

# MORE THAN WORDS

## 腹語山

*This “coming-of-age” novel weaves together stories of love and hiking in a narrative spanning three distinct love triangle relationships across three generations. On the labyrinthian path to finding each other, the protagonists come face to face with their own self-doubts and bygone traumas.*

When Fu Yu-Shan and Lin Hsuan-Yung’s childhood friendship blossoms into reciprocal love in adolescence, their parents step in, forbidding either from seeing each other again. Despite furtive contacts through a friend’s text message account, the two gradually fall out of touch, their love for one another lost in the passage of time.

Years later, a now older Yu-Shan strikes up a friendship with Joe, a dashing handsome colleague, while organizing a hike for their company. She soon learns that Joe not only knows of her past with Hsuan-Yung but that it was his account they had used to keep in touch early on. With Joe’s help, they reconnect, begin hiking together and, well removed from their parents’ shadow, pick up where they’d left off on their romantic journey. But Yu-Shan also harbors feelings for Joe, especially after learning of his own emotional struggles with trauma.

Yu-Shan keeps news of her rekindled romance from her parents because of the complicated relationship they share with Hsuan-Yung’s mother, who is both as close as a sister to her own mother and her father’s lover. Hsuan-Yung, honoring a promise to an old hunter friend, leaves to trek in Nepal. Yu-Shan learns from the old hunter that Hsuan-Yung’s trek is tied to the misfortunes encountered in Tibet several decades ago by a young woman ... a story with which Yu-Shan too is connected.

The author imbues the narrative with insights gleaned during contemplative hikes and weaves rich metaphor and imagery into her characters’ inner dialogues. The undulating mountain landscapes described throughout mirror the emotional twists and turns in the



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plotline, guiding the reader on a trek in which high mountain mist, morning dew, and alpine flora and fauna all take on deeper meanings in the narrative. Read with your heart and discover the truth in what the mountains have to say.

## Kit Fang 山女孩 Kit (方妙)

Kit's works, notable for their crisp, emotive storytelling and poetic prose, touch regularly on themes of hiking, travel and lifestyle. The author is followed by tens of thousands on Instagram. Her essays have been published and serialized in *GQ* and *Unitas* magazines and as essay collections in *In Between* and *The Mountain on Your Mind*. *More Than Words* is the author's first work of fiction.

# MORE THAN WORDS

By Kit Fang

Translated by Catherine Xinxin Yu

## Chapter One: The Mountain House That Lost Its Water Source

“I have to see that mountain with my own eyes,” I said. With the rain pelting down, I was worried I wasn’t speaking loud enough, so I even stressed my words.

1.

The morning I said that, the rain blew in from the sea. Gray clouds, gray ocean, and the wind slowly blurring the boundary between them into an indistinct expanse of fog. Dense staccato raindrops fell on banana leaves large and small, each tapping out a distinct sound, some crisp, some dull, like a prepubescent boy trying to deepen his voice – now thin, now low.

He said he’d come over.

He phoned me to ask what food was left. I went downstairs and opened the fridge to check: a bundle of creeping foxglove and three free-range eggs. Worried, he said he’d get some groceries in town once he returned from the mountain.

“But the weather is expected to be unstable over the next few days. If it rains too hard, I might not be able to get down.” He said.

Ever since hearing he might come, I’d been waiting for him in the house. As usual, his blue Volkswagen would be parked outside the lush banana orchard, clearly visible from the second floor. Like a cat, I bent my knees and tucked my legs into my body, shivering slightly as I curled up in the rattan chair with a shawl wrapped around my shoulders. From time to time, I craned my neck to peer outside, but my expectant gaze was met only by the heavy rain.

When I last saw him a few days prior, he looked completely different from the first time I met him. He had outgrown the physique he had back in Taipei. He was tall with a straight posture to start with, but his return to the countryside had suddenly buffed him up. His arms, which he once used to type code with his shirt sleeves rolled up, had become tan and firm. Someone close to the earth would have a physique different from someone who exercised on machines in an air-conditioned room. Now, his well-proportioned frame and muscles looked sturdy and unobtrusive.

His black-framed glasses suited him well, as if they were a natural extension of his facial features. Without them, his long, slender eyes seemed defenseless, as if the slightest word might hurt them. A few days ago, he had come to my place to help fix my boiler. He climbed up and down, getting all sweaty. After a hot shower, he stretched out his long legs and reclined comfortably on

the tatami with one arm propping up his head. I stared at his large feet and stubby toes. I thought one foot to be extraordinarily wide.

“Oh, you’re looking at that? You didn’t know I had six toes on my right foot?” He swung his foot in my direction and stretched out all six toes, waving them showily. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from that sixth toe.

“Did it ever bother you?” I asked.

“Of course, but only when I was a child.” He sat up, pushed his glasses higher on his nose, and examined them closely with me. “I didn’t dare take off my socks in front of people, and I was even reluctant to join the swimming team because of this. Still, everyone saw it eventually.”

He said he had always been tall and strong. The other boys didn’t dare mock him. However, when they lost a fight, they would roast him about it.

“They all said I won because of my extra lan-tsiau...like a third leg.” Tongue in cheek, he gave me a sideways glance, and I laughed out loud. I replied saying it was really quite something.

“But in the summer of my first year of middle school, Hsuan-Yung asked me whether I could run so fast because of my extra toe,” he continued.

“He said when I pulled a fast break, I was like a bolt of lightning. From that moment on, the sixth toe was my weapon, my source of strength. After that, whenever I came across any difficulty, I would tell myself, I’m someone who possesses a bolt of lightning!” His eyes were fixed on his toes as he spoke.

I couldn’t help wondering what it had been like the first time they had met. That summer, in a sports field melting under a torrid sun, one boy looked up at the other, and those words that struck his heart like a bolt of lightning were spoken. They would influence this tall boy for the rest of his life and anchor every event to come.

As I was thinking, an inexplicable conviction slowly came over me, telling me that I was there with them. I saw myself walking towards them, our three shadows gradually overlapping in the sun.

Night fell. I kept staring at the banana orchard. The rain continued to pour. He still hadn’t come, and he would never know all the thoughts swirling in my mind.

## 2.

I was twenty-nine years old. I had left my first job and moved into Lin Hsuan-Yung’s place in Taitung. Come to think of it, this was my sixth day here.

Hsuan-Yung was two months older than me, and we’d been born in the same hospital in Taipei. His parents got divorced when he was three. Because a woman in her twenties looking for a job in Taipei with two infants in tow was such an insurmountably sad story, his mother decided to keep only his newborn baby sister by her side. He on the other hand, who could already walk, was sent off to live with her maternal family in the Amis village of Piyoxo in Taitung County.

It was because of this that Hsuan-Yung harbored complex feelings towards his mom. She smelled nice, and had dark hair that fell to her shoulders, beautiful nails, and a thin diamond

necklace. But she always seemed annoyed, perhaps towards Taitung, perhaps towards Hsuan-Yung. After long periods apart, she would often arrive bearing gifts, new clothes or new shoes; but she would also bring lots of new rules that Hsuan-Yung didn't understand, like no running at home or use a handkerchief to wipe your sweat.

"Can you imagine an indigenous boy taking out a hankie to wipe his sweat dry? I'd rather throw myself into the sea than be seen doing that." I can still remember how fifteen-year-old Hsuan-Yung would pose in a way that advertised all of his inbuilt adolescent rebelliousness; even the rhythm of his breath conveyed impatience. We lay side by side on the tatami, listening to the Pacific waves washing ashore in the distance.

"How come you didn't say this to Auntie Ting-Ting?" I asked.

"It's not like you don't know her. Would she listen to me? I tried to communicate with her a few times, but we always ended up arguing until Grandma pulled us apart."

Whenever Hsuan-Yung talked about Auntie Ting-Ting, his expression would vacillate between stormy and overcast; a sharp contrast with how he looked when talking about his maternal grandmother.

Granny Kao was only sixty, but her hair had already turned fully white, and was thick as snow atop a high mountain. She was a skilled cook, and was good at acting cute too. When she laughed, the wrinkles around her nose would snuggle together. Men who entered her house, regardless of age, would almost never want to leave. They would help her change light bulbs or build pallets, or willingly pick up hoes to weed her field. Young lads would carry bundle after bundle of bamboo poles all the way from the city for her, and spend days going "heave-ho, heave-ho" to build a long fence at the edge of her field to keep mountain monkeys from descending upon her rice paddy at dawn and wreaking havoc.

Women, all crying about men, would visit her under the moon. In the bathroom, Granny would fill a large basin with hot water, sit next to the bathtub and pour her herbal infusion over each woman's trembling shoulders to warm them up, like watering soilless trees. As a child, I was allowed to sit by the bathtub on a little wooden stool to listen to the women's broken sobs while I caught termites attracted by the light. When Granny Kao realized I was growing up and beginning to understand what the women were saying, she sent me away to play with my little sister.

"Kui doesn't like me."

Granny Kao lowered her voice and corrected me. "Nonsense. Kui is just afraid of you."

I didn't speak. I just silently severed the termites' cellophane wings to thwart their attempts to fly. They were like burst bubbles under my fingers. I rinsed away heaps of corpses with a water scoop, shoals of them drifting with the current, becoming beached on the bathroom floor, forming some sort of pattern.

As I scrutinized it, I was overtaken by a sudden sense of fear. I turned away anxiously, and asked the woman in the tub whether she had seen it. She squinted through the steam and said hesitantly in Amis, "Is that a fish's tail?" Feeling like I was being choked, my heart dehydrated and beat frantically. Panicked, I scooped up some water and splashed it. The corpses swayed their tails and swam into the sea. Granny Kao sighed, saying how kids would play with anything, with no

respect for life. She didn't see me holding back tears. She just coaxed me to get out and go help the other adults.

But I was like all of the other children: in that we just wanted to orbit Granny, now asking to eat this, now asking to eat that, tricking her into bathing us, or scooping our ears clean. She always found ways to accommodate everyone, like the fairy godmother who magicked the pumpkin carriage. Whenever she came out of the kitchen carrying something in her hands, everyone would stop what they were doing, and docilely gather around the big wooden table.

I regularly witnessed such scenes as a little girl. Granny would gently listen to everyone, never asking any questions, nor offering any advice; the answers just seemed to come to her. She just quietly refilled the teacup, like a mother in everyone's dreams.

When Hsuan-Yung talked about his granny, a sweet expression invariably took over his face. I fully understood because, whenever I thought about her, I probably had the same expression.

This was also why Hsuan-Yung couldn't understand Auntie Ting-Ting's disdain for Taitung and for living by the sea. She would wonder why spoiled things weren't tossed away, and how expired food could still be eaten.

"Food comes from the earth and isn't ruled by use-by dates. What's the point of expiration dates on plastic packages? Stuff naturally tells you whether they're spoiled or not. But Mom never cared to know." He went on staring at the ceiling, while moonlight trailed the sound of waves and poured brightly through the window. We stayed silent for a while.

My fifteen-year-old self couldn't think of any words that might comfort Hsuan-Yung, because my family was different from his. Maybe because my mom was my best friend, or rather, I wanted to be her best friend.

Hsuan-Yung inhaled deeply, turned on his side to gaze at me, and squeezed out a raspy voice from his thin chest.

"What she didn't care to know, that included Dad, and me."

### 3.

The summer he got into high school, Auntie Ting-Ting suddenly told Hsuan-Yung that she had a stable partner. But that was the only time. She would never mention the man again. He didn't ask either, knowing that his mom didn't want him to live with them in that secluded hillside mansion in Xindian. She rented an old apartment for Hsuan-Yung near the botanical garden and within walking distance from his school.

At the time, Hsuan-Yung was eager to go to Taipei and didn't find anything objectionable with the arrangement. There was no obligation to get to know that man, and he could live an independent life free from the adults. He thought nothing could be more perfect. Nobody was there to discipline him, he had more pocket money than he could imagine, and he could run or shout in his own apartment as much as he wanted, without anyone interfering. It was just that every Wednesday, Auntie Ting-Ting would bring Kui with her to the botanical garden apartment to have a meal with Hsuan-Yung, and he had to play the role of a clean and well-behaved high

school student. No matter how ridiculous and slovenly his other days were at the moment, come Wednesday morning he would jump up by reflex, diligently pick up the vacuum cleaner and showerhead, and clean his flat and the plants until everything was spick and span.

"I mean it! Not just the sheets, but also the sofa cover and curtains. I'd remove them all to wash them." Many years later, by Chiaming Lake, twenty-nine-year-old Hsuan-Yung told me about those days for the first time. In the midst of shining his headlamp on the camping stove, head cocked and listening for the faint hiss of leaking gas, he shared the experience with a smile.

"Wow, Lin Hsuan-Yung, you really managed to do that?"

"Don't you find it amazing? Back then, I thought it was a real blast." We were sitting on a vantage point some distance from the camping ground, looking at the tents glowing in the dark like giant wombs, the silhouettes inside moving like fetuses.

"I only had to be proper for one day per week, and then I could spend six days however I wanted. I could go all out playing bridge, or play video games way past midnight. I could sleep, or not sleep, I could choose to be awake, or not to be. Compared to all this, Wednesday was like the one little dead bulb on a dazzling Christmas tree. It was that insignificant."

"That might be true, or maybe not. Maybe you never saw this," I expressed myself quietly. "It's possible that, because of Wednesday, you deliberately squandered your other six days in reckless abandon."

He lit the gas canister in the dark. Blue flames rose up. He clipped the pot to the canister-top stove, let out a brief sigh, and smiled embarrassedly.

Back in high school, the only person he felt sorry for was his little sister. Sometimes Kui visited him alone. She would change out of her gray private-school uniform, put on a checkered mini skirt and thick makeup, and stay out until dawn. Hsuan-Yung knew perfectly that his mom was too busy with work to spend time with Kui. But the two of them had been separated for so long that he didn't know how to be a good big brother. Most times, he would just cover for her, and he only asked about it once. Kui shrugged and gave him a blank expression. "It'd freak you out if I told you."

Twenty-nine-year-old Hsuan-Yung brewed milk tea and passed me the titanium mug. I reached out and held it with both of my gloved hands, but he didn't let go. "You knew my life was a mess. You knew I wasn't doing well. Back then, whenever I couldn't sleep, I would walk along Chongqing South Road, and I'd eventually arrive outside your building. We lived so close by, yet we couldn't approach each other." He stared at me like he did back when we were fifteen.

"Tell me, why did we lose contact?"

#### 4.

Hsuan-Yung called Kui "Little Sister", and so did I because, a long time ago, my mom was Auntie Ting-Ting's little sister, too. In high school, Auntie Ting-Ting, the rebel, was the one who would wear her untucked green dress shirt over the black pleated skirt she had modified into a mini skirt, while mom, always prim and proper in her gold-rimmed glasses, was the up-and-coming

leader of their school's marching band. They had nothing in common initially. One evening, during a self-study session, Mom got dragged into the bathroom by some senior girls, who said they would "teach this conceited ugly cow a lesson." It wasn't the first time. Sometimes they would force her to kneel, or tug her bra down. They would say they were just giving their goody-goody junior a lesson on how to handle pressure.

"You think you're some kind of goddess? You're so ugly, and you still lead the band, what a disgrace! I bet it's just because you have good grades and you suck up to the teachers!" Just as they threw a bucket of water at Mom, Auntie Ting-Ting, who had just taken a final drag on her cigarette happened to walk in, the poorly aimed splash drenching Auntie's new white canvas shoes. Mom told the story slightly differently each time. Sometimes, she said Auntie Ting-Ting dragged the senior girls over by their hair and forced them to apologize to Mom. Other times, she said they were scared stiff as soon as they saw Auntie Ting-Ting. No matter which version, it always ended with Auntie Ting-Ting helping a soaked Mom stand up while saying, "I got your back from now on."

From that day onward, Mom was practically in love with her. Beautiful Auntie Ting-Ting had many admirers, and Mom would spend her pocket money on dresses that Auntie Ting-Ting could wear on dates, give her white ice skates, do her homework for her, and even facilitate break-ups with her boyfriends on Auntie Ting-Ting's behalf. Pretty girls always have a plain sidekick, and Mom was more than willing to play that role.

When it came time for her university entrance exams, Mom picked the same university as Auntie Ting-Ting. My maternal grandmother noticed Mom's marks were way above what was needed to go to that school and was so furious that she cut off financial support and kicked her out. The two university girls, penniless and homeless, bought some clothes and accessories at Wufenpu Wholesale District, prettied them up with their own designs, and sold them in major night markets after class. Auntie Ting-Ting always managed to find temporary nests for the two of them, but being the headstrong person she was, she often had tempestuous fights with men and then asked Mom to pack up and move out with her overnight.

One time, Mom didn't leave with her. She stayed put, and then got pregnant. The man married her and became my father.

## 5.

Auntie Ting-Ting, after leaving in a fit of anger, got married soon after and started a family. But she divorced less than four years later. Leaving her firstborn in Taitung, she exploited her good taste and sales experience to start an import-export business for designer furniture in Taipei. Then the economy took off and Taiwan was swimming with rich people. Her business thrived, and she also began to help big guns and rich wives import prestigious wines and artwork that were hard to find. As for Mom, she suffered from poor health after giving birth, became a housewife, and went out only rarely. It was only when Auntie Ting-Ting was away on business trips that she would take me to the hillside mansion in Xindian to visit Kui, who had her own nanny and private tutors.

As an only child, I learned early how to share with others. I learned to give away my belongings, sometimes even the best stuff. I never quite understood the logic, but that was how Mom and Auntie Ting-Ting were. No matter whether the other needed something or not, they would always reserve it for each other. Mom treated Granny Kao like her own mother, while Auntie Ting-Ting would take Mom back to “their maternal family” on New Year’s Eve every year. Because of them, Hsuan-Yung was my older brother, and I had to call Kui my little sister.

But I didn’t treat him like an older brother, nor did he call me little sister. He was just Hsuan-Yung. As kids, I was as tall as he was and my hair was short like his. When seen from the back, we were practically twins. We would run to the seaside in Piyoxo to burn wood, catch hermit crabs on rocky reefs, practice cartwheeling on the sandy beach at low tide, follow the coastal Baonon Road to Chenggong fishing harbor to watch the returning boats. I remember how, one night after a typhoon, we went to Wushibi and pushed a canoe hidden in the grass into the water. We spent the whole night drifting at sea. The coast guard was sent out to search for us, and our adventure even made the local news.