

# PANGOLIN NO. 67

## 第六十七隻穿山甲

*Decades ago, two child actors shared a moment of fame. Now, on the threshold of middle age, they are reunited at a film festival in France. As memories mingle with the hard truths of the present, they find solace together, and finally tend to the wounds of childhood and the disappointments of lost love.*

Just past the threshold of middle age, “she” is no longer a glamorous starlet. Nor is she a beautiful wife in a perfect family, as others saw her after her marriage to her politician husband. Roughly the same age, “he” was once a leading man, but he slowly retreated from the spotlight and now resides quietly in France. As child stars, the pair had appeared together in a television advertisement. The director was so taken with them that he tailor-wrote a dramatic script for them, and the resulting film became a worldwide art house classic. Now, the film has been restored in 4K, and will be screened at the Nantes Film Festival, giving the stars a chance to reunite after many years of silence. Their pasts will join them for this fateful reunion, as the memories of childhood and past loves resurface.

As her mother’s money tree, she had been pushed into the acting world at a young age, setting her apart from her peers. The men she grew close to – an aspiring medical student, a student activist, and an assistant director of a theatrical group – were all the same: they treated her like a ragdoll, subjecting her to their violent whims.

Like her, he had never felt loved by his parents. His father treated him no differently than the pangolins he raised to sell on the black market. After appearing in some nude scenes, and participating in the gay liberation movement of the 90’s, his father’s indifference turned to scorn. Thus began his self-imposed exile in France, where he entertained a string of lovers, but, sadly, the only one that stole his heart died in a car accident.

Loneliness was their shared fate. Each bearing the burdens of



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childhood trauma, only the other can reach to the heart of their aloneness. As a homosexual male and a heterosexual female, each turns to the other for sympathy and understanding as they twist in the fetters of patriarchal power and abuse.

Within the novel, the unnamed “he” and “she” represent larger groups – homosexual men and heterosexual women – the objects of patriarchal oppression. Masterfully narrated in the third person, the novel nonetheless reads like a direct account of the inner conflicts of the characters, announcing a new milestone of Taiwan LGBTQ literature from perennial award-winner Kevin Chen.

## Kevin Chen 陳思宏

Kevin Chen began his artistic career as an actor, starring in the Taiwanese and German films *Ghosted*, *Kung Bao Huhn*, and *Global Player*. Now based in Germany, he is a staff writer for *Performing Arts Reviews* magazine. His publications include the novels and short story collections *Attitude*, *Flowers from Fingernails*, and *Ghosts by Torchlight*, and the essay collections *Rebellious Berlin* and *Three Ways to Get Rid of Allergies*. His novel *Ghost Town* was published to widespread critical acclaim and has been translated into thirteen languages. The English version was longlisted for the 2023 PEN America Literary Awards.

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By Kevin Chen

Translated by Darryl Sterk

## Part 1: A stroll

### The first cell phone dialogue

"It's me! Remember me?"

"Hi."

"OMG, is it true? I can't believe I found you. You actually let me. What? I'll never be able to tear myself away? What the hell, here I come, Paris! I'll scream it at the top of my lungs when I see ya."

"OK."

"Should I really go? You want me to come? Want to see me?"

"?"

"Will you please...You know. Say something. Don't leave me hanging like this. I've been waiting all day. I keep looking at my phone, waiting and waiting and waiting.... And all I get is a question mark. It wouldn't hurt to write a few more words."

"Sorry."

"Don't mind me. I'm fine. Take your time. You do you. Just let me talk. Please listen. I'm not happy. Anxious. Please, take me somewhere quaint. Where you hang out. Where you work. Take me for a stroll. I want to walk, wander. Walk and walk and walk. Down the block. Where you live. I'm not interested in anywhere touristy. We haven't seen each other in ages."

"OK."

"When I get there, the first thing I'll do is catch up on sleep."

## Sleep

On the last day of summer, in Paris, they finally slept together again, she and he.

How long had it been? He'd completely forgotten, but she remembered. He was the one who'd left, who wouldn't change, and she was the one who'd stayed, waiting and waiting, unable to leave, waiting for sleep, pretending to sleep, waiting for insomnia to leave her be. After all this time, she wasn't so sure anymore if she was waiting for him, or for herself to give up. She'd waited too long, so long the seconds stretched to centuries. Her wait grew into a rainforest, with its own microclimate and convoluted ecology: fallen leaves and sticks waiting for fungal decomposition, an insomniac leopard waiting for sleep, a mosquito waiting for death on a spider's web, a tapir

waiting for a lost cub to wander back to the nest, a raindrop waiting to fall from the leaf of a tree, a python waiting to shed its skin, an eagle waiting for a breeze, a tree canopy waiting for the sunrise, and a pangolin waiting for ants, or termites. All she could do was keep waiting, for the one who'd disappeared to crawl back into bed and fall fast asleep with her in the rainforest. Even if he finally reappeared, would the wait be over? Perhaps waiting gave her the will to live, waiting a little longer, for the next chance. Waiting is active, not passive; the one who waits is poised, battle ready. She was waiting for a good night's sleep, and for that, she had to wait for him.

Now that they were finally in the same bed again, the stone of her chronic wakefulness started to shift. The rain fell, the stream swelled, the stone relented, dislodging itself from the riverbed. It drifted along with the flood that flushed it far, far away.... Where? No matter, she didn't hurt anymore, the ache was gone. He was the rain, he was the deluge, only he, the water, could move her, the stone, to sleep, from hard and dry to soft and spry. Lying on his narrow Parisian bed, she knew sleep had begun in primordial chaos, in a snore that awakened civilization, a gob of spittle that quickened the earth. She knew that she would wake up to a new future of splashing silver and glittering gold, right outside the window.

But he couldn't sleep.

The window was open, and outside it, Paris, too, was sleepless. The moon was bright, the neighbors noisy, the drunks in the street kept yelling.

The breeze brought in the smell of rain. He knew it was called *pétrichor*. He'd looked it up. "The scent of rain on dry soil." J had taught him. When? While he was waiting on a park bench for an order to slip in, in the afternoon heat of the summer, when time stagnated, when the earth grew parched, and only rain in cahoots with wind could mend the cracks. He didn't mind that kind of waiting, when everything was late, when Paris paused. He and J were the only ones left on the bench, and if only the sun had been a little bit rowdier, just a little bit, tree branches brushing against one another could have caught fire, burning the park to the ground; and then he would finally disappear, deliberately, for good. He got scared, every time. But this time he wasn't afraid at all, not with J beside him.

He couldn't follow what J was saying. In heavily accented French. No matter, he didn't care. He understood anyway. He had nothing to say, why not listen to J? Regardless of grammar or syntax or pronunciation, he still got it. Even though he never knew what "getting it" meant. If he understood words, phrases, punctuation marks, did that mean he'd gotten it? The truth was like a lobster, hard shell and feelers and pincers and all. Watch out, it'll pinch you. *Ouch!* Boil a pot of water, throw it in, lid it, it'll be a goner. Kill the truth and it doesn't hurt anymore. A freshly cooked lie can be tasty, words can be picante. With J, there was no beating around the bush. J's motto was: when you want something, say so. When you kiss, French! When you're sad, cry your eyes out! When J was frustrated, a 10-episode horror series would get acted out. No ambiguity. J would meet you head on. That lipstick was the most luscious red, and those false eyelashes were octopus tentacles. J could love you wholeheartedly, and then hate your guts. So even though he couldn't understand J's words, he always caught the meaning.

A familiar smell had suddenly drifted into the park. It was sticky in his nostrils, almost musty. J stood up and took a deep breath, whooped, and said *pétrichor* over and over, p, t, k, through red-hot lips. He shook his head. *Say what?* J spelled it out in his hand, *p-é-t-r-i-c-h-o-r*. He typed it into the cell phone, spelling it wrong a few times before finding it. He'd never heard of it, not even in Chinese. Oil secreted by drought-stricken plants that oozes into soil and rock. When the rain hits the dry earth, it mixes with the oil and produces the odor *pétrichor*. That was it. He'd smelled it before of course. It had terrorized him through childhood. It reminded him of Mother, and parting. It'd wring rain from his eyes. Turned out there was a scientific-sounding word for it. The city was under siege by *pétrichor*, which came rushing in from the streets around the park, where the parched earth had lain open-mouthed, waiting for rain, all summer long. Before skin could intercept the drops, lightning struck the Eiffel Tower, pedestrians scurried for shelter, fluttering floral dresses did a Marilyn Monroe. The rain screamed like a mad ape, gale-force wind tore up the parasols of outdoor cafés, coffee cups, cake plates, wine glasses, and ashtrays crashed on the sidewalks, composing a discordant clink-clank Debussy.... Polychrome store signs broke free of their screws. Who'd pressed the fast forward button, speeding Paris up? A torrential downpour was about to occupy the tiny park. J and he held hands, closed their eyes, and took a deep breath; *pétrichor* poured them full. When the deluge arrived the next second, a fierce tropical rain was already gushing in the palms of their tightly-clasped hands. The warm rain came and drilled holes in his scalp; J's tongue, a groundhog, reached over and burrowed in his face.

This summer in Paris, there had been no rain, and no J. It had been dry and hot, with temperatures hitting forty degrees for days on end. Today she'd come to Paris and lain beside him. It'd been such a long time. They slept in the same bed, on the pillows of estrangement. But where else could she sleep? On the couch? There was no simply no room in the less than eight square meters of this pint-sized Parisian flat. As they lay in bed together, dark clouds moistened the moon, a cool breeze blew, and he could clearly smell the *pétrichor*. That heralded rain. He'd thought the summer in Paris was endless, but it must have been her, she'd ended it, by bringing fall.

Hadn't he promised himself he would leave Paris at the end of summer? Why was she lying beside him now? Why was he still trapped in this tiny cage?

After J was swallowed by the ambulance, he wanted to make himself scarce, again. Living out of a suitcase, he could leave whenever he wanted; no one in the whole of Paris would ask him to stay. The Seine would not remember him, Le Penseur had not seen him, and the trees in the Bois de Vincennes had forgotten him. The thing was, where could he go? He didn't know. His specialty was disappearing, but his flaw was not knowing in which direction. He was always trying to run, never knowing where. Why had he come to Paris in the first place? He didn't remember, and now he was leaving again. Suddenly an invitation slipped into his mailbox. His long-lost agent had found him. He'd climbed up to the "penthouse" in a sweaty mess, cursing summer. "What a shithole! No elevator, the stairwells are filthy. You're not easy to find! How many times have you moved? Do you know how many people I had to ask to track you down? Those whores downstairs can talk your ear off. Holy moly, your place is a fucking birdcage! It's smaller than the toilet at my place in Taipei."

The birdcage metaphor didn't discomfit him. It was only now, when the agent's gut hit the doorframe, when he spun around and knocked over a glass of water, when he sat down on the floor and grumbled, when he showered sweat, when his navel almost pressed up against the ceiling, that he realized how confining his cage truly was. Hardly a place to entertain guests.

The agent said the girl from Taipei had immediately agreed when he called her. She'd said she was happy to fly to France. "You two have been invited to the release of the 4K restoration. The director's dead, a lot of the actors are nowhere to be found, so we're depending on you. By the way, they're going to show the one you won best male lead actor for, too. It'll be a double feature. A modest personal retrospective."

Was the agent speaking French, Chinese or English? He didn't quite get it. His hearing had been silting up for many years, and now waves were crashing into his ears, against his brain. *Ouch!* The agent's mouth was spewing toothpicks into the mud. "I know our contract expired, I'm just doing you a favor, you know? I see you're in pretty good shape, you're working out, aren't ya? Lemme have a look at ya. Nice arms. How about your abs? Good, good, good. Wanna make a comeback? For old times' sake. I'll arrange an audition right away, okay? Think about it. The organizer is up for it. And the chairman likes your movies very much. When he talks about you, he gets stars in his eyes."

A million toothpicks filling his head, he imagined stars coming out of a person's eyes. Were they fireflies on a summer night? Or the crystalline sparkles on the screen when the power goes out in the theater, right before it goes black, when the explosions are still playing out in the mind's eye? Or flakes in the first snowfall of a Parisian winter? The freeze had sucked out all the sounds of the city, muffling everything. Little white lights drifted through the gray sky. He looked up and his lashes intercepted the first glittering flakes. Or was it a meteor shower? A big bang deep inside his body, cosmic dust rushing toward his pupils, burning bright arrow trails. He'd seen such a spectacular sight. When his mother bade him goodbye, shooting stars burned in her eyes. See you again. Never again.

Through his agent, he and she, long separated, reconnected. They added each other's social media apps and accounts. He hadn't actually nodded, or said a word, but the agent took his silence as a yes, and couriered over a couple of designer suits for the film festival, battle array. Fuck was the flat ever small. With suits, shirts, accessories, and shoes lying on the floor or hanging on the wall, there was no place to move. He wanted to open the window and jump, not to end his life, but just for one breath of fresh air. The expensive clothes were too fancy, too gorgeous, too greedy. They sucked up all the oxygen in there, stifling and deforming the tiny tables and chairs. He opened the window, stuck his chest out, opened his mouth wide, and inhaled Le Marais, the whole neighborhood. Exhaling vigorously, he returned it. A few centimeters further out, he could also return his body to Paris by relaxing his grip and plummeting. The window downstairs suddenly spit out a pale arm, cigarette between the fingers, head nowhere to be seen. A big puff of smoke floated out. The old lady downstairs had fallen off the wagon again. She finished her ciggy, tossed the butt into the street, and turned up a wrinkled palm, waiting for the next fix to fall from the sky. A streetwalker looked up and saw him. She smiled and blew a kiss, so hard it

pushed him back in. The first night he moved here, he couldn't sleep, so he went out to sit on the sidewalk and people watch, taking in the drunks, the hipsters, the tourists, the pickpockets, and the whores. A redhead came and sat down next to him, tapping a movie still on her cell phone with a glossy fingernail, then pointing at him. He nodded, and she said something he didn't quite get, gave him a peck on both cheeks, and put her index finger to her lips, as if to say: *I won't tell a soul. You can tell them*, he replied, under his breath, *it's okay, not many people recognize me anymore*. Not even J. J didn't recognize him. He had wanted to tell J he used to be an actor. But before he could say it, before they could watch his films together, J disappeared.

He and she squeezed in the narrow bed, and with the magical tacit understanding from their childhood, they rolled, tossed and turned, curled up, without touching at all. It was not uncomfortable, the odor, the snoring, the posture. All familiar. But it wasn't exactly sweet. It'd been ages, after all. So much was left unsaid. Before disappearing, J had slept here almost every night. Squirming and groaning, unable to lie still. J would kick off the quilt and say, "We don't need it, I'll be your quilt." J was a skinny flesh quilt lying on top of him, wriggling like a shrimp fresh out of water. That trembling comforter always needed to cry a little to get to sleep. J would bawl or whimper. Tears were guaranteed. He hugged it tight and got hard. He stayed hard all night. He really wanted to go in and out of J's body, but he couldn't, he had to hold back. J had finally fallen asleep.

Now raindrops came knocking at the window, and the *pétrichor* grew even stronger. The mercury was suddenly low, the sky a silver glow, and the fishing rod of sleep finally swung toward him. Baited by the sound of rain, he closed his mouth on the hook. And took the baton from her in the sleep relay race.

Her last dream before waking was white.

She knew exactly where that was. She shook her head to shake the white off. Why did it have to be white? White walls, white beds, white pillows, white floors, white clothes. White wasn't calming, it was the color of death, and it was angst-inducing. She wanted to intervene in her dream, to crash a paint truck, red, yellow, green, purple, whatever would cover the white. But the truck never came. White kept streaming in.

He slept quietly beside her. He didn't talk awake, or snore asleep. He was flat on his back, just like when he was a kid; he hadn't changed. The bed was just too small for such a thick dude, how could he get to sleep? His knees were bent, his head and feet pressed against the wall.

Thick. Yes, that was the word that came to mind as she gazed at the man beside her. Thick stubbly hair, thick beard, thick liplines, thick crow's feet, thick eyebrows, thick neck, thick arms, thick fingers, thick fingerprints, thick thighs, thick toes, thick dick, thick skin, especially on the wenis – the elbows. She wanted to pinch that skin with her fingers. Her gaze stopped at his crotch, at the bulge in his baggy cotton pants, a towering peak. Thick black pubic hair trailed up to his navel, like someone'd done a splash ink landscape on his thick torso.

She wanted to walk in, but had never found the way.

So thirsty.

So small.

The reservoir inside her was so low she could surely accommodate a rushing river; she had only to open her mouth. She got up, took a couple of steps, and chugged a pitcher of water in the kitchen. Two was a crowd in there. Open the door too hard and you'd hit the shower. Her suitcase was like Dumbo in a room with one window, one table, one chair, one bed, one pitcher, one mini-fridge, one vanity. Two new suits hanging on the wall, no wardrobe to put them in. Pairs of plates and cups, assorted knives, forks, and chopsticks. A small stove, a pot and pan, a few folded shirts and pants. Sneakers, brand new patent leather shoes, and dumbbells. Just like that, so spic and span and bare, too straight and narrow for dust to settle. Last night, before going to bed, when she was going to take a shower, he said he was going out to get some milk. She appreciated his thoughtfulness. She couldn't very well ask him to turn around and face the wall every time she undressed. The shower was basically two plastic doors in the corner of the room, with a head hanging from the wall. There was a bar of soap, but no hook for a towel. Better not adjust the flow or lift the head or it'd rain on the wall, ceiling, and floor. The toilet was right next to the shower doors, without any partition. So she put her luggage in front of it and that was the elephant door. The whole apartment was smaller than her dressing room in Taipei.

*How could you live in such a place?*

She sat on the floor and watched the rain outside the window, drank her water, and looked at his thick bulge. How could it not go soft? Who was keeping it up in his dreams? Whoever it was, it certainly wasn't her. A cool breeze frolicked through the window, triggering a bolt of lightning in her body.

*Ouch.*

Time for another analgesic.

It'd only been a few hours since the captain had announced the landing. The babble and the cabin pressure had built a delicate nest of chirping birds in her ears. The wings cut through the clouds, the fuselage trembled, the champagne rippled. Almost there, finally. Champagne with Tylenol, indescribable pain, unknown source. Fish bones of turbulence, pricking her here and there. It hurt sitting or lying, wining or dining. Ten hours of travel pain had piled up, rumbling in her throat. *Oh no, I can't, can't ring the bell, can't let it out, or my neighbors'll find out. Wait, the pills are working. Maybe it's a placebo effect.* They seemed to subdue the pain, as soon as she swallowed. Maybe it was gone, or had never been there. Maybe Paris didn't exist. Maybe she hadn't even gotten on the plane. Maybe she'd imagined everything. If only she could sleep. She'd wake up as before. No blood. No trees. No son. No words. No daughter. No mother. No rain. Back to that mattress from childhood. *I'll have a good sleep. When I wake up, everything will take its place, ready to start all over again."*

*Paris, Paris, here I am, finally getting a good sleep.*

She knew she could get to sleep if she saw him. She could, for sure.

Who was he? What was his name? Had he changed it? Had he gotten older, fatter, thinner? How long had it been? Did he have a partner? Did he still make movies? Would he remember her? Would he still sleep with her?

Her childhood bedmate. The first time they met they slept together. The first time they met they had a sweet sleep. The first time they met she fell for him. The sweet beddy-bye memory of that first meeting grew a field of sugarcane in her mind. When it hurt, she could just cut a stalk and take a bite, letting the juice drip from the corners of her smile. Every time she couldn't sleep, she needed him, wanted him so badly. She couldn't explain it. Only when she was by his side could she fall into the abyss, eight hours at least, of deep, unwaking sleep.