

# CALLUSES

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*An apology letter from an ex-boyfriend disrupts the quiet life of a housewife, forcing her to revisit her past and reevaluate her present: a life of “calluses” formed by the responsibilities of motherhood, economic pressures, and the friction of cohabiting with her in-laws.*

A decade in the making, *Calluses* is a powerful new novel about the life of an ordinary woman from celebrated author Xia Xia. Written with characteristic nuance and restraint, the novel offers its title as a metaphor for longstanding inner tensions that cannot be resolved, and thus can only be ignored until they slowly harden over, forming a layer of protection that is inseparable from the sense of self.

The arrival of an unexpected apology from Ayi, an old flame, stirs emotions that housewife Chiu-lien had assumed were long settled away in the recesses of memory. It was just a short affair, ten years past. At the time, Chiu-lien hardly knew a thing about life. She didn't know how to cook, much less how to manage her finances, but she had been more than capable of losing herself in love, starved for any scrap of affirmation from the cool and detached Ayi. Now, wife to a good-natured husband and mother to a young daughter, Chiu-lien leads an ordinary and ordered life, lodging with her in-laws as she frets over when her small family will be able to afford a home of their own.

Through the lens of Chiu-lien's life, Xia Xia clarifies the common dilemmas of contemporary women: wanting to work, but forced to stay home and raise children; longing for independence, but forever reliant on the financial assistance of parents and in-laws; starved for quality time with a working husband who only comes home on the weekends; always compromising one's ideals to practicality. The novel's ultra-realism is composed of layered details that convey the texture of everyday life. From the familiar weight of the baby stroller, to the gossip shared with other mothers at the park, to household quarrels



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over the dripping AC unit, every trivial fragment is imbued with deeper hopes and anxieties.

With the incisiveness of a poet, Xia Xia captures the loneliness and warmth of urban life, distilling literature from our contemporary dilemmas and probing the potential for meaning within a quotidian existence. Under Xia Xia's pen, the wounds of everyday living are washed and aired by time, scabs form, skin heals, and, finally, new energy is found to meet the days ahead.

## Xia Xia 夏夏

Poet, novelist, and essayist Xia Xia is a meticulous stylist whose resonant prose unveils the inner lives of her characters, and illuminates the depths of feeling hidden within the ordinary stuff of life. A prolific writer, her works include poetry collections like *Claude-Emma Debussy*, novels like *A Beer Before Doomsday*, and essay collections like *More Sugar Will Come*.

# CALLUSES

By Xia Xia

Translated by Michelle Chan Schmidt

## 1

Chiu-lien and Chen-3 met in the park. It was in the fall, she clearly recalled, it couldn't have been any other time. Summer was too hot, and there were too many mosquitoes; winter was too cold; spring, too rainy. The truly clear-headed would only enjoy time in the park in autumn, including Chiu-lien.

She was so ordinary that she never fell beyond the range of the average. From her body to her facial features to her intelligence, everything was unremarkable, and nobody took a second glance at her as she walked down the street, or noticed her, or remembered her in a group of people. Nothing about Chiu-lien stood out. She lived her life in the background like a film extra, unlit by the limelight.

Hsiao-min had just turned two and a half at the time. All the elders agreed that her birth had been a blessing. As an infant, she slept and ate well, and apart from the few fevers she'd experienced that made Chiu-lien lose her head, and occasional aches and illness, she was in every respect a caring, considerate young girl.

But to take care of Hsiao-min, Chiu-lien had already extended her maternity leave once, and she constantly counted down the days until she could return to her job and redeem her life. She had no idea how it had all dragged on for so long. Then she thought she might as well wait until Hsiao-min got accepted to state kindergarten; if she got in, all of Chiu-lien's worries would be resolved, and Hsiao-min would be graduated from kindergarten straight into elementary school.

In these days of waiting, Chiu-lien had no desire to spend time locked at home with her parents-in-law, and whenever the rain stopped, Chiu-lien would strap Hsiao-min to her stroller and head to the park. As her daughter played on the slides, Chiu-lien would sit in a daze on a chair to the side, not daring to look at her phone, lest Hsiao-min fall or run off somewhere without anyone seeing.

Chiu-lien hoped no one she knew would ever see her in that state.

Though she had never been one for dressing up, she'd always admired the girl-next-door vibe, fresh and easygoing. Today, like every other day, Chiu-lien hadn't bothered; she wore haphazard clothes and no makeup, and her hair was so lifeless it'd be the death of her.

When had she become this way?

The pedestrians she'd pass on their way to work always appeared clean and neat, even if not especially nice. Clothes were clothes, shoes were shoes, and though they weren't necessarily

the newest, they didn't look old or worn either. They were a symbol for diligent adherence to something, for the maintenance of a line.

Her husband came back every weekend, but by the time he got off the high-speed rail and made it home, dinner would often have already ended. Her mother-in-law would leave a portion aside for him, suggestively wrapped in plastic. Pearls of condensation clung to its surface, though the flavor of the food always dampened a little with the dissipation of heat. Chiu-lien's husband, slapdash and sloppy, never minded. He'd shove mouthfuls of different dishes into his mouth at the same time, chewing happily. He was about to turn forty, and the physical transformation that men of this age would soon undergo could be characterized in two words: balding and bulging. Her husband was no exception to the rule: his scalp was starting to show, his belly to protrude. He'd hit all the targets.

After dinner, her in-laws would sit themselves in front of the TV, as always, keeping watch over the news channel they'd consumed for years, thanks to which the remote control was practically unnecessary. The arguments that the channel espoused contradicted Chiu-lien's own views, so she'd learned to shut her ears off, pretend not to hear. At the table, her husband yapped with his parents as he devoured his reheated dinner, maintaining the conversation with the minimal effort required. Chiu-lien never had the chance to exchange more than a few words with her husband.

As she waited for him to shower and come to bed, Chiu-lien would busy herself putting their child to sleep. Sometimes she'd unintentionally fall asleep too, and in the middle of the night, she would awaken to the rumble of her husband's snores, drilling into her eardrums. She'd clamber to her feet to extinguish the last lamp, turn over the page of yesterday.

And yet she didn't have too many complaints. Life was dull, yes, but as long as she still had hope for the future, she could find sweetness in the tedium.

Several times, Chiu-lien and her husband had discussed the prospect of his transferring offices. But the possibility was microscopic. If he were successfully transferred back from his posting outside the county, they'd buy a cheap, old apartment near her in-laws, move out, and seize the opportunity to have another child. If the transfer was impossible, Chiu-lien would simply leave her company and move with Hsiao-min to be with her husband. They'd rent for a few years, and she'd find a new job. When they'd saved up enough, they'd buy a house.

For now, they were crammed into her in-laws' spare room, the walls still covered with posters of her husband's teenage idols. Hsiao-min had recently plastered them with stickers of Peppa Pig and the Paw Patrol. But it was all temporary. It couldn't possibly continue forever, Chiu-lien promised herself.

On nights when her husband didn't come home, Chiu-lien would set up a video call for him and Hsiao-min after dinner. Hsiao-min, the child, was the protagonist of these conversations; she was also their main topic. If the spouses had anything to say to each other, they'd say it through text messages, back and forth, all practical issues, nothing else.

Texting was convenient, but it always fell short when something truly urgent came up. Their words were trapped behind a screen of opacity, neither honest nor fast enough, especially

when it came to things like transferring jobs and buying a place. So those matters stood locked in a stalemate for ages, neither too far nor too close: take a few steps forward, it would take a few steps back, visible but untouchable.

At least you could see it.

Before getting married, Chiu-lien had worked for long enough to save up a certain amount of money, which she transferred periodically into time deposit accounts. Her colleagues had often urged her to take the money and invest in mutual funds, but she would rather die than brave the risk. In just the last six months, those same colleagues had all lost money on the market. Chiu-lien congratulated herself on her former naivete; sure, the interest rates were going down, but at least her money was still there. The thought of it put her at ease, an ease that was the origin of life's stable coordinates.

If, next month, her husband once again put off discussing their plans to buy a house, she resolved to use the money from her time deposits as a down payment, and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. The house would eventually be in her name anyway, everyone said so, and the house would ground her husband, ground the whole family, tie them all firmly to the body of wifedom.

Was a house still a home without a wife?

Take her own family home. Her father had died of an illness a few years ago, and her mother had spent nearly seven years of her life as a carer. It wasn't that there wasn't any love between her parents; on the contrary, her mother's care had grown to the point of spilling over several lifetimes. But it was as if Ma had escaped the burden of love by the skin of her teeth. At first, she'd even appeared pale and sickly, as though Ba's illness had infused her with jaundice. And yet, within half a year of her husband's passing, color and light returned to her face; even the gray hairs on her head darkened.

Ba might have departed this earth, but Ma was still there, still putting food on the table, her chatter still ringing through her children's phones. Home still existed, unified and whole.

Whenever Chiu-lien returned to visit, she'd assert her right as a daughter to pass her child into her mother's care. As they ate, Ma would sometimes mention news about Chiu-lien's older brother and his wife, and their relatives' recent activities. Ma's exchanges with the neighbors and local gossip would also figure in her conversation. Though Chiu-lien never saw these people, they nevertheless seemed to encircle the family through Ma's words.

Chiu-lien didn't believe that, despite having money for a down payment, they were still unable to buy a house. At worst, they'd stiffen their upper lips and beg her in-laws for help. Her sister-in-law had just bought a place last year in a rapidly developing area of the city; in a few years, when the metro system opened there, the apartment's price would rocket. The sister-in-law had pressed this point to her parents for nearly six months, and eventually they'd softened and cut a little slice out of their assets for her. No one knew exactly how much capital Chiu-lien's parents-in-law possessed, and nobody dared to ask: it would come off as gold-digging in broad daylight, the shame of it. And what if her in-laws said that they were struggling themselves? Did

they expect cash payouts once a month? Her sister-in-law was unwilling, and so was Chiu-lien; they both had children to raise, futures to plan for.

Housing prices continued to soar, but it also meant they'd earn a tidy sum selling and rebuying. And while it would be best to only have to buy once, a two-bedroom flat could work for now if it were the only solution. Wait until she was pregnant with the second child: husband and wife would work even harder to save, and eventually they'd have a three-bed. Step by step, they'd surely get there. Even Chiu-lien's thoughts were so commonplace that they objectively belonged within the average range, silently yearning to be one with the masses.

Crammed into the spare room as they were now, Chiu-lien thought of it as a buffer zone, a way to save even more.

Her in-laws didn't ask them to pay the water and electricity bills, and bought Chiu-lien whatever she needed, as long as she took loving care of Hsiao-min and helped out with the chores. Though so much troubled her, Chiu-lien could bear it. Her mother-in-law often said unpleasant things, and twisted logic and social convention to put pressure on her: none of that mattered.

For instance, if Hsiao-min fell over while running, her mother-in-law would say that she'd taught the child to walk too early, damaging the growth of her bones. But what child has never fallen over? Or, if Hsiao-min had a nightmare and cried in her sleep, it was because they had chosen an inauspicious name for her. Her mother-in-law could even manage to blame it on too much time in the playground. As for the shape of Hsiao-min's head, her mother-in-law reproached Chiu-lien for not paying attention to Hsiao-min's sleeping position when she was an infant, fearing that this would affect the results of Hsiao-min's face readings when she was older.

Chiu-lien also knew that, when she was busy with Hsiao-min, her mother-in-law would steal the chance to sweep the floor that Chiu-lien had already swept, to refold the clothes she'd already folded. Washing vegetables, too: whatever Chiu-lien did never seemed to count, and her mother-in-law had to wash the vegetables herself for them to be clean. She didn't know why her mother-in-law was so nitpicky, and she didn't want to know, so she played dumb. Maybe she truly didn't sweep the floor carefully enough, and there were still hairs in the corners; or maybe her mother-in-law was unable to bear the imperfect creases in her folds. None of it mattered.

She could tolerate this sort of nonsense as long as money went into their savings account.

Chiu-lien knew that happiness depended on comparison. The way she gave herself temporary comfort was equally, utterly ordinary. She found a few chat forums online about marriage, raising children, and buying houses, and she'd regularly browsed them to see how other people lived their daily lives. The demonic in-laws and clamoring parents that she read about online would make anyone break out in cold sweat. It was possible to reincarnate into the wrong family. Every time Chiu-lien thought about the dwindling days of her maternity leave, what would happen with her job, and when she would be able to move away from her in-laws – it was enough to make anyone depressed – she'd log on and scroll through the forums to make herself feel better.

Sometimes she felt as though all that was left to her was the world of the internet. She read and reasoned through other people's struggles and left comments under their posts to vent and offer advice. And in the real world, other than gurgling little Hsiao-min, all she had left were the

in-laws on the other side of her door and the husband in her text messages. She also mostly kept up with friends from before marriage and colleagues from before parenthood through text. Opportunities to see each other in person were few and far between.

When Chiu-lien met Chen-3, it was as if she discovered that there were still other people in this world. How nice it was not to need texts but to speak face to face and say what you really wanted to say, deep down.

A while after her first encounter with Chen-3, Chiu-lien exhaled deeply from the bottom of her heart. It was just that she didn't notice.

## 2

An early autumn typhoon had just passed by the day before. Although the typhoon hadn't been too severe, it brought all the heat of summer together in one fell swoop, leaving behind a few pitying wisps of breeze to assuage the people melting under the greenhouse effect. The park's slides and swings finally cooled enough to avoid scorching young children until they screamed. In the blink of an eye, the tree branches that had been trimmed at the start of the summer sprouted again. The bench beneath the trees that Chiu-lien liked to sit on was blanketed in fallen leaves, as if draped in a shawl that presaged the shades of autumn.

That was the day Chiu-lien first saw Chen-3.

When she and Hsiao-min arrived at the park, Chen-3 was sitting on that bench, consuming a sandwich and drink he'd bought from a breakfast shop. In another half an hour, the Chinese-style diners would open for lunch; you could never be certain which meal you were ordering at that time of the day. Chiu-lien thought to herself that only unemployed people would eat breakfast here. Yet Chen-3 was wearing what seemed like a perfect outfit for work: a polo shirt and semi-formal loose trousers, with rustic-looking black leather shoes on his feet.

At first, looking around, she wondered whether she should go over and sit there. All the other benches she could see were dripping wet from the previous evening's heavy rain; some had even accumulated puddles of water in their hollows. Only that bench was somewhat usable. Chen-3 sat on it, quietly and neatly munching on his sandwich, and finished it in no time. Chiu-lien thought he would get up and go, but instead he took out his phone and looked at its screen as he sipped his drink. Chiu-lien could only harden her skin and push her stroller to the other end of the bench, where she sat and boldly doused Hsiao-min in mosquito repellent.

Over the next few days, Chen-3 consistently occupied the same bench to consume a meal that was neither breakfast nor lunch. It was always a ham sandwich with half a fried egg and a few strips of cucumber, the standard breakfast-shop fare. When he finished eating, he would swipe through his phone and sip on his drink, and after a while, he would leave. Chiu-lien could smell the mix of mayonnaise and ham wafting over the blank space she'd deliberately leave between them, and wondered whether this sandwich lover would appear in the park on weekends too, eating sandwiches that Chiu-lien couldn't possibly be more familiar with. Before

she got married, she would have sandwiches from the corner shop every morning on her way to the office. Too lazy to consider what she actually wanted, she simply picked whatever was displayed beside the grill. With no need to wait or choose, the sandwiches tasted safe yet flavorless.

On weekends, Chiu-lien never brought her child here because her husband would come home; they'd go together to a park a little further away, or to a nearby department store.

But on Monday mornings, once her husband returned to work, Chiu-lien would bring her child to the park, and Chen-3 was always there. From the very first encounter, Chen-3 appeared as though out of nowhere, descending from the sky, eating the same breakfast at the same time every day with unwavering determination. You could almost forget that he'd only recently started to show up there.

Two weeks passed before they interacted for the first time.

That day, Chiu-lien's mind was elsewhere, lingering on the email in her phone, while Chen-3's emitted exaggerated sound effects and loud jingles. Chiu-lien wasn't aware that Hsiao-min had run over to ask for a sip of water, but the sounds that came from Chen-3's phone drew the little girl over to him, looking at his phone. Chiu-lien pulled Hsiao-min away as soon as she noticed, but Chen-3 said a little glance wouldn't hurt anyone. His screen played a loop of funny animal videos.

"Do you like cats?" Chen-3 asked Hsiao-min.

Hsiao-min nodded.

But children have limited patience. After a few minutes, the children on the playground called Hsiao-min back, and she ran to join them. Chen-3 and Chiu-lien sat there, eyes glued to their phones. Chiu-lien couldn't resist looking at the email again, a message she'd never imagined that she would receive, but also, she felt, a letter that had been owed to her for far too long.

"Owed": that was the word that floated to the front of her mind, along with the resentment that, she only now realised, she had stifled deep within her.

The letter was quite short. It was only because time had stretched so far that each line of characters came to resemble the rings of a tree, eking out the ripples of the passing years.

In the morning, when she'd looked at her inbox, Chiu-lien saw the username wedged between rows of unwanted spam emails, a few English characters combining to form a word that, once upon a time, she couldn't have been more familiar with, yet had now excised from her memory. For a moment, she thought she was seeing things. She opened the notification and rapidly skimmed the email's contents, surprise, alarm, and a certain pleasure welling up in her throat.

Chiu-lien forced herself to swallow. She helped Hsiao-min put on her shoes as though nothing had happened. As they walked, she couldn't help but think of the words in the email and the signature that concluded it. She didn't even notice that Hsiao-min had somehow kicked her shoes off; it was the lottery shop owner who yelled for her to pick them up.

If she could, she would have called Amy immediately.

Amy was a name her friend had randomly picked in the junior high school English class they'd shared. Though it felt a little tasteless, she'd grown used to it and couldn't be bothered to

change it. It was as if she'd been born with it. Amy had gotten married before Chiu-lien, but two or three years later, her uterus still hadn't given any sign of life. She and her husband spent ages running between monthly appointments at infertility clinics and consuming various unpalatable herbal concoctions, but still, nothing happened. The couple had poured their retirement savings into this bottomless pit, and along with it, their love.

After a while, Amy gave up.

During their studies, Amy had been the sister figure; she spoke quickly and appeared worldly, experienced, and presentable. After Amy abandoned the idea of a child, she threw herself into her work. In her boss's eyes, she was the model employee, with no troubles at home. She rose speedily to a managerial position; she had less and less time to pick up her friends' calls during working hours, and could only respond to texts in the evenings, sometimes taking two or even three days to reply.

Chiu-lien swiped Amy's texting interface off the screen of her phone and scrolled through her list of contacts. She really couldn't think of anyone to talk to about the letter. She swallowed again, repressing the scream that was about to erupt from her throat.

Chiu-lien reread the email, line by line, word by word. She read it again and again. Suddenly a wave of panic surged inside her, and she feared that if she read on, the wave of panic would burst out of her like a spring of water, or the letter's words would lose their meaning, or even that the letter would disappear.

Hard-earned, it had truly taken too long to come to her.

She threw her phone into the deepest pockets of her shoulder bag. As she raised her head, she saw Chen-3 enter the Household Registration Office next to the park. An epiphany cut through her deflated mood, lifting her. Her gaze fell on Hsiao-min again.

Hsiao-min was playing with leaves she'd gathered from the ground. As big as Chiu-lien's palms, the leaves hadn't had the chance to yellow before the wind and the rain tore them off their branches, to become imaginary money in the economy of childhood games. Hsiao-min approached Chiu-lien with a fistful of leaf banknotes and pretended to buy a snack from her. In exchange for an invisible strawberry biscuit, the little hands thrust sodden leaves into her big ones.