

STILL LIFE IN WHITE

白色畫像

The White Terror, a program of political persecution conducted under the aegis of martial law, reigns over post-war Taiwan. Yet, somehow, everyday life continues for three ordinary citizens in this subtle portrayal of a society struggling under the dark clouds of mutual suspicion, surveillance, and coercive control.

May 19, 1949, the declaration of martial law in Taiwan initiates the White Terror – nearly four decades of intense surveillance, disappearances, and political oppression targeting local Taiwanese resistance to Chiang Kai-shek’s authoritarian rule. Yet, even in this era of political menace, life goes on....

A public school teacher with training in political warfare, Mr. Soo approaches everything with circumspection. Never one to rock the boat, he works to maintain political rectitude and counter-intelligence security at the school where he teaches. But above all, Mr. Soo hopes to provide his family with a better life during uncertain times.

Bun-hui has spent her life serving others. First the Japanese, then the mainlanders who arrived with Chiang Kai-shek, and now an elite local family. Times may change, but Bun-hui holds fast to the propriety that makes a good housekeeper; even as her employer is swept up in a dangerous political investigation, she refuses to air the faintest whiff of dirty laundry.

Miss Cassie is the daughter of local Taiwanese family with a fading aristocratic pedigree. In keeping with her class mores, she has chosen to study abroad in Paris, but her distance from Taiwan may not be enough to save her from suspicion when martial law is declared back home.

In the thirty years since the lifting of martial law, stories of the brutal indignities of the White Terror have gradually emerged. However,



Category: Literary Fiction, Short Stories

Publisher: Ink

Date: 1/2022

Rights contact:

booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

Pages: 272

Length: 99,000 characters
(approx. 64,500 words in English)

this collection of novellas stands out from other literary treatments of the period by foregoing the heart-wrenching cruelties and injustices in favor of unsentimental sketches of the struggle to maintain normalcy – the simple dreams, principles, and pursuits of ordinary life – in times of political repression.

Lai Hsiang-Yin 賴香吟

Before engaging in writing full-time, Lai Hsiang-Yin pursued graduate studies in Japan, and worked in universities, bookstores, and museums. She is the recipient of numerous domestic honors including the Wu Zhuoliu Literary Prize and the Taiwan Literature Award. Now a resident of Berlin, her previous works include non-fiction such as *Love Before Daybreak: Taiwanese Literary Landscapes Under Japanese Rule*; the novel *Afterwards*; the short story collections *Island*, *The Death of a Literary Youth*, and *Landscapes in the Mist*; and *Prehistoric Life*, a collection of essays.

STILL LIFE IN WHITE

By Lai Hsiang-Yin

Translated by Jim Weldon

Miss Cassie

1.

The autumn sunlight always slanted down so; it made it seem so very, very long.

Miss Cassie was an old woman now and had seen a good deal of sunshine, but she was still struck by the beauty of autumn when it came around; indeed, the longer she looked, the more beauty she saw.

She had been sitting in the waiting room for some time. Beyond the milk-white of the window were the dappled greens and yellows of a linden tree. Autumn light glittered like gold through its leaves and branches, throwing patterns like painted figures on the building opposite. Miss Cassie put a hand to her brow against the light, drinking in the beauty of the scene greedily through narrowed eyes – if her gaze met the light directly it made her eyes sting, and everything at once turned too dark to see.

She took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose where it was sore. She'd heard people joke that the Impressionists must have been shortsighted. Even if that were true, it wouldn't have been severe; not like her own terrible myopia, which made even the outline of objects unclear and everything just a blur dotted with blobs of color. Were she to try painting, she would likely not have even the first clue what she'd put on the canvas.

"Ms. Yen." Miss Cassie heard the nurse's voice and opened her eyes.

"Look up." The nurse shook the small bottle she was holding then put two drops of the liquid it contained into each of Miss Cassie's eyes.

The sharp sting from the mydriatic drops subsided slowly. Miss Cassie closed her eyes and waited for the pain to settle, relying on memory to savor the golden blaze of the autumn sun. She idly speculated why it might be that the spring sunlight, although similarly long and slanting, had none of the fiery glory of autumn; it was more of a pallid pink.

When Miss Cassie opened her eyes again, a change had come over her vision. The things that had been unclear were still unclear, but now everything was puffed up large like a cake after baking. Miss Cassie narrowed her eyes and reached out to the wall for support as she made her way slowly into the consultation room. The doctor turned on a lamp and shone it into Miss Cassie's eyes, checking the interior lining.

"Please look directly into the light and bear with me for a moment." The doctor, a woman, was growing older year by year just like Miss Cassie; bearing with things kept getting harder and tears kept welling in her eyes.

“Don’t flinch.” This was the doctor again.

Miss Cassie took a grip of herself and looked directly at the strong light; no slacking, no deviation. There was a stinging sensation that seemed almost to pierce right through her. She was not sure if it emanated from her eyes alone or her body entire. She forced herself to endure it and continue staring at the far end of the bright light until, whether due to fatigue or loss of vision, she seemed to break through into a strange space neither dark nor light; a wide expanse in front of her eyes where she could see everything, though she at once reminded herself that this was not so. She had seen nothing.

Blindness – was this what it felt like? Miss Cassie wondered if the notion of being cast into a universe of the unknown or thrown into a temporal torrent was supposed to describe a feeling something like this.

“It’s getting to be about time we dealt with this cataract situation.” The doctor switched the lamp off. She might have been describing fruit ripening for harvest.

Miss Cassie wiped away her tears. “The lens you were talking about last time?”

The structure in the eye that handled light rays, and ought to be clear as crystal, was growing progressively more clouded. The light could not get in and everything looked indistinct, color and luster dulled. “A bit like when a photograph fades.” The doctor was good at describing symptoms through everyday analogies. A cloudy lens – she described it like a windowpane that would not come clean no matter how much you wiped, so it made you think it was foggy outside.

The doctor continued talking about the state of her vitreous bodies, retina and macula, a whole plethora of information about parts of the eye. Miss Cassie might not have been inclined to know but she needed to, even though knowing did not necessarily imply she could be cured. If she asked about treatment, the doctor would say, oh you people really want too much, it’s organs aging, not some virus or infection, what medicine do you imagine could restore them to how they were? If there were a treatment, it would involve surgery and complete replacement, an artificial substitute for what Nature gave, and not everything that can be swapped out like that. Miss Cassie couldn’t help feeling downhearted; she came here once a year, if not to be told that the situation had deteriorated that little bit more, then to anticipate an announcement that the worst had come. These eyes; if she only had limited time left to use them, should she not be taking a good look at the world and committing it to memory? Or should she not look if she did not have to, let time just stretch on in an unremarkable haze?

The effects of the dilating drops had not yet worn off by the time she went home, and Miss Cassie’s vision remained unstable. She could dimly make out that the sun was already beginning to set, the sky a swathe of red cloud, fierce as burning fire. A long time ago, if a similar scene occurred in the lane by her childhood home, Granny would raise her voice from there under the eaves, point to the sky, and call out to the children playing in the street, “Look – burning clouds.”

She couldn’t get her head around the ways of the world, but time was always a thing of beauty and it would truly be a shame if she could not see. The more Miss Cassie thought about it, the more disconsolate she grew:

Dusk and the sun sinks down to the hill,

Sometimes the autumn wind blows chill...

She began humming a tune she often heard at home a long time ago – “Twilight Ridge”, her mother’s favorite song about sunsets. Miss Cassie had a fine singing voice; all her romances had seen her use soft voice and beguiling words to capture her paramour’s heart. She’d sung English songs and French songs, but neither was as tricky as this old song in Hokkien, with its mix of classical and vernacular registers. She seemed to recall that when Chi Lu-Hsia sang it, her voice had a touch of Taiwanese opera to it:

I turn my eyes and look to home, sitting under the banyan tree...

The notes for “banyan tree” were pitched so high, Miss Cassie’s voice cracked. Chi Lu-Hsia definitely sang it better; Miss Cassie lost interest and gave up trying. The idea of being homesick at her age! Plus, banyans you only got back home; if a person was homesick for here, they’d think about lindens, you’d suppose.

October was almost over, and the leaves on the lindens had turned. One more blast of autumn wind and the trees would be bare.

That autumn wind – it wasn’t *sometimes* chill; every year it was cold enough to make a body shiver.

Miss Cassie pulled her scarf tighter. Sundown – that was the Taiwanese term her mother used. The moon wasn’t up yet, so it was dark but not completely; *entre chien et loup*, but never mind spotting the difference, if an actual dog or wolf came bounding over right now, Miss Cassie wouldn’t see it at all with her dim eyes.

Miss Cassie washed the dishes and listened to music. She used to use a dishwasher, but it broke some years ago and couldn’t be fixed, and she couldn’t be bothered to get a new one. It was just her, so she only needed the one wok, a few plates, and a few cups; the only bother was when the weather got cold and her fingers wouldn’t do as they were told in the tepid water, either bumping and scraping against things or dropping a cup and breaking it.

Mind you, if you opened the cupboards, they were stacked full, Miss Cassie thought somewhat cavalierly. Plenty to last until old age finally did her in.

“Thinking like that means you really have got old,” her little sister scolded her on the phone the other day.

With a laugh, she replied: *Old? Well, of course I am.* Nothing wrong with that, she’d been very happy these past few years, dressing and living as she pleased. She had already done all the running around she wanted to. Those years in Paris, with those thick bangs; dark eyeshadow plastered on above those long, curly false lashes; everyone trying to be like Brigitte Bardot, eager to do the forbidden thing, using a flag like a bath towel, wearing kinky boots like standing in the Holy Grail. Ah ha! It had come to Miss Cassie in an instant of clarity – this is what looked sexy to men.

How long ago was all that now? What had got her raking all that up again?

Wie einst Lili Marleen,

Wie einst Lili Marleen

The music was all finished and done now, why bring it all up?

Miss Cassie finished washing the dishes and picked up the tea towel. There was more to do. A lot of scale in the water here; if you didn't dry up carefully, you might as well not bother washing the dishes in the first place.

She let the music play one more time. Mark had left her a whole stack of Marlene Dietrich, more than enough to go on with for the rest of her days.

Mark was obviously not an old man, but he was always listening to Dietrich. When they were living in Rote Insel, if they ever had guests, he would point at a window in the street diagonally opposite and explain it was the house Dietrich had been born in. If there were no guests, he would waltz her from one room to the next in time to the music. The old recordings crackled with static, but while the technology might have been limited, there was no shortage of self-confidence in the writing and performance. The primal chaos parted, and a light came on in the world. It was a Golden Age in which new things were truly new, so new they positively shone....

Golden Age. It was a term she'd learned from Professor Tsao. Professor Tsao would have been familiar with Marlene Dietrich; I mean, he studied stuff like Showa Modernism, so he was hardly going to overlook Dietrich. Professor Tsao and those of his generation grew up breathing the atmosphere of Showa Modern, and he had been in Tokyo to do it. Not that he ever talked about it. Professor Yang from the history department never talked about it either. That generation had a lot of things they never talked about. Mark said his father was the same, would never speak about the past. He'd often sit out in the back yard playing the harmonica and it would be "Lili Marleen". He'd play and play, play on to the end of the tune, then he'd lower his head....

If Mark were still alive he'd be a good seventy years old by now. What would the pair of them in their seventies get up to together? Dance? Well, they definitely would if they still could. If they weren't up to dancing, they would go for walks in the woods. If they weren't able to walk, they could sit and look at the flowers, which would be fine. What about Professor Tsao? He must have been dead for as many years as it was since she first went abroad.

Miss Cassie didn't pay much mind to her age but when she worked out how old the others must be, it suddenly struck her that she was now older than Mark, Professor Tsao, or her father had ever been, which meant she no longer had any model to pattern her life after. Mind you, things about them she didn't understand before, or didn't think were quite right, she now understood to at least some extent. Perhaps this was what they meant about grasping the meaning of life? But having arrived at this time in her life, when it was slowing to a halt and she was doing less and less, was there much point to grasping for meaning? School friends and family had been dying off one after the other these past few years. She'd gotten a postcard from her old classmate Chie-Hui in New York to say the Ku boy had died suddenly from a stroke.

All the men she remembered seemed to have died young. What was that all about?

Miss Cassie put away the now clean and dry dishes and wiped down the sink for good measure. Finally, she could sit down, pour herself a nightcap, and give all her attention to the music.

Die Seligkeiten vergangener Zeiten

Sind alle noch in meinem kleinen Koffer drin

Ich hab' noch einen Koffer in Berlin

Dietrich was like some kind of enchantress, making magic with every final note, filling every drab room with feeling all in an instant as Mark took her by the hand, turning and turning again, twirling from one room to the next....

On a chanté, on a dansé et l'on n'a même pas pensé à s'embrasser – oh no, wrong, this wasn't the Champs-Élysées, this was West Berlin – RIAS Berlin; Mark's radio station was going to be playing Dietrich's Berlin recordings again....

Eine Freie Stimme der Freien Welt. Mark copied the station call-sign, whispering breathily in her ear, "A Free Voice of the Free World, and I've still never been to Free China."

Free China. The way Mark said it was like lovers' talk, but it pained Miss Cassie to hear it, two words that seemed to describe something entirely apart from her.

Ich hab' noch einen Koffer in Berlin. Mark sang the line and said to her, "You know it means we're the suitcase?"

Miss Cassie lifted up her face to look at him, it was all a blur; she couldn't tell if it was true or false.

"We've been left here."

Miss Cassie cocked her head and listened until the song finished, then turned out the kitchen light and went into the bathroom to wash her face.

Ich hab' noch einen Koffer in Taipeh... Her younger sister in Paris always used to sing it with the words changed like that.

Why bother? Miss Cassie thought to herself. You wanted to leave and so you went, and you kept on going right up until today.

"If you're going to leave, do it while you're still young," Professor Tsao, who taught English poetry, said with an impatient wave of his hand.

Miss Cassie had certainly gone far. One ticket for a packet steamer and she'd gone round and about, halfway around the world: boarded in Hong Kong, disembarked in Marseilles, then to Paris by train.

2.

Miss Cassie came from Bangka. The Lungshan Temple had been at the center of community life for centuries. When they used to mess about around the snack stands and stalls out front of the temple, the old folk chatting would refer to the place as Pakpheliau and Hakkochō but if you were addressing a letter, you put Kangding Road, Guangzhou Street, and Kunming Street. Only when Miss Cassie grew old enough to read a map did she learn that these were the names of towns and cities in the south and west of China.

Miss Cassie passed through Kawabatacho and down Roosevelt Road to arrive on the south side of Taipei. The place-names were all confusing and the scenery completely different – fields, ponds and seedling nurseries. The campus grounds at the university were a wilderness too, the

newly built lecture halls and dormitories standing in splendid isolation, with only the old Faculty of Literature and Politics showing any signs of bustle. Royal Palm Boulevard just outside ran straight as an arrow, with at one end the piled ridges of the distant mountains and the other the Blue Sky, White Sun and Red Red Ground fluttering high on its flagpole above the fort-like guardhouse at the campus gates.

Miss Cassie and Chie-Hui sought out Professor Tsao, who was to be their tutor. Chie-Hui's family knew the professor already, so she was accepted with a minimum of fuss, but when it came to Miss Cassie, Professor Tsao scrutinized her forms without saying a word. Just when she thought he was going to shake his head, he said in a flat voice, "I hear your father studied under Dr. Tu?"

Her father's reputation – no, Dr. Tu's reputation – was something Miss Cassie had long been aware of; her father was forever recounting the doings of Doctor Tu, Taiwan's first Doctor of Medicine, and he looked to the good doctor as his model for general behavior and physical fitness. He even patterned the way he raised his own children on the education of the Dr. Tu's daughter, though only her eldest brother and eldest sister had been able to complete the full course of study. Her second sister had been stymied first by the war and then the change of government, and found only patchy success in the study of both the sometime national languages. Miss Cassie became a model student of the new phonetic curriculum and attended the same girls' high school that Doctor Tu's daughter had, donning a new green blouse and black skirt. When she returned excellent marks in English, her father remarked that Doctor Tu's daughter had been the first female Taiwanese student at what was then called the Imperial University, and that she had majored in English.

Miss Cassie made every effort to pass the entrance examinations for Imperial University – now called National Taiwan University – but her father, worn out from travelling, had a heart attack and died.

"Lord should act as lord, minister as minister, father as father and son as son." The ancient Chinese dictum captured just how things still were in those days. Now that the main pillar of Miss Cassie's household had fallen, leaving *yin* without its *yang*, it seemed the women left behind were doomed to end up orphans of the age. *We long to see you come back soon*, but father would not be coming back; he'd avoided war service and escaped the February 28th massacre, yet had still lacked sufficient luck to simply stay alive. The lights no longer shone in his clinic; all that remained was the traditional signboard inscribed with the characters for "virtuous service" and "benevolent application of skills." Fewer marriage brokers came round to suggest matches; such a big old house and just her mother and second sister all alone, sketching out ideas for Western-style dresses with storytelling and songs playing all day on the radio – songs of sorrow and unrequited love, of uncertain futures and the grief of betrayal. Some were in Japanese and some in Hokkien, but their melodies and style of singing were just about the same.

"Pshaw," her mother would sigh when she'd heard enough. "Used to be that Japanese songs were Japanese songs and Taiwanese were Taiwanese; how they got all muddled up together like this I don't know."

Miss Cassie knew the respective records her mother referred to when she spoke of Japanese and Taiwanese songs. Since five or six years old, she'd loved watching those things like big black pancakes spinning round and round with voices flowing out, quite simply magical:

*Alone by lamplight in the lonely night, a cool breeze on my brow,
When will a gallant come to pluck youth's flower that's blooming now?*

*A rain so cruel, a rain so cruel, no thought for my prospects,
A flower falls, falls to the mud, does anybody care?*

One song to each side, little Cassie already clutching the disc she planned to change before the song came to an end; the "Columbia" on the label probably the first English word she learned. Little Cassie would sing along in her reedy child's voice, and the smiling grown-ups would praise her whether she sang poorly or well. As she blossomed into young womanhood, her voice improved still more but she grew less and less inclined to sing, all those songs about the struggles and small sorrows of everyday life. Dreamy and detached as she was, Miss Cassie could still sense a faint overtone of bitterness sung in the music, seeping through day-to-day life, enough to make a body glum. The dead were dead, and those only half-dead were stuck away in a room, growing old year by year, secrets of the heart tucked under the bed like a jar of pickling vegetables. Miss Cassie didn't want to live out her days like that. The old folk were always on at them to just stick to their studies and well away from any trouble; and whatever they did, steer well clear of politics.

What did she understand about politics at that age? Certainly, she had not understood prevailing atmosphere of terror in her childhood, nor why the Hongan-ji had become slum tenements, nor why, in the fresh dew of early morning, there was such a look of sorrow on some people's faces. And you must not ask – there would not necessarily be an answer if you did, and if there were, it couldn't be said out loud. And if the answer were spoken, well then you had fear and more fear, too much fear, a powerful beam of white light that swept across and blinded the eyes of anyone who looked into it.

Listen to songs then, sing songs. Bored of Hokkien and bored of Mandarin, Miss Cassie hit the dictionary and memorized English, skipping about in time to the music:

*Seven lonely days make one lonely week,
Seven lonely nights make one lonely me.*

There was an obvious touch of sadness to the lyrics, so she wasn't sure why she clapped along so cheerfully, putting the record on again and again, dancing about to it round and round, then later someone came up with Chinese lyrics to fit the tune:

*Kiss me, will you please? On my face, make a mark of love.
Kiss me, will you please? On my heart, make me long for you.*

The presence or absence of any romance was immaterial; there was delight enough in just singing. So of course, before long that was banned.

Begging for kisses was hardly proper, and singing with that lilt and groan in the voice was far too provocative.

Miss Cassie headed dutifully off to university. On campus, the last chill winds of winter had just passed and fresh shoots were breaking through the wasted ground. They followed the standard curriculum, studying English prose, fiction, poetry, and drama, memorizing the Three Principles of the People, then Chinese modern history, physical education, and military training. The lecturers in their department came from all over China and the department head was a good-looking man of no small charm who was good with people, though he always had a wan and wasted look to him, as if even the mild and gentle surroundings here could offer him no succor. It made a body sad to see him so. Her classmates hailed from all corners of the nation too, and there was no shortage of clever types. They included the children of generals, brigadiers and diplomats, or came from families of judges, doctors, and business magnates. They all spoke with different accents; aside from Mandarin, Sichuanese and Cantonese ranked highly – just don't go speaking Hokkien.

Professor Tsao spoke with a Taiwanese inflection, which served to devalue even a man with a doctorate from the Imperial University.

“During the war with Japan, I'd deliberately teach about flies and coffins and bodily functions, but what about now? What am I going to teach you now? I'll teach all sorts of things, but if I can get you to appreciate what *rhythm* is and what *rhyme* is, then I'll have pretty much done my job.”

The professor had used the English words for rhythm and rhyme. Professor Tsao displayed the greatest patience when he was teaching Shakespeare; he could spend a fortnight working through one sonnet, but since this was an elective class, those who chose to be there only had themselves to blame. *To be or not be* was a question in literature, but in the real world, there was no choice in the matter. In Professor Tsao's classes, Miss Cassie did not stand out as one his better students but she appreciated his humor. She spent a lot of time hanging around Ximenting, where she'd watch Western movies. Then came the American Forces Network radio station – country, blues, rock and roll and every type of music. It felt to Miss Cassie like a whole new world. She'd listen by day, in the evening, and at night. *The other side*, they called it, and so it was; that intense music connected her to some whole other world. Even with the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean lying in between, whatever was popular in America soon made it to Miss Cassie's ears.

Chie-Hui listened to AFN radio too, with a view to improving her listening comprehension. Professor Tsao had been guiding her English studies since she was in high school; now at university, she was a more diligent student than Miss Cassie in every subject, taking copious notes; long before graduation she and her boyfriend from the science and engineering department had started to prepare for the examinations to study abroad. Together they planned out their courtship, marriage, and journey to America. Another classmate, the eldest son of the Ku family, had also been tutored by Professor Tsao since childhood and read books and articles in the original English with no problem at all. He considered the university lectures tedious and rarely

attended, apart from those on logic given by Professor Yin, when he could be found sat casually cross-legged in the first row.

Professor Yin used to say it was an age without ideology, in which everything floated unattached; should one or two things happen to come to prominence, they'd soon be quietly wiped away...

In her final year, Miss Cassie had a new cheongsam made for their graduation ceremony; a fair few of the others in their group photo were already preparing to go abroad. It was an age of boundless white and endless grey; those who could leave went away one by one. Miss Cassie had property, but without her father providing income, she couldn't afford to live on what she had. Her elder sisters had married, her little sister was still young. So she sat the examinations for a civil service post. She did well in the written test, but during the oral exam, the examiner asked:

“And your home, where is that?”

“Taipei.”

“I'm not asking where you live; I'm asking where you're from.”

Taken aback, Miss Cassie didn't understand what was meant, so she just tried being more specific, “Taipei, Wanhua district.”

The examiner nodded, and that was the end of their questions.

Miss Cassie got up to leave, and as she turned, she had a moment of insight: *Oh, he was asking about native place.*

It was an immediate disappointment; and indeed, she was not taken on. In those days public service jobs were allocated on a quota based on provincial representation in the National Assembly and there were far more candidates from Taiwan than places available, so the chances of her being one of the chosen were slim in the extreme.

She took the exam again the following year and had by now learned how to play the game. In addition, her specialization in foreign languages served as an advantage, and she was at last recruited for work in a government agency. She was transferred here and there between posts, dealing with foreign language documents, translating and acting as aide to visiting technical staff or diplomatic guests. Miss Cassie was eager to do her best, but strange to say, the more she was praised by the foreign visitors she assisted, the harder a time she unaccountably had at her work. This went on for some time before Miss Cassie realized what was going on; the world of work and human relationships operated not only by only by an overt set of rules but by a hidden rulebook too, and there were even situations when you shouldn't be trying to do your best. “The first bird to stick its head up gets the bullet” was the saying in the Mainland way of speaking, or as her mother might have said, “the peg that stands out gets knocked back in;” two different ways of putting it, but they meant about the same, albeit in neither case did it make good sense.

Miss Cassie was fed up with it. She thought of the term *yi-di-lao-jie*, a Chinese phonetic translation Professor Yin had coined for the term “ideology” that suggested a tight knot lying beneath one's conscious mind. No matter what your own ideas were, you were going to end up bound fast by a knot you couldn't undo and find yourself unable to put your talents to free use. Though was that actually what Professor Yin had meant by “ideology”? Did the professor want

people to have an ideology or not? Miss Cassie had left university some years since; now, no matter how much she thought on it, she couldn't get it straight, though the professor's four-character term for "ideology" gave her a feeling of disquiet no matter how she read it. On one level, it even seemed to suggest that if you did adopt a *yi-di-lao-jie* you would end up in the *lao* – in prison.

Miss Cassie was sent to Taoyuan to accompany a foreign engineer come to check the plant and facilities at a reservoir. Every day was spent noting down technical vocabulary concerning heavy machinery. On one occasion, she was in the midst of translating when her mind went a complete blank; fortunately, a certain Mr Chen who was present came to her aid. After the meeting, she made a point of going over to thank him and they got chatting. The conversation turned to singing and as a result, he invited her to join the works social club for its Wednesday night event.

Mr. Chen was a graduate of the Tainan Institute of Technology; in his spare time, he played in a four-piece band. They had instruments and sang vocal harmonies. Mr. Chen played lead guitar and sang; adding Miss Cassie gave them a bit of feminine spice, which made it all a lot more fun.

Miss Cassie liked to sing English songs; they helped dispel some of the gloom she felt at work. Mr. Chen was a few years older than she was and sang pretty well in Japanese. The song *Let's Meet at Yurakucho* was popular at the time, and Mr. Chen even resembled Frank Nagai a touch – plain, honest looks, but then when he started singing it was like a switch had been flipped and he turned all spirit and verve.

"Frank what? If you want to get a gig at the American Forces Club you need a foreign name." Mr. Chen stuck his chin out and put on a sultry expression, "What do you think, what would be a good name for me?"

"Marlboro!" Miss Cassie played up to the joke.

"I'm not that high-end!" Mr. Chen adopted a more normal expression and continued, "Tell you what, never mind Marlboro, I heard some guy called Panana at the American forces club, fantastic singer, did Paul Anka numbers that night and I've never heard better."

People say that love's a game

A game you just can't win

If there's a way

I'll find it someday

And then this fool will rush in...

Mr. Chen began singing the middle of the song in a marvelously deep voice, "*Put your head on my shoulder...*" Miss Cassie found herself joining in, and Mr. Chen reached out and put an arm round her shoulder. The pair lost themselves in the song....

Aside from singing and listening to music, Mr. Chen lived very simply, scrimping every penny he could on food and travel and sending what he saved back home to his folks and family. Miss Cassie had been so besotted with his singing, she never imagined he might already be married with children. "After the Rent Reduction Act there was a lot less work on the farm and they aren't making as good a living as they used to; my younger siblings are still at school, so I

have to help out there too." Mr. Chen said he applied for married accommodation a long time back, but never heard anything. He also said that he would often chat with the American engineers who visited and ask them how much an engineering graduate earned there as a starting salary.

"When they told me, it knocked me sideways."

"How come?"

"On a rough calculation it would be a good twenty or thirty times what I'm getting paid now."

"You can see why so many people end up going to America."

"If I can get put on one of the higher grades then my pay will be that much more and it wouldn't be such a worry." Mr. Chen sighed, "But you know as well as I do that the top jobs are all taken and there's rarely any vacancies."

"Yep."

"The better the job, the better the connections you need."

That reminded Miss Cassie of her own early interview, "And if they see you're Taiwanese, even if there is a vacancy, they won't give it to you."

Miss Cassie worried that she might have spoken too quickly, but Mr. Chen hardly skipped a beat, and he soon replied, "I wanted to apply for reassignment to some posting nearer to my family, but nothing doing there. If things just carry on as they are, there's no future for me here. Thought about going abroad and trying to get a better qualification too, but I've a wife and kids at home and there's no way they'd let us all go together. If I went on my own who knows when I would be able to come back?"

When Miss Cassie transferred back to Taipei, Mr. Chen was still waiting to be assigned family quarters. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful back in Taipei. Chung-Hwa Road had been completely rebuilt; the cinema she used to watch Western movies at had changed its name from the Taiwan Theatre to the China Theatre. It was playing *The Love Eterne* to packed houses, and the radios down every lane seemed to be playing the Anhui-style folk tunes that were a signature of the movie. There was even a little ten-year-old girl who won a singing competition doing one of its numbers, *Going to See Ying-Tai*:

Down from the mountain, beside the pond, she says see the ducks in pairs, how she too has longed to marry;

On Phoenix Hill, on Phoenix Hill, the house has a peony I could pluck...

A goose on the river, a goose on the river, oh my lad Shan-Bo, you're a silly goose...

As much as she loved to sing, there were times when Miss Cassie felt too low to do it; like Mr. Chen had said, her job had no future, and was plagued with petty injustices. She could ignore not being able to speak the truth, but you needed to learn how to out-and-out lie to get by. You were quite clearly being set up to fail but you could only smile along and suck it up; office politics were Byzantine, and everything played out according to a script. If you did as you were told, maybe the bosses would give you a chance.

Her elder siblings suggested she ask Young Master Tiunn who she used to hang out with as a child for advice; their parents had known each other fairly well back in the day. Young Master

Tiunn had spent the war years as a student in Hong Kong and Tokyo, and after the war ended had planned to continue his studies in America. He had a college spot all lined up, but the embassy in Japan wouldn't issue him a passport, so he had to come back.

"Probably because of the way I'd been educated in Japan, I was far too straightforward in those days, too simple-minded in the way I looked at things," Young Master Tiunn was a big-picture type of guy; nothing ruffled him and he always seemed easy and relaxed. "We came into Keelung, the boat was just getting ready to dock, it was all dark and there were soldiers stood on the quayside, and it was only then it crossed my mind that I might have made the wrong decision."

Young Master Tiunn had ended up working at the news agency; he spoke excellent English and Japanese and was always able to come up with a solution to any sort of difficulty. There were more than sixty staff at the agency but only four of them were Taiwanese, plus the pay was poor and his colleagues were all talking about resigning. Young Master Tiunn said, "But it's precisely because there's so few of us Taiwanese that we shouldn't go resigning."

Miss Cassie took Young Master Tiunn's words to heart. The way the world was now, Young Master Tiunn was bound to run into all sorts of difficulties as he dealt with international affairs and contacts. If the son of a good family like him could adapt himself to the times, then she certainly had no excuse, so she swallowed her misgivings.

She wrote to Chie-Hui to ask her how she was finding America. In her replay, Chie-Hui said she'd travelled along the Mississippi with her husband, like in *Tom Sawyer*, and now she knew what a really big river was like. Miss Cassie went with her eldest sister to a concert at the Zhongshan Hall, a composer recently returned from Paris, who complained of the lack of a milieu to make music in Taiwan. One time out near Taiwan University she happened to run into the Ku boy, just back from Kinmen where he'd been doing his military service; he had the same haughty manner as always.

"I heard your father has gone to Japan?" Miss Cassie stirred her lemon water.

"Did he not say he was going to kick Japanese painting influences out of the national ink-and-wash tradition?" Ku's reply was impatient.

"It's of Tataocheng, could hardly call it a Japanese painting."

Ku said nothing.

"Do you have plans to go abroad?"

Ku shrugged his shoulders, "Likely as not."

Empty, dejected, lost – common vocabulary in those times, and apt descriptors of the Ku boy. If you wanted to highlight a difference between him and the rest, it was that Ku was that little bit more serious. He hung out with a group of old university classmates who shared an interest in literature, art and drama, though it was hard to say whether they had come together due to these common tastes or merely for mutual support in the difficult climate. They hailed from various different provinces of China but had all plunged into the tide of thinking from the West in search of their future.

Miss Cassie had never been able to get close to them back in university, and that distance increased after she began work. The real-world dilemma she herself now faced involved her age

and the pressing question of marriage. She was quietly aware that nothing would come of her unrequited love, and the status of their family was no longer what it had been. In her mother's view, the longer she dragged things out, the more chance her daughter would end up an old maid. Mother urged Miss Cassie's eldest brother to find a match for his sister, but she never liked his choices, and it was making the whole family miserable.

You stewed, and you endured; no matter how you strained to get your head above water to breathe, there always seemed to be a hand pressing you back down, or demons in the water tugging at your legs, as if they wouldn't let you rise because they wanted you to take their place in the netherworld.

Such was the situation when the business with Mr. Peng occurred. Back when matchmakers had been eager to visit the house, Miss Cassie and her younger sister had hidden behind the door to listen to the way they introduced Mr. Peng. The proposal came to nothing, but Mr. Peng went on to greater excellence, becoming not merely a popular professor at the university but also an internationally reputed scholar, known for establishing solid positions and not exaggerating beyond the evidence.

It came as a surprise to learn that even a person of his standing struggled with his conscience and felt unable to speak the truth.

Empty, dejected, lost – Miss Cassie slowly came to understand what these meant, though she did not wish to, and when she looked at her life as it was then, the light seemed to be growing steadily dimmer. She knew she was unable to do anything about it, but nor was she happy to let things carry on this way. Miss Cassie tried writing to old classmates now in America to find out how things were there and was told there were few scholarships and little prospect of employment for a liberal arts major. Not long after, the Ministry of Education shifted policy to encourage study abroad in Europe instead; on the strength of an elective course in French taken while she was in college, Miss Cassie presented herself at the newly-established European Language Training Center and obtained a certificate of graduation in French, then bought herself a ticket for the boat.

Prior to leaving Taiwan, Miss Cassie went to see Professor Tsao. His eldest son opened the door to her; he informed her the professor was having a midday nap and invited her in to sit and wait. As she drank the tea she had been served, Miss Cassie asked how the professor had been these past couple of years.

"Drinking and cracking jokes same as ever," the professor's son smiled at first but then shook his head, "To be honest, there's times I wonder why he likes to joke so much."

An explanation sprang to Miss Cassie's lips, but it wasn't as if the young man didn't know himself – of course he did – so she left it unsaid.

Miss Cassie sat there until the sun began to set before Professor Tsao finally emerged, listless and looking groggy.

He cracked no jokes on this occasion, but spoke entirely of university business, the careers of both Professor Yin and Professor Peng.

"Management would like to see Yin out but he's not going anywhere."

“He says if you liken life to a candle, then burning to the end is fine. But what’s happening to him is more like putting the candle under an iceberg, where it will only go out.”

“If you are a scholar and you do not uphold a sense of right and wrong, how can you engage in scholarly inquiry? What scholarly inquiry could you do?”

“I used to just try to avoid it and think of myself as an academic, but the way things are it just isn’t that simple.” Professor Tsao turned away to look around the room with its shelves filled with books, “They call it making a living from the books, but I’m afraid I can’t put any of it to use any more.”

“If you’re going to go, then go far, far away.”

3.

Miss Cassie’s earliest impression of Paris was *white* – white buildings, white vehicles on the streets, white cigarettes in people’s mouths, and the basilica of the Sacré-Cœur on the hill of Montmartre whiter still; the waters of the Seine when viewed looking down from the Eiffel Tower were also a greyish white.

Other colors included the iron grey of the roofs, the green of the trees, and the black of churches and the overcoats of pedestrians. Miss Cassie made herself a black overcoat and wore it with the collar up, copying everyone else. She still felt the cold and she wasn’t used to the weight of the coat or the way the bottom flapped about.

She shared the first place she lived with a young Japanese woman called Sanae and a young woman from Argentina called Ihan. Sanae had also arrived by boat. She said she’d spent her entire savings on the ticket, but Paris was the very heart of the fashion world, so she really had to come and try her luck. Ihan was studying literature and philosophy. She spent most of her time in her room doing proofreading work for magazines and writing her own poetry. On many mornings when Miss Cassie was hurrying out to her language classes, she would find Ihan, having been up all night, in the kitchen smoking one last cigarette now her work was finished.

At her college she got to know Li Zhou from Hong Kong – or, more accurately, from Hong Kong having fled mainland China - who had tried and failed to get to Taiwan then ended up here. “France has broken off diplomatic relations but Taiwan is doing nothing; I find it quite simply incredible!” Li Zhou spoke at with an urgent speed and his hair was a mess, though his clothes were always neatly pressed. “The world is not fair and there’s no justice to speak of, but I still put my hopes in Taiwan. I want to apply for a Republic of China passport, but although I’ve written to them, I’ve heard not a thing.”

Li Zhou’s breast positively throbbed with patriotic feelings, but he had no country and no home. He wanted to get to know more people from Taiwan, so the Taipei born and bred Miss Cassie was of great interest in his eyes, and if she ever bumped into him around campus, he could stand there nattering away for the longest time. “It seems like all the people from Taiwan I meet lack any spirit at all and they don’t have the slightest interest in national affairs. You expect bureaucrats to be apathetic and pass the buck. The younger officials might talk big, but when they

have to deal with an actual issue everything still has to go through their superiors, and they won't do anything until they get a reply. I find it very disappointing." He also asked Miss Cassie if the stories he'd heard of vast numbers of young Taiwanese going to America and never coming back were true.

People like Li Zhou were indeed a minority, and many of those who came from Taiwan did fit his description. Would none of them go back? Miss Cassie hadn't given it any thought before she left, but after she had arrived, she found that was in fact the case.

"Have you read "The Rootless Orchid"? It really captures how we feel." Similarly adrift in foreign parts and looking at the flowers in a park, some would be reminded of the blooms in the parks of Peiping as it then was. Back in Taiwan all such feelings were lumped together as homesickness; only once you'd come a truly long way away did the difference become clear. If they really were to go back some day, it would be to native places in the China of their dreams, not to the tiny island of Taiwan that had been a necessary temporary refuge. Many of her friends originally from the mainland were burdened with expectations from kin that they would find success abroad and enhance the family status back home. There was also the notion that since they could not go back to China, wherever they went was a place of exile, and there were much brighter prospects in Europe or America than for those stuck on a little island. There were hardships but you couldn't complain, always on the move, flying onwards, building little nests here and there until finally you arrived somewhere you could settle down.

Miss Cassie could empathize with their difficulties, but it had to be said, when homesickness was really only chiming in with others, there was a loneliness to it too. She turned instead to making foreign friends using a strange language where at least the homesickness was of the same quality, or else she hung out with a group of other Taipei natives who'd found one another via mutual introductions.

"The first Salon de Mai exhibition I went to left me dumbstruck." Sia was from Tataocheng, and had been a classmate of Ku's elder sister in the NTU art department. She had gone to America, but Sia was keener on Paris because he greatly admired the French painters. "They might be working in oils, or pastels, or not using color at all, and whatever they do still succeeds. That is art and it's completely different to what I was taught at art school or what I imagined for myself. The more I look at it, the more I wonder if it's that they have turned art completely upside down or if it's just me is stupid."

Mr. Siu was from Bangka. Slow of speech, he turned down the heat of any frustration and fury. "The Paris art world is a big pond, and all the good oil painters are here. Every time I see a good painting, I'll ask myself if I could paint better? And if I could, what? That sets me thinking until I can't sleep at night. There was a time when I was pretty unhappy and I kept putting the color on thicker and thicker. I finally managed to finish a painting of old Paris, show it to my tutor and he just asks breezily why I didn't paint something on an Asian theme."

"He's just completely dedicated to his painting. Other people have learned how to make money, but he just spends every day painting," interjected Mrs. Siu with a laugh. "They say the

cafes of Paris are romantic, but with him, even if he takes you to a café he just sits there sketching; never mind kind words or flirting, I'm lucky if he manages to say a single word to me."

Miss Cassie did not study art and had set aside the literature that had been her major. She didn't feel up to struggling away at abstraction. The Tu girl, who had a job at the American Library said that after the war, Western institutions purchased a lot of Asian material, and now they were crying out for staff who understood Asian languages. Miss Cassie took her advice and switched to library studies, starting right from scratch. She could hardly have predicted the years of student unrest that would soon arrive, campus demonstrations large and small, walls plastered in slogans and frequent student strikes.

Before coming abroad, Miss Cassie had not been entirely unaware of the Vietnam War protests and the civil rights movement in America. Yet she couldn't possibly have witnessed anything like the scenes from the Mai 68 movement, with its flags and calls for rebellion and revolution, its great crowds and riots. The far smaller anti-American protests after Liu Ziran's murder had led to curfews in Taiwan, yet now she saw images of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Zedong being waved about before her very eyes. It was more than something she had never seen – it was something she could never even have imagined.

When you lived in such times, it made little difference whether you had come simply to study or as a drifter escaping the depression of home; whether you had been a loyal Nationalist or showed Communist leanings; whether you were genuinely a student or using it as a cover for something else. It was impossible not to be shaken to at least some extent. During Miss Cassie's time as a student, politics came down to whether the Nationalists would re-take the mainland or the Communists unify Taiwan, which neither required her opinion nor allowed anyone else to have one. Once abroad, however, even the dullest-witted person could see that the world was not the way one had been taught back home. Revolution was not just some doomed enterprise; the streets were full of people, protestors and the forces sent to repress them fighting it out, and they could call for the president to step down! Why? Was this all right? Why were they able to behave like this? Miss Cassie thought long and hard about freedom and it seemed to her to be a very complicated business. The metro stopped running, the banks were shut, the postman didn't bring the post; even if you stayed off the streets you couldn't avoid being caught up in the whirlwind. Her Japanese friend told her the Yasuda Auditorium at Tokyo University had been occupied, and entrance exams and graduation ceremonies were both suspended.

"The ones who fear this will only be more afraid," was what a friend she had back then who went by the name of Rainbow Phoenix said. "Conservatives will find reasons to become more conservative. The way they see things, freedom is a calamity and the source of everything wrong with society."

Miss Cassie could no longer remember Rainbow Phoenix's surname; if she recalled right she'd met her during some activity put on by the social society, then they'd gone out for coffee a few times. She had listened to her talk about her plans to go on a pilgrimage to India and various weird stuff like that. Rainbow Phoenix ended up going to Brazil, where there was plenty of work to be had and immigrants from all over. During one of their meetings, Miss Cassie had noticed the

thin silver bangle she wore on her wrist and said how much she liked it. Rainbow Phoenix took it off without batting an eye and gave it to her as a parting gift.

Parted for the best part of their lives now. Miss Cassie had lost touch with Rainbow Phoenix. Brazil's boom years had ended; was Rainbow Phoenix still there? She'd tried asking after her with the Taiwanese in Brazil Association but heard nothing back. Perhaps there were too many people going by the name Rainbow Phoenix?