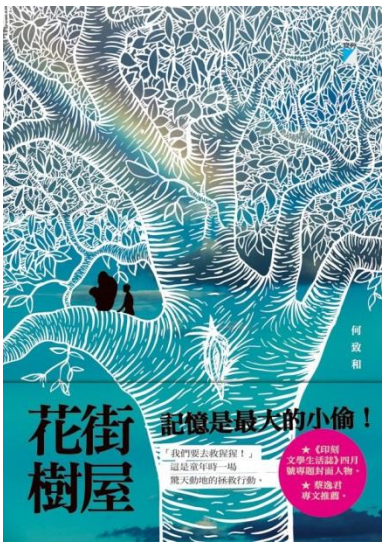
THE TREE FORT ON CARNATION LANE
花街樹屋



Fang Po-Chun's mid-thirties are marked by the birth of his daughter and the death of a childhood buddy. His daughter's birth reminds him of his own boyhood, his friend's suicide of the good times he had with his two best friends back in the old neighborhood.

They were the kids from the wrong side of the temple, kids who grew up in the night market and next to the red light district. Their parents didn't like them visiting the market by themselves and expressly forbade them from going to Carnation Lane. But the appearance of a chained orangutan in a night market spectacle the year the three friends turned twelve convinced them to defy the parental ban. While the adults were away at a protest against Taiwan's endless Martial Law, they stole into the banned zone, released the beast from bondage and led it upstream, on a quest to find the fabled Taipei Municipal Menagerie.

It seems to Po-Chun that this memory and his friend's suicide must somehow be connected. A cryptologist by training, he decides to investigate, hoping to solve the mystery of his friend's death and decode the message contained within the memory that has shaped, even warped, their later lives.

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THE TREE FORT ON CARNATION LANE

By Ho Chih-Ho. Translated by Darryl Sterk.

I

I have no idea where that hundred-dollar bill came from. They said I stole it, pilfered it out of the pocket of a pair of suit pants my father had left hanging over the bedroom door. I remember they had me surrounded and were shouting at me and that I found myself kneeling before the family altar. It must have been evening, because, as I recall, it was dark outside. The light in the family room was off and the bulbs from the two electric candles on the altar cast a reddish glow on the faces of the adults. Of course maybe their faces were red because they'd seen red. My parents and my dutifully widowed grandmother launched volleys of Mandarin at me, mixed with Taiwanese. I was crying, so was my mother. They were stamping their feet and gesticulating. They all kept pointing at my right hand, which—lo and behold—was clutching a crumpled green one hundred dollar bill. It was like it had grown out of my palm, as if it were part of my own body.

My earliest memory. I'm not proud of it, but I thought of myself as a thief before I had any conception of my own identity or any notion of anything as basic as my gender.

If the scene weren't so shocking I wouldn't have remembered it, or I'd have forgotten it long ago. After all, it happened over thirty years ago when I was all of three years old. A survey of some friends showed that most people's first memories form when they are five or six. One saw his Ma cooking in the kitchen one hazy afternoon, another was sitting bibbed in the yellow school bus and yanking on the braid of the girl sitting beside him, stuff like that. Nobody's first memory starts with him or her kneeling in front of the family altar.

I remember they were nearly apoplectic, my father, mother and grandmother. They were so enraged that they forgot I was only a child. Though nobody hit me, someone did quite forcefully jab me in the back of the head a couple of times. Judging by the angle of my head and based on their positioning in relation to where I was kneeling, I presume that it was my father, who was standing behind me. I must have spent upwards of an hour kneeling in front of that altar. Of course at the time I had no concept of time, so that upwards of an hour is a mere estimate I've come to as an adult. During that whole hour, if that is how long it was, Grandma and Pa yelled constantly. I'm not sure if they were yelling at me together or whether they took turns. I just remember how oppressive their yells—and my mother's sobs—were, how they formed a high wall around me so close that the slightest gust of wind could not get through. And no matter where I turned to climb that wall to call for help, someone would push me back down.

First I learned that what I had done was steal. Then I learned what if felt like to be powerless.

I don't blame them. I have to thank them really. If not for them, I might have got into some serious stuff, or

joined a gang like the boy who lived next door. They had reason to be so hard on me. After all, the neighborhood we were living in at that time was a less than ideal place to raise a kid. We'd settled down in Taipei City's sordid southwest, in a side street off a famous tourist night market right in the vicinity of the even more famous—infamous, actually—Carnation Lane. Night and day johns, drunks, drifters and potential criminals flitted past our place. I remember that I wasn't the only one getting yelled at that evening. My distraught mother took the opportunity to give my irate father a piece of her mind:

'I told you we should never have settled down in a place like this. See! Now our baby boy has gone bad. Are you satisfied?'

Of course this is more than likely my imagination, because I grew up listening to my mother talking about moving away as if it was her life's greatest dream. Unfortunately, my father was never able to make it come true.

I can understand why my elders were so angry, but I still don't get how a three year old kid like me could have had any notion of money. Or what kind of worldly desires could have possessed me to filch a hundred dollars. Or how, at less than a meter tall, I had managed to reach my hand into the pocket of my father' pants. It's unpleasant to think that I was already hung up on money so early in life. But no matter how hard I try to remember, I can't go any earlier: kneeling there is the first thing I recall. The harder I try, the more details occur to me, embellishing my memory. Of course some of these details might also be my overactive imagination, because people are as good at imagining things as they are at forgetting them. The more time passes, the more the boundary between imagination and memory blurs. What's frustrating is that these details still only clarify what happened after I knelt before the altar, after I came to be holding the money in my hand: I still don't know where the crumpled hundred dollar bill came from.

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Ling Ling's first word was 'Mama,' her second 'Papa.' Then came 'wallet.'

The word 'wallet' easy to pronounce. She draws out the 'wa,' as if to practice molding her mouth into the proper shape, before finally issuing a decisive 'let.' She's just started to talk now, but before her linguistic faculty began forming she had already evinced an interest in wallets. I give her mine when she's restless and unwilling to eat, a tactic which buys me at least twenty minutes of quiet time, enough to feed her half a bowl of congee.

'I wonder if this has anything to do with Taurus being her rising sign,' says Hsing-Chuan, looking at Ling Ling with a worried look in her eyes. 'A Cancerian shouldn't be so fond of money.'

But I'm not at all worried about Ling Ling having some kind of precocious fondness for filthy lucre, because most of the time the bill compartment of my wallet is empty. Ling Ling enjoys divesting it of its contents, but usually that only amounts to a few cards—business cards, my health insurance, ID, driver's and scooter licenses, even my store and library cards, the sort of thing a pickpocket would toss in the public washroom bin. I am sure that as long as I don't yell at her when she stands on her tiptoes, grasps the end of the table and reaches for my wallet without permission—as long as I don't punish her by making her kneel in front of the family altar—Ling Ling will

completely forget her early fondness for money by the time she's grown up. Without suffering some unusual trauma, who can remember anything that happens before the age of two?

Hsing-Chuan bends down, snatches the wallet from Ling Ling's hand and collects the cards that are scattered on the floor. Ling Ling immediately starts wailing.

'Waaaaa-llet.' Her tears are flowing, her nose running. 'Mine.'

Hsing-Chuan hasn't given me back my wallet or put it back on the table.

I draw a baby wipe and use it to clean up the mess of mucus and tears on Ling Ling's face, taking out my cell phone for her to play with. She releases a few more sobs before succumbing to the cell's charms, the colorful screen and the key tones, then sits and plays, utterly absorbed. A disastrous loss of control has been averted, thanks not just to the cell but also to Ling Ling's outstanding forgetfulness. The brevity of her memory staunches her tears.

I reach out and stroke her face. It's soft and smooth to the touch, without the slightest wrinkle or blemish like her memory at this age. She will probably not, like me, remember things that happen to her over the next year. She might never know that I crawled on the floor like a horse for her to ride on, or that I bathed her and changed her diapers. If Ling Ling were to be abducted I would be easily erased from her memory, I would have no part in her wistful reminiscences. It would be as if I had never existed.

Scary.

The possibility was somehow troubling.

'Would Ling Ling remember us?' I ask Hsing-Chuan, my gaze lingering on Ling Ling. 'If she was separated from us now, I mean, if she never saw us again. Do you think she'd remember us?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Considering that in the twenty two months since Ling Ling was born I've been with her twenty four seven. I've bathed her six hundred times, fed her eighteen hundred meals. If anything happened to her like in the City section of the newspaper, say she was abducted by human traffickers or went missing or something, what do you think? Would she remember me?'

'Remember you? Didn't you just ask if she would remember us?'

'Well you know, if Ling Ling didn't remember me, there's no way she'd remember you. How much time do you spend with her each day? You've got your career and I'm a stay at home dad! If she didn't even remember me, these two years I've given up work so I could take care of the baby would have gone to waste, right?'

'You didn't give up work, work gave up on you,' Hsing-Chuan corrects me: 'If your old department hadn't gone bankrupt, you would never have let your college teaching gig go.'

'It didn't go bankrupt, it just wasn't able to attract any students. It's just a temporary closure.'

'What's the difference? In any case you're out of a job.'

'I could still teach somewhere else… Hey, I thought we made this decision together. Since the department was closing, I would just stay home for a few years and take care of Ling Ling. You didn't want Ling Ling to be sent somewhere unfamiliar, to day care or that nanny's place, remember?'

'I don't blame you for staying home to take care of the baby. It's just that there was three thousand dollars in your wallet the other day. Where did it go?'

Hsing-Chuan raises my wallet and, like she's pulling apart an orange, opens it with her thumbs, showing me that

except for the lining, which is printed with some fancy monogram, there's nothing inside.

'Waaaaa-llet.' Cue Ling Ling. Her little face looks up, then her tiny hands reach out: 'Mine.'

Hsing-Chuan lets Ling Ling grab the wallet out of her hands. My daughter now has both.

I try to extricate my cell, but Ling Ling uses my wallet to bat my hand away. She is still none too clear about the concept of ownership, though she understands possession. Anything she labels 'mine' is as good as gone unless we immediately correct her, repeating that it is 'Daddy's' or 'Mommy's.'

I give it another try. This time she screams, as if to assert sovereignty. I give up.

'Don't you have enough money? Some major purchase you needed to make?' Hsing-Chuan won't let the matter drop.

'I took it out of my own account.'

'You took the money out?'

'Sunday is Yiya Chiang's funeral, remember? I put the money in the drawer. I'll take it with me on Sunday.'

'Oh…' Hsing-Chuan's tone has softened. 'The money for the white envelope can be listed as a joint expense. You don't have to use your own spending money.'

'Don't be like this. He was my friend. I want to use my own money.'

'Yiya Chiang was my friend, too.'

'No, he wasn't.'

'I knew him for years. How can you say we weren't friends?'

'Of course he was. But he isn't anymore.'

I do want Hsing-Chuan to understand how I feel, but there isn't any point explaining. She must be thinking, here he goes again, the resident Assistant Professor of Cryptology is up to his old tricks. Idle at home, he's got nothing better to do than encrypt the simple concept of 'friend' and turn a readily intelligible message into apparent nonsense.

Of course that's not what I intended. After all, my research area is reversion and recovery: my specialty decryption, not encryption. Yiya is no longer Hsing-Chuan's friend because we didn't meet Yiya together. She only met him after we started dating and it was only because he was my friend that she considered him hers. She was friends with him for less than eight years, while I met him before we were ten. Yiya appeared in my life before Hsing-Chuan. To Hsing-Chuan he was a subplot, an inconsequential but established bit-character. Having decided to step inside the panorama of my world she had accepted Yiya as a friend, a part of our connubial life, as a person we would be seeing a lot of and that she had to be nice to. Now that Yiya has disappeared from the face of the earth, logically the friendship he and Hsing-Chuan formed should come to an end, because he will never again come to visit me.

I want to use my own money for the white envelope not out of some sense of justice, but for personal reasons. While Yiya was still alive, I always wanted Hsing-Chuan to consider him her friend, which indeed she did. But as soon as Yiya died I became selfish, suddenly feeling like Yiya should be my friend alone. I don't want to treat this sum of money as a joint expense. I don't want Hsing-Chuan's money to be added in, diluting the purity of my friendship with Yiya.

Like I said, there's no point explaining.

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This dash of selfishness seems rather silly when I see the flood of mourners at the memorial service. Though Yiya was a well-known pianist I never expected him to have so many friends. When I reach the mortuary there are no more seats inside the mourning hall and the walkway by the door, the steps up to the door and even the plaza at the base of the steps are crowded with people. All the funeral guests are about the same age as me. They must all be Yiya's friends.

I squeeze through the crowd and pass the white envelope to the person collecting the condolence money at a table by the entrance. There is no guest book on the table, only a big poster of black and white piano keys. This seems strange. I am no expert in these matters, my personal experience limited to my grandmother's and my father's funerals, but I'm sure I've never heard of getting people to sign a poster instead of a guest book on such an occasion. I pick up a black marker and look for an empty spot amongst the densely penned signatures. Just as I am about to sign I have a sudden sense of déjà vu. Perhaps I'm reminded of Yiya's wedding three years before, perhaps of the petition booth at the protest against American beef imports.

A picture of Yiya is hanging over the altar inside the mourning hall, beside it a big projection screen, which has got to be two meters wide. They're playing clips from recordings of Yiya's stage recitals. I stand by the door awhile, but the heavy floral fragrance pervading the mourning hall forces me out. I find the smell of scented lilies so morbid. Maybe they aren't scented lilies. Maybe I don't know what it is I'm smelling. Even if it that's what they are, maybe I am wrong to lay all the blame on one flower. Surely people don't use just one kind in funeral wreaths. All I know about this is what I observed at my grandmother's and my father's funerals: in both cases I was standing up front, my eyes stinging and my nose smarting from the stink of all the potted perfume lilies on the flower stands behind me.

My grandmother contracted cancer of the esophagus, my father of the stomach, ten years apart.

Three years ago, Yiya's guests had signed another poster, printed with a picture of Yiya and his bride. I forget her name: her marriage to Yiya lasted all of a year, too brief a time to register in my mental database. I just remember that she was a nurse because she reminded me to go for a regular colonoscopy even though I was only in my early thirties. Cancer of the digestive tract runs in the family.

This was reasonable advice, based on our current understanding of genetics. Even so, I still haven't followed Yiya's ex-wife's advice and gone for an examination, because in the end cancer was not the reason why I had to attend my grandmother's and father's funerals.

My grandmother died of a stroke, my father of a heart attack, also ten years apart.

And Yiya? He killed himself. Found hanging from a tree by the riverside. Slipped his head through a noose and took his leave of our dear planet earth.

'But why?'

'He was doing just fine. How could this happen?'

At grandmother's and father's funerals, I kept hearing comments and questions like this in the conversations of friends and relatives. Yeah, she was doing just fine. The tumor had been removed, she finished the chemo. The doctor announced his five year survival rate, he was optimistic. We were like spectators at a baseball game that had gone nine extra innings. We'd dragged our tired bodies and happy moods home, only to receive word that the star player had dropped dead. Nobody knew why it turned out this way.

Now, in the parking lot of the same funeral home, I'm hearing the same phrases being repeated in each of the small group of mourners. Yeah, things were going really well for him. I walk past this one group on purpose and pretend to look at the titles and names on the gift wreaths. In each group there seems to be a speaker holding forth on his recent meeting with Yiya, detailing the place and time like a criminal witness giving a statement to the police. Yeah, yeah, last month we had hot pot together. Who knew it would be for the last time? Yeah, he always drove to my place, but that day he took the bus. Come to think of it, he was acting kind of strange. I can't help but take note of the timing of these meetings. I really didn't want to hear that in the month before Yiya left this world, or in the two weeks before his death, or even in the last few days of his life, he had time to meet so many friends. When was the last time I saw him? Half a year ago? He made time for all these people before doing himself in, but didn't give me any notice, didn't so much as drop me a line. I don't even have the right to say he was doing just fine.

Finally A-Huang shows up, the only person here who really knows me. He drives a shiny new sapphire BMW roadster right into the mortuary and he's got some bodacious babe sitting next to him. The hardtop is down, just like the low cut skintight top the girl is wearing, allowing folks a full view of the luxury interior. The bereaved family members and the funeral guests forget their sorrow at his arrival, as he brings something of the fuel-injected vigor of a car show into the stagnant ashen gloom of the funeral home.

'I'm late. Is it over yet?' A-Huang asks.

'The part that's over is over,' I say, 'but Yiya is still inside, so you still have a chance to see him.'

A-Huang raises one of his eyebrows, squinting at me ever so slightly. I know what this expression of his means. 'I should hurry up then.' Then he says: 'You wait here, I'll be right back.'

'Don't leave me, A-Huang honey. You know your girl gets scared all by herself in a places like this.' The car show babe pouts her lips, cocks her head and brushes her hair to one side with her fingers to reveal the pale, flawless skin on the nape of her neck that seldom sees the sun. I imagine that a girl like that would find herself very busy riding in a car like this. Hair to rearrange and all that. Just like A-Huang's escort is doing now.

'Alright,' A-Huang says. He leans over the car door and presses a button on the driver's side.

Like some giant beetle opening its elytra, the roadster begins raising the steel panel located on its rear end, startling onlookers who are standing too near into retreat. Propping up something like a glossy hard shell travel case, two steel arms emerge from the black hole beneath the panel and arc forward towards the windshield. Unblinking, the woman stares up as the travel case separates into two steel arcs, one of which forms the roof, the other the rear window. But what a change in her expression just now! In the moment before A-Huang pressed the button she was still the consummate socialite, flaunting her physical charms, hoping to use a coquettish tone and a flirtatious demeanor to make her man change his mind. But when she looked up and saw the posh plaything undergo a manly metamorphosis that she might have only rarely seen before, a change came over her, an unadorned flash of excitement peeking through her heavy foundation. Her eyes pulsed with light from where they were hidden beneath

the jet-black arcs of her false lashes, her eyes pulsed with light and her lips, soaked with rouge, formed a nimble O.

I don't know the woman in the car, but I do know that look. Every time I unwrap a new toy, or a packet of her favorite cookies, Ling Ling, too, will look up with the same fascination, her eyes tracking the thing in which she is so very interested. The process by which an open top turns into a hardtop is certainly new to me, but 90% of the time my gaze remains glued to the woman's face: I don't want to miss for one moment an expression which has become so familiar but whose true value I understand only now.

But now the two steel arcs have become the roof and the rear windshield and the panel at the back has been lowered back into place. The automatic tinted windows are up. I can't see a thing.

It's been three years since we last met, but A-Huang doesn't give me the slightest feeling of distance. It's like we just went out last night, ended up drinking until dawn and have only now managed to make it to the mortuary. As expected, A-Huang is a man of his word: he hastens into the mourning hall, now all but deserted, and emerges in no time, out of breath from running.

'How'd you get here?' A-Huang asks me.

'By bus.'

'Get in. I'll give you a ride.' A-Huang opens the passenger door and calls inside: 'Get out. You're taking a cab.'

The roadster shudders, I guess because the chick is stomping her feet in displeasure. Though maybe I'm wrong. She gets out of the car and, despite being fully a head taller than A-Huang, steps meekly to the side and offers a courteous smile to the guy who has just stolen her seat.

Without further ado I hop in and close the well-built door, hoping to shut the embarrassment out. The leather seat still carries the body heat of the woman's naked thighs and the air conditioner vents are blasting an icy stream of her perfume. The warmth and the scent that I will inadvertently carry home with me will take some explaining. But before facing Hsing-Chuan I have to rack my brains to figure out what to say to dispel another kind of embarrassment, which I have shut into the car, the kind of embarrassment two grown men feel when they are seat-belted into the same automobile but can't think of anything to say.

A-Huang drives onto the elevated freeway. When he steps on the gas, I am immediately pressed back into the seat like in a plane that is gathering speed on the runway before take off. This kind of speed, the kind the 125 CC motorcycle I used to ride when I was eighteen or nineteen couldn't reach even when I maxed it out, dampens the embarrassment. I no longer feel any need to try to think of something to say.

But when I glance at the dashboard and see that the needle on the speedometer has gone higher than my height in centimeters, A-Huang suddenly speaks.

'I saw it coming.' He gazes ahead, matter-of-factly. 'I knew this would happen, sooner or later.'

I give no response, because I am not sure if he is saying this to me. I feel Yiya is with us somehow. Though there are only two seats, it's like he's in the car, perhaps hiding in the black hole beneath the lid of the trunk, just like the three of us used to tuck ourselves into that tiny tree fort on Carnation Lane. I don't bother telling A-Huang he's missed my exit.

As the sapphire roadster rumbles on and on, the cars ahead of us keep retreating towards us, seemingly fixed in place as we overtake them. I have the sense that time has stopped, or even started flowing in reverse.