

Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto

When my father died, I sat in front of my mother at the wake. There were enough chairs set up for fifty people but there were only three of us so we sat in the first three rows, one person in each as if we were high-schoolers on an empty bus. She didn't cry at first.

‘Ni zhi dao, wo meng ershiwu sui de shi hou, wo meng youyi ci xiatian qu hou wan. Ta dai zhe ne li hao jiu wo yi wei wo yao bata la huijia ne!’

You know, when your father and I were twenty-five, we went to the lake one summer. He wanted to stay there so long I thought I was going to have to drag him home!

I asked her if she actually wanted to come to this country. I forgot the word for *country* (guojia) so I just said *here* (zhe li). It was not the first time I had asked her that. She gave a different answer than last time.

‘Wo bushi bu xiang lai zheli. Danshi wo de pengyou he jiating dou zai zhongguo. Shi yingwei ni de baba womeng lai zhe li de.’

I didn't not want to come here. But my friends and family all lived in China. We had to come here because of your father.

It was the middle of February and there were flies buzzing outside the window. You could see another family in the garden out front, huddled together in their black clothing. Meimei picked at the eczema on her knuckles. A month ago, she watched our father pass away against the crystal blue of Stradbroke Island, somewhere I hadn't been since my sixteenth birthday. When the police brought her home that day, she told me the people on the beach – who were “very cool” – performed twenty minutes of CPR on our father before she decided to look away.

‘Ne ni wei she me li kai zhongguo?’

Then why did you leave China?

Mother was never one to cry. She remained stoic at the worst of times. Father was a crier. He cried over dinner; he cried when his favourite sports team won; he cried when he dropped me off at school camp. He didn't cry when his father passed. Or so he said.

'Wo meng gei ni yi ge hao rizi. Zhongguo tai nan le.'

We wanted to give you a good life. Life in China is too hard.

'Do you think wo meng zai zhongguo hui survived?'

Do you think we would have survived in China?

Mother laughed as she wiped her undereye with a finger. The sequins on her neckline shuddered.

'Survive? Sheng cueng?' She repeated.

'Yeah, whatever. I thought *sheng cueng* was more like surviving as a species.'

'Shi ya, bu shi ni shuo de me?'

Yes indeed, is that not what you mean?

'Not in a life-or-death way. "Survive" as in "get by".'

She cocked her head to one side. 'Wo bu zhi dao.'

I don't understand.

Mother asked me to bring my violin so that I could play for father. When she stopped crying, she gestured to the black case in the corner of the room. It was the same shape as the coffin.

'Gei nide baba la yige qu zi ba?'

Why don't you play your father a song?

The Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto had eight bars of rest in the beginning. It had been three years since I played the piece for my exam. At the time, father was so elated I was playing his favourite piece of music for my highest achieving exam. He took me to the exam and before I went inside, he kissed me on the cheek and told me we'd go out for takeout afterwards.

Now at the funeral home, I counted all eight bars of rest in silence.

Mother sang with the violin, her soprano voice clashing with my old strings. On the last note, I could only feel the dampness of my hand against the wood.

She cocked her head to one side, frowning slightly.

'You yi dian zou diao. Ni hao jiu dou meiyou lian le ba?'

It was a little out of tune. You haven't practised in a while, hey?

Her face was dry and she was smiling a little.

'You should get meimei to play something.' I said.

'Ni de meimei she me dou la bu liao. Wo hohui mei you bije ni xue qing xue hao yi dien.'

Your sister doesn't know how to play anything. I regret not pushing her to practise violin more.

'Why are we talking about this?' Meimei shrugged, sinking into her chair.

As we left the room, the receptionist hugged us one at a time. Her hair smelt of pine and salt.

'Beautiful music in there. I'm sure he loved it.' She said.

On the drive back, mother said she wanted to scatter his ashes at Stradbroke Island. I looked at meimei. She watched the electric lines above us. They crossed over us as we drove on, never stopping, even when we got home. The theory of the infiniteness of parallel lines was true.

‘Don’t you think it’s too soon?’ I said.

‘Shuo zhong weng.’

Speak Chinese.

I placed my hand on top of meimei’s. We always sat in the backseat together, even though now it made mother look like a chauffeur. It reminded us of being children.

She studied me through the rear-view mirror. She plucked her eyebrows this morning so they were extra sparse. For whom, I was not sure.

‘Shuo ya.’

Say it.

‘Bushì tai zào le me?’

Isn’t it too soon?

‘Tai zào gān shēme?’

Too soon for what?

‘For meimei to go back to that place.’

‘Zhongweng. She me yi si, tai zào le?’

Chinese please. What do you mean, it’s too soon?

‘Don’t worry.’

When we got home, we filed into our bedrooms but left the doors open still. Father never let us close them. If we did close them to get dressed or to watch a film in private, we’d

have to tell him in advance. Sometimes we could hear mother and father talking about their money problems late at night, mother tossing and turning in the bed next to him while he pried at the information he wanted. At some point, one of them would fall asleep.

The sun had begun to set over our house, orange spilling in all corners of my room. There was a large tree with dark green leaves and scaly branches that stood in the way of my window and the outside world, but since they cut it down, I could see and hear every person and vehicle that passed by. I undressed in front of the mirror and let the light prickle my skin. The clothes were heavy and nothing at the same time.

‘Ni bang wo bao huntun ba.’ Mother said as she passed my room and went down the stairs.

Help me make wontons.

She mixed the wonton filling with her hands, massaging the mince up and down until it became a soft pink ball. With chopsticks, she pinched a sliver of meat off the top of the ball and placed it in a hot pan, bringing on the quiet sizzling of oil. She picked it off the hot pan with her fingers and tasted it.

‘Ni ke yi zai fan yi dian yan?’

Can you add more salt?

Meimei took the spoon out of the salt container and waved it around.

‘How much?’

‘Yi dian dian.’

A little bit.

‘How much is yi dian dian?’

‘Ni fang ba, wo hui gei ni jiang de.’

Just put it in, I’ll tell you when to stop.

She heaped the spoon to the brim and tilted it so slow that the crystals cascaded off one-by-one. They landed with the touch of new snow.

‘Kuai yi dian. Ni yao sheme shi hou chi fan?’

Hurry up. Are you planning on eating tonight?

She tipped the spoon over and all of the salt fell into the bowl.

‘Tai duo le!’

That’s too much!

‘You said faster!’ Meimei said.

‘Wo bushi shuo zeme kuai! Xian zai ni yao ba yan wa chu lai!’ Mother cried.

I didn’t mean that quickly! Now you have to get the salt out!

‘Sorry.’ Meimei said.

‘Ni naozi li mian shi houhou me?’ Mother asked.

Is your brain mush?

She stared at the white particles as if they had the answer.

It was dark out and the birds were home. We sat around the dining table, trying to make our wontons resemble mother’s as much as possible. We each had our own stack of yellow wonton wrappers and bowls of tap water. Mother sat at the head of the table, where father used to sit. The light above us flickered.

‘Jangzi,’ she said, demonstrating the fold. Her fingers had a thin film of flour on them from the wrappers. ‘Bu yao yong taiduo shui, yi diandian gou ba ta zhan zhe. Huo zhe shi ta jiu hui niannian de.’

Like this. Don’t use too much water, a little bit is enough to stick it together. Or else the dough will get very sticky.

With a wet finger she met the two tips of a folded wonton and sealed it together, creating a soft dimple in the bump where the filling was. She placed it on a floured Styrofoam tray and began filling a new wonton wrapper.

‘Ni zhidao weisheme huntun shi zhe yige xinzhong me?’

Do you know why wontons are this shape?

The filling in my wonton seeped out of the side as I tried to fold it up.

‘Ni fangle tai duo rou,’ mother said, snatching the wonton from my hand.

You’ve used too much filling.

She removed some of the filling and gave it back to me. It was warm from her hands.

‘Shi ying wei zhongguo reng heng xi huan qian! Huntun kan zhe xiang jinzi!’ Her glasses slipped down her nose as she guffawed.

It’s because Chinese people are obsessed with money! Wontons are made to look like gold ingots!

When we finished wrapping the wontons, she boiled a large pot of water and washed some gailan while meimei and I tidied up the table. She gave us each a steaming bowl of wontons in their soup and we passed around bottles of aged vinegar and soy sauce for seasoning.

‘Ni de nanpengyou ze me yang?’ She said, in the middle of drinking her broth with both hands.

How’s your boyfriend doing?

‘Good. Ta heng supportive.’

‘Ta meiyou juede nande?’

He doesn’t find this difficult?

‘No.’

‘Zhe haihao. You yi xie nande hui paodiao dang shi nande shiqing fasheng.’

That’s good. Some men run away when things get hard.

‘Baba yiqian shi zheyang zi me?’

Was father like that?

She put her bowl down and wiped her mouth with a tissue. The last wonton in her bowl bobbed around.

‘Ta wufa yingdui kunnan dan shi ta xihuan ba biereng de shenghuo bian de kuannan.’

He couldn’t handle hardship but he liked to make other people’s lives hard.

‘Then why did you stay?’ Meimei said, pushing her bowl away.

‘Sheme? Jiang zhongweng.’

What? Speak Chinese.

‘Never mind,’ she said, leaving the table.

After meimei went upstairs, mother watched me for a long time. I didn’t look back at her.

‘Ta shi bu shi weng wo wei sheme geng ni baba dai zhe?’ She whispered, after a long pause.

Did she ask me why I stayed with your father?

‘Yes.’ I replied, meeting her eyes. They were red and wet like fruit syrup.

‘Er lin lin yi nian, sheng ni zhi hou, wo jue ding li kai Sichuan ying wei ni de baba dai bu liao xiaqu. Ta mei yitian he jiu, chou yan, da pai. Ta wangji wo sheng le hai zi. Womeng li kai de shi hou cai juide cuo zhede. Ta huale heng chang shijian chengwei yige fuqing.’

After I gave birth to you, I decided for us to leave Sichuan because your father could not stay. He was drinking, smoking, and gambling every day. He forgot I birthed a child. Only

after he left China did he realise he had become a bad person. It took him a long time to become a father.

The family in the framed picture were nothing but faces and bodies. It was taken many years ago on a family holiday at our favourite beach north of home. Father was wearing expensive board shorts and his white polo shirt, like a golfer. He had his hand on mother's shoulder. He squinted into the lens and mother shielded her face. Her hair was longer than I remembered. After that summer, we never went back there.

‘Ni keyi bang wo xi wan me?’ She said, putting her head into her hands. Her rings were all twisted the wrong way.

Can you help me wash the dishes?

‘Sure. Should I get meimei to help as well?’

‘Bu yong. Ta bushi heng gao xing.’

No. She doesn't seem happy.

‘Well, we just went to see our father's coffin.’

‘Ni juede wo gao xing me? Wo haishi yao zuofan, xiwan, da saoweisheng. Buneng jiou bugang le! Wo sheme shi hou keyi nan guo? Mei you shi jian.’

Do you think I'm happy? I still have to cook, wash the dishes, clean the house. I can't just stop! When am I allowed to be sad? There's no time.

Once during the school holidays, meimei and I went with mother and father to work. That day, they had a bond clean in a five bedroom, two bathroom house. Halfway through, father disappeared for an hour. When he got back, he had paper bags with hot pies and pastries in them. He said he'd walked to the bakery and bought them while mother was upstairs. Meimei and I listened carefully as he explained each one.

When mother came downstairs to find us covered in crust and crumbs, she put her cleaning cloths on the floor and stood there for a long time. There was no expression on her face.

‘Ming tian, ni meng bu yong geng wo lai. Tai wu liao. Ruguo ni de baba xiang geng ni meng wan, ta ke yi! Mei wan gou me? Zai wan!’ She said to us when he went to table tennis that night.

None of you have to come with me tomorrow. It's too boring. If your father wants to have fun with you, he can! He hasn't had enough fun? Keep having fun!

For the rest of the week, she cleaned houses on her own.

I passed her a dirty plate. She coaxed some suds onto it and wiped it clean. Her movements were gentle despite how hot the water was.

‘Ta zheng de shi si zai zuo ta zui xihuan de shi qing,’ she said, almost to herself.

He really passed away doing what he loved most.

I laughed and an image of us swimming at the old townhouse pool came to me. If father wasn't around and mother had to supervise us, she would sit undercover with a book and a hat. It would take us half an hour to get out of the water after mother told us to. Then, she would start on dinner while we showered and napped. When dinner was wontons, we'd complain and ask when father was going to cook next.

‘Wo dong le.’ I said, putting a new plastic bag on the bin.

I understand now.

‘Ni dong sheme?’ She said.

What do you understand?

‘Wo dong ni wei sheme mei li kai ta.’

I understand why you didn't leave him.

She nodded once. 'Dan shi ni bu dong. Ni keng ding yongyuan bu hui dong. Dan shi zhe shi yige hao shi qing.'

But you don't understand. I'm not sure if you'll ever understand. But that is a good thing.

She hung fresh tea towels on the oven handle. Mother went upstairs and turned on the shower. For the first time since I found out my father passed away, the house was quiet and warm.