

THE WOMAN AND THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

洗大象的女人

Blindsided by divorce, a suspicious housewife hires a private investigator, thereby setting off a chain of events that ends in murder – and the killer is her ex-husband! Even more improbably, her ex-husband then kills himself in jail. What was he hiding? And why was it so important that two lives were sacrificed to keep it secret?

When her husband Ming-jen demands a divorce, he only gives one excuse – “my love for you has died” – but Cheng-fang isn’t buying it. Suspicious by nature, she hires a private investigator to tail him.

Over the course of the divorce proceedings, Ming-jen unexpectedly yields custody of their two children. Gradually, further suspicious details come to light: Ming-jen has secretly changed his name, and now sports a tattoo of a raven on his back; he has shut down his software company, but continues to rent an office; increasingly, he avoids coming home, and frequently spends his nights elsewhere... he might not be having an affair, but he’s definitely up to something!

One evening, Ming-jen comes home bloody and bruised. A month later, he is accused of murder, and the victim is an employee of the private detective hired to keep tabs on him. Cheng-fang visits Ming-jen in jail, and in a desperate whisper he begs her to find one of their son’s games. The next day, Cheng-fang is notified that Ming-jen has killed himself.

Confused and alone, Cheng-fang struggles to connect the dots. What’s hidden in the game that Ming-jen was so concerned about? What business was Ming-jen mixed up in? And why was it so important



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that someone would stop at nothing – not even the sacrifice of two lives – to keep it secret?

The “elephants” of the book’s title refer to the problems in a marriage that we pretend not to see. With an eye for the absurd comedy of marriage, family, and divorce, author Hua Po-Jung takes the story of an ordinary housewife facing an impending divorce, and spins it into a murder mystery that probes the dark recesses of our closest relationships and reveals our inescapably human needs and desires.

Hua Po-Jung 花柏容

After majoring in history at National Taiwan University, Hua Po-Jung began his career in advertising. Now a novelist and screenwriter, his works have won the “Big Three” Taiwan literary awards, namely the Unitas Newcomer Award for fiction, the United Daily News Literature Award, and the Lin Rung-San Literary Award.

THE WOMAN AND THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

By Hua Po-Jung

Translated by Petula Parris

So this guy lets people feed off his face? Ouch. Just the thought sends shivers down my spine.

As I wait, I find myself contemplating Anpanman's motto, from the cartoon. My son Hsiao-Yu explained it to me once.

The waiting area for the visiting room at the detention center is packed, with so many people standing they form a ring around the walls. I've rolled my visitation slip into a cigarette shape several times already. The nicotine cravings haven't given up on me yet.

My nose is busy receiving information, periodically assaulted by the jumble of rich aromas from the dishes people have brought in – some are freshly cooked, some smell older, some veritably aged. The sesame oil chicken is hard to miss. I just wonder if its owner chose it because it's November, or because someone is expecting. I also catch a whiff of Buddha Jumps Over the Wall soup, alongside the smoky tones of roasted chestnuts.

So... he actually tears off chunks of his face to feed the hungry? Maybe it's all the food, but I just can't stop thinking about Anpanman and his life mission. I smell a cruel irony in there, too.

How does he feel, ripping the flesh from his face – his dignity – one piece at a time? And what even drives him to do it? I forgot to ask Hsiao-Yu that part. Is it for justice? Or for love, or peace? Speaking of motivations, I still couldn't tell you why Ming-Jen committed his crime in the first place.

A quick scan around the room tells me I'm probably the only person to have come empty-handed. The mountain of food, ready to be transported in, evokes the kind of scenes you'd expect outside a temple on days for making offerings to the gods. No matter what Taiwanese do, there always has to be food involved – just like the Hobbits. Though in this case, the dishes are also a manifestation of love: an attempt to offer loved ones a respite from the unpalatable prison food. People stripped of their liberty soon long for those few crumbs of freedom, to provide the mind some solace. I should know. I worked in the rat race. I've been married.

Prior to leaving the house, I agonized over my makeup and what to wear, before settling for my usual ensemble: a sky-blue T-shirt and casual, loose-fitting pants. The T-shirt had a mini rainbow embroidered on the left chest. I kept thinking about how Ming-Jen would have limited access to the actual sky, and that perhaps a splash of blue might raise his spirits. That was my wishful thinking, anyway. Everything starts out with wishful thinking. How it turns out in the end is a matter of luck.

I unroll the visitation slip one more time and, this time, notice the words “Family copy” in small print in one corner. *But you’re no longer family, you’re his ex-wife.*

Two weeks ago, when I visited with the kids, Ming-Jen told me to stop coming. Last week I came again – this time with the in-laws – bringing three dishes I’d prepared. His face told me he was pissed, and as soon as I picked up the phone, he ordered me to go home. My father-in-law moved quickly. He grabbed the receiver from my hand and tried to stand up for me, explaining how I’d been slaving over a hot stove. Without a flicker of gratitude, Ming-Jen said I could take the food back home with me. That got me riled. I told him to share it around – I’d been reading up, so knew this might gain him some brownie points with the other prisoners. But he persisted, saying he didn’t miss outside food one bit, and cared even less about what his fellow inmates thought. Well, suit yourself and starve! I thought. He may have been wasting away, but Ming-Jen was also becoming a lot more stubborn. Who would have guessed then that last night, I would receive a call from him asking me to see him.

“That’s not my job, right?” I made a point of clarifying. Before the divorce, he seemed to think I was duty-bound to handle everything relating to him and the kids.

“No, it’s not. I’m asking you to come.”

That’s what makes today’s visit different. He *asked* me to come. Such humility coming from my ex-husband is a rare occurrence in itself, so it’s hard not to feel a little smug about this minor victory. *Look, you’re finally asking for my help!*

Despite this being my third visit, it still feels surreal. Here I am, once again, in the visitor waiting area of the detention center – a place I never once imagined stepping foot in – waiting to meet the man I now call my ex-husband. In truth, there was never any real love between us. Now, we aren’t family anymore; heck, we aren’t even friends. The workings of this man’s mind remain an absolute mystery to me. And now he’s managed to get himself locked up?

I am here, for him. In a place with fluorescent bulbs so obsessively bright they urge you to leave as quickly as you came. I am here, patiently waiting to find out why he finally remembered me.

With that, I suppose I’d best explain what happened this summer....

Volcano

In the name of the kids’ summer homework, we took a family trip to see the volcanic crater at Mount Huangzui. My husband, Ming-Jen, waited in the car, while I took Hsiao-Yu and his sister to complete their nature observation assignment. The public had only recently learned, quite out of the blue, that the group of “dormant” volcanoes on the northern edge of the Taipei Basin were, in fact, still active. This discovery gave new undertones to the familiar whiff of sulfur that pursued residents of northern Taipei year-round, portending nameless, new dangers to their lives and property.

It was an August afternoon, still early in the fall. The breeze that whispered through the Visitor Center parking lot felt surprisingly cool. I closed the car door, but turned back resentfully and tapped on the window, which slid down to reveal the iPad positioned firmly in Ming-Jen's lap.

My back was turned for no more than a second! It seemed the iPad was now a permanent extension of his body, an extra organ.

Not expecting him to listen, but knowing the kids would ask me why Daddy wasn't joining, I tried to coax Ming-Jen up to the crater. I suggested he make the most of a break from the heat, but predictably, he refused.

When I ventured a few more questions, he scrutinized me through his thick high-prescription lenses. It was like being watched by a transparent wall.

"I thought we discussed this before we left? I'm just chauffeur today. I have to do some work in the car."

My husband, a programmer, ran a web design company with a friend. It didn't matter where we went, he never stopped working. It's not like I didn't know this.

The man in front of you is a destination you will never reach, a chasm you will never fill, a black hole from which no light can escape. It's not like you didn't know...

A voice within me tried various approaches, urging me to listen. Was I supposed to keep ignoring it?

"Is there another woman?"

Unable to calm my long-held suspicions, the spring that was my patience snapped without warning. I was taken aback by the words that left my own mouth.

Clearly, the timing could have been better. At this very moment, my kids were racing toward a volcanic crater filled with sulfurous gases, chanting like cavemen around a campfire as they went: "Active volcano! Active volcano!" What kind of mother stands around discussing marital problems while her offspring are let loose on a mountain dotted with scalding-hot springs? I could hear them laughing in the distance as they made jokes about farting smells. When I turned around, I saw Hsiao-Yu teasing his sister by trapping a puff of sulfurous gas in his hands and holding it over her nose and mouth. Mei-Mei responded by running wildly after him, trying to get him back, which only made Hsiao-Yu laugh harder.

"Is now the right time?" Ming-Jen asked, reluctantly shifting his gaze from the iPad to me, an unwelcome intruder in his virtual world. I'd seen that look a million times; it was cold and indifferent. Yet today, it somehow amplified my current predicament as a mother. It also reminded the wife in me that my body ticked all the boxes for middle age – weight gain, double chin, deepening crow's feet, and more. I could almost hear the money I'd secretly invested on those few cosmetic injections, splashing senselessly into the ocean.

It's a pity, really, but Ming-Jen's attitude was nothing new. My abrupt question hardly caused him to blink. Rather, he handled it with the composure of a seasoned chess player, as if he'd been calmly anticipating this exact move all along. I knew he was paying my question careful

thought – otherwise he wouldn't have bothered looking up at all.

"Forget it."

I decided to leave Ming-Jen for now, turning my attention back to the more pressing matter of locating my children. Before long, the sight I'd been dreading materialized before my eyes: Hsiao-Yu and his sister crouched beside a small pool crevassed between some rocks. I was about to yell at them when Mei-Mei turned to face me, eager to show off: "Mom! Come here! We're boiling eggs!"

Where did they get eggs? "What are you doing?! It's not safe! Hsiao-Yu, bring your sister over here!" Before I knew it, I had erupted like a volcano, my eyes brimming with tears as I shot forward to deal with those two rascals. Sure enough, there were three eggs, bobbing up and down in a steaming sulfur spring. I gave them both a good lecture, reminding them that this was no hot spring resort and certainly wasn't meant for cooking eggs. I even managed to throw in a scare about how the police might come and arrest them. As I hurried them away from the scene, I couldn't help but wonder where the eggs came from, but was too incensed to ask. Our nature observation class was over before it had even begun.

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On the journey back down the mountain, fully aware of the trouble they'd caused, Hsiao-Yu and Mei-Mei behaved themselves perfectly in the back seat. Sensing the frosty climate in front, they knew it was in their best interest to keep quiet and observe.

"When did they get the eggs?"

"Why not ask them yourself?"

Ming-Jen made no attempt to question them. I took this to mean I should have somehow known the kids had sneaked eggs out the house, which only fueled my annoyance. "You know, taking care of the kids isn't solely my job!"

"Well, it's primarily your job, isn't it?"

"My job? Yeah, that's my job! This family only seems to consist of me and those two in the back! Where the hell are you in all this?" The volcano inside me erupted over and over. For me the whole world was roaring with indignation. But what was the point? My words were simply absorbed into Ming-Jen's impenetrable wall of silence, with just a fraction escaping through the air-con to the rear seats.

"That fart smell is in the car too," I heard my daughter whisper to her brother. Perhaps she was implying my rage stank like sulfur.

"Dad, can you take me and Mei-Mei to Grandpa's house?" Hsiao-Yu had picked up on the unusual chill in the car telling him his parents would be preoccupied for a while. He wanted to get himself and his sister to a safe haven.

"Is that OK, Mom?" Hsiao-Yu made sure to double check with me.

"Yes, fine!" I had no objection. Anyway, I hated the kids seeing us argue.

Ming-Jen drove us to his parents' house, not far from the volcano, and took the kids

upstairs. I remained in the car, imagining Grandpa's delight on seeing his grandchildren. I also knew he'd be wondering about his daughter-in-law Cheng-Fang's whereabouts. "Mom's feeling a bit under the weather," Hsiao-Yu would answer on Ming-Jen's behalf – an excuse Grandpa had heard countless times before.

For the entire hour-long drive, Ming-Jen and I sat in silence. His eyes were locked on the road ahead; his hands gripping the steering wheel with the inertness of a humanoid autopilot system. Of course, this robot mode spared him from feeling any awkwardness. Meanwhile, the endless ebb and flow of traffic gradually disoriented my thoughts to the point that my own unease faded away.

We finally arrived back at our mountainside home in Muzha. While the air was less stifling than in the city center, Muzha's humidity remained high throughout the year. The exterior walls of the house were covered in patches of gray-green moss, as if the mist had travelled from the dense forest across the mountain and exhaled directly onto them. When we bought the place six years earlier, I hadn't thought too much about it, but now the downsides were obvious. Ming-Jen's parents certainly didn't approve. Accustomed to the more refined surroundings of northern Taipei – almost to the point of arrogance – they were forever complaining about the dampness of the southerly mountains. They insisted it was bad for our health. I explained how it was closer to Ming-Jen's office in eastern Taipei, but they thought I chose it on purpose to get further away from them. That, and to make it harder for them to see their precious grandkids...

I got out and watched Ming-Jen back the car into the garage, still irked by the memory of the north-south debate we'd had with my in-laws when we first moved in. Then, for some reason, I started thinking of my own home back in Chiayi. I realized how long it had been since I last visited. Well, it's even farther from *my* parents! I wanted to tell my in-laws.

I stood outside our front door on the sidewalk, still lost in thought as I stared up at the house. I imagined moss and vines gradually taking over the whole house, like an ominous shadow. In fact, I was so absorbed by the thought that I didn't notice Ming-Jen walk up beside me.

"Is there a squirrel?" Ming-Jen asked, frowning up at the trees. He worried a squirrel might scoot up to the second floor via the camphor tree outside our door. He loathed each and every tiny creature inhabiting these mountains.

"Why did you agree to move here, seeing you dislike the mountains so much?" The kids and I loved mountain life; Ming-Jen was the odd one out. I knew he'd made an effort over the years, but the joy I found in tending the garden or sipping afternoon tea on the balcony seemed totally lost on him. His study window, which faced directly onto the vast expanse of green mountain, with its tree ferns and tung blossoms, was kept shut at all times. The blackout curtains were perpetually drawn, too, lest he catch sight of any flying insects or bugs crawling on the mosquito screen outside.

"Because I knew you loved it here. So I tried to play along."

"Thanks for that," I couldn't tell if I was genuinely grateful – he had tried after all – or if I was being sarcastic.

"Porgy! Slow down!" One of our neighbors, Big Sister Fang, was in the process of being

dragged down the street running by her son's husky. It was like she was caught between pressing the brake and the accelerator, falling over herself as she came at us from a distance.

"Hello, Cheng-Fang! Hello, Mr. Cheng!" Big Sister Fang yanked the dog to a stop, signaling her intention to spend some time chatting. But with the precision of a weathervane, she instantly picked up on the tension between Ming-Jen and me. "God, I can't stand this crazy dog. Let's talk another time!" she said. And, with that, she let the husky's stubborn pull prompt her departure. I turned to watch her retreating figure, and noticed a "For Lease" sign hanging from the second floor of one of the houses across the street. It was new. The house had been empty for a while, with only an elderly couple occasionally coming by to clean. Obviously, they'd finally decided to rent it out.

As soon as we were inside, I headed directly for the sofa. I was ready to get to the bottom of things, on a mission to uncover the truth. Ming-Jen, on the other hand, walked unhurriedly toward his study, carrying on with his day as usual.

"Where do you think you're going?" I asked, making no attempt to conceal my displeasure.

Silently, Ming-Jen took an about turn. He then took his place in the single sofa chair. He seemed to be acknowledging the onus to provide an explanation.

"Is there another woman?"

"No. That's not the problem..."

I hugged my knees to my chest, waiting for him to clarify exactly where the problem lay.

He mentioned something about a "psychological reality" and went on to explain how there had been an elephant in our marriage, right from the start. According to him, we'd been hiding beneath the elephant's belly, treating the space between its legs as our home, and even welcoming in two children. With the kids now seven and five, he could no longer "pretend to be a husband or father". He claimed to have had a profound revelation: all he truly wanted was to return to his old, single life.

"Single life? Well, nothing's changed there then! The kids and I are invisible to you as it is..." Even though Ming-Jen's words were making me dizzy, the demon inside me clung onto its sarcastic streak. It was the same demon that, from time to time, longed to leap out and call Ming-Jen every insult under the sun. Without moving so much as a muscle fiber, I quickly banished the monster back down inside. I was giving nothing away.

"An elephant, huh?" I was having difficulty coming to terms with Ming-Jen's unusually abstract language. I'd always envisioned his mind to be a series of programming codes. Though I suppose programming codes are abstract in their own right...

"You've always been more the engineering type. Since when did you turn into a poet?"

"I'm being serious. You can mock me all you like..."

"It's just you never spoke like that before."

"Is that so? Well, I never expected to keep having the same dream. The one where I'm living with an elephant that grows bigger and bigger, like a balloon. At first, the pain of being crushed by it was too much. But then something strange happened. It was as if the elephant somehow merged

with the house, and I eventually got used to it.”

“You got used to it. So that’s good, isn’t it?”

“But the pain keeps coming back.”

“Did I get this right? You’re telling me you want to divorce because of a dream? What you need is to see a doctor...” I was on the verge of saying something a lot ruder, driven by the painful pressure of the huge balloon expanding in my own chest. At the same time, I was baffled by Ming-Jen’s pathetic excuse – although his account, bizarre as it was, did sound sincere. Were we simply operating on two different wavelengths?

“Suppose I said there was another woman. Would that make it easier for you to accept?”

“Maybe. At least it would make sense. So, is the elephant supposed to be me and the kids combined?”

“I’m responsible too. I created part of the elephant.”

“It’s a shame, really. I quite liked elephants...” Ming-Jen shot me a puzzled look, and I too was surprised I’d blurted out such nonsense. Yet, for a fleeting moment, I somehow detached myself from the situation entirely. It was a sort of out-of-body experience – like when people in pain or distress see their souls peel away, then observe their bodies from a distance. I found it didn’t hurt as much that way.

“What I’m trying to say is that... for me... I just can’t ignore it anymore.”

“And by ‘ignoring it’ you mean...?”

“My feelings for you are dead. Not only that. My feelings for everyone are dead.”

“Dead? In what way?” I knew things were serious, but feigned ignorance in order to keep probing. I was clearly getting to Ming-Jen. His legs were getting jittery with nerves.

“I’ve lost all feeling.”

“You mean you feel numb, right? Didn’t I say spending all day on your phone and iPad would turn you into a zombie, sooner or later?”

“Several times in fact.”

“Exactly! How many times have I told you? It’s because you’re always—” What was I even saying? I wanted to cry but couldn’t, so rambled on instead. I knew this was the final blow to our marriage, the kind from which even detaching my soul couldn’t save me.

My feelings for you are dead... With these words, my eardrums started to pulsate so loudly, everything that followed sounded like it was coming from behind a soundproof barrier.

“That’s pretty harsh...”

“I know. But it’s the truth.” Ming-Jen’s tone was flat, as if he already knew he’d been infected by a zombie virus.

Ming-Jen confessed that he’d never wanted to marry or have kids. At some point, he told me, he decided to put his ego to one side and fulfil his duty to procreate. Now he had carried out that duty, he no longer wanted to walk, hike, camp, or travel together with us as a family. To him, every second of family life – especially outdoor activities – felt like a burden. It reminded me of the time I specially ordered a Snow Peak takoyaki griddle pan from Japan for a camping trip. First, he made fun of me for packing so much camping equipment to survive the great outdoors. Then

he called me stupid for splurging on “unnecessary extras” when the whole point was just to enjoy a bit of nature. Well, now I never need worry again about what he deemed stupid. Now, I was free to live any way I pleased.