

Give Me  
a Girl  
at Age  
Eighteen

Feng  
Yang

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PEOPLE'S LITERATURE  
PUBLISHING HOUSE

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*Translated from the Chinese by*  
DAVE HAYSOM

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BEIJING

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## Glossary of Key Words and Concepts

*niúbī:*

(*nyoo-bee*)

(adj. / n.)

[lit.]: cow pussy

[fig.]: the epitome of awesomeness; not giving a shit about what anyone thinks about you; badass; the dog's bollocks; cool as fuck.

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## 1. Zhu Shang

I had heard The Old Lecher Kong Jianguo talking about Zhu Shang's mother before we'd even moved into the block. She was a peerless beauty, he said. The first time I met Zhu Shang, I made up my mind: I would do whatever it took to spend my life with her.

A youth on the cusp of eighteen has no concept of time. A lifetime may as well be an eternity.

## 2. Must Get Hard

“You’re still young, you won’t understand this. But it’s important, very important. When you get to my age you may well find cause to ask yourself this. In your whole life, since you were born, have you ever encountered the kind of girl with the looks, the figure, the attitude that *compels* you to get hard, *compels* you to get it up, *compels* you to fuck her? It doesn’t matter, after that, if your feller gets chopped off or shredded, or if they lock you up and throw away the key. You *must* get hard, you *must* get it up, you *must* fuck her. *That’s* the kind of girl who’s a truly peerless beauty. There’s only one man in a thousand who’ll dare ask himself this, round these parts. And of those that do, there’s only one in a thousand that will know the answer. And only one in a thousand of those that know the answer will have actually managed to fuck her. This one, this one man who succeeds, he may one day find himself wondering whether there’s any goddamn point to it after all. But you *must* strive to find her, to fuck her, yes. *This*. This is ambition. This is purpose. This is *niubi*.”

It was a summer’s afternoon, and The Old Lecher Kong Jianguo was leaning against the locust tree as he lectured me. Only the drone of cicadas indicated that time had not come to a complete stop. Caustic rays of clotted sunlight scoured the arid earth, spattering the dust, undisturbed by the breezes that occasionally stirred the little green inchworms dangling from the leaves they had cannibalised. The OLK had just woken up.



He was stripped to the waist; his torso was still muscular, even if his belly button was lost in midriff flab. The pale knife scar slashed across his face lent him a benevolent look. His military-style Dacron trousers were held up by a leather belt, and the four holes he had pierced in the belt recorded the growth of his belly like the rings in a tree trunk: the innermost hole was from several summers ago; the one next to it, the following winter; the hole after that, last winter; and the outermost was now. The OLK must have spent his afternoon nap lying on his left side, because the sleeping mat had left indentations and bamboo splinters across that half of his body. His hair was a mess. Having finished his speech, he lit up one of his Da Chienmen brand cigarettes and took a ruminative drag.

My dad had gone to a traditional-style school where they were force fed the classics: The Three Character Classic, The Book of Family Names, The Poems of the Masters, The Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism. He had to memorise them all, he told me, and he hadn't understood a word. It was only after he grew up that he came to appreciate them in retrospect, like a cow chewing over two-day-old grass. It was something to be proud of. He would often slip poetic allusions into his work reports, his literary refinement dazzling each and every one of his female colleagues, except the ones between the ages of twenty-five and fifty, who thought he was a dick.

I hadn't understood a word of The OLK's monologue. I too had just woken from a nap and was chiefly preoccupied with figuring out how to while away the hours between now and dinner time. Oh he was *so* profound, this old lecher. Just get to the point – why was he gussying it up with all those rhetorical questions, parallelism, anadiplosis? He sounded like my Chinese teacher, the pretentious wanker. I already knew what it was like to be desperate, to be *compelled* to do something. I had

run around on tiptoes, for example, searching for a public toilet while holding back a colossal piss. I had hankered for the crispy fried *sachima* on top of the wardrobe when I was five years old. I had craved a pair of white Nike high-tops for my fifteenth birthday.

With the benefit of hindsight, I suspect that if I hadn't received that traditional schooling from The OLK, the peerless object of my desires would never have transcended the urge to acquire Nike high-tops, to eat *sachima*, or to relieve an urgent need to piss.

### 3. Quick, Seize the She-Lecher

The Old Lecher Kong Jianguo was old. Twenty, or even thirty years older than me. Four or five years is a generation in Lecher Years, just like it is for traditional opera singers. An old lecher will often be eliminated by the next generation of young lechers, stabbed up or knocked out with a brick to the head. (Just like traditional opera singers.) So if you totted up the years according to Taoist calculations of seniority, The OLK and I were five, maybe six generations apart.

I was nearly eighteen. The age when I'd always do the exact opposite of whatever my parents told to me do.

Before we moved into the block, my mum told me the majority of the people living there were good people. Honest people. As long as I sucked up to them – *Good morning Grandfather, Grandmother, Uncle, Auntie* – and accepted their gifts of candy and cash then I couldn't go far wrong. If any of their kids came looking for trouble then I should use my discretion: if it was worth it then I could go ahead and let rip, avoid the face, but let them have it in the vulnerable spots below the belt. But. There were two categories of people I absolutely had to avoid.

The first group was the Che sisters, a pair of ethnically Korean twins. Their eyebrows were a skyline in spring; their eyes, two peach blossom petals. They had similar-looking faces and the same long hair, but differed in figure. One was delicate and dainty, the other sturdy and infinitely well endowed. Since their

surname translated as “Chariot”, the sturdier was thus dubbed “Big Ride” and the daintier “Lesser Ride”. The days of opening up and reform had just begun, and the Rides were making the most of their exotic foreignness and outlandish attire. Nothing got past my mum’s eyes. “*Look* at them, jingling and jangling with their fancy gold anklets.”

The Rides were inseparable. Whenever they steered into the building, I would drop my homework and leap out onto the balcony. There I would peer down on them in their weird outfits and see what kind of person they had brought back with them. Their hair fell sleekly down on either side of their faces, revealing a straight line of pale scalp at the centre parting. This was still the pre-Head-and-Shoulders era – Jinsong district was still farmland back then. You could hunt dragonflies in the paddy fields in summer, and the cops kept pigs and sheep. I used a brand of soap called Lighthouse to wash my hair, and it turned your head into a hog-bristle brush. But I remember distinctly that neither of the Rides ever had a speck of dandruff in their hair. It was as strong and healthy as glossy, green fertiliser-glutted crops. So sleek and shiny that your eye would slip right off and tumble to the ground. My gaze would follow the hair down, and when I caught a flash of boob I would chant a nursery rhyme to myself: “Mary had a little lamb, its fleece as white as snow, and every time that Mary came by, my cock would surely grow.”

My dad was a busy man at his work unit in those days. In the interests of the working masses he had to spend a lot of time away from home on business trips. My sister, she was one of the good girls. She had her hair buzz cut in order to keep her brain from overheating. She was a study mule, working harder than anyone else in class, but she still never managed to get top marks. She could always have cropped her hair even shorter,

but that would have diminished her appeal in the eyes of the boys. So she buried her head in her books instead.

Born a peasant, my mum had managed to make her way to the city and become a worker, which put her in the highest echelon of society. She brought home the white cotton gloves issued to her by the Labour Safety Division and unstitched them to use the thread to make clothes for my sister and me. These garments offered no protection from the wind and had absolutely no give. Had the thought occurred to her, she could have made them into underwear, thus denying me any hope of ever achieving an erection – but my mum did not have the breadth of vision to conceive of such possibilities. She would stick the unspooling glove onto the leg of an upturned chair and sit there, bored out of her mind, desperate for someone to talk to. We did have a television, but it was a nine-inch black-and-white screen, and she didn't much care to watch it. She was constantly complaining that the TV presenters were all either retarded or had shit for brains. My sister was always busy with homework, so my mum would come and talk at me. Whoever marries my daughter will be one lucky man, she'd tell me, because he'll have me to talk to for the rest of his life; he won't have to settle for those retards on the TV *and* he'll save on the electricity bill.

You concentrate on your studies, she told me, don't go rushing out onto the balcony every time you get a whiff of perfume.

But I need to keep watch for messenger pigeons, I said, and I need to look out into the distance to give my eyes a rest now and again. Plus I can keep an eye on who the Rides are bringing back with them, and if I spot dad in some sort of cunning disguise I can let you know.

The Rides are Bad Folk, my mum said.

The Rides look like pretty distinguished folk to me, I said, I'm not sure dad is in their league.

You just ignore them, my mum said.

They're the ones who ignore me, I said. They're She-Spies and I'm just a Little Red Guard. Not a Red Captain, not a Red Secretary, and definitely not a Red Chairman – I'm nowhere near distinguished enough. The only way they're going to touch me is if they need to grab a messenger's cockfeather out of my trousers.

What if they set you up, she said, what if they plant a feather in your trousers, hmm? What will you do if they try and trick you into talking to them?

Then I'll cry "Oh Auntie, I'm too little!" I said.

What if they carry on? she said.

Then I'll cry "Oh Auntie, I'm scared!" I said.

What if they still carry on? she said.

Then I'll cry "Come quick, seize the she-lecher, oh, oh, oh!"

My mum still had three pairs of gloves to unravel, which meant there were yet more new clothes to come. Constant vigilance was required. I was just a kid, which meant the air was full of deadly cold germs just waiting to get me, the streets were lined with Bad Folk, and even when there were no actual Bad Folk around there were still plenty of Slightly-Less-Than-Good Folk itching to take their place.

I was as keen on cold germs as I was on Bad Folk. Coming down with a severe cold meant a day off school, and instead of going to work my mum would stay at home and buy me yoghurt. The yoghurt came in a ceramic jar, with a white paper lid attached by a red rubber band, and to drink it you poked a hole in the lid with a plastic straw. The hospital smelled of Lysol. The old she-doctor had a face of wrinkles, scrubbed and scrawny like a witch, and the young nurse wore a little white hat to cover her sleek shiny hair. Their faces were usually concealed behind gauze masks, and they never looked me in the eye. They

had eyes only for my arse. They'd rub on a chilly splash of iodine, and – Mary had a little lamb – I knew the needle was on its way. Hurry up and stick it in, fuckyougoddammit.

But the She-Spy remained in the movies, smoking and stroking her glossy hair, and Big Ride and Lesser Ride never did grant me an opportunity to cry “Come quick, seize the she-lecher!”

## 4. Ten Thousand Whys

The other person I was forbidden from approaching was The OLK. I asked my mum why. She said the Old Lecher Kong had a nasty glint in his eye – you could tell right away he wasn't Good Folk.

You can't judge a book from its cover, I said, you're generalising. My eyes are also quite shiny.

That old lecher is a reprobate, my mum said, he's not a worker or a peasant or a merchant or a student or a soldier. He doesn't fit into any category.

But Confucius and Jing Ke and Li Yu and Yu Xuanji and Su Xiaoxiao and Chen Yuanyuan and all my other heroes don't fit into any category either, I said. They strive to swim against the current, to forge the stuff of legend, to bring spiritual enrichment to the rest of us.

That old lecher has no work unit, my mum said, and he has a convoluted web of social connections.

But mum, you have a convoluted web of social connections too, I said. You know the butcher at the grocery store, and he always gives you the leanest meat, even when you don't have a coupon, mum. You know the guy who makes the ice lollies at the factory, and he always gives you the first lolly out of the pot, the lolly with the richest colour and flavour, mum, the lolly you can tell with one lick – with one glance – is haw fruit flavour, the lolly so rich it makes your mouth go numb when you take a



bite. And you know the guy who sells stamps at the post office, so you can get a new set when they're first issued without having to queue, and then sell them on at the stamp market by the Temple of the Moon and make a tidy profit.

Mum this, mum that, she said. Who's mothering who here? Listen, you. You stay away from that old lecher, or else I'll tighten the collar of your shirts by an inch. Got it? No means no, and that's the end of the matter.

My life back then was dull and mundane. My mum woke me up as soon as there was a bit of brightness in the morning sky. I'd gulp down a few mouthfuls of rice porridge, and swallow a few bites of steamed bun, the sugar or sesame paste smeared inside it the highlight of my morning. Then I'd ride my bike to school. I often ran into girls from school on the way, and their shirts of crepe or Dacron shimmered translucent in the morning sun. This meant you could easily tell who was wearing a bra and who wasn't, and even whether the bras were fastened at the back by a button or a hook. The thought of that translucent shimmering is a hundred times more erotically charged than any of the adult movies currently sitting in my drawer.

If I came upon an ugly girl, I'd pedal extra hard to zoom past, leaving her gasping at the marvellous sight of me and the red rubber soles of my trainers. If she was decent looking, and if the weather was good, I'd exchange a few words with her as I rode alongside. Girls' hair in the morning had a special colour that you would never see at any other time of day.

We had class every morning, assuming there were no uprisings or earthquakes. The maths teacher was a retard and, as such, treated us as if we were retards. In order to explain the concept of negative numbers he would pace back and forth across the cement floor of the classroom. "If I take three steps forward, and then I take four steps backward, how many steps