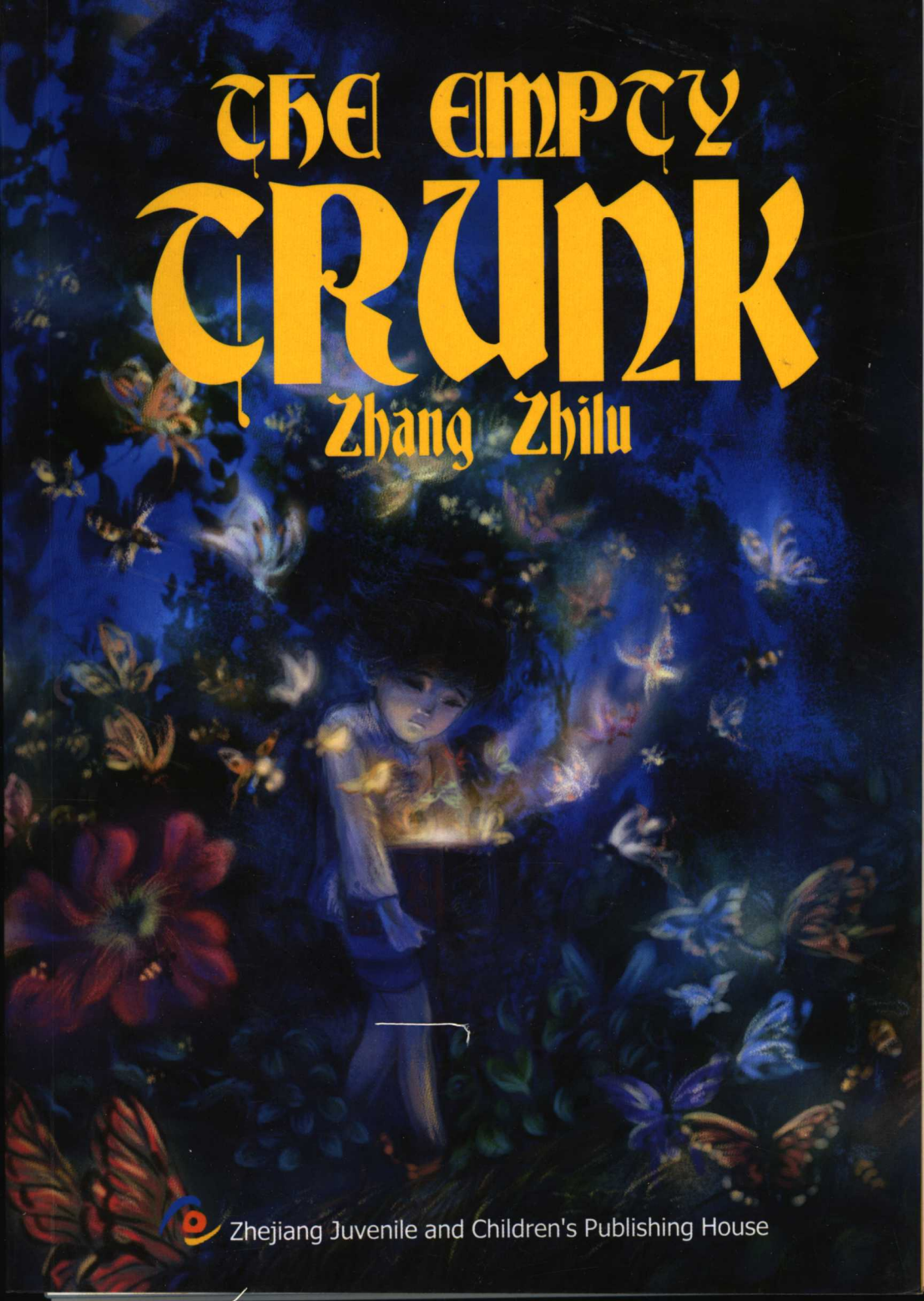


# THE EMPTY CRUNK

Zhang Zhilu



Zhejiang Juvenile and Children's Publishing House

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## ***The Wooden Antelope***

**I**t was snowing. I was by myself on the way to Wanfang's home. Snowflakes were dancing lightly in the dim glow of the street lamps.

Wanfang's home was only about 100 meters from mine. During the day we had run a 100-meter race against each other along the same road; it was flat and straight. Now it was snowing. I walked very slowly toward his home, my shoes going crunch crunch in the crisp snow.

Not long before, back home shortly after dinner, I was sitting at my desk reciting the lever principle discussed in class that day. Mother was knitting on the sofa. I occasionally looked out of the window at the drifting snowflakes — we seldom got such a heavy snowfall. It was wonderful! Tomorrow would be perfect for snowballing!

My mother walked over and slowly drew the curtains.

My father and grandmother were watching TV in another room, from which came the clashing and banging of cymbals and drums. Peking Opera again! I covered my ears with my hands. Mother left the room and turned the volume down. Then she came back to me and gently pulled my hands away from my ears.

"Xinyu, where is the antelope?" my mother suddenly asked me.

The antelope she asked about was a black wooden carving. It used to sit on a corner of my desk. My heart pounded, because

I had given it to my best friend, Wanfang, as a gift.

"You said I could have it," I murmured.

"Of course you can have it. But where is it now?" She seemed to suspect something and looked into my eyes. Now it became a big deal!

"I put it away." I don't know why, but I told a lie.

"Where did you put it? Show me now," my mother insisted.

I had no choice but to sit still. I didn't dare to look at her, and bowed my head.

"Tell me the truth. Did you sell it?" She now sounded stern.

"I would never let you do that."

"No, Mom, I gave it to somebody," I blurted out, feeling like crying.

"Tell me. Who did you give it to?" My mother shook my shoulders.

"To Wanfang."

"You have to get it back right now," she said firmly. "I can go with you."

"No!" I cried.

My father entered the room. He remained calm when my mother told him what had happened. He lit a cigarette and said to me slowly, "How can you children give away things from home without permission from your parents? You did wrong. If you don't agree, tomorrow you can ask your teacher what he thinks. I'm sure he will disagree with giving away such a valuable thing."

"But, it belongs to me."

"Yes, we gave it to you, but we didn't say you could give it

to someone else."

I had exhausted my reasons. My father always sounded too reasonable to argue with. I knew the black antelope was a souvenir my father had brought back from Africa, and he liked it a lot. But I felt very sad when I thought about taking it back from my best friend. My parents had no idea what a wonderful friend Wanfang had been to me.

Wanfang and I had been classmates since primary school. He got good marks all the time. Besides that, he was always ready to help people. He was very strong—he could do ten pull-ups in one go on the horizontal bar — but he never bullied the other students.

The other day we had a physical education class and we all put on our new gym suits: they were navy blue with three white stripes along the sleeves and pants. We were chasing each other around for fun when I tore my pants on the branch of a tree. I sat on the ground and cried, because I was afraid that my mother would scold me for it. Wanfang sat down beside me and sighed. Suddenly, he took off his pants and said, "Let's swap pants. My mother is a tailor. She can mend pants so well that you would not see any sign of a tear." Being very selfish, I believed him and swapped pants with him. I learned later that his mother asked him to stand facing the wall for half an hour because of the damage to the pants. I wanted to get my pants back, but he refused. "I've already been punished. If you get them back now, you will be punished, too. Just leave it as it is."

Wanfang visited me the other day. He was very fond of the

antelope on my desk, so naturally I asked him to keep it. "We will always be good friends. Always." He was touched and gave me his favorite knife. I started to sob when I recalled all this.

My grandmother stood by the door. She whispered, "Let's forget it. Just remember it next time. Young children also need to be credible. How could he take back a gift he has given to a friend?"

My mother couldn't help snapping at her, "You always spoil him. Do you know how expensive it is?"

My father kept quiet. He sat on the sofa, smoking.

I felt even worse. I was no longer a child. I would be in middle school soon. I quietly took the knife Wanfang had given me from a drawer and dashed out.

I got to the building where Wanfang lived, went up to the third floor and knocked softly on the door. The door opened and Wanfang leaned out and tried to pull me in.

"Wanfang..." I just stood there and wouldn't go in.

"What's up?" he asked me anxiously.

Slowly, I showed him the knife. "I want to get my antelope... back," I muttered in a barely audible voice.

Wanfang was quiet. He stared at me and bit his lip. I bowed my head, not daring to look at him. We stood there in silence.

After a while, Wanfang asked, "Why you do this? Didn't we have a deal today? Are we still good friends?"

I couldn't help bursting into tears. Wanfang's mother walked out of the room and asked what was happening. I couldn't speak, and kept sobbing. She then turned to Wanfang for an



answer.

"He wants to get back what he has given me," Wanfang said.

Wanfang's mother slapped Wanfang's bottom. "How dare you exchange things with your young friends? Now give him back whatever he gave you."

Wanfang didn't move. His mother pushed him and he reluctantly walked off.

Wanfang returned shortly with the antelope in a glass case he had made.

Wanfang's mother took it. "Well. How could you accept such an expensive thing?" She passed the antelope to me. "Take good care of it. I will give him a good talking-to."

I gave her back the glass case. I felt like speaking to Wanfang, but he had gone back inside.

I went slowly down the steps. It was snowing heavily. Snowflakes fell onto the antelope, and drifted away. The antelope suddenly seemed so heavy that I had to carry it with both hands. I was trudging along in the snow when I unexpectedly heard Wanfang's voice behind me.

Surprised, I turned round. Wanfang stopped in front of me, gasping for breath. He wasn't wearing his hat or his coat. He covered the antelope with his glass case and put the knife in my hand. "Keep this. We are still good friends, even without gifts."

"But your mother will be unhappy." I looked at him.

"That's OK. When my mum and dad give me things they don't mind if I give them to someone else," he said with a big smile.

"We will go snowballing tomorrow. Be early." He ran away, waving to me. Slowly he disappeared into the white world of flying snowflakes.

I remained where I was. Snowflakes landed on the glass case. The antelope looked listlessly out at the white world, a place he had never seen before. I thought he must be sad, because he couldn't run around in that world.

I cried. Snowflakes and tears fell onto the glass case. I had never been so sad.

## *Wanwan's Collection*

### 1

Teacher Yang walked into the classroom with a thick album. "The winter holiday will start tomorrow," she said, smiling, to the class. "I am now going to give you a meaningful and interesting assignment for it."

Everyone stared at the album.

Teacher Yang continued, "I'd like each of you to collect something that has special meaning to you. We will arrange an exhibition of all your collections when school starts again. If you already have collections, like postage stamps, matchbox pictures, bookmarks or birthday cards, you will collect more and show them to us at the exhibition."

The announcement sent a shudder of excitement through the class.

Li Xiaoming looked very conceited. He was the best stamp-collector in the class. He had a complete set of stamps of the twelve animals<sup>①</sup> of the Chinese zodiac, especially the one of the Year of the Monkey, with a furry black and gold monkey

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① Each year belongs to one of twelve animals. The Chinese traditionally believe that the year one was born partly determines one's personality and future, just like the signs of the zodiac for westerners.

② against a red background. No one else in the class had it. The best stamps they had found were only those of roosters or horses. Besides Chinese stamps, Li Xiaoming had stamps from more than one hundred countries. The rest of the class had not even heard of some of the countries, let alone understand the foreign words printed on the stamps, so Li Xiaoming could brag as he liked, pretending to understand all of them. When he showed off his collection, he did not allow anyone to touch it. He would also ask his classmates to stay at a distance, because he was concerned the carbon dioxide they breathed out could damage his collection. Everyone else could only roll their eyes and do what he asked. Well... Li Xiaoming was so lucky to have a father who worked in an embassy.

At the same time, Sun Qingqing's face split into a proud smile. He had good reason to: he had collected a complete series of matchbox pictures. Actually, there was nothing special about Sun Qingqing — his mother designed pictures for a match factory.

Sitting on her seat, Xu Wanwan felt a bit nervous. She couldn't smile, because she didn't have a father working in an embassy or a mother in a match factory. Both her parents taught in a middle school. Her father was an English teacher, but no foreigners had ever written to him.

Teacher Yang went on, "The value of a collection is not how expensive it is, but its meaning. I hope you will all use your imaginations. There are all kinds of collections in the world: coins, watches, tickets, or even old ration coupons<sup>②</sup>, such as those for rice, cooking oil, clothes and bicycles. People collect

whatever they come across. At your age you will not have seen any rice or bicycle coupons. Well... some people collect liquor bottles, and some foreigners are keen on getting bathtubs and toilets."

"Collecting toilets?" the students giggled.

Teacher Yang picked up her album from the desk. "Can you guess what my collection is?"

"Pictures," Jinfeng shouted. She was extraordinarily bold for a girl student. But she had a funny voice: she sounded squeaky, as if she had her throat gripped and had to force her voice out from a very narrow, flattened tube. It was quite unpleasant to hear, so she was called Half Pitch Higher.

As usual, she caused gales of laughter.

Jinfeng's face turned red and she became quiet. But she had a very short memory, and would still try to be the first one to answer questions from teachers next time.

Teacher Yang beamed at the students as she opened the album.

"Wow!" The class was astounded.

On a black background were rows of beautiful butterflies in all colors: yellow, white, red, black with golden marking... Beneath each butterfly was a white note, which was too small

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② Before China's economic reforms started in the late 1970's and productivity improved, many daily commodities were in short supply and could only be bought if one had ration coupons, or on the black market.

for the class to read. Xu Wanwan figured the notes were about the names and origins of the butterflies.

"These butterflies are presents from my former students," Teacher Yang explained. "In the past, I would tell my students just before they graduated, 'You are soon leaving school. I hope each of you will give me a present: a butterfly caught by you, not now, but in the future.' My students grew up and worked in various fields all over the country. Each year I would get dozens of letters from them, along with the most beautiful butterflies they could find. I have pinned each butterfly to the album and written down the name and workplace of the student who sent it. Some of the students graduated more than twenty years ago."

The classroom was silent.

Xu Wanwan thought, "I will make the most meaningful collection."

## 2

The winter holiday began.

Xu Wanwan read an English text out loud at her desk at home while her mother sat reading on the sofa. Her father had been out since early morning teaching a class of students cramming for the university entrance exam<sup>③</sup>.

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③A national exam that is taken by most graduating high school students. It is of great importance to parents and their children, because doing well in this exam allows students to go to the best universities.

"Wanwan, you should follow the tape when you read. If you just read out loud by yourself, your pronunciation will not be correct," said her mother.

"It's too much trouble!"

"No effort should be too much trouble when it comes to learning. Here, let me turn on the tape recorder for you."

Wanwan's mother inserted a tape and pressed a button. "Come on. Get ready. Read the sentences one by one after the tape."

Xu Wanwan turned around, held her textbook up and mumbled, "Isn't it great to be a grown-up? You don't have to do any homework."

The tape recorder hissed.

A moment passed before Wanwan and her mother chorused, "Why is there no sound?"

"Oh! I did it wrong. I pressed the record button!" exclaimed her mother as she dashed from the sofa to the tape recorder.

Wanwan giggled. She hit the reverse button before her mother got to the tape recorder and then played the tape.

Mother's voice filled the room. "Come on. Get ready. Read the sentences one by one after the tape."

Wanwan couldn't help giggling again.

Her mother's voice on tape was a bit different from usual: she sounded more pleasant, like a radio announcer.

The tape continued and it was Wanwan's voice. "Isn't it great to be a grown-up? You never have to do any homework." It sounded quite good.

Wanwan and her mother laughed together.

An idea struck Wanwan: "Hey! What if I collect the voices of the whole class on tape... It would be fun. That's right! Just one sentence from each classmate, then play it at the exhibition. It will knock them out. But it is a secret for now. I mustn't tell anyone, or it will be ruined."

Wanwan jumped up excitedly and hugged her mother around the neck. "Mom, you're great!"

"What happened to you?" Mother was bewildered.

Wanwan's father was an English teacher. He had an expensive palmcorder, his pride and joy, which he used with great care and would not allow anyone else to touch it.

At lunch, Wanwan asked her father, "Dad, when is my birthday?"

Her parents exchanged looks, not sure why Wanwan had raised this question.

Her father narrowed his eyes. "Why do you ask? Are you planning something naughty?"

"Just tell me when it is."

Her mother could not remain silent. "January 28th, a winter's day, freezing hands, freezing feet: no wonder you are so fidgety. ④" She then counted the days with her fingers. "22, 23...

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④ Just like in English, there are many puns in Chinese. The character (冻) for "freezing" in Chinese is pronounced *dong*, exactly the same as the character (动) for "move". So Wanwan's mother saying "freezing hands, freezing feet" sounds like "moving hands, moving feet," i.e. fidgeting.



Well! Only six days to go."

"What presents will you give me this birthday?" Wanwan tilted her head slightly sideways.

"I knew you had something on your mind," said her father. He patted her head. "Shame on you. Presents are chosen by those who want to give them to you. How can you tell them what you want?"

"Actually, it is hard to pick gifts. Tell us what you want," said her mother.

"I don't want anything. You won't have to spend one *fen* on it. I want you to lend me something, Daddy."

"What is it? As long as I have it."

"Really?"

Again her parents exchanged looks, and nodded.

"I want to borrow your palmcorder for a week." Wanwan looked straight into her father's eyes.

He hesitated a moment, then said, "OK. You can have it for a week, starting from 8 o'clock in the morning on January 28th. Take good care of it."

"I will return it in good shape."

From that moment, Wanwan looked forward so excitedly to her birthday. Finally, it came. Her father showed her how to use the palmcorder, and then she managed to disguise it: she made a hole in the top pocket of her jacket for the wire to go through and attached a mini-microphone to the jacket collar. She looked into a mirror and realized the microphone would be easily noticed. She then moved it to her left jacket pocket and aligned it with a black pen. After another look into the mirror,