

**"The most exciting and original voice in crime fiction since Ian Rankin." Matt Thorne**

# **BAD TRAFFIC**

**SIMON LEWIS**

**A Chinese cop searches for his missing daughter on the mean streets of rural England**

---

# Bad Traffic

Simon Lewis

---

# Contents

Title Page  
Inspector Jian  
Gold Mountain  
The Floating Lotus  
Wilderness  
Lost  
Joy  
Speeding  
Snakehead  
Hope Farm  
Copyright

---

# 蛇头

**INSPECTOR JIAN**

THIS MAN HAVE COME FROM CHINA TO FIND HIS DAUGHTER WHO HAVE SOME TROUBLE. HE DOES NOT SPEAK ENGLISH.

Jian walked into Leeds University and handed his message, written for him on the back of an aeroplane boarding pass, to the front desk security guard. This was the first black person he had ever met and he noted the paleness of the man's palms and the brown tea in his mug. It seemed to have milk in it, the way Mongolians liked it.

The guard took his time, turning the boarding pass over and considering the flight number – AR57 from Beijing Capital Airport – and, in irritation, Jian's fingers tightened on the handle of his suitcase. He wiped sweat beads off his forehead.

He was wondering whether to give the guard a cigarette to help move things along when the man looked up, and the whites of his eyes seemed to shine out of his face. He beckoned for Jian to follow.

The corridors were painted rather an informal yellow. He was led past a lounge area, like the one at the airport, and a refectory noisy with the alien clamour of metal cutlery on plates. Students bustled round. Jian was used to towering over people but it wasn't going to happen here, a lot of these guys were over one eighty. Some of the girls too. There were many different races but everyone seemed to be getting along.

He was led to a door labelled '106' and ushered into an office where a middle-aged woman addressed him in a witter as meaningless as birdsong. Her hair was blonde, her eyes a disconcerting green. She wasn't wearing a uniform but she appeared to have her own computer, so was presumably of more consequence than the guard. He replied, in Mandarin Chinese, '*Wo zhao wo de nu'er ... I'm looking for my daughter.*' No one would understand, but it satisfied a need to hear his own voice and words he could comprehend, it soothed away the unfamiliarity. The guard and the woman babbled, and he said – surely it was obvious – 'Get a translator.'

Back home Jian had rank and status and was used to people rushing to do his bidding. But he was doing nothing here, just a nuisance. If he wanted things done he'd have to do them himself.

He stalked out, the guard following at his heels. The bulky suitcase made him list to one side as he retraced his steps to the refectory. He stood on a chair and stepped up from it onto a tabletop. A girl twirling yellow noodles onto a fork looked at him with alarm and slid her tray away.

He cleared his throat and yelled, '*You ren hui shuo zhong guo hua ma? ... Does anybody here speak Mandarin Chinese?*'

A hush fell. The noodles slipped off the fork. Someone laughed nervously. Making a scene didn't worry him, he didn't feel any pull of social convention here. These people weren't his people, he could make monkey noises and it wouldn't matter. He bellowed his question again, so even the queue over by the vending machines in the corner shut up and looked at him.

The guard beckoned him down with angry sweeps of his arm. Jian ignored him and scanned the crowd, picking out the Asian faces. All he saw was curiosity or alarm. Perhaps no one could help him, perhaps there was no one he could speak to in this whole peculiar city.

‘Anybody?’

~~Another security guard was coming, this one portly and white. The guards looked at each other and~~  
Jian recognised the silent communication that passed between them, he knew it well – citizen acting  
up, placate and eject. The black guard put a hand on his leg.

Jian told him, ‘You don’t understand. My daughter is in trouble.’ But of course no one was  
listening.

The call had come thirty-two hours previously, at around 11pm, Chinese time.

Jian was pouring Chivas Regal into a crystal glass. When the mobile trilled he winced theatrical for the benefit of the girl opposite, to show how much he resented the interruption.

He finished pouring, making sure her measure was the more generous, and topped up the glass with a green tea mixer. The trick was to pick the most sugary brand available, then the girl tended not to notice how drunk she was getting.

The mobile trilled on. If she complained about how much whisky he'd given her, he'd blame it on the distraction.

This was her first visit to the flat in the new housing development and he was anxious she find it pleasing. It was just the sort of chic little penthouse, he hoped, that a classy mistress of a certain age might like to be shackled up in, but you could never second-guess the tastes of these modern girls.

So far it was going well. She'd admired the equestrian statue above the compound's arched entrance and the portico with the name of the development in English, 'UBBER WEST SIDE'. She had even commented that when the water feature was working, you'd be able to see the moon reflected in it.

All the buildings were named after foreign cities. They were in 'Lisbon', and he'd looked it up on a map in case she asked about it. Ah yes, he knew Portugal, home of the indomitable Figo. The team had generally performed well in the group stages, then flopped in the quarter finals.

Inside the flat, the gold-effect taps and Western toilet had met the lady's approval, as had the glass coffee table held up by bronze-effect lions. She talked of completing the place with modern-art-type pictures and European historical-style chairs.

When she'd wondered aloud how much he paid, he had deflected her curiosity with an airy wave. He would not do for her to find out that the lease was free, a reward from the developer for helping to smooth the project through. As well as introducing its financiers to the more flexible local politician he had overseen, in his official capacity, the requisition of the land from those peasants who had been under the impression that because they'd farmed it for generations, it belonged to them.

Now, he reckoned, all he had to do was get her a bit tipsy, then manoeuvre her into the bedroom to admire the black sheets, perhaps. When she saw the erotic print above the bed he would smile, making an effort to look twinkling rather than wolfish. It was important that she didn't look out of the window, so he had already drawn the curtains and fastened them with the tasselled gold rope.

It was true, he reflected, that women made you feel younger. He felt about fourteen – all nerves, uncertainty and plans.

No one rang him after ten.

Teasingly she said, 'Is it a girlfriend?'

He worried that it was. But no.

'It's my daughter.'

He went into the kitchen to answer it.

This was Wei Wei's second call today. When she'd phoned earlier she'd sounded downbeat, and

had told him her marks were slipping. It had not been a convenient time, he had been at a noisy banquet with portly dignitaries, he had downed a lot of toasts, and now he guiltily reflected that perhaps his attempts to jolly her along had seemed brusque and formulaic.

He yawned. Certainly he had drunk rather too much at the banquet, and he hoped that he would be up to his later duties. Well, he had his blue pills. The problem was the pounding headache they gave you in the morning.

With his mouth still stretched wide, he pressed 'start call'.

'Dad, help me, help me,' sobbed Wei Wei, above background clamour. 'Help me. Help.'

He snapped his mouth shut. A clatter, a clunk, a gurgle, and the phone was silent.

'Wei Wei?'

He reeled, looked at the mobile as if it were some horrific object, then pressed it hard to his head.

'Wei Wei? Is that you? Wei Wei?'

But there was only a flat drone, the connection had been severed. He shook the mobile as if that would make it work, then looked for last number redial. It did not feel appropriate somehow, to be, at a time of crisis, navigating chirpy graphics and menus on a tiny screen.

He called her back. After eight rings, she said something curt and upbeat in English.

'Wei Wei? What happened?' But it was just her voicemail. He said, 'What's going on? Call me back now.' Then hung up.

He rang back again, but this time the call was not connected. An incongruously calm recorded voice, not his daughter, said something in English. He tried again and again, and got only the infuriating message.

'*Baba bang wo...* Dad, help me.' Her words reverberated like an echo. He leaned his forehead against the cold metal of the extractor fan and ordered himself to go over what had happened before forming conclusions.

Plea, noises, silence, the impossibility of reconnection. His daughter had called, in a state of distress, and begged for help. Then she'd dropped the phone or perhaps it had been ripped from his grasp.

He shuddered at this, and slapped a palm against the wall, and the windowframe rattled. In the window of 'Hamburg', the block opposite, a woman cleaning her teeth looked across sharply.

Then the battery had run out, or been taken out, or the phone had broken. Perhaps it had been hurled away and shattered. No – then it would have clunked more.

His forehead was cold, but his cheeks were heating up. And what about that background bawling? Babies crying, rubber squeaking, pumps pumping? It could even have been mocking laughter. It was impossible to know, the noises were so ambiguous, and already his memory was compromised by his interpretations.

What now? He pressed his head harder against the metal. He felt something give, and the whole facade came away from the wall. He caught it and pushed it back.

Did he have any other numbers for her? No. Why, he did not even know the address where she lived. How ridiculous, how remiss, to have no way of contacting your own daughter but one mobile number. He stepped back, the extractor fan clattered to the floor and screws pinged about the kitchen.

The only connection he had to her life in England was the address of her college, which would be on the prospectus, in her room.

He walked into the lounge, hardly noticing the absence of the girl, and barked his shin on the edge of the coffee table.

Perhaps it was a joke, perhaps she was just having a bad day, there was every chance it would prove



a false alarm and another line would be added to the already lengthy text on how his daughter caused him stress.

---

He'd catch the first flight to Beijing in the morning, but he would have to get busy now, pulling in some serious favours to arrange an express British visa. Hopefully he could be met at the airport by an official from the embassy, then he could be on a flight to London tomorrow afternoon. He gathered up his keys, wallet and cigarettes and, though he felt better at least to be active, a cold stone of dread had settled in his stomach.

The girl called from the bedroom. 'Darling, all you can see from here are the slagheaps. I didn't realise we were so close. There'll be filthy coal dust blowing in. It's hardly ideal.'

He opened the front door.

'Darling?'

'*Xiansheng*'. Jian heard a word he understood and turned sharply. A gangly white youth was standing by the guard. The lad said, '*Wo hui shuo zhong wen yi dian*'r... I can speak little Chinese.' His tones were flat, but comprehensible. Jian looked at him with open-mouthed astonishment. A white person speaking Chinese was like a dog walking on two legs – a good trick but there was something unnatural about it.

'I am learn Chinese here. I can help you.'

Jian stepped off the table and the security guard let go. He kept it simple.

'I have come to find my daughter. Her name is Wei Wei, she's twenty-one, she's studying Tourism and Leisure.'

Speaking the banal facts seemed an oddly poignant act. Perhaps they would evoke her, and she would breeze around the corner – that fake Louis Vuitton bag hanging off one shoulder, hair swinging, chatting on a mobile, some no-good lad following at her heels. The image was achingly precise. He rubbed his face.

'I have reason to believe she's in trouble.'

Back in Room 106 there was more of the clack and cluck of the English language. Jian wondered if he could smoke but couldn't see an ashtray and he didn't want to distract them by trying to ask for one.

The lad said, 'It's not school law to tell out information about student. Can you prove you have father?'

'Here's my passport. Same name.'

'Your visa is dated today.'

'I just got here.'

Jian had used his clout to get himself attached as technical advisor to a delegation from Daqing oil extraction facility number three, on a junket to the United Kingdom to explore new refining techniques.

The oil men had been drinking on the plane and expected him to join them. He'd explained that he had a stomach upset and they'd assumed he was afraid of flying and ribbed him about it. He hadn't slept at all on the twelve-hour flight.

When they had landed in London he'd taken the group translator aside and made her write him the note, and promise not to talk about it. Unable to read a single sign, he'd got lost in the Underground on the way from Heathrow to King's Cross. Getting a train ticket to Leeds hadn't been easy either, and had involved soliciting aid from strangers, as had finding the right platform and even opening the train door. Just about every single thing was different from home and it was infuriating to be made so helpless.

He'd assumed there'd be hot food on the train, but all he could get was pricey sandwiches. The bread had tasted like foam, and had grease smeared on it, and the filling was not tofu, as he assumed, but hard yellow cheese which made him feel ill. Now he was tired, hungry and jet-lagged.

He was given a manila folder. A passport photo of his daughter was clipped to it. He touched the

edge, careful not to put a coarse finger across her face.

‘That’s her.’

Big dark eyes looked blankly out. In pictures she cultivated a model’s vacuity and this image was giving nothing away. Sleek hair flowed from a centre parting. She’d bleached the ends brown. Last time he’d seen her, it had been dark red. Her mouth was closed, as always in pictures, to cover the gap between her front teeth. She was so self-conscious about that gap, she didn’t understand that the small imperfection didn’t mar her beauty but completed it.

And now, the student explained, they were going to the Tourism and Leisure department to talk to her tutor. He made it sound like they were on some guided tour. Clearly he was enjoying this practical use for all his effort.

The student asked where he was from.

‘The north east.’

‘It must be very beautiful up in there,’ said the lad. ‘But cold yes?’

‘Ugly and cold.’ Jian was in no mood for chit-chat. But this lad was useful, and had to be treated with respect.

‘What do you do?’

‘I’m a policeman.’

‘Do you have any friends in this country?’

‘No.’

‘Do you have a place to stay?’

‘No.’

He’d sort out a hotel when this was done with. He’d also get something to eat, shave, and have a shower. But he couldn’t think about mundane details now, not until his mind was clear.

He was escorted to a Room 317, where he paced while a South Asian lady with a dot on her forehead tapped on a keyboard. A display of portrait photos hung on the wall. He guessed they were the members of staff for the department: they had the same thing back at the station.

The student said, ‘She have found your daughter on the computer. Your daughter teacher Mister Delaware.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Let us go and see.’ There were five in his little group – the wary black security guard, the woman with green eyes, the student exalting in his usefulness, and this lady with the dot. They stopped outside a classroom and through a glass panel in the door a man could be seen lecturing students.

‘Teacher Delaware will be finish in about twenty minutes.’

Jian shoved the door and strode up to Delaware. Twenty or so surprised faces watched him brandish the folder, jabbing at the passport picture.

‘Please, I need to find my daughter, where is this girl?’

The others came in and a discussion began, with people talking over each other and looking flustered and students craning forward to watch the show. These people used a lot of hand gestures. Jian made them look excitable.

Delaware dressed very casually for a teacher. He made a placating signal – hands raised, then lowered – said something to his class and studied the passport photo. He didn’t recognise her, Jian could tell, and he began to dislike the man, knowing in his stomach that he would bear no good news. He dug folders from a briefcase and showed a list of names with rows of ticks next to them, and the student translated.

‘Here her name, see? This is how we write it in English. These the records of the classes Wei Wei

went to. She here at start of course, in September last year.'

~~All the names had a row of ticks beside them, extending to the edge of the form. Except Wei Wei's.~~  
There were only three ticks by her name.

'She here only three week.'

'No no no. She rings me every week and tells me how her studies are going. There's a mistake.'

'These records...' now a faltering tone showed that the lad thought of his language skills as a curse – he was to deliver ill tidings. 'These records say she no here. She no go to lecture or hand in work since after that time.'

Jian realised his mouth was open, and closed it.

'She said she was learning about the hotel trade and all that kind of thing. She was a member of the East Asian student society and she was going to act in a play. She was here. She was learning here, and he was her teacher.'

Jian pointed at Delaware, who raised his eyebrows at the security guard.

'No here,' said the student. 'She go, long time ago. She no come here for... four months. For one month no come here.'

The room seemed to be tipping upside down, so Jian put his hand on the whiteboard for support. Suddenly the world was a strange place, he was in the territory of dreams, everything seemed normal but the details were all wrong. He was surrounded by words but he couldn't read them, the faces around him were the wrong shape and a man with blue eyes was telling him he didn't know his own daughter.

'You're telling me that my daughter rang me every week to lie to me?' He pressed his palm against his face. The sad thing was, he could believe it. He felt ashamed of her, then of himself. 'Fuck.'

'Let us now go out.'

'Go where? That's it. Where am I going to go? Where?'

He kicked a chair, and the security guard put a hand on his arm.

'Now how am I going to find her?'

Standing outside the university, Jian looked gloomily at a billboard across the street. The giant image of a pretty Asian girl flanked by a black man and a white man seemed to be taunting him. It was impossible to tell what it was advertising.

The student had called a taxi for him. When it came he showed the driver a print-out teaching Delaware had made, lines of squiggles which apparently showed the address his daughter had given when she enrolled.

In the back seat, Jian took from his briefcase a slim hardback book. Wei Wei had sent a portrait photo to a magazine and been invited to Beijing to take part in a 'prestigious modelling competition'. He'd forbidden it: he knew what those competitions involved. She'd thrown a sulk, and to mollify her he'd paid for this portfolio of fashion images to be made.

Before leaving home he'd scoured the house for recent pictures, and because he couldn't find any better alternatives he'd bought a copy of the dumb book along. He flicked through it. In one image she posed in a tight military uniform, cradling a gun, legs wide apart, lipstick as red as the star on her beret. In another she was in a red qipao slit right up the thigh, and here she was in a little black dress, cocking a champagne glass and a cigarette holder. The photos had captions – guff like 'woman beauty' and 'true love is forever' in Chinese, and other stuff in English, the language of fashion and modernity.

He thought what a good actress she was – just from the pictures you could tell she was inhabiting each role. She'd had to do a lot of acting on the phone for all those months. But he hadn't made it difficult for her. Their Friday night exchanges had been ritualised, absent of true communication. Ask you well? How is college? How are your marks? How is the food? Yes, great, okay, rubbish. Only on food had they gone into any detail. She'd tell him about the strange things she was eating and the tastes she missed. He'd emphasise the importance of a good education and they'd say brisk goodbye. Every remembered word bought a wince – what a tower of deceit.

The cab passed houses with slanting slate roofs, given a look of ruddy health by their red brick walls and wide windows. The front doors looked flimsy and none of the windows had bars, even on the ground floor. It was remarkable how much care had been lavished on the little gardens. No one seemed to be growing vegetables and no dogs were chained up. There was no litter, the trees were bushy, the pavements flat and smooth. Everything spoke of contented prosperity. But, with no streetlife – no food stalls or vendors, and not even many pedestrians – it was all rather dreary.

The cab pulled up and the driver tapped a meter. It said seventeen. Jian gave him two of the orange-brown notes and received three chunky gold coins in return. He tried to calculate how much that had been in yuan. A not unreasonable thirty. No – an outrageous three hundred. Standing on the pavement, he watched the taxi pull away. Had he just been conned?

He was standing outside a row of three-storey houses. He checked the printout. Among the squiggles were digits – thirty-four, the same number displayed on a wooden panel on the house before him. The path to the door passed a brick mounting that held rubbish bins. Odd place to put them, in the way of visitors.

He rang the bell and planned what to say to his daughter. He'd play it cool and ask her how she was eating. She'd apologise for stressing him out like that. She'd be impressed that he had come all the way out of paternal concern and would apologise for her unfilial behaviour. He'd be magnanimous. He would not get angry, not yet. The door was opened.

An unfamiliar Asian girl held the door on a chain.

Jian said, '*Ni hui shuo zhong wen ma?... Do you speak Chinese?*'

'*Hui.*' A mainlander – that was lucky.

He held the vanity book open at an image of Wei Wei looking dreamy with a fake butterfly in her hair.

'*Zheige nu'hai zhu zai zher ma?... Does this girl live here?*'

'No.'

'Did she live here?'

'Yes. A long time ago.'

'I'm trying to trace her. She's missing.'

He flashed his PSB namecard. The logo of Tian'anmen Gate was in red above embossed black characters. He'd had them specially made, in thicker card than the government issued.

'Come in.'

He had said it out loud, just like that, without thinking. Missing. Now the heavy word clattered round inside his head.

The hallway was carpeted. He bent to take his shoes off but she told him not to bother and led him past bicycles into a cramped kitchen. On a plate sat some half-eaten bread and paste dish.

'I interrupted your dinner.'

'It's okay.'

'What is that?'

'Pizza.'

'Is it tasty?'

'It's simple to cook.'

'You eat with a knife and fork. That's clever.'

'It's easy.'

'What's your name?'

'Song.'

The only time Wei Wei had ever talked about her flatmates was to call a certain Song 'a top-class bitch'. The girl wore glasses and had bad skin but there was a good figure beneath the jeans and jumper. Her accent was Beijing, a croaky 'r' inflection at the end of words. She seemed okay to him.

'When did Wei Wei live here?'

'She moved in in September of last year, and she moved out again after three months.'

'Did she say where she was going?'

'No. She moved out in secret, when we were all at college.'

'She didn't leave a note?'

'No. She ran away owing a lot of rent. Three hundred and sixty pounds.'

'Did she leave anything?'

'We put it in a box. I'll get it.'

Song left the dingy kitchen. Jian opened drawers. He found food in the cupboards, bottles under the sink. A cork noticeboard held postcards, bills, restaurant flyers, timetables, phone numbers and the like. A magazine on the table had glossy images of good-looking people on the cover, and inside were bad photos of these people doing ordinary things, shopping or just walking in the street. Good-quality paper, though. So much of detective work was about spotting things that didn't quite fit – but he couldn't do that here, where everything was strange to him. The girl returned with a cardboard box.

'This is the stuff she left. You're lucky we haven't thrown it away.'

Books, pens, folders – she'd left behind everything associated with her course. Even though she was writing in English, he still recognised her slapdash hand. In notebook margins she had doodled elaborate question marks, turning them into spirals and swirls. Across the cover of a textbook she had scrawled 'dull dull dull', and that symbol he hoped she'd grown out of, a flower with a happy face. He put the relics carefully into his suitcase.

'Is this an official investigation? You're going to struggle without a translator.'

He said, 'You didn't like her.'

'She never talked to us, she was hardly even civil. Except when my boyfriend came round. An English boy. Then she'd put make-up on and walk round in a nightdress. She was flower crazy.' Jian flirted. 'She liked to show that her English was better than mine, so she used long words to him. I think she looked them up in the dictionary before coming in.'

She slopped the remains of the pizza into a bin and dropped the plate into the sink with an irritating clatter. There was a catch in her voice as she said, 'He kissed her.'

'I see. And?'

'And that was the kind of person she was. She was trouble.'

'I need to see her old room.'

'We got someone in as soon as we realised she wasn't coming back. Mili is in there now.'

'I have to have a look around.'

'Mili doesn't like anyone going in there.'

'If you fail to co-operate with the investigation, that will be noted in my report.'

She rolled her eyes.

'Be quick.'

She led him up two sets of stairs. It didn't feel right to be walking on carpet in shoes. The walls were wallpapered and the lights had tasselled shades. It was civilised and girly and he felt like a trespasser. Song knocked on a door and, when there was no reply, opened it.

Plastic figurines were displayed on shelves and posters of Japanese cartoon characters covered the walls. He'd imagined there would be something of his daughter left, some lingering presence, but of course there was nothing. He'd fooled himself. He'd intended to treat the place as a crime scene but what had really motivated him was a pilgrim's crude need to see.

But now he was here, he had to try. The main light was dim, so he replaced it with the much brighter bulb from the hallway. He got down on all fours and examined the carpet.

'Please be quick. Mili might come home any minute.'

The bed was on a baseboard on castors. He tried to peer under it but the bottom was only a few centimetres off the floor. He shifted a bedside table and a robot-shaped alarm clock fell off. Song watched him from the doorway as he dragged the bed away.

'You're a northeasterner, aren't you, like her? Which city?'

'Qitaihe.'

'What's it like?'



‘It’s a pearl.’

Qitaihe might be home but Jian had no illusions. It was a town of dour apartments built around state-owned factories and surrounded by freezing wilderness. Time was you could at least make an honest living, but now the hurricane of capitalism was sweeping the country, the inefficient factories were closing, and workers who’d been promised an iron rice bowl – a job for life – were getting thrown onto the street. The biggest industry was the prison, whose inmates made counterfeit watches for the entrepreneurs of the People’s Liberation Army. It was a mean town and getting meaner.

The carpet below the bed was dusty and pale. What filthy things they were, just a dirt trap, and what a strange idea to fill your house with them, then not even take your shoes off. The thing must be full of evidence, dust and hair, and who knew what else. Something gleamed by the skirting board. He slipped it in his pocket while the girl talked on.

‘Have you heard of Scotland?’

‘It’s in England.’

‘It’s the name for the northern area. It’s cold and wild, like the northeast. Scottish people are fierce and direct, they make good friends and terrible enemies, and they like drinking and they’re not so good at business. Just like northerners in China.’

‘People from cold places are all the same.’

He found a black hair and pulled it straight. It ran from his fingers to his elbow, and it was hair bleached. Wei Wei had thick, strong hair. He wrapped it round his finger and pulled it tight so that it caused pain and redness, and it didn’t break. It was his daughter’s, he was sure of it. When he unwound the hair it left a white striation with a bluish tinge either side. He laid it between pages in his vanity book.

‘What kind of trouble is she in?’

‘I cannot divulge that information.’

‘How come you’re on your own?’

‘My colleagues are following other lines of inquiry.’

He put the bed and table back and changed the bulbs and closed the door on the room and the girl was visibly relieved.

‘I really think you’re going to need a translator.’

‘Where’s your toilet?’

The bathroom was cluttered, with pebbles, candles and shells among all the bottles and vials. The showerhead was above the bath, like in a hotel. He sat on the lowered toilet seat and pulled out his wallet to find.

A pewter jewellery box, oval, big enough for a few rings. An image of a phoenix was etched on the lid. It was a fake antique, made in a factory on the outskirts of Shenzhen, and aged by being left in a pot of strong tea. He knew because the stallholder had told him all about it when he’d tried to buy it. The stallholder had insisted that the public security man take this thing of little value for free, as he himself could not in all honesty receive money for such a trifle from an esteemed official. Jian had given it to his daughter before she left for England. She’d said it would prove very useful, that she would keep her best earrings in it.

The phoenix was depicted at the moment of rebirth. The flames were crudely sketched, but the bird was well done, all its feathers delineated, its neck craning away from the fire, wings spreading. So what was it a fake? Someone had taken a lot of care to scratch the picture into the metal. Or maybe they did it with lasers, the way they carved signature chops.

The lid fitted too tight. It would take nimble fingernails to prise off, his own were too thick. He

found nail clippers and used the nail-file attachment as a lever.

~~Inside the box were two pink pills, a half-smoked handmade cigarette and a package of glossy paper, a couple of centimetres long. He unfolded the package into a flat square. Half a gram or so of white powder gathered in the creases. Drugs. It wasn't even a surprise.~~

Jian had suspected Wei Wei was doing drugs back home. She'd go to that sleazy YES! disco dressed up like a tramp, and get up to who knew what with the disreputable elements that hung round there. He'd tried to get the place shut down on grounds of moral pollution, but no chance of that – the proprietor also owned a sauna where you could get a massage and something else, and city bureaucrats got their something else for free. He'd personally overseen the beating-up of the club's drug dealers and she'd got mad because they were friends.

He'd hoped a stint at a foreign college would knock some sense into her. And look what she'd done. She'd dropped out of her course, taken drugs, argued with that sensible girl and run away from the comfy house. She'd lied to him for months on end, and now who knew where she had gone and what trouble she'd got herself into. He wanted to punch something in his frustration. Damn her that she'd caused him such hurt.

The handmade cigarette was four centimetres long with a blackened end. He split it, revealing crispy shreds of tobacco and green fragments of plant matter. It was too old to smell, but presumably it was dope. Rolled-up paper had been inserted to act as a filter. He slid it out with the nail file and uncurled it.

The paper was glossy and white. It had two straight edges and two rough, showing it had been ripped from the corner of something, perhaps a magazine or book cover. It was unmarked except for a curling red line, part of a larger design, possibly a letter.

Jian put the paper in his namecard holder and dropped the rest of the cigarette and the pills and the powder into the toilet and flushed it. The sound awakened a response, and he remembered he needed to do a bit of shit. He normally took a dump every morning, and his regularity was reassuring to him, but of course now, with the time difference, and staying up for hours, his system was out of whack.

The porcelain was unpleasantly cold. He hadn't used Western toilets much. More and more, he saw them around, but he stuck with what he knew, the squat variety. He realised that other bare arses had sat here recently, including that of the fetching Song. A strange intimacy to share.

So his daughter had moved here in September of last year. She'd attended her course for three weeks and she'd lived in this house for three months. In December she'd run away to save herself from paying rent. It was March now. So what was she doing between dropping out and leaving here? And why did she drop out so quickly? And what had she been doing for the many months that she'd lied to him? And what had happened to her now? That was a lot of questions, but of course only one mattered.

There was no toilet paper bin by the loo, so he wrapped the used sheets in clean sheets and put them in the only bin he could see, under the sink. His turd was not the usual colour and it took two flushes to get it away.

Back in the kitchen, Song was tackling the washing-up. He guessed his presence had made her self-conscious about it. He didn't want to leave. Where would he go? Who else could he talk to?

Did Wei Wei use a knife and fork?

'I guess.'

He'd never seen that, didn't know she was capable of it.

'What did your boyfriend tell you she said to him?'

'Ex-boyfriend. We split up. What are you studying, oh that is so interesting, tell me more. The importance of – what was her catchphrase? Grace. How she wanted to live like an artist. She got it all out of magazines. She was a silly country girl desperate to look sophisticated. Now I've got all ups and downs again.' The washing-up gloves made decisive slaps as she took them off. She wiped a tear away. 'I wish she'd stayed at home.'

'What else do you remember? What else?'

'She once said how sick she was of oily Cantonese muck and how she wanted proper Chinese food.'

That seemed odd. He did not remember her saying the same to him.

'Where would she get Cantonese food?'

'She usually had takeout.'

'Usually?' She had told him she was cooking for herself. Even about the food, then, she had been lying. 'So who eats takeout and complains about it?'

Jian's eyes were drawn to the restaurant flyers on the corkboard. A couple were for pizza places with shocking pictures of the lurid things. He answered his own question. 'Waitresses. She worked at a restaurant.'

'That would make sense.'

He could see it. The course had bored her stupid, so she'd stopped attending. Fearing that he'd stop her allowance, she hadn't told him. Needing to do something, she'd got a job in a restaurant. It was a good supposition. He was excited, the detective in him exalted at leads, and while there were leads there was hope.

'There can't be many Chinese restaurants.'

'No, they're everywhere. English people like Chinese food.'

Jian took the flyers down and picked out the ones with Chinese characters on. The flyer for the Wild Crane was flimsy and yellow with a green bamboo design on the cover. He put it aside. The second was glossier, with thicker paper. On the cover a stylised image of a pink lotus flower hung over the name, The Floating Lotus, written in fluid running script. Inside was a long list of dishes, and on the back an address. Jian took out the slip of roach paper from the drugs cigarette and placed it against the bottom right-hand corner of the back page. It was a match, with the red line the bottom curl of the number nine, the last digit of the restaurant telephone number.

'I'm taking this,' he said. 'Thank you for your co-operation.'

‘I hope you find her,’ said Song, seeing Jian out. ‘I hope nothing bad has happened.’

It was getting dark and the streetlights were on, glowing orange and not the white he was used to. He approached a pedestrian walking a dog and held up the flyer, but the guy just babbled and walked away.

After ten minutes he still hadn’t seen a taxi. They did not seem to be as prevalent here as they were at home, and no wonder, when they cost so much. He supposed they didn’t cruise residential areas. Frustrated and at a loss, he got on a bus, hoping it would take him back to the centre of town. At least he knew there was a cab rank outside the station. Even buying a bus ticket required educated guesses and keen observation – no conductor, so does money go to the driver or into a machine? How much money? These chunky gold ones? How many? He was given novel coins in his change – hexagonal ones, copper ones.

He hadn’t been on a bus in a decade, it was not done for a man in his position. Tired, he pressed his fingers against closed eyes. It was the early hours of the morning back home – he should be tucked up in bed with some chick to warm his feet. He didn’t feel right and wondered if he’d caught an illness. Perhaps he just wasn’t used to this climate or this air. He spat on the floor, smeared the goo with his heel, then lit a 555.

He didn’t know why his daughter had gone wayward. Probably she blamed him for the car crash that had killed her mother. He’d been driving a station Toyota and he’d been drunk and pushing hard, but the lorry hadn’t even bothered to indicate, and its driver had been even drunker. Whichever way you looked at it – and he’d looked at it from all the ways you could look at it – it wasn’t his fault.

He’d made sure the lorry driver had got a harsh sentence. Now, though, he envied that driver. The man had served his time and paid his dues. How was he supposed to pay his? He blinked hard and rubbed his face to jolt his mind out of that particular, well-worn, track.

Two women were looking at him and tutting. He scowled right back and in his head confronted them, saying, ‘What? Am I in a zoo? You never seen a Chinese guy before?’ The bus was passing fields and trees, which couldn’t be right, so he dropped his cigarette and got off at the next stop.

It was dispiriting. If he couldn’t even get around, or have a conversation, how could he conduct an investigation? Jet-lag, fatigue, all-pervasive foreignness, the unique and unsettling experience of anonymity and powerlessness – it was affecting the way he thought. He did not feel like a successful, wealthy and high-ranking policeman any more. He put his hand in front of his face. He was this dense flesh and nothing else, a middle-aged man, big but running to fat, with a lot on his mind.

He stepped into the street and a car honked at him and he had to scuttle forward sharply. Traffic here came from the wrong direction. He’d remembered fine earlier, but now he was slipping. He grabbed the same number bus going the other way.

He counted out three hundred and sixty pounds and wondered who the figures depicted on the notes were. The woman on the back of them all was presumably the Queen or Madam Thatcher. It was a beautiful currency, very artistic, but he was getting through it at a frightening rate.

He got off at a stop he recognised and rang the bell at number thirty-four. Song answered.

He said, 'It's not an official investigation. I'm Wei Wei's father.'

Embarrassment, then consternation, passed across her features.

---

'This is the rent she owed.'

He gave her the money. Some people would just pocket it, but he was sure she was an honest citizen. It would go where it was supposed to and a wrong would be righted. Now she looked at him as if seeing him for the first time.

'There's one condition.'

'Which is?'

He held up the flyer for the Floating Lotus.

'Come and have a drink with me.'

‘My daughter called and begged me to help her. Now I don’t know where she is.’

‘Oh dear.’ Song bit her fingernail. His distress had made her sad.

Now that Song was leading him, Jian was passive, and instead of trying to figure out his environment he just let it happen. The illuminated signs outside the bus window all said the same thing – ‘You do not understand.’

‘She’s probably just ashamed that she dropped out and wanted to spare your feelings. And now she’s got into some little trouble. There’s probably a man involved,’ she said, with the confidence of youth and inexperience. ‘Women do stupid things over men. If she’s at this restaurant, I’ll take care of it, okay? Leave you alone for a reunion.’

Indeed, it was quite possible that Wei Wei was working at the restaurant. Maybe she was doing well, had found something she could throw herself into. He pictured her waiting tables, dreaming of stardom as an actress or model, living with some guy. A local difficulty had occurred – jai pregnancy, a perception of failure – and she’d called him in a moment of weakness, then lost her phone or her nerve. Perhaps she’d called during a bad trip, and afterwards forgotten she’d called at all. She’d be so surprised to see him, she’d drop a plate.

The more he thought about her, the more elusive she seemed. He could conjure her features, but not arrange them into an expression. He could remember her character – moodiness, kindness, thoughtlessness, romanticism – only in the abstract, without the accompaniment of illustrative incidents. He saw her doing little things that meant nothing – washing, humming, tapping her feet with her headphones on. The dumbest of details came to mind – a smiling sunflower, a fake bag, that green gonk that dangled off her phone. He couldn’t place her in this environment at all – walking the roads, talking in that jabber to these people.

‘Do you want a cigarette? 555. English brand.’

‘They’re not English.’

‘It says on the packet they’re English.’

‘They cheat you. They’re Chinese. And you’re not allowed to smoke on here.’

They got off and Jian began to recognise logos, on clothes and adverts – McDonald’s, KFC, Nike – each a small reassurance in the ocean of the unfamiliar. The change in his pocket jangled. He never carried a wallet, Chinese money being mostly notes, but he might need one now.

Here was a shop selling shoes and another selling newspapers, and in between was the Floating Lotus. It looked like a fancy concern, with lanterns hanging outside and a neon sign. They went in and a bell tinkled as the door closed.

More than any restaurant back home, this place advertised its Chineseness. Limpet-shaped hats and idealised landscape paintings hung above a bamboo skirting, and pride of place went to a back-relief of a waterfall. Yet there were no clue as to which part of China the proprietors were from. It was very quiet, there wasn’t even any music playing, and the place was so dark Jian wondered if there had been a power outage. There was none of the boisterous vitality he looked for in a restaurant. There were ten or so tables, but only three were occupied. All the customers were white. Neither waitre

was tall enough to be his daughter. No, she was not here, and again hope was cruelly extinguished.

~~A waitress approached, a slim Chinese girl in a red uniform with nails and lips painted to match. She said something in English, and he asked if she spoke Mandarin Chinese. She looked blankly back – she didn't.~~

'They're Cantonese,' said Song. 'Like most Chinese people in this country. From Hong Kong originally, I expect. They won't speak Mandarin. You won't meet many Mandarin speakers here at all.'

He instructed her to inquire after his daughter, and opened the vanity book. Wei Wei posed by a balance beam in pink tracksuit, hair tied back, not much make-up. It was the homeliest of all the pictures, and the one he liked best. The inviting smile of the girl in red vanished and her face closed shut.

'She says she doesn't know her,' said Song.

An old man stood at the back trying not to look like he was watching them. Like the girl he had a high forehead, full lips and a receding chin, and Jian guessed he was her father, and the owner. He said, 'Let's ask him.'

Jian pushed the vanity book across the counter. He thought of the Cantonese as cunning, but the old man was no actor. He looked at the picture, scratched his balding pate as if thinking, cast his eyes to the ceiling as if thinking some more, looked at the picture again from another angle, turned the page to look at another picture, then shook his head.

Song translated. 'He says he's very sorry, but he has no idea who that girl could be. He's never met her.'

The old man looked as if he regretted terribly being unable to help. He closed the book and pushed it firmly back.

'He wants to know who she is.'

'Tell him some friends of hers need to talk to her, but they're having trouble getting in touch. Don't say I'm her father.'

The old man was trying hard not to look too curious.

'He wants to know what it is about.'

'Tell him it's a love story – it's about a boy, he's looking for her, the parents don't approve. Tell him the boy is right now on the other side of town doing other Chinese restaurants. Make sure he understands that, that someone is out doing other restaurants.'

'He wants to know who we are.'

'We're concerned friends who want to see true love run its proper course. Tell him we'll have a table for two.'

The mask slipped and the owner looked crestfallen, just for a moment. He escorted them with overdone courtesy to a table far from the counter.

The lighting was arranged so that patrons could see their own tables and little of the rest of the room. It was like going to eat in a cave. The menu was in English and Chinese. Jian read the names of all the dishes because it was good to see words he understood for a change. It was all southern staples and staples.

'Why did you make me lie to him?' said Song. 'I didn't like it. I thought he was a nice old man.'

'I wanted to test his reactions.'

'Did you think he was lying?'

'A policeman doesn't think, he establishes facts.' Which was rubbish, but the sort of reply that satisfied the public.



- [read \*A Theory of Fun for Game Design \(2nd Edition\) \(10th Anniversary Edition\)\*](#)
- **[download \*Stealing the Bride \(Danvers, Book 2\)\* online](#)**
- [read online Jeff Smith's Senior Portrait Photography Handbook: A Guide for Professional Digital Photographers \(Photot\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [download \*Nonprofits and Advocacy: Engaging Community and Government in an Era of Retrenchment\* pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
  
- <http://flog.co.id/library/Rimertown--an-atlas--poems--New-California-Poetry--Volume-23-.pdf>
- <http://schrolf.de/books/Stealing-the-Bride--Danvers--Book-2-.pdf>
- <http://fortune-touko.com/library/Raven-s-Shadow--Raven--Book-1-.pdf>
- <http://academialanguagebar.com/?ebooks/Nonprofits-and-Advocacy--Engaging-Community-and-Government-in-an-Era-of-Retrenchment.pdf>