

WHATEVER ANNA WANTS

愛貪小便宜的安娜

As far as Hsin can tell, her mother Anna always gets what she wants. She doesn't mean it in a bad way, but being able to get things out of people is just her mother's way of dulling the pain of being dealt an unlucky hand.

Because Anna was adopted. Her birth mother, a poor country girl from Taiwan's south, was worked nearly into an early grave. Her adoptive mother loved her deeply, but her new father was really only interested in having a son. Her older brother ignored her. When her adoptive mother grew ill and died, she was forced out on her own. A boyfriend followed, but he soon disappeared, leaving her with an illegitimate child...

Life hadn't been easy, but still Anna managed to squeeze advantages out of most situations. She never left a restaurant without a handful of toothpicks or a wedding without a large bag of leftovers. The greatest lesson she taught her daughter was how to sneak into the movies for free. Other people's junk were the precious bricks from which to build her own fortress against the injustices of the world.

Anna is Taiwan's very own Blanche DuBois, brought to life by Hua Bo-Rong's direct, earthy, yet charming prose style. *Whatever Anna Wants* is a down-to-earth entertaining read, refreshing in its lack of pretention.



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Hua Bo-Rong has always been passionate about literature, and despite attempted diversions into other careers, decided at the age of forty to dedicate himself to his writing. *Whatever Anna Wants* was his first novel, and was quickly followed by two more, including the thriller *Shadow Taken Hostage*. He has won three awards for his short fiction, and the *Unitas* award for best new writer in 2007.

WHATEVER ANNA WANTS

By Hua Bo-Rong. Translated by James Friesen & Chen Ying-Che.

I. The Screaming Episode

'If it weren't for my hopeless inability to turn down a deal, I would have drowned myself long ago.'

Anna is my mother. Her birth name is Chen Xiao-Lin. She has been alive over forty years now, and just like everyone else that still exists somewhere between life and death, there have been times when she swung in the balance.

Anna has contemplated suicide on many occasions, but each time the impulse nearly overwhelmed her that niggling, penny-pinching propensity stopped her from crossing the line and ending it all.

The first time Anna thought about killing herself was the month before middle school started. It was the summer of 1981 when she received the enrollment notice. She was 13 years old, Princess Diana had just married Charles, and Space Shuttle Columbia had set off on its maiden voyage.

Diana's married a prince

Columbia went to outer space and back

All I'm doing is going to middle school

And I have to chop off my locks

These were the first words written across a blank page in Anna's recipe book. It was a memory of that summer, written six years later when she was 19 and living at Miss Zhao's place in New Beitou.

I read somewhere, I forget where exactly, that misery and humor are inseparable friends. I sense a brooding humor hidden in Anna's words, as if to say, Why me? Attached to the notice was a slip of paper explaining the school uniform: clothes, hair, shoes, and even length and color of stockings were included. The school helpfully included a diagram showing that dresses must fall at the knees, no higher. Hair must be a centimeter above the earlobes, and no longer.

At the time Anna had long, lustrous hair that attracted a lot of compliments, and which her mother, Chen Shu-Nu, would carefully comb every day. As Anna held the dress code in her hands – printed in an inky blue on coarse paper – she saw the long, nightmarish road that lay ahead of her. She thought about the 'student cut' – one centimeter above the earlobes, the patch of pallid white scalp that would be exposed high on her neck – and the thought of suicide crept into her mind. For the next few days she brooded on it, unable to eat or sleep, feeling like a volcano ready to erupt.

Then the fateful day arrived. Chen Shu-Nu dragged her daughter to the salon where, with the assistance of the hairdresser Li Xiang, she strapped Anna to a chair. Seeing Li Xiang approaching with scissors in hand, the blades yawning wide, Anna struggled to get out of that chair as if she were a trapped animal. And then she screamed.

Her scream was so piercing that everyone in the place ran for the door, covering their ears. As a little girl, Anna's high-pitched screech was her lethal weapon, though this was the last time she'd unleash it; after middle school she never used it again. This one scream in the salon was enough to exhaust her reserves, and thereafter this superpower,

once both frightening and irritating, was gone forever. However, Anna's own explanation on the matter was that she matured after attending middle school, and so she had no more need for such a childish tactic.

Anna stays as stubborn as ever

As for the other customers in the salon having their hair washed or permed that day, as well as the neighborhood folk just stopping by—well—they had never faced a situation like that before, and one by one they fled the premises. Li Xiang had sturdy eardrums and, having watched Anna grow up, had long been mentally prepared for this day; but even she gave Anna a resounding slap as she started to scream, nearly beating the sense out of her. Anna's mother gently attempted to console her headstrong daughter, but Anna kept on screeching like a broken machine which nobody knew how to turn off. Then, just when everybody in the general vicinity had begun to consider flinging themselves against the nearest wall, she stopped. Everybody, including Anna's mother, rejoiced as the dinosaurian howl finally ceased, until they realized that Anna had passed out.

Completely exhausted, Chen Shu-Nu sat paralyzed in her chair, trying to catch her breath. The pallor of her face was like the dusty gloom hanging in the air, or a white-washed wall on an overcast day. When she saw that her daughter was unconscious she snatched up a bottle of water with the intention of reviving her, but Li Xiang told her to wait. It was then or never, so Li Xiang cut Anna's hair as fast as she possibly could.

When Anna woke up and saw herself in the mirror, the long hair that she'd grown for years had been turned, irreversibly, into a student crop. It looked like a toilet seat had been placed atop her head. She stared into the mirror silently as tears streamed down her face. Then, unable to accept this reality, she passed out again. Li Xiang joked about the incident for many years after, until everybody in the neighborhood knew the story. Nobody had ever heard of someone fainting over a haircut before; but for Anna it was nearly the end of her.

When Anna came to her senses a second time she tore out of the salon at a full sprint. At that moment the entire world became her enemy. Her blacklist grew to include Li Xiang, her mother, the other customers in the salon, and finally anyone that had anything to do with that cursed enrollment notice. She ran all the way to the riverside and stopped in the middle of the bridge, looking down at the Dahan River. She had resolved to end it all. She hopped over the railing, standing precariously on the bridge that was no wider than her foot, and leaned outwards, her hands clinging onto the railing behind her. Her head dangled almost perpendicular to the water, which was brown like chocolate but reeked like a pigsty. Over and over she said to herself: I'll jump.

Just then, a familiar sound reached her from afar. She swiveled her head in time to see an ice cream seller struggling to bring his tricycle on to the bridge. It was Old Uncle Monkey! Anna let out a silent cheer; the image of a sweet cone topped with three scopes of ice cream had suddenly dispelled her death wish. Gleefully, she felt around in the pocket of her skirt for a one-dollar coin, deciding to first buy some ice and then see how she felt. Old Uncle Monkey only came around that area once every three days, if you missed him then you had to wait a long time before you would see him again. Anna called him Old Uncle Monkey because—well—he looked like a monkey with his big protruding ears, long arms, and short legs. Every time he saw Anna Old Uncle Monkey wiggled his ears for her, like an elephant fanning away flies. Anna loved buying ice cream from him because she could usually cajole an extra scoop or two. She hopped back over the railing and ran straight towards to ice cream heaven.

Therein lay the story of Anna's life: every time an unbearable circumstance presented itself, some triviality distracted her, evaporating her worries into a ribbon of smoke. Just like Achilles and his heel, Anna's anxieties too

had a mysterious weak spot.

Actually I can relate to Anna quite well. Four years ago, in 2005, I joined a private high school. I already knew wasn't that great, but my marks were so low I didn't have much choice in the matter. When I looked up some information on the school website I couldn't believe what I saw: the girl's school uniform was a dress that literally dragged on the ground, as if you were wearing mosquito netting. If you wore a pair of pants or hid a baseball bat under the skirt, nobody would even know, which made me think that over the next three years of my life I would turn into one of those bad ass Bosozoku biker girls you see in teen movies. I could even hide a mace in there... the very thought of it scared me half to death—it was enough to make me seriously regret not trying harder on the test. I told Anna that there's no way I can go to that school, and when she heard about the uniforms she was more taken aback than I was.

'Those schools actually exist?'

'Believe it.'

'The people who decide on the uniform... what were they thinking?'

'Who knows, they probably just wanted to mess with us!'

Anna supported me so I took the retest, much to my relief. We're like that when we go to the cinema too—if we find ourselves watch a terrible movie we just walk out, no questions asked. There's no point in wasting time.

If I had been made to wear that type of dress to school, I probably would have killed myself, or someone else.

II. Watermelons and Dolphins

So once Anna had finished off the ice cream she ran back to the salon with a heart full of joy. As to why she ran—well—she started out walking, but that gave way to the kind of caper that only kids on a snack-induced high can cut, as three steps morph into two. Then she suddenly felt that something wasn't quite right, and, worrying mom and the rest of the people at the salon were gone, she picked up the pace.

It turned out her sixth sense was right. When she got to the entrance of the salon the door was closed. It was dark inside, and peering through the window past the lace curtains proved that it was indeed empty. Customer's hair still lay on the floor, making it seem like Li Xiang, who was also the salon manager, had left in a hurry. Only after a few seconds did it register that the hair Anna saw was likely her own, which made her heart sink even further. Separated by a piece of glass, gazing in on those strands of hair severed from her head, she felt keenly the emptiness of separation. She opened the door and went in, grabbed some of her hair, stuffed it into her pocket, and ran out again, fearing that someone else might see her silly behavior. With that she ran home as fast as she could. She wasn't sure why but she suddenly missed her mom deeply. She needed to see her right away.

The first thing she did when she got home was grab a piece of scrap paper from the box beside her dad's printer, which was in the first floor living room. She arranged her beloved hair evenly on the paper and tenderly folded it up. Next, she went up to the second floor, hiding the packaged up hair behind her back, and walked over to her mom's room. Nobody was there, so she turned around and quickly retreated into her own room. It seemed nobody was at home. She tucked the packet away deep in her closet, covered it with some clothes, and ran up to the third floor

where her dad's room and study were. Still nobody was to be found. She walked back to the stairwell and gazed up the staircase that ended at the fourth floor. Normally she didn't dare climb these stairs. But today, even though it was clear that her mom was not to be found there, Anna worked up the courage to make the ascent to her brother's room. She knew he was busy studying for something called the TOEFL test. Anna had asked her mom what that word meant. Mom had said that when it comes to education, TOEFL means USA, and a small piece of their pie, and Anna was rather impressed by it all.

Her big brother hated other people coming up to the fourth floor, could even smell if someone had been there in his absence, as if he had a surveillance system set up. Anna crept carefully so as to not make a sound when she snuck into his territory, but just as she neared his room, the door quickly swung open, and a silhouette blackened in rim light faced her, 'What do you want?' His voice was entirely void of emotion.

Anna's heart nearly stopped, but she croaked out her question. 'Is mom home?'

'No.'

After saying so his black shadow drew back and was replaced by a larger, square black mass—a slammed door of course. All Anna could do was go back down to the first floor and sit on the hallway steps to wait for mom. She waited until the evening sky grew dark. Looking up she saw a flock of sparrows that had gathered, returning to their nests after foraging all day. It was as if they were celebrating the sun sinking behind the mountains, excited at the conclusion of another busy day. Flitting across one by one, the sparrows formed scissor shapes silhouetted against the sky; Anna unconsciously felt her shorn hair. This flock of scissors was up to no good—they had come to cut her hair again. An ominous feeling settled in her heart. At this point Anna had no way of knowing that her mother had taken ill, and that her home was collapsing around her for a second time.

Anna was adopted. Her first home, the one belonging to her biological parents, was somewhere near Taixi in Yunlin county—where exactly she couldn't say. As she remembered it, there was a crossroads near her parents' house that lead to the main road. Someone put up a wooden sign there with arrows painted on it: to the left was Flying Sands, and to the right was Taixi. The name Flying Sands has a poetic ring to it, but Anna didn't feel there was anything poetic about the people living there or even the surroundings for that matter. Everyone seemed so poor with their dusty hair and dirty visage, and the ocean breeze with all its salt and sand which had scarred all of their faces. Anna was brought to her Shulin home not long after she was born. Shulin was very close to Taipei but considered a part of Xibei, so when her classmates asked her where she lived she always used the greater area name, Xibei, at which all the boys would howl with laughter, because in the Taiwanese dialect that meant 'dead dad'.

Once when Anna was watching Chibi Maruko-Chan, Maruko's grandfather Tomozou made a Haiku, and Anna learned how to make one herself out of three place names.

Shulin

Xibei

Flying Sands

Anna could vaguely recall that when she was little there was a woman with a deep tan and muscular build, who looked old and who she called Auntie. Every now and then Auntie would come up to Shulin, bringing goods that she'd dug up from their fields, sometimes sweet potatoes, other times garlic, onions, or cabbage. The last time she

came, it was watermelons.

Auntie was actually Anna's birth mother, but as far as Anna could tell, Auntie was more like her grandmother or some other elderly relative. The summer break of her second year in elementary school Anna went to Auntie's place in Yunlin. Her place was small and dark but there was a big patch of land out front, and a thatched hut that looked like an onion covered in really long hair. The entire village stunk of fish and there were lots of old people sitting outside their front door shucking oysters; walking along the street you would come across a small mountain of white oyster shells every few paces. Auntie had ten kids, and only later did Anna figure out that they were really her brothers and sisters. Anna had no recollection whatsoever of her biological father. He had had a stroke years ago, so most of his time was spent resting up in his room. At lunch Auntie brought out a plate of meat that was crimson black, which she said was called fried green onions and pork of the sea. Her curiosity piqued, Anna asked what pork of the sea was, and the response to her question was a cacophony of ten or so kids fighting to get a word in while fighting to stuff their mouths at the same time. It turned out the pork of the sea was...dolphin! Anna's heart hiccupped when she heard it. There was no way she was eating anything of it, because she loved those animals. She even had a dolphin picture book that she would read every night before going to sleep. As her nose caught a strong whiff of fish from somewhere in the room Anna thought to herself, this is a group of dolphin-eating meanies. Auntie assumed that Anna didn't eat anything out of shyness, so she started to load up her plate, but Anna hid behind her mom, taking her bowl with her. At that time Anna didn't know that this old Auntie was in fact only a few years older than her adoptive mother Chen Shu-Nu, but working in the fields every day had aged her faster.

Anna's siblings went out to play as soon as they had finished their meal, calling her to join them. They told Anna they were going to see some dolphins by the sea, and she was thrilled. When they got there, Anna did see dozens of them, just as she had been promised; but the scene was entirely different to what she had imagined. She saw instead rows of dolphin corpses, lying in between the rocks, creating a river of blood. The seaside was bustling like a fish market. Locals were carrying knives ready to slice open dolphin stomachs right there and then, package up the meat and go on home. Anna froze in fear. As everyone busily chopped up the dolphins, she gathered up all the pain and anger from deep within her, stood atop a nearby rock and screamed that high-pitched scream. It was a good thing that they were out in the open, with space enough to soak up the awesome power of Anna's sound waves, but still, everyone there had a good fright, and her brothers and sisters quickly dragged her on home.

As far as the locals were concerned, those dolphins—lost, stranded and piled up—were free for the taking.

As Anna returned to Shulin with her mother, she asked why Auntie's family ate dolphin. Mom explained that the dolphins were already dead and it wasn't Auntie who killed them. Their family didn't have a lot of money so they simply took some home from the seaside. But Anna couldn't accept this. Dolphins are cute, so people shouldn't eat them, dead or not.

And just because something isn't cute, that doesn't mean you can eat it

When Anna was thirteen years old, now in middle school and fully aware that she was adopted, she would lie on her dorm room bed and think of those rows of dead dolphins draped across the rocks. She thought about her relatives eating them, and a strong feeling of repulsion welled up in her. She thought she was lucky to have been

raised by her Taipei mother; even if, as she said to me, she felt a little guilty about this thought she couldn't help feeling it, and still does to this day. She told me not to tell anyone.

The last time Anna saw Auntie was when she was nine years old. Auntie had just harvested their watermelon field. By pure coincidence everybody had decided to plant watermelons that year, so many that the price of watermelons crashed. Auntie couldn't sell off her yield; hiring someone to pick and sell them for her would only lose her money. She hadn't even wanted to plant watermelon at first, figuring she would just leave the land uncultivated. For years now she had lost out on whatever she planted, to the point that she didn't dare plant anything anymore.

But her husband, although he could not work in the fields after his stroke, still had a working mouth. He ordered Auntie around, and he was adamant that those fields were given to them by their ancestors, and so they had to plant crops. If you don't—why, then a field is not a field. It would be like getting married and then not having kids. It would be dishonoring your forefathers.

During the watermelon harvest that year Auntie brought a troop of her kids to the fields to do the picking themselves. She hired a truck and driver, and once they finished picking, she hopped in shotgun and drove from Yunlin all the way up to Taipei. A friend of hers knew a guy who ran a fruit market that was willing to take the entire truckload for ten dollars per 500 grams. When they got there, and the boss saw the size of their load, he went back on his word, offering instead to buy half of it at five dollars per 500 grams. While Auntie was not about to put up with this kind of flip-flopping, her driver was even more outraged than she was. He walked up to support Auntie, trying to straighten things out. Before long, he and the boss got into a big fight. As the driver tells it, Auntie rushed in to pull him off, and in the midst of all the chaos she grabbed a machete, normally used to chop watermelons, off one of the counters. Nobody dared move. There, under the shimmering market lights, Auntie pressed the machete to the boss's throat and screamed in the loca dialect, 'Hey! We've come all the way up from Taixi today to do business. Let's just keep it to talking OK? Next person who moves will regret it!'

The boss wasn't too rattled, but eventually he gave in. After all, she looked old and had a machete in hand... besides, he was in the wrong. He agreed to buy only half of the goods, but for the price originally set—ten dollars per 500 grams. Auntie still felt like smashing the guy's head in, but the thought of that mountain of road-weary, homeless watermelons stopped her. On top of that she was exhausted. No matter how she focused her rage she wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. She accepted the new terms, wanting to get her money and get out of there without involving her driver. Yet an even bigger problem presented itself: What was she going to do with the remaining watermelons?

Because Auntie made such an impressive scene at the fruit market, and out of a kind of camaraderie, the truck driver offered to take her around Taipei. They went to the Pigeon Association, pork wholesalers, and cargo-packaging dealers. Eventually they decided to give the whole lot to friends and family. The two of them were busy well into the night, and when they were done with that, fifty or so watermelons still remained on the truck.

Auntie asked the driver to take her to Anna's place in Shulin. Since Anna's adoptive father He Xin-Zhe ran a cram school Auntie figured that he would know lots of students and teachers; maybe he could help distribute the leftover fruits. Chen Shu-Nu answered the phone when Auntie called. Agreeing to take the watermelons, Chen Shu-Nu called her husband and asked if he couldn't come lend a hand, but he said, coldly, that he needed to stay at school. Chen Shu-Nu thought that rather odd, but couldn't do much about it, so she was forced to go up to the

fourth floor and ask her son for help. Anna's brother was only capable of holing up in his room and studying. Sometimes he wouldn't even come down to eat, as if he were a lodger rather than a member of the family. Chen Shu-Nu couldn't lift such heavy objects on her own, but she practically had to beg him before he agreed to come down and help.

Once the truck arrived, Auntie, the driver, and Anna's brother unloaded the watermelons together. The sight of fifty odd watermelons in the yard really excited Anna. It looked like dinosaurs had come and laid a bunch of monstrous green eggs. The next day Anna and her mother ate watermelon like their life depended on it, all the while trying to think of a way to distribute them around the neighborhood. Even though Chen Shu-Nu tried her hardest to give them all out to friends, as the sun beat down the watermelons started to go bad after a few days. The yard started to stink as the watermelons juice started to ooze out. Arriving home, Anna's adoptive father simply walked past the watermelons, neither acknowledging their fragrance nor asking about their presence in his yard. He just pretended not to notice them, so there was no hope of him giving them out to the students and teachers at his school.

III. The High School Hottie

Anna's adoptive father lived in a brand new four-storey town house, located in what thirty years ago was part of Shulin. Most of the other houses in the neighborhood were just bungalows, so if you were walking on the street it was pretty easy to see just by their home that they had a lot of money.

Ever since she was little Anna thought that their house could actually be conveniently divided into just three floors—three different floors under the same roof, each entirely independent of each other. Her brother, on the fourth floor, was always at home but you never saw him; her adoptive father lived on the third floor, but was almost never at home. Anna's mom always said they were extremely busy. The only one left to be with Anna, then, was her mother.

When she was little, it never occurred to Anna that her adoptive father didn't like her, though she was sort of afraid of him, and her brother too for that matter. It was a kind of fear that's hard to put words to, so she just ignored it. She didn't dare stay home alone in those days, but Mom was always close by, and when Anna wasn't at school she was like her mom's shadow—that is, until middle school. It was only when Anna's mom sent her up to Taizhong to study at a private Christian school that Anna really began to suspect that her adoptive father didn't like her. It seemed as though he believed that the farther away she was the better. Anna was both right and wrong. Chen Shu-Nu said that Anna's adoptive father didn't hate her – only, it was time for her to grow up. She needed to learn to be independent, and that's why she was sent to boarding school. Anna believed her, because she believed everything that Chen Shu-Nu said. After all she had nobody else to believe. In fact, Chen Shu-Nu was planning for Anna's future. She had a sneaking feeling that her own days were numbered, and sensed that once she was gone, Anna might be left out in the streets. She knew that her husband wouldn't treat Anna well, but at the same time she didn't want Anna to hate him outright, so although she had been carefully planning Anna's future for many years, she never said anything bad about her adoptive father.

Anna's adoptive father, He Xin-Zhe, had a deeply instilled belief that boys were superior to girls. His first wife gave him his son and Anna's brother, He Xue-Ming. When his son was three years old the mother took off, and after dealing with the whole mess, He Xin-Zhe became even less trusting of women. When he married his second wife, Chen Shu-Nu, she helped raise his son. Chen Shu-Nu took He Xue-Ming as her own, but he was already six years old when it happened and he knew that she was not his real mom. One day he said to Chen Shu-Nu: 'When I grow up I am leaving. Before I do you don't need to look after me, because you are not my mother.'

Chen Shu-Nu could see the hatred in He Xue-Ming's eyes, and saw that some of that hate was directed towards her. His tone of voice was like an adult, indifferent, as if he already knew everything. He had convinced himself that Chen Shu-Nu would leave them just like the last one did; and Chen Shu-Nu couldn't do anything to reassure him, because in reality she wasn't so sure herself whether she would stay or not. When she talked about this with her husband, he said he'd take care of it. Taking care of it, she found out, meant bringing He Xue-Ming to Datong Waterpark and buying toys for him, as if to tell him that he'll be fine as long as he listens to his father—what anybody else thinks doesn't matter.

Two years after Chen Shu-Nu married into the He family, she developed gastric issues, a symptom of which was incessant burping, belching every couple minutes. He Xin-Zhe couldn't handle sleeping next to a 'bullfrog', so they slept in separate rooms and he started spending much less time at home. Chen Shu-Nu had tried Chinese and Western medicine, but the bullfrog in her belly wasn't about to give up so easily.

He Xin-Zhe, already regretting marrying a bullfrog, became even more aloof towards her when he found out that she was infertile. Chen Shu-Nu blamed herself and her stomach, but she thought to herself that if she couldn't have her own child then maybe she could adopt a baby girl. At first her husband rejected the idea outright, but his attitude softened and eventually he yielded. Chen Shu-Nu had a strong suspicion that this act of submission only came about because her husband already had a woman on the side; she knew that in reality the last thing he wanted was to adopt a child, let alone a girl. He Xin-Zhe had a particularly heightened self-regard, and anticipated that one day he would become someone truly great. He always imagined having three boys so that at least one of them could live up to his name and inherit his wealth. But Chen Shu-Nu really wanted to have a daughter, so He Xin-Zhe relented, allowing her to adopt, if only to distract her for a while.

Much later on, Anna found out from Li Xiang that, as Chen Shu-Nu was taken to hospital from the Salon, she would mumble to herself whenever she neared unconsciousness: 'I can't go, what'll happen to her if I go?' Knowing that Anna would have nowhere to go once she died, Chen Shu-Nu was determined to cling on to life. It wasn't until Anna was nineteen years old that Chen Shu-Nu finally succumbed to stomach cancer. It was a protracted and painful struggle. Her hair had fallen out after chemotherapy, and she looked deathly white, like a wax figure. Sometimes when Anna looked at her mother she would wish for death to come quickly, but at the same time she couldn't bear to see her go. Chen Shu-Nu held on until she seemed certain that Anna could take care of herself, that she'd grown up. Then, at long last she closed her eyes for the final time and Anna could feel glad that her mother could rest.

After that incident at the Salon, when Anna's mom was first rushed to the hospital, Anna blamed herself for her

illness. Even as she moved to her middle school, Anna continued to blame herself, carrying these feelings back with her to her dorm. She didn't have any desire to do homework, only stubbornly counting down the days, and as soon as Thursday came around she started counting the number of classes until it was Friday. She spent the weekends in the hospital with her mom, not wanting to go home, because without her mom there it was simply not a home. Anna had also discovered that, with her mom seriously ill in hospital, He Xin-Zhe had started bringing other women home.

Even though Anna knew she wasn't very welcome in her adoptive home, she did have a little respect for He Xin-Zhe, because he used to be a high school math teacher, and Anna had idolized teachers, ever since she was little. Because he was a teacher He Xin-Zhe had students come over to their place so he could tutor them, and he quickly discovered that this was a much more lucrative job than teaching at school was. He left his position at the local school and moved to a cram school on Nanyang Street in Taipei—the hub of cram schools—planning on learning a bit about business management there. A few years later, as he was walking on Yanping North Road by Taipei Bridge, he noticed there were always loads of school kids gathered there. They came in over the bridge from Taipei County to Taipei City for class, and left the same way – it was the perfect place to start his own school. So He Xin-Zhe found a two-storey house next to the bridge and erected an enormous sign on the roof, so that anyone entering and exiting the saw his 'Harvard Cram School'.

And sure enough he made his fortune, quickly becoming a renowned math tutor for high school hopefuls. To achieve guaranteed high-school entrance success he conducted his classes military style. Students in their fourth year of junior high needing to retake the entrance exam were given strict rules: boys had to crop their hair close to their head, while the girls had to keep their hair two centimeters above the earlobe. Everyday before class, be it at noon or in the evening after regular school let out, everyone lined up to sing the national anthem and do calisthenics before starting their classes. When the parents saw such discipline they felt at ease because they knew their kids wouldn't be following a bad example. And so more and more parents sent their kids to his school, until he made enough money to buy the adjacent house as well, further assuring the parents that this was a successful man, and thus a good role model.

Chen Shu-Nu and Anna didn't benefit one bit from He Xin-Zhe's fortune. He kept his money in his own pockets, mostly, and a little in the pockets of other women too. The only other person who got anything was He Xue-Ming. He Xin-Zhe put away an education fund for him, but when He Xue-Ming tested into the School of Veterinarian Medicine at National Taiwan University his father was sorely disappointed. He Xin-Zhe always wanted a doctor in the family; but he'd planned on his son becoming a medical student. He had never imagined he would only get into veteri-whatever it was called, becoming only second-rate, imitation goods. When the people in the neighborhood congratulated He Xin-Zhe on having a doctor in the family he didn't feel happy, thinking that his neighbours must be mocking him.

The two of them argued over the whole situation. If you can believe it, He Xue-Ming told his dad in no uncertain terms that the only thing he wanted to study was veterinarian medicine. He Xin-Zhe ridiculed him: he might as well go to Africa to practice, there are no shortage of wild animals there. He Xue-Ming said that going to Africa was actually a pretty good idea, at least animals are easy to get along with. From this moment He Xin-Zhe

gave up on his son. He couldn't be bothered—his son's way of thinking was all wrong, and there was no hope for him.

Years later, when He Xue-Ming spoke to his father about studying abroad, the education fund was not mentioned at all. His father only agreed to lend him some money. He Xue-Ming's answer was frank. Not a problem, he would pay him back. After this, the last time anyone in the family heard of He Xue-Ming was when a letter arrived, addressed to He Xin-Zhe. In it, He Xue-Ming said that he hated his home. Since he was little, he knew that his mother's decision to leave was a right one, and he would always be sorry that she had not taken him with her. He had spent his whole life getting ready to escape, and he had finally made it. He never wanted to see He Xin-Zhe again. The letter ended like this:

'I don't plan on paying you back! I hope I will never see again. You might be angry, but if you ever try to look for me, I warn you that I have evidence of your affairs with underage girls. I am making sure your hospitalized wife possesses this as well.'

Anna never saw the evidence He Xue-Ming was talking about, but she witnessed it in person. One day Anna went home to get a change of clothes for her mom. She was planning on taking a shower, but fell asleep on Mom's bed. When she finally woke up, she could smell the scent of instant noodles wafting up to her. She walked down to the kitchen to grab a glass of water, and startled to see a girl, who looked like she was still in high-school, standing over the stove. She was only wearing a white long-sleeve shirt, her bare legs extending out below it. The shirt was translucent, and Anna could see her red underwear.

Upon realizing that she was not alone, the girl's surprised expression only lasted for a split second, quickly being replaced by a confident look that belied her age. As she started to speak, her manner reminded Anna of someone in a speech competition, enouncing everything carefully in an even, pretentious tone, neither too slow nor too fast.

'Hi! Are you Mr. He's daughter? I am his friend.'

Friend? Anna looked at the girl, unsure of how to react. She felt confused at first wondering what 'friends' could possibly mean, but immediately afterwards she had a sudden impulse to laugh. His friend! She couldn't help thinking that her stepfather was quite something. His girlfriend was young and pretty, her eyes were big and round, just like Mom's. Her face blushed pinkly, but her smile was a little too sweet. Her whole figure resembled a white steamed bun, soft and ready to be eaten. Meanwhile, Mom hadn't laughed for a long while, and lay wasting away in a hospital bed. When the thought of Mom hit her, a laundry machine started whirling in Anna's head. It pulled the shirt off the girl, and threw in the red panties along with it. The words from a tabloid newspaper appeared, swirling and tumbling together: friends, students, teacher-pupil, unethical, love affair, adulterer.

As she stood there, still not knowing how to react, she couldn't help but imagine her stepfather and that girl holding each other passionately in bed. It also dawned on her that it would be a disaster if her mom found out. As Anna's thoughts ran on, the girl walked past Anna holding a bowl, trying to escape the awkward situation.

'Are you making instant noodles?' Anna suddenly asked. The smell of fried green onion from the Pork Instant Noodles grabbed her. The girl had put a boiled egg in with it.

The girl looked at her and nodded.

'Did you buy it?' Anna asked. The girl shook her head, and said that she took it from the cupboard.

Anna thought: Those are my noodles she's eating! My noodles. My noodles!

Like a broken robot the same phrase echoed over in her mind.

The girl went upstairs swiftly. Anna knew that her stepfather was lying in bed, waiting to eat *her* instant noodles. A frenzy was rising in Anna's mind, and her face turned red and bloated with anger. She quickly gathered Mom's clothes and some of her own, stuffing them into a bag. She ran downstairs, shaking, but paused on the second floor. She turned around, and shouted upstairs to her stepfather and that girl:

'Shame on you, you filthy people! You stole my noodles!'

She ran off at full speed away, from He Xin-Zhe's tall and grand house. She was worried that he might come out to beat her. In fact, she knew he would.

From then on, the main focus of Anna's life was to take care of Mom in the hospital. At times, she wished that mom would never be discharged because although the room there was dark and small with a smell that was a constant mixture medicine and feces, at least there was only mom and her. Somehow this made it feel like home. Later, when Chen Shu-Nu said that she didn't want to go home, but to move to an assisted facility, Anna was happy. But, it was not a complete happiness, but was mixed with some other feelings too. Moving to an assisted facility mean that Mom and Anna had been kicked out of their own home by some high-school hottie.

Chen Shu-Nu knew all along that He Xin-Zhe had other women on the side. Anna didn't dare to tell mom that a high school girl who was now occupying their home, but Chen Shu-Nu had received the evidence that He Xue-Ming had sent her. 'I am a broken, used car.' She said to Anna. 'It makes sense that Dad wants a new car.' When Anna told her that his new woman was practically the same age as her, Mom laughed and said: Well, he got a good deal. The old and sick have left, and the young and new have arrived. Mom's laughter, that day stuck in Anna's mind. It sounded so odd. Later she would learn that that strange laugh was the sound of despair.

Chen Shu-Nu only worried about Anna's future, and nothing else. Her own life was already a mistake that could not be erased. The only thing she had done right in her life was adopting Anna. She had to do everything she could to protect the only good thing in her life. She negotiated with He Xin-Zhe about moving to the assisted home. She wouldn't hold anything about his new lover against him, even as she signed the divorce papers. The only thing she demanded was cash settlement, for Anna. Anna's stepfather didn't say a word beyond agreeing to the condition.

Chen Shu-Nu would think of He Xue-Ming sometimes. Anna occasionally would remember that she had a brother. But he had rejected both of them. As far as Chen Shu-Nu could tell, He Xue-Ming hated everyone. To be more precise: he hated all human beings. Chen Shu-Nu recalled a time when he was very little, and he read in the newspaper that a zebra, injured in a local newspaper, and been sent to the Taipei Veterinary Hospital for treatment. After asking his father to take him to see it, Xue-Ming regularly took bus by himself to visit the sick animals at the Veterinary Hospital. For a kid, the trip from Shulin to the hospital was definitely a long one, but He Xue-Ming was not afraid. One day, he came home and told his dad that he had seen the entire skeleton of a whale. They had set it up in a very dark room, and its bones were glistening. As Xue-Ming spoke, He Xin-Zhe didn't seem to hear, keeping his eyes fixed on the newspaper. It simply wasn't something that he cared about. Chen Shu-Nu seeing that her husband didn't say a word, decided to answer Xue-Ming herself. But Anna's brother replied: I hate you. I hate all human beings.

The only thing kept Anna to going was her mother. At school, she couldn't wait for the holidays. After a long bus ride, she went to her mom who was now in the assisted house in Ba-li, Taipei. The reason Chen Shu-Nu chose

this place was because she had remembered a bus line that used to run from Shulin. Its terminal station had been Ba-li. When she tried to think of a place far away from Shulin, she remembered this name.

When she just moved to the assisted housing in Ba-li, Anna felt that mom was happier. When she was in good enough shape to sit in a wheelchair, Anna would push her around the facility and beyond. A few times, they even went as far as Ba-li Recreational Beach. Chen Shu-Nu liked there because it had a vast cement sign of spelling out BALI, and she would joke that she had finally made it out to the Indonesian islands. .

But in her second year at the facility, Mom was too frail to get out of bed again, and she would gaze at Anna with a myserious look on her face. Anna couldn't ask her why because by then she had too many tubes connected to her face to speak properly. She could only communicate by hand gesture. As she deteriorated further, Anna began to fear that her mother was forgetting who she was. But something interesting was happening. Her mom started to treat Anna instead as a new friend.

For Anna, mom was gone even though she was still alive. Anna had gone also, and had into someone else.