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NEW CHINESE WRITING

No.1 / 2012

A Sheep Released to Life

Fishbone

Friend of the Moon

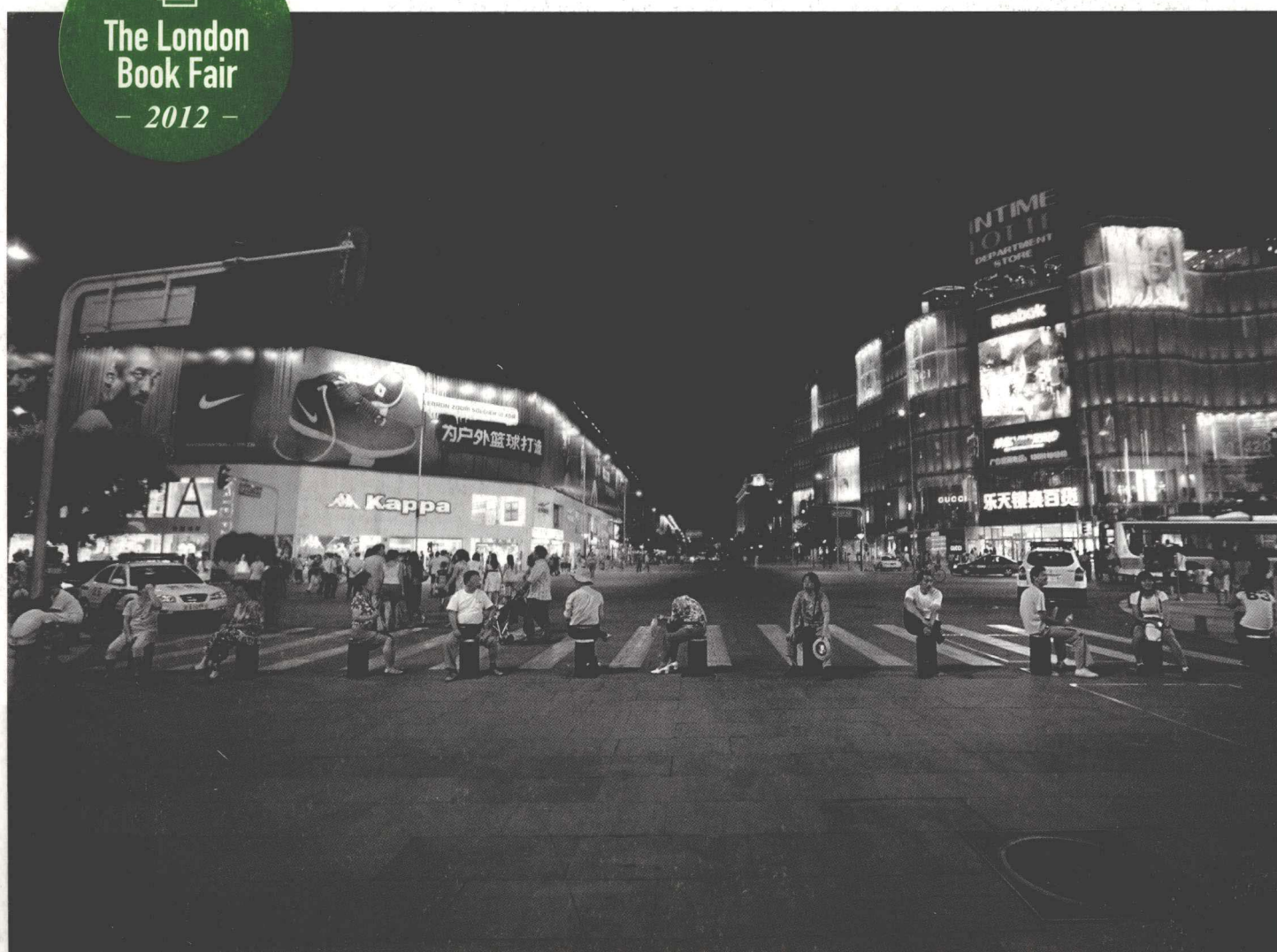
Pregnant Woman with Cow

Taking Care of God

Outdoor Film



The London
Book Fair
— 2012 —



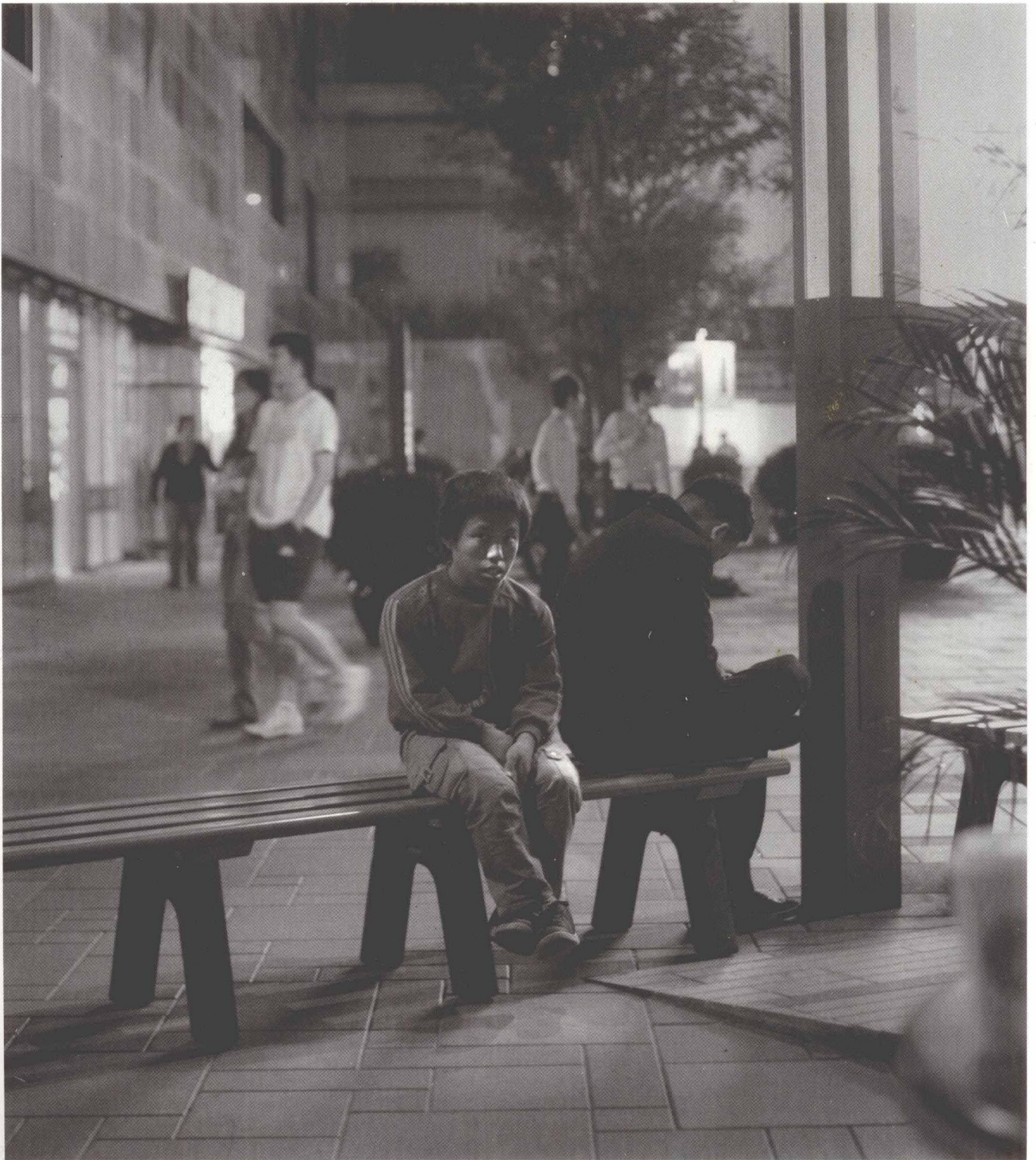
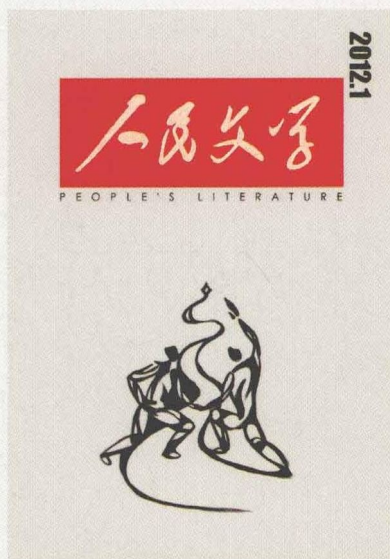


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Website: www.rmwxzz.com

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No.1 / 2012

First Edition 2012

ISBN 978-7-119-06356-0

© Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd, Beijing, China, 2012

Published by Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd.

24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

<http://www.flp.com.cn> E-mail: flp@cipg.org.cn

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation

35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China

P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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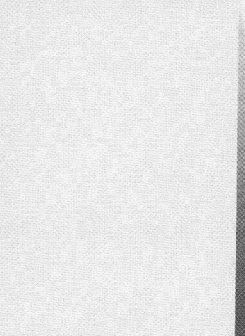
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Market Focus



The London Book Fair

China is the "Market Focus" of the 2012 Fair. This issue presents some of the writers and poets who will be in attendance.



鐵凝

Tie Ning

Born in Beijing in 1957, now Chair of the China Writers' Association, Tie Ning began publishing in 1975. Her most important novels are *The Rose Door*, *Bathing Women*, and *Benhua Village*. Her novellas and short stories number over a hundred, including "Ob, Xiangxue!", "The Red Shirt With No Buttons", and "How Long is Forever?", and more than fifty collections of her stories and essays have been published. The 5-volume "Collected Writings of Tie Ning" came out in 1996, and in 2007 People's Literature Press published the 9-volume "Works of Tie Ning." She has won six national awards in China, including the Lu Xun Prize for Literature. Her work has been translated into English, Russian, German, French, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Danish, Norwegian, and Vietnamese, among other languages. In 2004 the French house Bleu de Chine published two of her novels as *Pile de coton* and *La nuit des rois*.

Irina's Hat

by Tie Ning

I stood in Moscow's Domodedovo Airport waiting for a plane to Khabarovsk. A Russian speaker told me "Domodedovo" means "cabin." So this airport could also be called "cabin airport."

It was the summer of 2001.

I had been traveling together with my cousin to Russia, a ten-day trip. We both believed we were each other's ideal travel partners. Did you ever have a middle school teacher who asked, right before holidays, what's the shortest way to get from Beijing to London? The answer: not by plane, or the internet or what have you, but rather, with a friend. It sounds nice, but in reality, friends at the outset of a journey often become enemies by the end. When my cousin and I left from Beijing for Moscow we were still friends, but by the time we went from Moscow to St. Petersburg we were essentially enemies. The reason, well, I thought that my cousin and I would have a lot in common, both being recently divorced. We no longer had the support, or better yet the burden, of a husband, and we could curse our exes without holding back. But, shockingly, my cousin – practically on the plane to Moscow – began a new romance. Immediately after taking his seat, the man next to us, who was also a member of our tour group, began to chat her up enthusiastically. At first I thought their conversation was just aimless banter, but I soon found out that he was also unmarried. Truly a coincidence. I realized then that my cousin was a blind optimist, and that she excels at ingratiating herself to others. I'm not as optimistic. Dealing with other people, I am always quick to see their faults. If I want

to be unhappy I am unhappy, regardless of the time or occasion. When I let my face droop, my skin looks like a brushed-out layer of flour paste, stiff and cracked. And when my self-esteem is low, I conversely am even more easily agitated by other people.

On the plane, I observed the man in the seat next to us with a cold eye. Immediately I discovered that the nails on both his pinkie fingers were excessively long. From time to time he would habitually lift his outstretched right pinky and brush hair back from his forehead onto the top of his head. That long, translucent, pale green fingernail brought to mind none other than the set of gold nails in foreign paintings of the Empress Dowager Cixi: strange, unclean, frivolous. Then there was that staccato laugh of his, how blaringly it breached my ear. After we checked into the Cosmos Hotel in Moscow, my patience was strained to the limit, and I told my cousin of my impression. She laughed sneeringly, "Objectively speaking, you're not generous enough with people. Objectively speaking, he has some interesting opinions." It was then that I discovered something new about my cousin. I realized that she had a pet phrase: "objectively speaking". What in the world is "objectively speaking"? Who can prove that when she says, "objectively speaking", what she says is actually objective? On the contrary, as soon as she sets that "objectively speaking" in front of a phrase, odds are she's stressing that her opinion is overly biased. So I came to hate this pet phrase of hers.

When I was waiting in Cabin Airport for the plane to Khabarovsk, I sorted out all the reasons my cousin and I split up midway through the trip. It may

have been just the guy's overlong fingernail and my cousin's pet phrase. Sure, these reasons seem trivial, but their very triviality was why I couldn't just put up with them. After we arrived at St. Petersburg from Moscow, I forced myself, face drooping, to follow the tour group sightseeing to Dostoyevsky's old residence on Kuznechny Lane. We listened to a bone-thin old docent with an imposing face tell some stories about Dostoevsky. I didn't absorb anything from the stories, I only remember how many broken wrinkles there were on the old woman's mouth, like a dumpling that's been reheated over and over until the dough around the edges have shriveled. I also remember she said that one of Dostoevsky's great-grandchildren now drives a trolley in the same district as the old residence. At this fact I felt a spark of *schadenfreude*: Dostoevsky is one of Russia's greatest historical figures, and even among his descendants there's a trolley driver. I thought of my mother, also an author, and how I wasn't able to distinguish myself as she had hoped. Perhaps my career and marriage grieve her, but at any rate I'm still a civil servant in the capital. But I've never been interested in my mother's studio or her literature, so just as I saw my cousin and her new boyfriend cozying up to each other, head pressed against head at the small sales counter in the entrance to Dostoevsky's old residence buying bookmarks imprinted with the bust of that monumental figure, I promptly made a decision: I'd leave them and return home alone. Unable to wait until we returned to the Smolny Hotel where we were staying, I told my cousin with a superficial smile what I had been thinking. She was stunned, and then said, "Objectively speaking, you're acting a bit like a little

child throwing a tantrum. In four more days we can go back together." But in my head I nagged, "Don't even start with your 'objectively speaking'."

I wanted to fly directly back home to Beijing, but no, the travel agency said I had to exit the country the way our contract stipulated. I had to fly from Moscow to Khabarovsk, and from there board a train to cross into China's Mudanjiang through Siberia. This was a tiresome but money-saving route, and so I was willing to follow the travel agency. On that summer night in 2001, after I had drunk two bottles of odd-tasting kvass in the dilapidated, crowded Cabin Airport, the long-awaited, run-down Ty-154 to Khabarovsk finally arrived. I followed the flow of passengers into the cabin and discovered most of them were from out east. Most were from Khabarovsk, I thought, with only a minority of Muscovites and foreigners like me. I didn't understand Russian, nor could I differentiate between their accents, yet oddly I was able to tell the Muscovites apart from the Khabarovskians instinctively. My seat was in the back next to the aisle. It had a ready view of the cabin's vase, alternating red and blue carpet. The carpet was already dirty, its pattern almost indistinguishable, yet the stains of liquor, soup, and meat stock showed stubbornly clear. The slow-moving, chubby, middle-aged stewardess would occasionally lend a hand to passengers, helping them close each of the overhead compartments. Her lipstick brimmed over the edges of her lips, revealing that her heart just wasn't in it. It also sent a message to the passengers: this is a do-what-we-like kind of airplane. When you're here, go ahead and do whatever you want. In the row ahead of me there was a man and two women,

all three of them young. I'd heard them hooting and shrieking since entering the cabin. The man was clearly a Moscow nouveau riche, his face ruddy, hair clean, and fingernails immaculate and uniformly lustrous, like carefully selected seashells inlaid into his fingertips. He was holding a large-screen Nokia phone and was showing it off to the curly-haired, gaudily-dressed women flanking him. In 2001 Russia, cell phones were still uncommon. You can imagine the kind of envy this brand new phone would have inspired in these women. It seemed to make them willing to let him pinch, nip, and tweak their noses as he poured liquor, and grip their hair as he lit cigarettes. I sat in the aisle behind them, bored, as their heads twitched incessantly above me like three electric, spring-loaded Pekinese. The nouveau riche had some business in Khabarovsk, for sure. Khabarovsk was an important railway hub, port, and aviation stop in Russia's far eastern region, with a petroleum pipeline from Sakhalin, an oil refinery, shipbuilding, machinery manufacturing and what have you. All very advanced. Perhaps he was in oil. But his business didn't concern me, I only cared about the safety of the plane. I realized they had no intention of turning off the cell phone, so I had to ask loudly in my shoddy English. My expression must have been ghastly: the cell phone's owner shrank back abruptly. He turned off the phone and gave me a puzzled look, as if to say, "What's got you so upset?"

At this point the last two passengers entered the cabin, a young woman and a boy of about five. The woman was carrying no small amount of luggage, the most conspicuous being a round hatbox. The large hatbox, held in front of the other bags, was leading

her forward. The woman and the boy approached me. As it turned out, they sat down in the aisle seats to my right. I saw now that she had hung the brown ribbon that bound the beige hatbox from her pinky finger. I also saw that the side of the hatbox had an illustration of a bowler the size of a tangerine. I had a lot of respect for this pinkie, acting like a hand all of its own. The hatbox ribbon hanging from her finger made her seem vulnerable but caring. She was the mother of a middle-class Khabarovsk family. They had gone to Moscow to visit family. They were returning home bearing gifts from their relatives, along with others prudently bought in Moscow. The husband was busy and couldn't accompany them, so she had bought him a special gift: a bowler hat. I rationalized further in my mind as I watched her hastily stow the few bags she held. First, she set the large hatbox down in her seat, allowing the pinkie, now swollen and red from the weight, to carefully free itself from the ribbon's loop. The hatbox itself seemed like a passenger who was sound asleep. She then put the rest of the bags into the compartment above her seat. Finally, she held the hatbox in both hands, looking for a stable place to stow it. However, she had already stuffed the overhead compartment full. It couldn't hold the enormous hatbox. Still grasping the hatbox, the woman turned a circle in the aisle, hoping the stewardess could help her. The stewardess didn't come, and the nearest person, me, had no plans to help her. What could I have done to help? Now my cousin – it's hard to say whether she'd have made the token gesture of standing and looking for a spot. She often did that sort of thing. Just then a tall, thin man in the row in front of the woman stood

up, opened the compartment above his head, pulled out a nondescript bag, tossed it on the aisle floor, and then without any explanation took the hatbox from her embrace and placed it into his compartment. At the soft thud of the compartment latch, the tall thin man faced the woman and happily spread his hands to mean, "Doesn't this solve things?" The two then exchanged a few sentences, which I imagined went something like this: The woman pointed at bag on the ground and said, "What about your bag?" The man picked up the bag and casually placed it underneath his seat, saying, "It really wasn't big enough to merit the overhead compartment anyway. It'll be fine underneath the seat." The woman gave a thankful laugh and called to her son, "Sasha!" This word I understood. Sasha was standing near the Moscow nouveau riche in the row ahead of me, gazing intently at the new Nokia. Mumbling, he unwillingly returned to his mother's side. I guessed the woman wanted him to take the window seat, like she was intentionally keeping him away from the nouveau riche. But he wanted to sit by the aisle. Of course, in the end he wasn't able to disobey his mother. He was a flaxen-haired, timid-looking child, with two shallow wrinkles under his large, sea-blue eyes. I often saw under-eye wrinkles more fitting for the elderly in the tender faces of some European children. It made them look melancholy, like they were wise and contemplative philosophers.

The plane took off, and I turned my head to watch the woman on my right. To my surprise, I realized that she looked familiar. It came to me – in my mother's bookshelf there was an old book entitled *The Story of Zoya and Shura*. The picture of Zoya in the book

looked somewhat similar to the woman sitting to my right. She had maroon-colored hair, an oval chin, and two resolute-looking eyes just slightly too close together. Zoya was a hero in the hearts of my mother's generation, but to my generation, born in the Sixties, she was just too remote. I used to stare at her photo, but I was paying more attention to her hair. She may have been a World War Two hero, but from a fashion perspective it was her head of extremely short, curly hair that was most pioneering. I liked her hair back then, which was why I happened to remember her. I didn't want to call this woman sitting next to me Zoya, so I came up with a new name for her: Irina. Are there Russian women with this name? I don't care. I just thought the sound of that name would fit my neighbor. Irina. Her hair was tied in a bun on the back of her head. Her shoulders were slightly hunched, and she was wearing an overly conservative checked skirt. Her hands, a little large for a woman's, were fair and smooth with reddened joints. Her deep brown eyes were slightly narrowed and her eyelids trembled. She wore the tranquil expression of someone waiting to return home. All of this was more like Irina than Zoya. The intercom sounded, telling the passengers the plane's flight time would be about nine hours, and it would arrive at Khabarovsk in the early morning. In ten minutes they would be providing dinner, and liquor and other foods were available for purchase.

I hastily ate the lukewarm dinner: three slices of pickle, a few lamb meatballs, and oily borscht. I had to close my eyes and sleep for a bit. Khabarovsk wasn't my final destination; I still had to take a night train from there. Thinking about this made my very tired.

Why is it again that people need to travel?

When I opened my eyes, I noticed some changes around the cabin. Most of the passengers were still sleeping, but the change came from the seat in front of Irina's. The tall thin man was facing backwards, kneeling and chatting with her with his elbows propped up on the back of his seat. For the time being I named him Skinny. On his thin face was a mouth of disproportionally large, white horse teeth. This position, kneeling and looking back, made him look a little servile, a little over-eager. And his clothing was also in itself a little undignified: his denim pants and jacket were slightly too small for him. He wore an excited expression, and if he were holding a rose he would have been the perfect likeness of one of those guys who propose in public parks. Although Irina didn't look him in the eye, she wasn't put-off. It seemed like they were discussing their impressions of Moscow, or maybe not. They spoke energetically. The stewardess didn't come back to stop him from kneeling, but Sasha, sitting next to Irina, stared vigilantly up at Skinny, even though his eyelids were fighting to stay open. Finally, the long-kneeling Skinny caught on to Sasha's mood, so he pressed the call button for the stewardess and bought Sasha a can of Coke and a bit of Russian sausage. As expected, Sasha's mood lightened somewhat. With his mother's tacit approval, he shyly accepted the gift. He held the sausage in one hand and the can in the other, unsure of which of these unexpected delicacies to eat first. Skinny struck while the iron was hot. He stretched his long arms towards Sasha, in a gesture that I think was a blunt request to switch seats. He gushed over how nice his seat was. It's so nice. And it's

on the aisle – isn't that the spot you wanted, Sasha? Sasha hesitated, and Irina suddenly blushed, as if she and Skinny were conspiring together. Yet she didn't rebuke Skinny's suggestion but stayed completely silent, crossing her hands and rubbing them together. Skinny seemed to take this as encouragement. He stood and walked back, and then, gently wedging his hands into Sasha's armpits, scooped the child out of his seat and set him into Skinny's old seat in the row ahead. Calling it his "old seat" is perhaps quite appropriate, because it was this new seat that foretold a new stage in Skinny and Irina's relationship. Or could it be that they were already in a relationship?

His wish to sit next to Irina fulfilled, Skinny raised one long leg and set it on the other, leaning slightly towards her. The heel on his pinched toe loafers was askew, and I could see that he was wearing a pair of gray silk socks from China, the sort that most Chinese no longer wear. In one leg there was a hole as big as a mung bean. I discerned that Skinny was not rich, and things on the plane were ghastly expensive. Yet there he was, spending money again. He even rang for the stewardess to buy Irina and himself a bottle of red wine. The stewardess brought along wine glasses and opened the bottle for them. Lifting their glasses, they looked like they wanted to touch glasses, but didn't; or like they wanted to speak, but held back. Things between them were as stiff as a made-up bed. I watched Irina nervously press her lip to the glass and take a sip, as if the wine was actually a bowl of scalding-hot congee. Skinny took a drink, and then abruptly clinked his glass against Irina's, like a man crashing his shoulder into another's as he passes by – a provocation. The

wine in Irina's glass sloshed around, and she laughed at him in mock protest. I disliked this mock protest. You could tell that this was when the flirting began, or rather, when she accepted her counterpart's flirting.

I shifted in my seat to make myself more comfortable, and perhaps also to get into a better position to watch the pair. I admit that at this point I was in a dark frame of mind, the way the general public delights in the misfortune of celebrities. Irina wasn't famous, but I sensed that at the very least she was an upright woman, and watching an upright woman do something shameful gave me an ineffable satisfaction. I strained and squinted and looked around, hoping Sasha would see the state his mother was in. But Sasha was absorbed in his sausage; I could see his small profile from where I sat. The three electric Pekinese had slept for a while and were now waking up at the same time. As soon as they awoke they busied themselves eating and drinking. They bought practically everything there was to buy on the plane. They drank wine straight from the bottle, one per person. Now and then they would pour wine into each other's mouths. This boorishness suddenly made Irina and Skinny appear reserved and civilized. If you wanted to, you could even say it made them seem ridiculous. As I thought about this, the glass of wine had already relaxed Irina. Irina and Skinny had begun to shift from a distanced chat to a close whisper. The bun on the back of her head was rubbing back and forth on the cloth seat covering, which was white with an ornamental pattern. Some strands of hair had fallen loose and were hanging to the side of her ear, divulging her desire. Oh yes, she wants this, I sneeringly said in my head. The scent of

her desire had already permeated the air around me. It wasn't just a subjective, imagined scent, however, but a physical odor that had drifted back from the front.

From the front of the cabin came two well-dressed gentlemen. When I shifted my gaze from Irina's bun, I saw the two men and immediately knew the scent was coming from them – at least one of them was wearing a light Burberry men's cologne. I didn't know much about cologne, but the reason I was so sensitive to this cologne was because of my mother. She used the same kind. I remember I once ridiculed her: how can you use men's cologne? My mother said: "Actually, this style is neutral, fine for both men and women." I thought of *The Story of Zoya and Shura* on my mother's bookshelf. The woman who worshipped Zoya in her youth came to love Burberry cologne in her old age. She often baffled me. And now there was really the sense that these two gentlemen had just fallen out of the sky and landed on this dilapidated plane. I thought this even though we were airborne at the time. They were young, tall, beautiful, magnificent, exquisite and statuesque. There were only two types of people made up like them: male runway models and career pickpockets who roam 5-star hotels. Their fragrant bodies passed us as they walked towards the back of the plane. In the dusky cabin, their gold bracelets and thick arm hair gleamed. They brushed past me, and in the blink of an eye they had disappeared into the cabin's lavatory.

My dark curiosity forced me to peer back. I had to determine if one of them was waiting outside the lavatory or whether they really did go in together. I'll stress the word "together." The last row was empty. A

stewardess was cracking sunflower seeds. Clearly she was used to this kind of behavior on the plane. Around fifteen minutes later, I finally saw with my own eyes the two men emerge from the lavatory, one in front of the other. One of them even adjusted the other's tie, which had gone askew. On the one hand I was excited to have seen this, but on the other hand, to go so far as to squeeze two bodies into the plane's small and precious lavatory in full view of everyone made me furious. This plane was engorged with lust, and the two men's actions had pushed this lust to play out in bare abandon. And then this bare abandon turned into pure burlesque when half an hour later, they stood up and showily followed each other to the back, past our gaze, to squeezed once more into the lavatory.

The reason I say "our" is that when the two gorgeous men passed, Irina and Skinny also noticed them. And at this point Skinny's right hand was resting on Irina's left shoulder.

After half an hour, that hand had slid down to Irina's waist.

After another half hour, that hand had had pulled itself out from between her waist and the seat, and was now tentatively placed on her leg.

It was late at night, and I was at the peak of my exhaustion. Unwilling to relax my secret surveillance, I ate some chocolate as a pick-me-up. I had actually brought the chocolate from China. Dove chocolates. In China I hadn't found them so tasty, but in Russia I began to find all the things I had brought delicious. Sasha hadn't slept the entire ride either, and he was looking tired. He got up from his row and went over to Irina, surely to remind her to tuck him in. But when

he saw Irina and Skinny totally wrapped up in their whispering, head pressed against head, a wave of ferocity came over him and he turned toward me. Our eyes met unexpectedly and I saw a touch of indignation. In those brief seconds, he knew that I understood why he had turned toward me so suddenly, and I knew that he understood I saw what was happening with his mom. In those few seconds I imagined Sasha as a little abandoned orphan child. I am usually lacking in compassion, but in this case I couldn't help but pass him a piece of chocolate. Despite his usual excitement at the prospect of food, he didn't accept my gift. My pity seemed to have made him just as angry. He whirled around again and hastily returned to his seat. He sat down and closed his eyes, like a little old man full of grief and resentment.

I subtly swept my eyes back over to Irina. Her head had been turned toward Skinny the entire time. She hadn't noticed Sasha's arrival or departure.

After half an hour, Skinny's hand was still on Irina's leg – or had it moved up an inch? It was real suspense, his hand resting on her checked skirt, and it drove me to lift my heavy eyelids for fear of missing something. A long while later, I finally saw Irina cautiously lift his hand off her leg. She stood up and went to the next row to check on Sasha. Sasha had already fallen asleep, or perhaps he just faking, but this allowed Irina to return with peace of mind. Skinny's hand quickly returned to her thigh. She glanced at the hand placed on her thigh and didn't say another word to Skinny. She closed her eyes like she wanted to sleep, but also like she was giving him a hint: she didn't mind the hand on her leg. The hand, as if prompted by the