

READING CHINA:
TIBETAN STORIES

· 阅读中国 ·

藏族青年作家丛书

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PAPER
AIRPLANES

纸飞机

严英秀 著

Stephen F. Pomroy 刘组勤 译

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| The Crushed Jade | 5 |
| Paper Airplanes | 46 |
| Descend into Friends | 93 |
| Always Concede to Beauty | 140 |
| Endless Longing and Love (1999) | 186 |
| Individual Battlefield | 241 |
| Love Song 1990 | 293 |
| A Rose of Bitterness | 330 |

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The Crushed Jade

1

THE BRACELET DROPPED to the ground in an instant. Before Zheng Jie could react, the jade bracelet she had taken off fell onto the white tile floor instead of the cushion on the counter. Before it hit the ground it flew in the air like a bird, describing an emerald arc.

She did not realize what had happened until the shop assistant rushed over to pick up the fragments. Other shop assistants came over to watch and four strong security guards suddenly besieged her.

Actually, she still didn't fully realize what had happened. She stared stunned at the shop assistant carefully picking up the fragments and placing them on the table. She was bewildered by the buzz of people around her. She could hardly believe her eyes and ears. Had she really broken the precious thing she dared not touch into four green and white pieces? Had those pieces really been the bracelet she had just now tried on? She had long been enchanted by that bracelet; she even dreamed about it and had come to look at it

a dozen times without Wang Zhiqiang and her son knowing.

“Undoubtedly, you must compensate!” the shop assistant said. “For fear of damage, we always spread a soft cushion on the counter when customers try something on, which I also did today. So I fulfilled my duty. But you used too much strength when you took it off and you dropped it. I’ve reported it to our manager. Through negotiation with the manufacturer, he’s agreed to give you a 40% discount. That’s the lowest discount it’s possible for us to give. Would you like pay by cash or by card?”

“It’s my fault,” Zheng Jie said after standing in silent shock. “I was too careless. I’m so sorry!”

“Now’s not the time to apologize. Now’s the time to solve the problem. You have to pay 60% of the price.”

“How much?” she asked instinctively.

The shop assistant took out a calculator, tapped in a string of numbers and showed it to her. “It’s 78,320 Yuan. Considering it was an accident, we’re offering you the discount. We’ve never offered a discount lower than 25% before.”

“78,320 Yuan, 78,320 Yuan . . .” Zheng Jie mumbled. The sum was so strange to her that she couldn’t grasp its true meaning. She was still replaying the moment when the bracelet flapped its wings like a bird, escaped in a despair she couldn’t control and committed the fatal destruction in its flight. The tiny, musical “clink” when the bracelet hit the ground had been quieter than the time her son dropped a porcelain bowl.

Why did the destruction and the “clink” have to happen again in her life?

“Would you please tell me if you want to pay by cash or by card?” The shop assistant insisted. She stared at Zheng Jie. The seemingly

polite smile on her delicately made-up face was dreadful.

Until now, Zheng Jie clearly knew what confronted her. She glanced at the people around her apprehensively as though she were seeking help. She couldn't stop herself from sobbing, "I don't have any money. Please let me go home first and I'll figure out how to compensate."

"Go home? Are you joking?" the toughest security guard barked. He strode forward and stood in her way like a dark tower.

2

Wang Zhiqiang had felt his eyelid throbbing since the day before yesterday. As there were lots of customers that afternoon, he had been too busy to consider it. When he was finally free, he leaned listlessly against the wall like the left-over fish in the basin and pressed on his throbbing eyelid. Later, he couldn't help asking Zheng Jie, "The old folks always say a throbbing eyelid is an omen of coming into a fortune, but which one? The left or the right? Why can't I remember? Tell me, honey!"

"Be realistic!" Zheng Jie replied without looking up as she swiftly packed up their stall. "Haven't you seen the Chengguan patrolling more often recently? We may even lose our business. How can you expect to get a fortune? It'll be fine as long as we can stay out of trouble."

It was getting dark and there were no more customers. Having done business in this community for four years, she knew the times when people came to buy fish. However, things had changed this year. People were consuming much more fish because of the

rocketing price of pork. In the past, their customers were usually old people in the morning. This year, however, young couples and bachelors coming home from work were also buying some smaller fish from her.

Zheng Jie got home late when business was thriving, so Wang Zhiqiang came to help her so she could have lunch. She often said that she could make do by buying some food in the street and was unwilling to interrupt his sleep. However, he paid no attention to this because he loved his wife. He got up at 4 a.m. and went to the wholesale market to purchase stock. The round trip took over three hours. After he made everything ready for business, he called Zheng Jie to take over the shift and went home to eat and sleep. At one or two o'clock in the afternoon, he cooked lunch and brought it to her. At six or seven o'clock in the evening, she knocked off, her son Wang Wenzhe left school and Wang Zhiqiang placed supper on the table.

Wang Zhiqiang had done a variety of jobs from gas stove salesman to car-cleaner and from barbecue peddler to taxi driver. He had worked as a taxi driver for the longest time. At present, he had been unemployed for over a year since he suddenly fell ill with a spinal disc herniation.

"You're still not well," Zheng Jie said, "so you mustn't stress yourself out. But since business is good this year, you can help me for the time being."

Long ago, Wang Zhiqiang had been a technical worker in a big factory. He was once honored as the best worker, model worker and technical innovator and was required to give a speech on the podium. His bright red certificates of merit, though faded, were still meticulously stored by Zheng Jie in the small wooden case

in which they also kept their marriage certificate, her high school diploma and his technical school and night school diplomas. These seemingly important things were of no practical use but Zheng Jie was unwilling to throw them away. She could not discard the past, nor the man that Wang Zhiqiang used to be. In those difficult and busy days, his white shirts were always clean as though they were new. During the lunch break, everyone in the workshop played cards feverishly except Wang Zhiqiang, who silently read a book in the corner. For Zheng Jie, he was different from the others.

However, everyone ended up the same and she couldn't get over it. Sure, she could be laid off and so could those vulgar workers who dawdled away their time playing cards. But how could Wang Zhiqiang be laid off? It was only because the once glorious and prestigious factory was shut down and all the workers made redundant. Though capable, he was a technical worker, not the director or one of the administrative staff who remained rich after the factory was closed. Those people were living in comfort and ease elsewhere.

That year, Zheng Jie was 33 years old and Wang Zhiqiang 36. They were bought out by the factory for which they'd worked for over a decade at a settlement of 160 Yuan per month and they were thus kicked out into the strange outside world. In this seemingly boundless world, they were nobodies without a spacious place to stand. Grey hairs appeared on Wang Zhiqiang's head fewer than two months after they joined the re-employment crowd. His ambition of starting all over again was soon crushed by the harsh reality of being snubbed everywhere, the embarrassment of being a misfit and the indignation of being fastidiously treated.

Seeing Wang Zhiqiang becoming more dispirited day by day,

Zheng Jie was vexed to the extent that she suffered from many ulcers in her mouth. However, they still couldn't find any jobs. Being used to keeping busy, they felt horror in the idle, uncertain life as though they were walking a tightrope. Zheng Jie often unconsciously went out during rush hour. Watching the commuters hurrying to and fro, she was distressed and wondered why they seemed to march with purpose towards a destination while she herself was an invisible wanderer.

However, she could not allow herself to continue being a wanderer because her son Wang Wenzhe had to have a comic schoolbag, propelling pencil, colorful paper and a little pocket money like the other kids, as well as food to eat. She could not bear to see that her son was different from other kids or that he knew what had happened to his family even though they had been forcefully squeezed out from their past.

Wang Zhiqiang scolded his son, "Do you think I can sustain your happy life with my fixed wage and technician's allowance? I'll tell you: Wang Zhiqiang is finished! Finished! And you're finished with me!"

Zheng Jie couldn't stand him talking to their son in this way. She pulled him aside in anger and said, "Listen to me, kid. Everyone is fine! Even though someone is finished, it can't be you. Only those who don't study hard can be finished. Understand? I just want you to study hard and get good grades!"

Wang Wenzhe blinked his bright eyes and said, "I study hard every day, Mom!"

Her son's keen voice was an inspiration to her. She realized that for the sake of their son she must never be mawkish and despairing like her husband. What a useless man he was! He claimed to be the

pillar of the family and said he would support them even if the sky fell. In the end, he collapsed before the sky did. Nevertheless, Zheng Jie did not blame him. She knew he had been a model worker at the factory, so it was natural that he couldn't let it go or get used to the anxiety of failing to find a job. She resolved to leave him alone to let him heal in his own time, like an injured animal licking its wounds.

In the first year after the layoff, Zheng Jie tried jobs in restaurants, drugstores and housekeeping service companies but none of them lasted very long. Clearly aware that she was old and could not compare with the younger women, she spared no effort to work hard and quickly, which did not free her from the bullying of her boss, manager and co-workers. She had no idea why it was happening.

When she came home after quitting her last job, she stood in the yard staring at the silhouettes of her husband and son projected onto the window. There she indulged in wailing for the first time; for the old factory she had loved and hated, for the injustice she had gone through and for her dissatisfaction with her husband. The more she cried, the sadder she became. At length, her clothes were drenched with tears. When she ran out of the strength to cry, she felt comforted as though she had unloaded a heavy burden. She pushed the door open and hugged her son, declaring, "From tomorrow on, kid, I'm going to be my own boss."

Her son childishly cheered. Her husband stared at her swollen eyes and lowered his head silently.

Thus, she became a fishmonger. She combed her hair into a bun on the top of her head and wore rubber gloves, Wellington boots and a black PU apron. She would catch a frisky fish from the rectangular basin, deftly club its head with a short wooden stick