

SEVEN SEVEN

Taking its cue from the so-called “seven deadly sins”, this short story collection brings together seven distinctively different female authors to create an innovatively new work sure to provoke and engage its readers.

Each short story in this collection centers on one of the so-called “seven deadly sins”, namely gluttony, indolence, greed, pride, wrath, lust, and envy, with each author crafting their own unique take on the subject at hand. Taken as a whole, this book sheds light on the universally complicated yet individually unique lived experiences, constraints, desires, and social expectations of women at different stages of life.

The main protagonists in each story range from lesbian partners and young students to mothers and wives, and narratives take readers on journeys that, while at times warmly intimate, more often than not end in surprising plot twists foreshadowed by the myriad biting undercurrents, pressures, patriarchal expectations, and generational conflicts facing women as they grow and mature into their own. The unique writing style and perspective of each author help tie a brilliantly perfect bow on this encapsulation of life for women in modern society.

The seven established and up-and-coming female authors from Taiwan who contributed to this collection bring experiences spanning writing, translation, creative art, and design. Moreover, the bold photographs and illustrations accompanying these stories add visual punch to the narratives’ underlying ideas and finely honed insights. Finally, the unusual editing framework employed in *SEVEN*, beyond breaching the protective façade of superficiality to let readers experience the complex realities of femininity today, sows the seeds of introspective thought and provocative, continuing conversations.



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Born in Taipei, raised in Canada, and now living in Hong Kong, Shen is a wordsmith with a wide-ranging career spanning advertising, journalism, animation scriptwriting, and translation (including Tao Lin's first novel *Eeeee Eee Eeee*). Her short story collection *They Ain't Fatal, Those That Kill You* is one of her best-known works.

Chen Liwen 陳莉文

Born in 1999, Chen holds a degree in Chinese Language and Literature from National Chi Nan University and has been honored with numerous domestic awards for her short stories. A collection of her most recent works has been published under the title *Rainforest*.

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Born in Taipei City, Ye left her position as chief editor of a literary magazine to focus on literary translation. Notable works she has translated include Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Arlene Heyman's *Scary Old Sex*, and Julia Phillips' *Disappearing Earth*. She has published collections of her own works under the titles *Overflow* and *Dyed*.

Chang Yi-Hsum 張亦絢

Born in Taipei, Chang Yi-Hsum earned her Master's degree in Film and Visual Studies from Paris University No.3. Now a well-known advocate of queer writing, she has also written *Risks Along the Riverbank*, *Ephemeral Love: Notes from Nantes and Paris*, and *A Goodbye Letter: In the Era After I'm Gone*.

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Born in 1998 in Taichung and now living in Tainan, He holds dual bachelor degrees in Taiwan Literature and History from National Cheng Kung University. She has been honored with numerous domestic awards for literature and is the author of the short story collection *That Day We Searched for a Path Behind a Chicken's Butt*.

Cui Shunhua 崔舜華

Born in 1985, Cui has earned a number of domestic literary awards. Her poetry collection *Boléro* and essay collection *God Abides* ably reflect a creative career focused primarily on poetry and essays. Cui's first short story effort is featured in *SEVEN*.

Huang Simi 黃思蜜

Huang graduated from the University of Taipei's Department of Visual Arts and currently wears several hats at Rusuban Studio, including General Manager, Chief Editor, and Designer. Her works include *The Man with the Raised Pinky*.

SEVEN

By Coco Shen, Chen Liwen, Ye Jiayi, Chang Yi-Hsum, He Wenjun, Cui Shunhua, Huang

Simi

Translated by May Huang

When Mary Met Sally

By Coco Shen

Sally didn't say, "I want to eat spicy hot pot." Instead, she said, "David wants to eat spicy hot pot."

Sally was like a cat. She'd awakened at 3 a.m. and whispered in Mary's ear, "Mary, I'm craving spicy hot pot."

"Sounds good...You want spicy hot pot," Mary mumbled, half-asleep.

"It's not me that wants it, it's David."

"Alright, *David* wants spicy hot pot."

Sally was relentless. "Don't you want to know what David wants to eat?"

"David wants spicy hot pot."

"Yeah, but what does he want in the hot pot?"

"..."

"Come on, ask me."

"What does David want in the hot pot?"

"Duck's blood, hundred-layer tofu, intestines, taro balls."

"Taro balls?...Sorry, you want to put taro balls in your spicy hot pot?"

"It's David who wants the spicy hot pot."

"...and duck's blood, hundred-layer tofu, intestines, and taro balls."

Pleased with herself, Sally flipped back over like a walrus, and fell asleep soon after.

But Mary was now wide awake.

* * *

Perhaps it really was David who was craving spicy hot pot, Mary thought to herself. The Sally that Mary first got to know eschewed spicy hot pots and the like. Back then, Sally dined on avocados, blueberries, nuts, grass-fed beef, wild salmon, virgin olive oil, and 85% dark chocolate. She wouldn't even eat chicken. Factory farming was unethical, so chicken breast meat was out of the question as well as chicken drumsticks, which were injected with all kinds of unnatural hormones and drugs.

"The needle always goes into the leg," Sally would tell Mary grimly as she picked up the latter's fried drumstick order.

The two had met in the so-called culinary scene. Although both identified as "foodies", they couldn't have been more different.

Mary loved eating fried chicken, especially the crispy skin and the translucent chicken fat that oozed from it. Sally started her day with a mushy, colorful blend of five veggies and fruits, sprinkled with matcha powder and turmeric, which to Mary looked like the gooey remains of an alien, suited only for use as fertilizer. Mary liked to drink beer on an empty stomach the moment she woke up, claiming it was the best hangover cure and helped switch on her brain. At noon she'd pop a bottle of champagne, and, after her afternoon nap, it was time for happy hour, which she justified by saying that negroni and old fashioned captured perfectly the colors of sunset. Evenings invariably belonged to vodka, whiskey, and brandy.

In the summer, Mary liked to travel in the southern hemisphere to feast on the plump, tasty oysters raised in the cold waters there. In the winter, she'd feast on organ meats braised in spicy miso stew, throwing in a scoop of ice cream when she fancied. Mary believed the only ethical question one needed to ask when it came to food was whether it had been cooked to perfection.

Hoping to satisfy both Sally's request for low-calorie, low-carb foods and her own voracious appetite, Mary chose a Japanese restaurant for their first dinner together. However, this did not stop Sally from asking those same probing questions about Mary's culinary preferences.

"I can't see why anyone would choose to eat horse meat," Sally crossed her arms, as if Mary was eating her childhood friend.

"Horses are proud and beautiful creatures," Mary replied. "They don't lie down, even when they're sleeping. Their meat tastes lean and refreshing. Unlike cows, they don't fart methane into the air. In fact, you're doing the atmosphere a favor by eating horses."

"So you're saying, the reason horses sleep standing up, is for your eating pleasure?" Sally glowered as she watched Mary pick up her chopsticks.

"I meant that we should be grateful that such a beautiful creature sacrificed its life. My cravings are paired with affection."

The thin slices of meat with almost no fat, dipped in ginger, a splash of yuzu vinegar, and light soy sauce, lay soft and tender on Mary's tongue. She tasted notes of mint. She delighted in savoring the sashimi before her, and didn't think twice about Sally's feelings.

The tsukemono was served. Then sashimi, sushi, and stewed dishes. Empty plates were cleared away, then came dessert: shaved ice made from fermented fruit pulp. Mary could feel Sally's eyes on her at all times. To avoid her intense stare, Mary busied herself refilling their glasses, downing shot after shot of hot sake.

Mary was beginning to feel tipsy. Although the woman sitting before her was beautiful and charming despite her temper, Mary couldn't shake the feeling that she was making a mistake. She was preparing to down her last drink, when Sally grabbed hold of her hand on the cup, and met her eyes with a solemn and unyielding stare.

"If I died, would you eat me?"

* * *

The two women first met at a European-themed food and tourism event. Sally was a guest speaker who had been invited to talk about clean eating and sustainable wines, while Mary was simply there to eat and drink. It was another uneventful Sunday afternoon, the most depressing time of the week. In the poorly ventilated conference hall of a five-star hotel, a group of strangers looked at posters together, hoping soon-to-be-expired drinks and dry goods could transport their souls somewhere far away, somewhere that had different air, weather, gravity, and water pressure.

The only sport Mary was good at was chasing the bottle. As the atmosphere in the room grew rowdier and the air quality worsened, the host began to invite distinguished guests onstage. As was typical of these occasions, middle-aged men and young women gathered in a line. The host's face resembled a slab of pig liver. Boring social pleasantries spewed from his mouth, and the crowd howled with laughter.

Mary, holding an olive in her mouth, was about to sneak away with a half-finished bottle of Vinho Verde when she spotted Sally standing at the end of the line. Mary watched Sally's smile falter as the host described her as "yesterday's top model, today's trophy wife", but no one else seemed to notice. Then the crowd scattered like a flock of pigeons pecking at each other.

Though it lasted only a split second, Mary was the only person in the crowded room to catch Sally's deflated expression. That was all it took for Mary to decide to approach her.

* * *

There were a million reasons why Mary was against Sally's pregnancy. But she couldn't name one out loud. After all, Sally had the right to make her own life decisions. It was *her body, her choice* – a slogan advocating for a woman's right to choose abortion. Who would've guessed that a woman's pregnancy could have nothing to do with her.

Mary knew why she didn't want kids and knew why Sally did. Sally believed in blood ties the same way she believed in coincidence and fate. Mary believed in taking what she could get; if the shoe fits, wear it. Sally believed the world had been created for a divine purpose.

Once, in the early days of their love affair, as the oxytocin rushed in at the climax of their lovemaking, Sally looked at Mary with dreamy eyes and said, "I want to have a baby with you only. One that belongs to us alone. With today's technology, they'll be able to take our DNA, and intertwine us like this."

Mary turned her head to look at Sally: her silhouette resting on the pillow, her beautiful bosom, and her fingers that were at this moment raised towards the ceiling, intertwined, such that it looked like she had more than ten fingers, beyond the bounds of reality, just like her imagination. Words like mitochondria, stem cells, nucleus transplantation, and even genetic

engineering flashed across Mary's mind, but in the end she decided it would be best to keep her mouth shut.

These were but the words of a lovesick fool at the peak of fertility, no different from promises to love each other "till the end of time". Mary knew she shouldn't take them seriously. Back then, she and Sally were in the honeymoon phase of their relationship. They could smell each other's scent from afar, an aroma as sweet as freshly baked bread. They felt destined to be together, as inevitable as the domestication of humans by wheat, thousands of years ago.

Sally always visited Mary after dropping her kid off at school, a time when Mary was usually still lounging in bed. In an effort to get Mary to quit her morning drinking habits, Sally traded her own gooey, alien-like smoothies for greasy croissants, eggs, sausages, and bacon that could absorb the remaining alcohol left in Mary's system. Sometimes, instead, she'd bring rice balls, shaobing, soy milk, and steamed buns with scallion egg that were sold outside her son's school. The scent of breakfast and lovemaking blended together, while the health drinks Sally brought from home were used to water the various potted plants Mary never could seem to keep alive.

Those plants miraculously began to flourish, alongside a new, croissant-eating Sally. Her waist began to expand with her diet, and her flushed face took on an almost drug-induced glow. Sally no longer spent ages in the bathroom, sighing at the number on the scale. She began to admire her appearance in the mirror again, and would laugh heartily while eating fruit after dinner. At night, while her husband snored in bed, she'd sometimes hide herself in the only room in the house that could be locked, and stand for ages in front of the mirror, reviewing every word Mary had said to her with an attentiveness on par with examining each brushstroke on an oil painting.

The stray hairs that escaped the razor's sharp edge, the chickenpox scar that made a tiny dent under her right eyebrow, the freckles on the left side of her face caused by driving in the sun, her split earlobes...Sally pressed her hot palms against the porcelain basin as she carefully traced her own outline in her mind's eye, from one earlobe to another, just like Mary had done with her icy fingertips.

Mary loved all her imperfections. All those subtle and abstract details that a man stops noticing over time, yet women become increasingly meticulous about. The slightest tightness or looseness in her flesh, variations in her skin tone, the discomfort and insecurity that only a woman could feel, the stringent rules she arbitrarily imposed on herself...all lost their former importance. For Mary saw those parts of her and found them charming, and that was enough to make her like them too.

Sometimes Mary would accompany Sally to her kid's school and watch from the next street over as Sally, her back turned away, made small talk with the other mothers. Sally would feel the warmth of her child running into her arms and sense that her true self wasn't standing there, but rather somewhere behind her, throwing herself into Mary's arms as if no one was watching.

* * *

There was nothing wrong with Sally's husband; he had good looks, was well-educated, and had a good family background. He didn't speed while driving, drank in moderation, told their son bedtime stories, and even washed his own dishes after dinner.

The couple had experienced their fair share of romance. Early romance, flirtation, declarations of love, fits of passion, quarrels, breakups, tears, reconciliation...they'd checked all of the boxes. They'd navigated all the doubts and certainties people should have before marriage. The culmination of their four-year courtship was a pragmatically planned wedding, where the balance between family finances and cultural tradition was carefully disguised in the form of fresh flowers, champagne, and banquet food. After both families had sealed the deal, any pretense the couple had of continuing to live in their two-person world was extinguished. There was no grand romantic gesture like the one at the end of *The Graduate*, but after bidding farewell to their wedding guests and being left with only a man by her side, Sally felt just as confused as the woman in the movie.

They say that a woman looks most beautiful on her wedding day. Doesn't that mean she has no choice but to get uglier after that, for the remainder of her life?

When Sally's feelings of doubt began to spiral out of control, the only explanation people, including Sally herself, could think of was that it was about time for her to have a baby.

I want to have something that belongs to me. I want a connection that feels absolute.

Others can do it, so I can too, she told herself.

Sally thought she was prepared, but she still struggled as she watched her own body transform, stretched open by the creature inside her belly that could eat and move. She had finally gotten used to living with it inside her when it suddenly couldn't wait to leave her womb, breaking through flesh to enter the world.

Then came the unending days that felt like one interminable hangover. Everything seemed to happen reactively – if he cried, she needed to feed him; if he made a fuss, she had to soothe him; if he smiled, she'd smile back at him; and if he screamed, she would want to scream, too. When the child grew old enough to not need constant supervision, husband and wife finally had time for each other again. But Sally realized she could no longer clearly perceive his appearance, and believed he felt the same. She began to understand why Picasso painted women the way he did in his later years.

He was the father of her child the same way kitchen utensils they'd used for years, while no longer sharp, still fit in her hand and were easy to grip. Sally was the mother of their child, and she was like the furniture in their home: you couldn't tell what color anything was, but still knew where to sit down in the dark.

Looking at her husband was like looking at a piece of salted meat that took up space in the kitchen. Although she wanted to throw it away, she knew it could be chopped it up in winter and be steamed with rice or stir-fried with hot oil and served with green vegetables. Several years passed like this; she didn't throw anything away, but didn't eat the meat, either.

Sally couldn't point out any real issues with her husband, it was just that they had lost their original shapes and were no longer human. She felt like all his flaws and virtues no longer had anything to do with her.

* * *

The more Sally considered the scientific details of her plans for another baby, the more overwhelmed Mary felt. Sally had discovered that if she really wanted to move forward with this plan, some things were plausible, and not even that difficult, such as finding a sperm bank or a gay friend who was looking to do the same thing. That way, both of them could get pregnant at the same time.

By this point, Sally had already learned that no matter how kind-hearted a person might be in a marriage, the topic of separation could transform them into entirely different people. At first, her husband thought Sally, in spite of her unfathomably brazen behavior, was just playing an absurd game that would eventually end. Sally, while trying to keep up appearances at home and pretend that everything was as it used to be, succumbed quickly to her own dark thoughts.

When reflecting on her husband's efforts to mend their relationship, or the family holidays he meticulously planned, Sally could only remember mindlessly stuffing the suitcases, lugging them into the taxi, arriving at the boarding gate, taking off, landing, catching the airport express and the bullet train, and acknowledging the bows that greeted them at the hot spring resort. It all flashed through her mind now like a montage. Sally remembered donning her ski suit and boarding the cable car to admire the snowy scenery. For the hundredth time, she thought about how when she suggested to Mary that they break up, Mary only nodded quietly. The phone in her pocket made no sound; perhaps Mary didn't, and would no longer reach out to her. Sally felt as if her insides had been scooped out, as if the slightest gust of wind would blow her away. Her husband and son were asking if she wanted a family photo, and as Sally looked at the image of her own family smiling back at her on the phone screen, she wondered if Mary would see the photo and believe she was having a good time. Didn't Mary go back to living her own life? Who was she with now? Sally had a splitting headache.

Sally believed she was doing a good job of maintaining the façade of marriage. But then on the flight home, her son, who was sitting in between her and her husband, suddenly turned to her. *Mommy, you don't want to be here, so you should go.*

* * *

The first thing that began to tempt Sally was the spaghetti Bolognese sold in the convenience store by the law firm. Over the months spent negotiating with lawyers over the divorce settlement, Sally felt bound by the terms of that lunch box. While she and her husband's lawyers engaged in heated discussions about her and her husband's comparative contributions to the marriage, all Sally could think about was the everlasting bliss she'd have if she could only hear the "ding" of

that convenience store microwave. She became entranced by various sauces and refined starches contained in those food items. She came to know every item in the store and the other small shops by heart: Mexican-style chili dog, cheeseburger with spicy mayo, risotto with satay beef, pig intestines with duck blood, mapo tofu, eggplant with garlic sauce...The smell of a healthy breakfast and the careful calculation of calories were no match for the seven, no, eight necessities – firewood, rice, oil, salt, sauce, vinegar, tea, and MSG.

By the time the dust had settled, her ex-husband had already decided to take their son and move overseas. In the process of trying to find herself again, Sally had instead lost her entire family. Sally hadn't lost all custody, but fell so ashamed, that she agreed to the move. Guilt-ridden, she kept her composure at the airport gate, wanting to present the most affectionate version of herself in front of her son. That evening, she went to her friends' gathering as usual, but stood stiffly off to the side, like one of those armless, headless statues of the goddess of victory.

Mary couldn't tell how much Sally had eaten, how much she had imbibed. In the end, it took a group effort to drag her inside the apartment. Mary cleaned up Sally's vomit in the kitchen while listening to the howls coming from the bathroom – it was the first time in Mary's life that she had heard that kind of sound, like the bellow of a whale from the depths of the ocean or the cry of a bird of prey that had lost its hatchling in the wilderness.

This was all my fault, Mary thought to herself. She knew that wasn't entirely true, but it was hard not to think that way. After all, it was because of her that Sally could entertain such an insane possibility. For the first time in her life, Mary pondered going vegetarian as atonement...a way of giving up the one thing she thought she could never relinquish.

Before Mary could even give voice to this foolish idea, Sally had already thought of an even more effective way to destroy her lover's life.

"As long as we use the sperm from the same person, our children will be siblings, related by blood," said Sally, this time full of confidence. While she spoke, she squeezed ketchup onto fried rice, dyeing it red, as if it were gel squeezed onto a belly before an ultrasound. "We can get pregnant together, get ready together, do our physical examinations together, do pregnancy exercises together, then give birth together, breastfeed together...Our children will look quite alike, maybe even like twins, and they'll resemble us too. We can put them in matching outfits, and have them grow up together...how cute would that be?"

* * *

The first time Mary heard Sally talk to "David" inside her belly, she sensed that something was amiss. People wish for their deceased pets to be reincarnated and return to them, and want to bring a lost child back to life by having another one. But David was still alive and well on this planet, living with Sally's kind-hearted ex-husband at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.

"How will you differentiate between your two Davids?" asked Mary.

"Big David, and Little David."

"What happens when they meet for the first time? How will you introduce them?"

“David, meet David; and David, meet your big brother, David.” Sally couldn’t be reasoned with. Delighted with herself, she shoved the last piece of red velvet cake into her mouth without a second thought.

Before she met Sally, the thought of having kids had never even crossed Mary’s mind. Wasn’t the best thing about being with women not needing to get pregnant? When making love with a man, there’s always a knife hanging above your head, and the thing penetrating your body is more terrifying than a knife; if the alien makes it way inside, it will first drain the life force of the mother then sap her mental strength. How beautiful it is to be with a woman, no matter how intimate you get with her, there’s no risk of bringing a human life into existence by accident.

Mary’s relationship with her own mother was her Achilles heel, the biggest enigma of her life. Even at age forty, Mary was still regularly awakened by the same nightmare. Every erotic dream she ever had ended the same way – with her mother opening the door on her, sending her into a panic. She would then become engulfed by a dark abyss just before being jolted awake.