witnessed his first love. The two of them had been together for several years, but she ended up leaving him due to her parents' opposition. Zhang was so sad he vowed never to marry, while she married out of town. A few years ago, Zhang ran into her on the street. His ex told him she had gotten a divorce. Seeing how tired and thin she looked, he didn't know what to say. They had a meal together, and Zhang gave her a ride home. Zhang had never kept anything from his wife, but he didn't tell her about meeting his ex. He never saw her again. A few times the thought of going to her house would bubble up, but he ended up deciding against it. The past was past, impossible to reclaim. But Zhang had not completely forgotten, and her image would flit through his memory now and again.

Oh the memories! Once Zhang got started he couldn't stop.

The more he thought about it, the more important the bicycle seemed to him. Song arrived and left on it every day, and Zhang started to find it difficult to watch. No, he had found it difficult right from the start. He had just tried to suppress the feeling, but now

he couldn't any longer. The bicycle was not just any bike. It was like his wife or an old flame that Song was holding in his arms right in front of him. How could he not see what was going on? How could he stand it? He had to get the bicycle back... He had to!

One day, Zhang and Song went down together. Song wheeled the bike out, and Zhang commented: This bicycle has been through a lot. Song patted it and said it still rode well. Zhang thought: Yeah, that's because I took such good care of it. Zhang said: You used to have another one, didn't you? Song smiled and said: You've got a good memory. I lost my old one; I bought this one second hand. Zhang said: Oh really? Where did you buy it? Song sensed the urgency in Zhang's voice, so he asked: Oh? You want to buy one, too? Zhang nodded. Song said that he had bought it at a bike repair stand for fifty yuan, and that the bike must have been offloaded by some thief. That's the bicycle I lost! Zhang almost yelled, but then a sedan honked behind them, forcing them to dodge and startling Zhang's yell back into his head. Zhang looked troubled. He asked: Doesn't that make it stolen goods? Aren't you worried about getting caught? Song chortled. It's a beat up old bicycle, not some antique. The mechanic didn't say anything, and I feigned ignorance. Zhang asked the location. Aren't you worried about getting caught? asked Song derisively. Then he said: I'll ask on your behalf. If there's another one, I'll buy it for you. Zhang was still displeased. Even if you bought it, how could you not recognize that it was mine? We see each other every day! Then again, he could not blame his colleague. Bicycles all looked the same. Could he remember what Song's old bicycle looked like?

The next day, Song said he had told the mechanic, who would reserve one if anything turned up. But a month went past, and Song hadn't mentioned it again. He must have forgotten, and Zhang did not remind him. Buying a bicycle wasn't the issue for Zhang. He wanted his own bicycle back. He wanted to buy a new one so he could exchange it for Song's. Or just buy it from him directly. Song had spent fifty, so Zhang would offer a hundred; they could haggle. Either an exchange or a purchase – both approaches seemed straightforward, but neither was feasible. He wouldn't be able to explain why; he wanted his bicycle back, but didn't want to let Song know he had lost it. He had missed many opportunities to tell him, and now it was too late.

One evening, when his wife was online with their son, Zhang butted in to ask his son's advice. His son was a college philosophy instructor, but to Zhang he was still a kid. Zhang said he was at his wit's end, and wondered whether his son had any good ideas. His son said he didn't have to even think about it. He should just come out and tell him. Zhang shot him down. If it were that simple, why would he be asking? His son said: That's the trouble with Chinese culture: simplifying complicated problems, and complicating simple ones. Putting personal relationships ahead of principles. The bicycle, it turned out, touched on profound philosophical issues. His son recommended that Zhang read some Western philosophers to wipe the slate clean. Wasn't it just a bicycle? What did it have to do with philosophy? His son was the one who had complicated a simple problem. He had sat across from Song for twenty years because he knew how to

manage personal relationships. What was wrong with that? Wasn't the point of life just to try to get along? But Zhang could not type as fast as his son. His son attacked, and Zhang was beaten back. In the end he just went off-line.

One day, Zhang was out and about on Song's bicycle when he had an audacious idea. He slapped himself on the forehead and asked: Why didn't I think of it before? Ecstatic, he raced home and locked the bicycle in the garage by his building. Then he took the bus back to the *danwei*, where he appeared out of breath, with a frantic expression on his face. Song stared at him, on the verge of a smile. Which made Zhang all the more frantic. He was truly frantic. I really... lost it. Song finally smiled. If you lost it, you lost it. It's just a beat up old bicycle. No need to get so upset about it. Realizing he had managed to carry it off, Zhang relaxed, and started telling Song what had happened. Song waved his hand to stop him, and said: I'm just glad *you* didn't go missing. Zhang cursed emphatically. Song just said: What can you do? Thieves need to make a living, too. Zhang agreed. Yes, everyone has it tough, but you shouldn't go around stealing our bicycle. Song said: What else do you expect a two-bit thief to steal? Zhang got out a hundred yuan bill and pushed it towards his colleague. Song's eyes widened. He asked: What do you take me for? Zhang said: Let's keep our eyes open for another second hand bicycle. Not a new one, don't worry. Song stood up, and pushed the bill back towards Zhang. What do you think you're doing? It was just a beat up old bicycle. Zhang said: You need a bicycle! Song called out, red-faced: Zhang, don't make me lose my respect for you! Another word and I

won't speak to you! Zhang could only leave it at that.

After work, Zhang insisted on taking Song out somewhere. Song chided him, but ended up going along. They didn't talk about the bicycle, just about sundry matters at the *danwei*, their impending retirements and news they had heard, some of which they had talked about at work and were repeating with gusto now. The meal cost less than a hundred yuan, but a lot more than Song had paid. Treating Song had taken a weight off Zhang's mind.

Only the next morning did Zhang realize he had a problem. He had gotten the bicycle back, but could not ride it to work anymore. Not only that, he could never let Song see it again. No matter what, the bicycle was his. Even if it just sat there it was his. Zhang kept walking to work, feeling the added strength in his legs. Song took the bus to work, but went to the market on foot. It delayed him just a bit, but Zhang would cover for him on the afternoon's editing.

A couple of days went by and Zhang was itching for a ride. When Song had the bike, Zhang could still take it out every once in a while, but now that it was his he couldn't. Zhang decided to disguise the bicycle. He bought a roll of colored tape and wrapped it around the frame, adding a cover for the seat. He switched the lock and the bell. Just like an old lady who has a facelift: it wasn't any prettier, but it did look different. Song would never recognize it; Zhang felt proud of himself. The first time he rode it, though, he had just left his building when a woman said: Wow! Look at that! Then a child said: Ooo, a bridal palanquin! Zhang slammed on the brakes, jumped off, and looked at it doubtfully. Gosh! They were right: too

showy. It didn't look like a bicycle anymore. It was like a flamboyant cock among crows. It'd be hard not to notice. Zhang was not afraid of other people noticing, just Song. If Song asked, he had a response ready, but couldn't guarantee that Song would not have his doubts. And if Song saw underneath the tape, it'd be all over. Despondent, Zhang wheeled the bicycle back in and stripped the tape.

Zhang was still walking to work. But on the weekends he took his bicycle out on the road. In the past he'd stay home unless something came up. But now he went out every chance he got, except that now he would look around, worried he might run into Song. The bicycle was clearly his, but it was like it was stolen. But then again it *was* stolen, wasn't it? Sometimes, Zhang would lose it and think: So *what* if Song saw me? But the impulse passed. Avoiding Song was the right thing to do. Zhang was avoiding him, not afraid of him.

One Sunday, Zhang was riding his wife to the supermarket when he got to the three-way intersection and saw Song at the bus stop, about thirty meters away. He slammed on the brakes and got rear-ended. *Zhang* got rear-ended, but the other guy, who looked like a hoodlum, got angry: Who taught you to ride like that, pops? Zhang said sorry, sorry, and turned and rode off, leaving his scowling wife behind. He had been in such a rush he hadn't managed to get his leg over the bar on the first try. Afraid Song was chasing him, he rode desperately, turning at random, until he turned into a dead-end alleyway. On the way out he bumped into a stroller. He didn't knock it over, but the lady pushing it started yelling at him, and wouldn't

let him leave. Soon the woman's husband arrived, and Zhang apologized profusely for the second time in a few minutes. The husband wouldn't let him off, saying he'd given the baby a bad scare. To make them go away Zhang ended up giving them two hundred yuan, almost enough to buy a brand new bicycle. Zhang scooted home, heart still pounding. His wife came up with the noodles and chewed him out. How could you just leave me there? How *could* he just leave her there? Zhang wondered.

Another Sunday, Song called and asked if he was home. Song said he'd just left the Fourth Hospital, and asked if he could stop by. Zhang said: Sure, I'm home; just come over. Hanging up, he suddenly remembered the bicycle. He tore downstairs and wheeled it down to the basement. The Fourth Hospital was only a couple of hundred meters away! Zhang made it back into his flat the moment before Song knocked. That was a close call! Zhang gave his friend a warm welcome, but couldn't stop a voice in his head from nagging: Did Song suspect? Song had only come to the house once before, a couple of years ago. His colleague had called in advance this time, but who was to say he wouldn't show up unannounced next time? At the thought that he might, Zhang felt his heart tighten again. He couldn't rest easy with the bicycle in the open-air garage. He'd better leave it locked up underground. The bicycle would be safe, even though it was inconvenient to wheel it up and down. No, even with the bicycle in the basement, Zhang could not guarantee Song would not see it.

The bicycle became Zhang's obsession. It was like winning his wife back and finding out she still be-

longed to somebody else. No, it was worse: with his wife, he could give her an ultimatum: him or me? But with the bike... Oh!

Zhang no longer rode the bicycle on the weekend whenever he had the chance. It was too risky. Occasionally he rode it, like a thief, or like he was keeping a mistress in an expensive apartment. Zhang sometimes thought: What if he were to just give it back to Song? But he always decided against it. First, he could not bear to part with it. Second, how on earth would he give it back? How would he explain? What if he said that he ran into the thief and got it back from him? That was preposterous.

One day, Song sprained his ankle on the way to the market, and limped all the way back to the bureau. Zhang was thinking: Song would never have twisted his ankle if he'd had the bike to ride. How could he look his colleague in the eye? Zhang said: It'd really be better for you to get another bicycle. Song had said as much himself. But now he said: Forget it; it'll just get stolen. Zhang was finally ready to tell him the truth, right then and there, and he would have, had not the telephone rang. Zhang swallowed the words before they had a chance to escape, realizing his presumption just in time: What *was* the truth? On the other hand, it was getting harder and harder for him to keep the truth – whatever it was – to himself. It was like a sprouted seed swelling in his heart.

At the year-end *danwei* banquet, a red envelope was given out to each colleague, as usual. It wasn't much money, just a token. Someone nudged him before he noticed they'd called his name. He had never been so nervous before. He almost twisted his ankle

like Song had done. Seeing as how Zhang was an old comrade, the MC asked him to say a few words. Zhang hesitated, then said: I'm a thief. Everyone burst out laughing as soon as the word left his mouth. Zhang was flabbergasted. What a slip of the tongue! He was angry. What's so funny? he yelled. I'm a frigging thief, what about it? But nobody heard: the sound of his voice was drowned out by even louder laughter.

Translated by Darryl Sterk