

ZHANG ZHILU

DO YOU HAVE MOUSE PENCILS?



Zhejiang Juvenile and Children's Publishing House

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Chapter 1 The Password

My Dad is a teacher at my school. He teaches physics, just like my teacher Mr. Liu, except that Dad teaches tenth grade, not seventh. It just so happens that Mr. Liu's son is in one of my Dad's classes as well.

One day I said to my Dad: "Wouldn't it be great if you taught seventh grade and Mr. Liu taught tenth grade? That way, you could teach your son, and he could teach his. The benefits from a management standpoint are obvious, plus we would get to see each other all the time."

"Of course I'd love to do that. I'm just afraid of what other people would say. Even if people didn't gossip, you're still my son, so I'd have to be much stricter with you than the other kids. If you did something well, I wouldn't praise you, and if you messed up, I'd have to come down on you twice as hard. You'd feel like I was picking on you," Dad said, laughing.

I said that I wasn't scared.

"No matter what you say, I still wouldn't do it," said Dad.

"To hear you now, I'd think you really had a heart. It makes me wonder just who put all those handprints on my backside when I was a kid," I said.

"It's for your own good, and it's because I love you. Just think about where I hit you and you'll understand. Why do you think I only hit you on your backside and not your head?" Dad said, becoming serious.

"It's because you're afraid you'll spank me into a fool, and

I won't be able to get into college."

"You're only half right. It's mainly because there's a lot of padding on your backside; hitting you there doesn't hurt as much. It hurts, but only for a little while, and besides, I've spanked you less and less as you've gotten older. This year is almost up and you haven't even gotten spanked once!" Dad said, getting a little riled up.

"Wow! Even the number of spankings I get is budgeted? You think you've come out at a loss?"

"You don't get it," Dad shook his head. "Wait until you're older, then you'll see it's not my loss. It's your loss."

"My loss?" This was too absurd. I could only take Dad's words as a joke.

But Dad wasn't smiling at all. "When I was your age, my Dad spanked me. Now that I'm a grown-up, married, and especially now that I have you, when I think back on it, not only am I not mad at him, I actually miss him... no parents want to hit their child. It's just that they're exasperated and don't know what else to do. You know what they say, 'spare the rod and spoil the child.' Now that your grandfather's not with us anymore, I wish he could give me another spanking, but he can't now," Dad said, tears welling in his eyes.

At first I was just kidding around with Dad. If Dad actually were my teacher, my good grades would be instantly clouded by the suspicion of favoritism. I had no idea that our talk, which started on such a light note, would end so gloomily. Seeing this, I quickly added, "Dad, if you're free this Sunday, you can give my backside a good beating. What do you

say?"

Dad instantly perked up from his moment of sad reflection and said, "You think that giving a spanking is just as easy as clapping your hands? It tears me apart inside every time I have to spank you. I just turned forty this year and now I understand, spankings don't solve anything at all. I won't ever spank you again." Dad pledged solemnly.

Well, how could I expect that Dad would come to this conclusion? The person doing the beating took a loss, and the one getting beaten comes out on top. By this logic, it is difficult to estimate the number of times I've "come out on top" since I was little.

There's a Chinese tongue twister that goes: "Fourteen is fourteen, and forty is forty; forty's not fourteen, while fourteen's not forty."

This year Dad is forty and I'm fourteen. It's as if the tongue twister was written just for Dad and me. The tongue twister seemed to mean just this to me: "I'm always me, while Dad's always Dad; Dad's not me, and I'm definitely not Dad."

Mom was always critical of the way Dad let me "talk back" to him in our conversations. When we ate around our little square table, Dad and I faced each other and Mom sat between us. Meals were terribly boring. Dad and I always wanted to crack jokes to liven things up a bit, but we couldn't get too carried away because we didn't know what kinds of jokes were safe, and what kinds were going to get us into trouble. At times like this, Dad and I would look at each other, and I knew that he was as lonely as I was.

One night at dinner, I just couldn't help myself. I beat a pair of chopsticks together and started chanting, "A-one and a-two/ me and Dad face each other/ today our topic is no other/ than our family's mean old..." this little ditty was obviously a jab aimed at Mom.

Dad picked up his chopsticks and was about to join in when Mom glared at me and snapped, "What are you doing? Even food can't stop up that big mouth of yours! Where on earth did you learn that vulgar stuff? How can you beat together your chopsticks while you're eating?"

Dad quickly came to my rescue, "It's from a performance at school. It's called chopstick singing, and it has actually won a prize...."

"What? A prize for beating together chopsticks? If it has won a prize, then why isn't it on TV?" Mom said.

Dad and I looked at each other hopelessly. What on earth was Mom talking about? Does everyone who wins a prize automatically go on TV? If you don't go on TV, does that mean that you can't win a prize?

"Come on now. Have a sense of humor!" said Dad.

"Humor? Does humor put food on the table?" Mom quipped.

That's how it was. The atmosphere at our table was always solemn and tense. We would finish our meals at an incredible speed. Of course, this did cut down on our food bills.

This evening, right in the middle of dinner, Dad, for some reason, suddenly asked a question he couldn't seem to repress. "Xia Gang, can I ask you something?"

"What?" I said, downing a spoonful of soup.

"When people eat soup, do they find the spoon with their lips, or their lips with the spoon?" Dad asked.

I had never considered this question before, so I quickly picked up my soup spoon to give it a try. I cleared my mind and tried to use the spoon to find my mouth. It turned out to be quite awkward. Then I held the spoon aloft and tried to use my mouth to get at the spoon, and that felt even weirder. "They find each other," I said, laughing.

We couldn't help but cast a secretive glance at Mom. She was right in the middle of fierce concentration, trying to use her mouth to catch at the soup spoon. Her look of earnestness was absolutely hilarious. I'd never seen Mom look like that before. Dad and I laughed out loud.

Mom hurriedly drank the soup down and said while feigning calm, "What's the big deal? Of course, it's the spoon that finds the mouth..."

Dad and I burst into uncontrolled laughter again. Even though Mom was still saying, "What's so funny?", it was clear that her voice didn't carry the same "holier than thou" tone it usually did when she would scold us.

Dad took this opportunity to tell a little story about spoons.

"When Churchill was Prime Minister in England, he attended a banquet held by the Queen. A distinguished guest with a big beard was sitting beside Churchill. This big-bearded guest took a shine to the silver soup spoons on the table, so he picked one up and put it in his pocket. Churchill saw him do it, but made no sign that he had seen anything. Then Churchill also picked up a silver spoon and put it in his own pocket.

Churchill chuckled knowingly with the big-bearded guest. After a while, Churchill leaned over to the big-bearded guest and said, 'I saw the attendants staring at us. They must have seen us take the spoons. We'd better just put them back and forget about it, otherwise there will be a scene.' And saying this, Churchill took the spoon out and placed it on the table. The big-bearded guest had no choice but to put his spoon back too."

"Ha! Now Churchill had a sense of humor!" I said, laughing.

But Mom said, "Did that really happen?"

"Oh, come on, it's just a joke! It's just to show what a clever character Churchill was," said Dad.

Mom didn't say anything else, but her posture while eating soup was a little awkward. I smiled inwardly.

Even though there wasn't much food at this meal, it was absolutely delicious. It seems that even if a sense of humor doesn't put food on the table, it does make the food on the table go down better.

The next day, I ran back home excitedly as soon as school let out. I couldn't wait to tell Dad that I had made the "Honor Roll." I stopped outside the front door to our house. Through the door I heard a sound in the kitchen. I knocked on the front door, but there was no response. I knocked again harder, but there was still no response. Not only was there no response, there was no sound at all. Suddenly, I broke into a sweat, and a shot of cold ran through my body... Was Dad sick? So sick that he couldn't even speak? Or was there a robber in the house? At that mo-

ment, it seemed as if I could see that shifty-eyed thief was staring intensely at the door, gripping a knife. If he were to fling the door open and burst out now, there would be no way I could defend myself.

"Dad, are you home?" I called out in a strained voice. I thought to myself that if no one answers, I'll run right back to the street and start yelling, "Thief! There's a thief in my house!"

My father's even voice came through the door, "Did you forget?"

I instantly breathed a sigh of relief. I was sweating from head to toe. "Forget what?" I asked, puzzled.

"The password."

I suddenly remembered that Dad and I had made a pact. He and I had decided to do this last night.

I put aside my anger at Dad for a moment and knocked again at the door, saying, "Excuse me, do you have Mouse Pencils?"

"You are..." Dad said in a drawn-out voice.

"I'm a student at the Mouse School!" I yelled, losing patience.

"Is there a cat outside?" Dad said in a low voice.

"Yes! Hurry and open the door!" I thumped again on the door.

The door opened and Dad stood in the doorway, "Hey, why the long face? You're acting like you're not having fun at all."

"You scared me half to death! When you didn't say anything just now I thought you were a robber," I said.

"Hey! We set this up last night. If you don't say the pass-

word, how could I say anything?" Dad argued.

"Oh, come on! Next time don't do that, it's a pain in the neck," I threw my schoolbag on the bed.

"A pain? It was really fun. Just think, if you come home after school every day, and I open the door as soon as you knock, you say 'Hi, Dad', I say 'Hi, Son', and decades will seem like a day. Doesn't that seem boring? This way, it's a lot more fun!"

I didn't say anything. My tense, angry mood hadn't quite passed yet.

"Son, listen to me, don't think that humor is childish. Humor's not something that you can either take or leave. A sense of humor is the most precious temperament a person can have in life. Or let me put it this way, say, two people encounter the same kind of disappointment or setback. The person without a sense of humor might die; the person with a sense of humor might have the strength to go on living. People say that all you need to overcome hardship and setbacks is willpower and bravery, but a sense of humor is actually just as important... Do you understand?"

I shook my head, "No, are you kidding? If someone is dying, you can just joke with them and say, 'Hey, don't worry. It's just the Grim Reaper kidding around with you!' and it will help him live?"

"You don't understand humor at all. You've got to have a quick mind to use humor. It's not your fault. You're too young. I'll put it this way: don't you like watching those comedians on TV? That's other people talking. No matter how

funny they are, there's still no way for you to listen to them every day, isn't it? If we have a sense of humor, we're just like the comics, laughing at everything all day long. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"So, the only thing we'll say all day long is 'Do you have Mouse Pencils?'"

"Come on, use your noodle! Humor happens spontaneously at any place and any moment. As soon as you see it, you catch it, and then have a good laugh..."

Someone knocked at the door.

"Your Mom's home," Dad whispered to me.

I hurried over to the door and said, "What's the password?"

Mom banged on the door, "What nonsense are you talking about? Open this door right now!"

Dad said pitifully to Mom standing outside the door, "If you could just give the password, Ma'am."

Mom blew up, "Are you getting smart with me? Open up this instantly!"

Dad and I cast a mournful glance at each other. Dad shook his head and opened the door, saying to Mom, "You have no sense of humor at all..."

Mom said, "Don't go around teaching this kid how to get smart all the time. You should teach him how to face society. Humor! Humor! Is humor going to put food on the table?"

I was so sad when I heard this. Last night at dinner, Mom had seemed so receptive to humor. Why was she so cold-hearted towards it again? Besides, if she doesn't like it, that's fine, but there's no need to make humor Enemy Number One.

And why does she always have to link humor up with putting food on the table? The two things have nothing to do with each other.

It's at times like this when I really feel sorry for my Dad. He goes to such pains to light up a tiny little spark to make everyone happy, but Mom heartlessly dumps a whole pan of cold water on it.

Chapter 2 *The Challenge Begins*

Two days before summer vacation, the grades for final exams had just come out. It went without saying that I was at the top of the class.

That evening, I said to my Dad, "Dearest Father, where shall we go to *experience life* this summer break?"

When Dad and I speak, we always like to play tricks a little bit. For instance, whenever he went to the corner store to buy something, he would say, "I'm going to *do some market research*." When on a crowded bus he would say, "I love to *stand with the Masses*." When talking about our days off, he would never say going travelling or anything like that, he would only say, "Today, let's go to the Summer Palace to *experience life*," or "Tomorrow, let's go to the pool to *plunge deeply into life*," and so on. When he talked this way, I would play right along with him.

Today, Dad was very serious, "Don't worry. I'm making all the arrangements myself. All you have to do is preparing mentally."

He pretended to be quite serious. I just took it as a joke.

On the second day of summer vacation, after all the dishes were cleared away after dinner, he called me over to sit across from him. He poured a cup of tea and waited until Mom had sat down next to him. He cleared his throat. It seemed eerily solemn.

He plucked a small hard paper card from his pocket and

handed it to me, saying, "Xia Gang, take a look at this."

"What's this?" I asked.

"You don't even recognize a train ticket? This just goes to show how much you need this." Dad glanced at Mom, who nodded her head.

"I've never taken a train, so of course I don't recognize a train ticket." I argued.

"Do you recognize it now?"

"Sure..." I was so excited. A train ticket! This meant that we were going to take a train to *experience life*. What's more, we were going to a *distant* place.

"Where are we going?" I held the ticket in my hands. That little piece of paper was tiny, only a couple of inches long, but to me it felt precious.

"See for yourself."

Even though the face of the ticket was covered with words, my eyes flew straight to the letters that spelled out "Beijing-Qingdao".

I leaped out of my seat and hugged Dad, "Dad, I appreciate your kindness." I turned and hugged Mom. "Mom, I'm greatly obliged."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Mom said.

Mom didn't know when Dad and I wanted to thank each other, we loved to use this expression. She didn't know that this expression that was so common between friends and classmates, so much so that it could even be disingenuous, was totally different when Dad and I said it to each other. It was extra-specially meaningful, extra-specially lifelike and

colorful. At this moment, if I were to say thank you, or thank you so much, it couldn't capture the excitement I felt, and it would be too distant and unfamiliar, wouldn't it? I used this expression to say, "Mom and Dad, you are the best!"

Normally, Dad would say to Mom, "Now that's a sense of humor." But this time, to my surprise, Dad said, "You don't need to thank me yet. The best is yet to come."

"What else is there?" I asked.

Dad said, "This time, you're going by yourself."

"What? Just me? You two aren't going?"

"That's right! We're not going. It's just you..."

"How can I go by myself? I've never taken a train... I don't know anyone there... I'm so young. I only just started seventh grade..."

"Now don't you refuse out of courtesy," said Dad, with a grin.

"I'm not being... polite..." I babbled. "I'm not going... where are you two going?"

"We're not going anywhere. Your Mom has to go to work as usual, and I'm going to use the break to read for a while. If you really don't want to go, you could stay home and do schoolwork," said Dad.

Dad used the phrase *do schoolwork* to threaten me. He knew all too well what terrible torment it would be for a seventh grader, especially a seventh grader like me, to use his vacation to *do schoolwork*! At this moment, the thought of going by myself was starting to sound better and better, but I wanted to know just what exactly Dad was up to. Up until now, he had