WISH YOU WERE HERE
希望你也在這裡

After her love affair with a married man ends, Mei-Ya decides to head overseas to find her mother, whom she hasn't seen in many years. In Japan she meets An-Te, a man who dreams of searching for a mother he never knew in the first place. The two pair up and travel to the ancient city of Dali in Southwest China, where the issue of their missing mothers takes on renewed urgency.

Abandoned by her parents in childhood, Lien Mei-Ya pours herself into perfectionist pursuits, but can never escape the feeling that she is searching for some kind of redemption. When a secret love affair turns sour, she decides to travel to Japan to track down the mother she hasn't seen for years.

Hsieh An-Te is a bastard child, the product of his father's illicit affair with a prostitute while working in China. Now, he obsessively scans street view images online, fantasizing that one day he will stumble upon his missing mother.

After a chance meeting in Japan, Mei-Ya and An-Te discover they both are hoping to visit Dali, an ancient city in Southwest China. For An-Te, it is an opportunity to locate his mother. For Mei-Ya, on the other hand, it is a chance to walk in the footsteps of the woman she has been stalking on Instagram – the wife of her ex-lover.

When two grown children go searching for their lost mothers, paths cross, intertwine, and suddenly disappear without a trace. What decision does each make when they encounter a crossroads? When travel becomes a journey, when wandering finally becomes a search, will they find what they are looking for? Will it be possible for them to return home less encumbered than when they began?

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Essay Liu 劉梓潔

Essay Liu has known she wanted to be a writer since childhood, but only decided to pursue writing full time after winning the Lin Rong-San Literary Award for her essay “Seven Days of Mourning”, a deeply personal reflection on the pain of losing her father. The essay was incorporated into a collection under the same name that went on to sell 70,000 copies in Taiwan. A movie adaptation followed under the title *Seven Days in Heaven*, garnering Liu the 2010 Golden Horse Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. Liu cites Lawrence Block as a major influence, admiring his taut elegance tinged with cynicism.

WISH YOU WERE HERE

By Essay Liu
Translated by Michael Day

0. The Charnel Ground

The vultures waited.

The hillside was like a round arena divided in two, vultures on one side and people on the other. On the vultures' side, hundreds of giant birds sat watching, solemn and still, while hundreds more hovered above. Countless black dots flecked the blue sky – on closer inspection, each turned out to be a bird. Slightly later, as if by secret agreement, the airborne vultures swooped down and took up their perches, each seeming to know its place. Once the birds landed, there was no struggle and no squawking. With eyes gleaming like birds of prey (which they were), they all watched a single spot.

The humans' side brimmed with color and noise and bristled with fans and umbrellas. Decked out in broad-brimmed hats and UV protection suits, still the people complained loudly about the heat. It was summer on the plateau, and the temperature was over thirty. People wore light cotton clothes during the day and changed into quilted jackets at night. There was no shade anywhere, and the sun beat down mercilessly. The sun could be a blessing, but now seemed like a curse. The people cursed the sun in return as they switched from saying "It's hot out today" to "It's so goddamn hot out today," and from saying "This is taking an awfully long time" to "When will the torture end?" People dressed in garish Western clothes had stampeded into the holy land, eager to get the best shots to post on social media. Selfie sticks jostled with umbrellas. Arguments erupted. The humanity, muttered Molly with a grimace. At least they weren't using Buddhist scriptures to fan themselves, or setting them on fire.

Among the throngs of people, some sitting, some squatting, some standing, were a couple of skinny girls in cowboy hats and traditional Tibetan clothes. They had pretty faces and carried themselves gracefully, with perfectly straight posture. Miniature megaphones in hand, they were clearly there to maintain order. They didn't seem to be traditional volunteers, travel guides, or workers, and they were clearly non-Han Chinese. They were surrounded by a special aura, like the pretty young girls who hand over the prizes at the Golden Horse Award Ceremony, or the ones who pass the microphone to the president at the inauguration. Yes, special, that was the word for it. If she weren't dragging around the two of us outsiders, thought Mei-Ya, Molly would have fit right in with them.

Lien Mei-Ya and Hsieh An-Te had come with Molly to see a sky burial in a place called the Charnel Ground. Apparently it had once been just a burial platform in a barren wasteland. Over the years, as blood and body fluids seeped into the soil and people trampled the ground,

it became a swamp. A few years ago, they had completely renovated the place, paving the ground and putting in a parking lot, turning it into an educational theme park complete with a relief sculpture of the cycle of life and death called a bhavacakra, a pavilion dedicated to Yama, King of Hell, and a skull shrine. The main attraction was the sky burial that took place at one thirty every afternoon. Though they didn't sell tickets, each day before showtime, an eager crowd gathered, like spectators waiting to enter a theater.

It was past showtime, and Mei-Ya and her friends stood just past the dividing line of the humans' half of the hillside. To be exact, they had been slowly shoved outside by the surging crowd. Molly warned them not to join in the chanting unless they knew what they were doing – though they could chant the six-syllable mantra "om mani padme hum". Since the mantra was so simple, even if they lost their concentration, it wouldn't be difficult to find their places again. It was awfully noisy: *om mani padme hum*. It was awfully hot: *om mani padme hum*. God, this was boring: *om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum.*

They saw the lamas, the burial master, and the families of the departed bustling around the platform, but otherwise, there was no sound or movement at all. Mei-Ya thought to herself that the bodies that were about to be chopped up and fed to the birds must already be lying on the burial platform behind the iron sheeting. She had read about the ceremony online, and knew the lamas were chanting to placate the souls of the dead.

"Here they come! Here they come!" The people in the front row suddenly began shouting excitedly. A stir rippled through the humans' half of the hillside, while the vultures stayed still. Mei-Ya couldn't help glancing around curiously; she turned her gaze toward where the crowd was pointing, and saw some men carrying a crude wooden coffin. The smell of blood and rotten meat drifted upon the breeze. People began to shout "What's that smell?", holding their noses and frantically putting on masks, assuming that the show hadn't started yet because the vultures were still waiting. Mei-Ya held her breath as long as she could, exhaling only when she truly couldn't stand it anymore, then gasping frantically for air. The men carrying the coffin circled the stupa three times before approaching the burial platform.

Several more coffins arrived, by which point the stench had saturated the air and blanketed the ground; you could smell it even when you held your breath. The big white clouds and blue sky over the plateau still shimmered brightly, but the air had coagulated into a stew of blood and putrid juices that overwhelmed the senses of those who could still smell. Mei-Ya wobbled, seeming on the verge of fainting; Molly reached out to steady her, then put two droplets of cedar oil on her palms. Mei-Ya cupped her face and breathed deeply. She knew she would survive now, at least for a few more seconds. She took another whiff. No, at least for the moment, she wasn't going to die.

The men approached again, this time carrying a white burial shroud bound with cords instead of a coffin. They wrapped up the body, lifted it from either end with the cords, and circled the stupa three times. Two more men arrived with a big garbage can, and they too did three circles around the stupa. Molly had explained that not just anybody could be buried this

way; only the most virtuous were allowed to take part in this final offering. No matter who they may have been or what they may have accomplished, they now became food for the birds, giving themselves in an ultimate act of sacrifice.

There were twenty-some coffins in all – the most in a long time, they heard someone say. The iron enclosure was just high enough to block the bodies from view, but still they could clearly see the burial master in the big hat lifting the hatchet and hacking away to the sound of breaking bones. The vultures knew what to do: they took small, orderly steps forward, like runners inching up to the starting line. The burial master waved, and in an instant, every vulture on the hillside dove down on the platform. Instantly, the roughly ten-square-meter iron enclosure was enveloped in a cloud of dark brown down.

Gradually, the crowd dispersed, though the odor did not. Every departing spectator took a bit of the rancid stench back with them. Many people – men and women, old and young alike – had stopped their nostrils up with toilet paper. Mei-Ya noticed that even An-Te had bits of toilet paper sticking out of his nose. It looked funny, but somehow she couldn't laugh.

They said the vultures were incarnations of the dakini, female servants of the Buddha, representatives of mercy and wisdom. They helped the dead leave behind their bodies and break free from ego. When the vultures finished their meal and took wing, the souls of the dead hitched a ride to heaven. Mei-Ya waited eagerly, hoping to witness that moment, but the vultures – that is, the dakini – kept eating.

The driver called, urging them to hurry – if they waited any longer, they'd get stuck up there. They headed slowly downhill with the rest of the crowd, passing by the bhavacakra sculpture and the Yama pavilion. On the way down the set of stairs, Mei-Ya missed a step and tumbled to the ground, and suddenly, she was surrounded by the stench that had seeped into the ancient soil. No, she *was* the stench. She began to dry heave.

Molly and An-Te walked her over to a drainage ditch. Molly pounded on her back. "Try to throw up if you can. You'll feel better."

Mei-Ya opened her mouth, took a deep draught of the god-awful putrid air filled with every hateful thing in the world, and doubled over, clenching her throat and sucking in her stomach. An equal and opposite force pushed back, and fluid rose up her throat. Although she had eaten a big lunch, all that came up was a little bit of foam and water.

She tried again. Her retching harmonized with the squawking of the birds, and she sensed the dakini were lending her their strength, helping her to expel the rotten meat stench, along with everything she had ever eaten, the things she had learned in school, all her memories, both happy and sad, her parents, her siblings, people she'd betrayed and people who'd done her wrong, and everyone and everything she'd ever known – all of it rushed out in a forceful stream. She puked and puked.

"Did you throw anything up?" her friends asked gently.

Mei-Ya's head felt much clearer. Forcing a smile, she shook her head.

"Just bubbles."

1. A Critical Case

Mei-Ya:

Last night, I dreamed again of the house where we used to live.

After moving, we rented it out, but when I went to the bank to check my balance, I realized the rent hadn't been paid. I was peeved – I went over with the keys and let myself in. Remember the big living room? Well, they'd put up sheets of plywood, dividing it up into a many little rooms. The place was a disaster. Both men and women, some of whom seemed to be homeless, were milling around. Wet clothes hung everywhere, and they were cooking on a hot plate connected to a small gas tank in the middle of the living room instead of in the kitchen, and the kitchen island was covered in mahjong tiles. And they asked me, who are you?

I said, I'm the landlord, and you haven't paid the rent. They said they had. They claimed they paid on time every month.

I asked: Where's the money, then? I wasn't nice – I got right in their faces. It's been almost twenty years since we moved out, and the rent is at least five hundred thousand a year, so where the hell is my ten million bucks? I demanded to see the receipts, and wouldn't you know it, those flea-bitten bag people had kept them all, folded up neatly in a plastic bag, hanging on the rack in the entryway.

I took out all the receipts and checked them one by one. Then I saw the account number, and it suddenly struck me, the house wasn't ours anymore.

We'd moved away and sold it.

But I refused to put my head down and say sorry. I decided to say I wanted to see the swimming pool, then slip out the back gate.

I went in the back yard to find the pool empty. There were mud and dried leaves in it, and some broken appliances and furniture. It irked me to see the place in such a state, but then I thought again, it didn't belong to me. Then my anger went away, and I've never felt better.

I sent money. Did you get it?

Mom

Are a house and a home the same?

The summer she left for college in Taipei, Mei-Ya learned her birth mother's secret: even if you owned a house, home could slip through your fingers.

Her adopted parents had bought a condominium, saying they'd transfer the title to her in two years, when she turned twenty. For her adopted parents, it was mission accomplished, the end of their relationship: she was on her own. She was eighteen years old and a homeowner – how could she ask for anything more? What did she think she was, a princess?

That was exactly it. She'd been born a princess, but hadn't been allowed to live as one. Her birth mother was on the opposite side of the earth, and she sent money sometimes, for

tuition fees and things like that, and one time to buy a house, and for years, her adopted parents had managed the money faithfully, but now this responsibility was hers. With the condo came a checking account – later, her mother began sending money directly to her, without going through her adopted parents. Each payment was followed by a baffling letter like the one above, saying, I had this kind of dream, or, I went to get my fortune told, and they told me this. Mei-Ya almost never wrote back.

Now that she owned her own home, her adopted parents' house was no longer home for her. They went back to being just her aunt and uncle, which was what she'd always called them and what they actually were in the first place. Her aunt wasn't a bad person, and she wasn't mean, but the boundaries were clear. Occasionally, on a long weekend or a holiday, Mei-Ya would receive a text saying something like, come visit us in Hualien.

Not "come home", come visit.

Mei-Ya knew that her little thirty-square-meter condo was home now.

The new residential development stood on the banks of the river. You could see the university on the opposite bank, just a short bus trip away across the bridge.

Since she owned her own home, she never experienced climbing over the dormitory gates after a late night out, and she never shared toothpaste or toilet paper with a roommate. She never strolled a night market hand-in-hand with a girlfriend, and she didn't go out with boys. At the end of class, she went straight home. At first, she told her classmates she lived with family, then said her parents had bought a place in Taipei and she was going home for dinner. Her homework was impeccable, and she never let other people copy her notes. When the class divided into small groups, she always told the teacher she wanted to work alone. All this made an impression on her classmates: she was a rich, antisocial oddball.

She took the bus to school alone, had lunch alone in the cafeteria, and at the end of the day bought a bento box and ate it alone at home. The most important thing was, she was safe. Satisfied with the security features – you had to swipe a card to get into the main gate, the lobby, and the elevator – her aunt and uncle left the adult Mei-Ya in the care of the magnetic locks and washed their hands of her.

When she moved in, her aunt had picked out the furniture in the condo, selecting a double bed (saying that when she eventually got a boyfriend, or got married, a bigger bed would be more comfortable) as well as a matching vanity, nightstand, wardrobe, and bookshelf, all sturdy and made of wood. Her aunt always took pains to show she was treating Mei-Ya decently and wasn't throwing away the money her mother sent. The stuff she bought wasn't cheap either, it just wasn't up to date. Mei-Ya didn't realize it at first, having no basis for comparison, but later, after browsing some interior decorating magazines in Taipei, she realized that even though it had everything it needed, her home was missing something, something invisible – style, flair.

One time, she stopped in at the Workinghouse furniture store on her way home from school, and it struck her that it smelled just like home – it was exactly the same smell as the home she had lived in as a kid.

"I just love it when you come in the door and the house smells good," her mother had said while placing scented candles in the entryway, atop the shoe rack, in the bathroom, and on the wardrobe in the bedroom.

The second Mei-Ya stepped into the store, she sensed her mother's spirit hovering in the air. That was strange, though: her mother wasn't dead, she was still alive somewhere, it was just that she didn't know where. She spent a long time smelling different scented candles. That fragrance she remembered from back then, was it white musk, ocean breeze, or orchard apple? She lined up some scented candles and diffusers, planning to take pictures and send them to her mom, but fragrances don't come through in photos. Like her mother, they couldn't be seen or touched.

She thought about buying the whole sofa and coffee table set from Workinghouse and moving it right into her place, but there wasn't enough space, and she didn't have the time or motivation to redo her whole setup. Now, at least, when she talked about "going home", she knew exactly where home was. She had her own set of keys and her own number plaque over the door, and later on, she even had a deed with her name on it. Life was peaceful, stable, and settled.

She realized she was starting to enjoy the peace and quiet.

In order to savor this sensation a while longer, she took a temporary research assistant job at the university immediately after graduation, and found a secretarial position after the study ended. She worked from nine to five, and never went anywhere except the office. This went on until she turned twenty-eight.

She had lived in the condo for ten years already, longer than in the house she thought of in her heart as home.

The summer before fourth grade, her mother left her on the street corner with a pile of suitcases, saying, "Stay here and look after the luggage. I'm going to get the car." Mei-Ya's mother drove a Mercedes, and her father drove a Maserati, both with the lucky plate number 8888, as her teachers and classmates all knew. On the corner diagonally opposite from where she stood, an old couple sold all sorts of wicker chairs out of a stall. Doing her best to stay hidden, she peered through the cardboard boxes and suitcases, not knowing which direction the Mercedes might come from. Her mother normally parked at home in the garage, but for some reason, before moving out, she had parked in a paid lot nearby. She said that that way it was easier for the furniture and appliance trucks to get through, but if that was the real reason, couldn't she have just moved the car out of the way?

"That's strange." This had recently become Mei-Ya's pet phrase. Later on, these two words would become almost the only thing she ever said.

"You'll get used to it," was her mother's emotionless, unchanging response.

Both their cell phones were in her mother's bag. She wasn't sure how long she stood there, but she watched the rays of the sun slant gradually, bathing the entire street in gold. The longer she waited, the colder it got, so as the shadows grew, she came out of hiding and sat in

the sun. It was too cold to remain in the shadows, and anyway, who would see her? The flow of customers was thinning, and the elderly man and woman at the chair stand were packing up and preparing to go home.

If her mother didn't return, should she camp out on the street corner? No – she glanced at the "For Sale" sign on the wall outside the home, with the number of the real estate agency in small print beneath. They had to have a key. She would find a phone, call them up, and have them let her in. She would back home again, even if home had been hollowed out.

She silently repeated the number again and again to commit it to memory.

Just as the streetlamps flickered to life, she saw the Mercedes with the 8888 plate come around the corner. Nonchalantly, as if she had been gone for no more than five minutes, her mother parked the car, got out, and began loading boxes into the back seat and trunk. Her mother was strong, as Mei-Ya had known since she was little. She was always boasting of her heroic strength: "You know, I brought a big traveling bag without wheels all the way from Hualien. I took the train to Taipei and then an unlicensed chicken taxi to Taichung, all by myself."

"You know, back when I worked at the flea market, at the end of every day I would wrap all the purses in bedsheets, load them on my motorbike and take them back home all by myself."

"You know, I used to carry your grandfather around on my back. I would take him to the bathroom, bathe him, and carry him back, all by myself. Your uncle was pretty strong too, but your grandfather never asked him for help. Whenever he needed anything, he called out, 'Lien Ai-Feng!'"

But Lien Ai-Feng's superhuman strength seemed to have failed her now. Try as she might, she couldn't cram the last few boxes into the car. She said to Mei-Ya, "Okay, we'll leave these boxes on the street. Anyway, there's nothing but clothes inside."

"On the street? Why don't we take them back home?" She may have only been ten, but she knew to take good care of her things.

"We sold the house, why fill it up with stuff?"

Mother and daughter saw the place differently: she called it "home", while her mother referred to it as "the house". People say "let's go home," not "let's go back to the house"; we talk about "moving home", not "moving the house". But we say "selling the house", not "selling home". Now that their home had been emptied out, it was nothing but a house, and home was this pile of boxes. Her mother was ready to abandon the boxes, since after all, they contained only a bunch of clothes, nothing to get sentimental over. She turned back into that superhuman strongwoman at the flea market, briskly piling the unwanted boxes beside the road, irritably flinging the door open, climbing in the driver's seat, and turning the key in the ignition.

There was nothing Mei-Ya could do but climb sheepishly into the car. A twenty-nine-inch suitcase occupied the passenger seat, so she squeezed into the back seat between the suitcases and boxes.

"Don't worry, the boxes won't be there long. Someone will come snatch them up," her mother explained to Mei-Ya at the first red light, seeming slightly calmer now.

"If you left me there on the street corner, would someone snatch me up, too?" Mei-Ya

asked her mother, and began to cry. She only sobbed twice before stopping herself abruptly, though she sniffled a little, and her eyelashes were moist. When she let out those two small sobs, deep resistance welled up from her depths. She became a sheet of glass, rigid and unmoving.

Her mother was another sheet of glass, and it was impossible for two hard surfaces to embrace. When they clashed, they both shattered. She always resolved to stand her ground, but went to pieces anyway. Her mother may have been good at carrying bags around, but she lacked the strength to lift her daughter from the ground.

"That's strange." She had no other words.

"No, it isn't. I went to the bank. There were a lot of people. I had to wait," replied her mother in a calm, even tone as she accelerated in preparation to merge onto the highway.

It was the last long road trip Lien Mei-Ya and Lien Ai-Feng ever took together. They must have stopped to rest or get dinner, and they must have spent the night somewhere, but she couldn't remember where. They had to have at least stopped for gas and bathroom breaks, and Ai-Feng hadn't quit tobacco yet, so she must have pulled over to smoke, or had she smoked while driving? Mei-Ya had no memory of it whatsoever. She couldn't remember whether rings of smoke had hovered in the car.

It was at least a seven-hour trip from Taichung to Hualien. Maybe Ai-Feng had such incredible determination and control over her bladder that she had made the journey without a single stop, speeding directly to her parents' home in Hualien, pushing the Mercedes hard down the Beiyi and Suhua highways (the Hsuehshan Tunnel hadn't yet opened), or maybe she had pulled over to smoke or nap while Mei-Ya was sleeping. In Mei-Ya's memory, it was dusk when they left Taichung, and they reached her grandmother's house just as dawn was breaking.

Her mother told her to open her eyes and reached out to stroke her face, then unloaded the suitcases and boxes all by herself, stacking them at the entrance to the narrow lane where her grandmother lived. A deep drainage ditch ran between the alley and the main road, so cars couldn't get into the alley. Mei-Ya remembered riding down the alley on the back of her mother's bicycle when she was very little, the two of them wobbling their way along, laughing and shouting.

When her mother finished unloading their things, Mei-Ya at last got out of the car. Her mother gave her phone back, saying, "The battery died. You can charge it at your grandmother's." Next she said almost the exact same thing she said twelve hours earlier – only one word was different. "Stay here and look after the luggage. I'm going to park the car."

History was essentially repeating itself in a different time and place. Once again, Mei-Ya waited forlornly by the pile of suitcases.

But this time, her mother didn't make her wait long. Only five minutes or so after the car with the 8888 plate disappeared, she saw her uncle approaching, pushing a large shopping cart. While briskly loading the luggage into the cart, her uncle said, "Let's get you home."

"Where's Mom?"

"She went to park the car."

This didn't strike Mei-Ya as strange. She followed behind her uncle, dragging two

wheeled suitcases down the narrow lane. Did they always have this cart lying around? Or had her mother asked her uncle to get it ready? At her grandmother's house, she ate the breakfast her aunt had bought for her, black tea and egg crepes from a local place called Miaokou, but still her mother had yet to return. Mei-Ya slept a while, but when she woke up, her mother still wasn't back. She didn't ask, and none of the three adults volunteered any information. Night began to fall, and her aunt asked her sort out her things from her mother's. Mei-Ya took her things to her grandmother's room and left her mother's untouched in the cart in the corner of the living room. Her uncle reclined on one side of the sofa while her grandmother lay on the other, watching TV.

Her aunt told her to go take a shower.

That must mean she was moving in. Mei-Ya remembered something her mother had said one time. Her mother's girlfriends – a rich, tony crowd – were always coming over to eat, drink, play mahjong, and sing karaoke. One time, on coming out of the bathroom, one of the women exclaimed with an exaggeratedly awestruck expression that it was just like the bathroom in a five-star hotel! You couldn't see incense sticks or a diffuser anywhere, but somehow it smelled amazing from the instant you walked in. The little towels arranged neatly in the bamboo basket looked brand new, and the small bamboo hamper for used towels was a classy touch. The gleaming granite floor looked so clean it seemed you could roll around on it in white clothes and not get dirty. But the woman asked, what about the shower?

"The shower? Planning on moving in, are you?" asked her mother icily while placing a mahjong table on the board. But her tone quickly warmed: "Not that that's a problem. You can stay in the guest suite as long as you want. There's a shower in there." In spite of what her mother said, as far as she knew, no one, not even her uncle or her grandmother, ever stayed in the guest suite.

It was just like her mother: first to say what she really thought, then backpedal and tell people what they wanted to hear. Often, it was impossible to tell what she really meant.

The porcelain tiles in her grandmother's shower were cracked, and plastic basins of all shapes and colors were strewn across the floor. The towels were all different sizes, and none of them matched. There was no hot water. Apparently, a water pipe had broken, and no one had bothered to fix it. As her aunt instructed, she went to the kitchen, poured hot water from the kettle into a plastic basin, filling it halfway, then returned to the bathroom and filled the basin the rest of the way with cold water. Using a mug as a ladle, she took a bath.

Fortunately, she had slept outside at summer camp during the summer vacation just before fourth grade, so she felt right at home. Staying at her grandmother's house felt like a camping trip. When she finished bathing, she washed her socks and underwear. Her aunt said, "Good girl," and went outside to hang them on the line.

When she returned to her room, her phone had charged up, so she turned it on and called her mom. The call went straight to voice mail. She looked through the call history: from four to five in the afternoon, while she was standing on the street corner in Taichung waiting for her mother, calls had been put in to a long string of landline numbers starting with different

area codes, 04, 02, 03, 06, and 07. All the calls were brief. She pulled her computer from her backpack. Since fourth grade, she had had a laptop – yes, she was a princess, but right now, Princess Mei-Ya was roughing it. Her uncle didn't have internet, not even dialup.

So she couldn't get online and figure out whom her mother had called. Had she called her friends to ask for money? If so, the calls would have been to mobile numbers, not land lines. Mei-Ya tried calling one of the numbers. It rang twice, and someone picked up. It was a tired-sounding women's voice, one she didn't know. "Who are you trying to reach?"

"Sorry for the trouble, but is Lien Ai-Feng there by any chance? This is her d—" Mei-Ya's gut told her that her mother was hiding behind one of these phone numbers.

"Who again? This is Merciful Hill Home for Children," the woman broke in brusquely.

"Sorry, wrong number." Mei-Ya promptly hung up.

Heart pounding, she called the next number on the list. This one was clearly a corporate operation. After two rings, a machine replied: "This is Hope Springs Orphanage. If you know your extension, please dial it now." She hung up, then dialed a number starting in 07. This one turned out to be a public orphanage. She could hear children laughing and shouting in the background. Her hands started to shake. The previous evening, her mother had dumped her on the street corner, then sat in her car a couple streets over calling up one orphanage after another. In brief calls, none lasting more than eight minutes, what had she said?

Had she asked them to come and take Mei-Ya away, as if asking a scrap dealer to haul off an old broken fridge or TV?

Hi, I'm moving, and I have a daughter I don't want, can you take her? Yes, she's my biological child, a fourth-grade girl. I'll load her in the car and bring her over now. I'll say I'm going to park the car, and you come out and grab her. If she says, that's strange, tell her, you'll get used to it.

You're the strange one, she imagined the orphanage saying to Lien Ai-Feng at the end of the eight-minute call – that's what any normal person would have said, anyway. Maybe Ai-Feng had gotten what she hated the most, a lecture. Maybe she had talked back. Anyway, after being rejected by every orphanage in Taiwan, running both cell phones out of battery, she had switched to Plan B: load her daughter in the car and head for her parents' home in Hualien.

Of course, she had had one other choice. She could have hit the road without looking back, driven far away where no one would ever find her. But instead, she had returned.

Maybe, that eight-minute call had ended with a deal – okay, we'll take her. Ai-Feng had driven back home, loaded her daughter and the suitcases in the car, but lost her nerve and switched direction, heading for her parents' house instead.

"Now that the house is sold, we have to go live somewhere else," Ai-Feng had said. And that was the problem. What she hadn't said was, *we* have to move somewhere *together.*

"What about Dad?" Mei-Ya had asked.

"Your dad has another family in Shanghai," Ai-Feng had explained to the ten-year-old Mei-Ya, carefully enunciating each word, stern and serious, like an English instructor teaching a student a new grammar rule. There was an insistence in her tone: this is the way it is, you've

got no choice, get it right.

"Why?" Mei-Ya had asked.

"No reason. That's the way it is." Ai-Feng went to on to explain that people could have more than one family. For example, when she was little, she lived with her parents in Hualien. Then she moved in with a friend in Taipei, and after that, she bought a small condo in Taichung. Still later, she, Mei-Ya, her father, and Jungjung had lived together in a big house. Now, Jungjung was in Heaven and her father was with his other family in Shanghai, so they had to find a new home.

"Dad cheated? That's why he has another family?" Though she was only ten, she had watched plenty soap operas with her mom's girlfriends, and knew well that adults had affairs.

"Yes." Her mother spat the answer forcefully, shooting it like an arrow into the air, but she soon noticed the arrow had turned in midair and was heading straight back at her.

"No," her mother continued as she packed without looking up, "I mean, yes. We're the other family."

She knew the second answer was the truth.

She, her mother, and her younger brother who had recently died by drowning were the other family. Her father in the Maserati, and his mistress – her mother – in the Mercedes, both with plates reading 8888.

"Don't worry, your father says he'll take care of us. He's committed."

"What does 'committed' mean?"

"It means doing what you say."

Lien Ai-Feng was committed. She gave her daughter a new home, which happened to be the same home she had fled from years before, the squat one-story house by the drainage ditch with the ratty rattan chairs in the living room and no hot water in the shower. Meanwhile, the mansion in one of the nicest parts of Taichung, the one with the elevator and the gated garden, which the agent had managed to sell in spite of the boy's death by drowning in the pool, was now a "stigmatized property," not a home.

Her dad had gone back home to Shanghai, she was at her grandmother's house, and she had no idea where her mother was.

Mei-Ya and her grandmother slept in a double bed. It didn't have a mattress, just a wooden board and a thin bamboo bedroll. The pillow and the bedding smelled like Tiger Balm and lanolin, an old person's smell. Mei-Ya refused to wake until the sound of someone unzipping a suitcase in the living room woke her.

Was it her mom?

She opened the door and looked outside to find her aunt removing the bags and suitcases one by one from the shopping cart and lining them up on the ground. Her aunt glanced up, saw the bewildered look on Mei-Ya's face, and said, in the blasé tone of a secretary reporting to her boss on the day's business, "Your mom says she wants you to be able to shower. She says to sell one of the purses and get the hot water fixed."

As she spoke, she pulled the last of the brand name bags from the reusable dustproof packaging and placed it in the pile on the rattan chair. “Want to choose?”

Mei-Ya shook her head. “Was she here?”

“She called this morning.” Her aunt answered Mei-Ya’s next question before she could ask: “She didn’t say where she was, and the number didn’t show on the caller ID. She asked how you were doing. I told her you were sleeping, and she said not to bother you.”

“Next time she calls, can you let me listen?”

Her aunt nodded, selecting a square leather handbag from an orange box. In the same flat, businesslike tone, she said, “I’ll ask Brilliant Butterfly to come take a look. They’ll know what it’s worth.”

Her aunt waited for Mei-Ya to nod, then put the other bags back in the boxes and stacked the boxes back in the cart.

Soon, the bathroom became a construction zone. To shower, they had to go to the fruit store next door with their clothes, towels, and toiletries in hand. It seemed even more like summer camp.

Her grandmother’s house was long and narrow, with two doors on either end of the living space. The front door faced the main road, while the back door let out on the alley. The front and rear halves of the house were connected only by a single small door in the middle. The front was rented out to a fruit shop. Her uncle lived off the rent, while her aunt operated a small seamstress shop beneath the overhanging canopy of the fruit store.

Two weeks later, the ratty old home had a brand-new bathroom with quartz flooring, a Japanese TOTO brand toilet, a gleaming stainless-steel faucet, and a glass shower enclosure. All this seemed to be her mother’s way of thanking her grandmother for taking her in. In addition, a new desk, a gift for Mei-Ya, appeared next to the shopping cart in the corner of the living room.

One day, her aunt and her uncle changed into slightly more formal clothes, and the three of them went to the elementary school by motorbike to complete Mei-Ya’s transfer procedure. While the adults did the paperwork, Mei-Ya looked over the family registry: her relationship to her guardians was “granddaughter”, her family position was “eldest daughter”, her mother’s name was Lien Ai-Feng, and where her father’s name would have been, there was a blank.

The adults obviously had a clear picture of her family situation, and the look of pity on the face of the dean of studies was plain. Mei-Ya followed her homeroom teacher, a woman with thick, burly arms and legs, to the classroom. She noticed the teacher had muscular calves and wore stilettos, and her large butt waggled exaggeratedly beneath her tight white skirt when she walked. As they drew near the classroom, the teacher turned, stooped down, and looked Mei-Ya directly in the face with eyes that were almost cartoonishly huge.

Noticing the teacher’s thick fake eyelashes and heavy makeup, she realized she had been wrong: her teacher was a he.

“Do you think I’m strange?” The teacher’s voice was low and husky, but at the same time it had a certain softness.

Mei-Ya thought for moment, then answered in a small voice, “I’ll get used to it.”

Covering his mouth, he let out two girlish giggles. “Sure you will, but the other students might not get used to you. They might run their mouths. Know how to shut them up?”

Mei-Ya shook her head.

“You have to be the best, and no one will bother you. And do you know how to do that?”

“Be the number one student in class?”

“Bingo! Nobody messes with number one. They’ll still talk behind your back, but who cares?”

She may have only been a fourth grader, but she knew what a drag queen was. Still stranger than her cross-dressing teacher was the sense of security Mei-Ya felt in his presence. She felt safe saying what she really thought. Meeting a talented teacher could change your life, even if the teacher was a weird one.

“Teacher, can I skip class and go to the library instead?” For the first time since arriving in Hualien, her tone was buoyant and bright.

“No problem! Go girl! You do you! But first, you have to introduce yourself to the class. Is that okay?”

Just a few steps from the classroom, she ran through her memories of giving speeches at the clubs she attended with the children of the rich women in Taichung – future leader’s club, camping club, and social EQ development club. Then she set down her bookbag, strode confidently to the podium, and bowed.

“Hi everybody. My name is Lien Mei-Ya, and I’m from Taichung. My mother and my father are in Shanghai for work, so I’m staying with my grandma in Hualien for a while. Nice to meet you all. Hopefully we’ll all be friends before long.”

She didn’t yet have a uniform. She wore a navy blue wool skirt, a white knit sweater, and black leather shoes. She knew she might not be making friends any time soon, but at least the other students wouldn’t pester her with questions about who her father and mother were.

Before her teacher and classmates were finished applauding, she was out the door and on her way to the library.

First thing, connect to the internet.

She typed the names of the orphanages her mother had called into a search engine. She wasn’t trying to track her mother down, but she wanted to know what she’d been planning.

“Providing a safe, supportive environment in critical cases of abuse, abandonment, and severe neglect.”

She’d found it.

That was her, a “critical case”. It sounded a lot better than severe neglect or abandonment.

“I’m a critical case, so my mom sent me to live with my grandma.” It sounded a little silly, but made her feel special.

She learned later on that her homeroom teacher, the one who wore thick makeup and women’s clothing, had several students who had advanced to the national level in language competitions, and had helped the school film its anniversary celebration and even designed the

school's website. But most importantly, all the students liked him, and the principal and the other teachers left him alone.

She told her aunt and uncle that in order to become the best student in the class, she wanted to learn English and composition and enter a project in the science fair. When a look of hesitation flashed briefly across her aunt's face – surely she was thinking of the tuition – Mei-Ya just pointed at the cart full of brand-name purses.

Later, she learned that her aunt put the bags on consignment at an imported goods store on Hualien Street called Brilliant Butterfly. Sometimes, on the way to cram school on the back of her uncle's motorcycle, she turned and saw her mother's purses sitting in the showroom window behind a sheet of glass. It was a special "Lien Ai-Feng Exhibition". Or maybe a "Lien Ai-Feng Memorial".

Maybe, back when she was working at the flea market, Ai-Feng had dreamed of someday opening a store like this one, so she had become a brilliant butterfly and flown away from this little mountainside town. Maybe, in that way, she hadn't abandoned Mei-Ya, she had just been flying so long she had forgotten how to land.