



Flower City Publishing House
Guangdong Provincial Publishing Group

Li Peifu

Wait For Your Soul

One of the Ten Best Books in 2007 by the China Book Business Report



A Novel

WAIT FOR YOUR SOUL

A Novel

江苏工业学院图书馆

"Don't walk too fast, wait for your soul to catch up,"
American Indian say.

藏书章

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Introduction

FOR many years, friends have called me a “night owl”.

I have lived in the city for 26 years. Almost every evening, my dinner finished and the bowl pushed away, the words fall out of my mouth like melon seeds; Let’s take a walk. —Or to put it in a more literary way; Let’s promenade.

The city is a good place to hide. Only 30 meters away from my house, I have found a sort of freedom; the freedom of being a stranger; the freedom of having no identity, no past. I glide through the lamp-lights, pass faces, dodging cars and motorcycles. No one knows me, and I don’t know them. What freedom! The streets are like rivers of light, and I drift from one river to another; down one block, around the next corner, sometimes with traffic and sometimes against. I sniff the air like a dog, catching every scent. . . Who could know that a lonely night is being killed in such a way? Somebody might think that I was thinking deep thoughts, but the truth is I’m just walking.

Walking has become a habit. From south to north; from east to west, sometimes I walk halfway around the city, all the way to the suburbs, to the state highway, and watch the lights float past my eyes like string after string of pearls. . . The greater part of a night can pass like this. I have slipped on a banana peel; and got my face slashed open by getting hooked on a dangling electrical wire. But I never got “hooked” by people. I walk along street after street, night after night; almost all the faces I see are strange to me. There have been a few familiar ones,

very few, only one or two, thorn-like in the light.

Sometimes I get tired. At first when I got tired I'd go back. But later, I took to walking farther and farther, just wandering. In the darkness of the night, a soul is wandering lonely and alone. Even on a soundless night, walking in the snow, you can smell mint in the light. When I'm tired, exhausted, I find a café or tea house, and just sit quietly.

Finally there came a day I was "hooked" by a person. There was this woman, quietly sitting by the window in a café. Sometimes she'd take out a slim MORE cigarette, light it elegantly, with her slender fingers slightly tilted, not wanting to have a smoke so much as to set the atmosphere. I was walking along the side of the street, passing by once or twice, and I always saw her sitting at the same table, with her head delicately tilted; her cheek in her hand; like a still life. Loneliness was emanating from her eyes, flickering in and out of sight. . . So I walked in.

There are too many people in the city who know this café; so I don't want to name it here. I remember first I was five seats away, and then three seats. . . maybe it was because there was a strange smell of mint, we met each other, and we had this story. In the meantime I have to make it clear that this is completely a work of fiction; do not try to find yourself in the characters or the plots.

I clearly remember the first words she said after we had gotten to know each other,

"That year, peach blossoms filled the sky. . ."

One

REN Qiufeng had a habit of looking at his watch.

After getting off the train and taking his first steps into the city, the first thing he did was to glance at his watch; ten thirty-three. That's his time as a military man, three minutes ahead of the rotation of the Earth. During his 12 years in the army, those extra three minutes helped him move from a soldier to a deputy regiment commander. Now he had been demobilized and had come back to the city.

Back home at last. Standing at the door and digging for the keys, Ren—driven by the old habit—looked at his watch again. That specific time froze into a bullet that fired right into his head!

It was 11:11PM, March 12, 1990. The pain penetrated his body as the key squeaked. A bullet of poisonous gas and malaise stabbed his chest. The white light shining from under the bedcovers in the dark room almost blinded his eyes! Suddenly he wanted to throw up. Already queasy from 19 bags of ramen in three days and two nights on the train, the smell of sex coming from the bed made him disgusted, he felt the vomit rise! But after that, as though abruptly enlightened, a phrase appeared in his mind, the phrase once said by an old commander he held in high esteem. He said, in a typical soldier's tone, "Go on—keep going."

Panic fills the room. . .

The moment he stepped back out of the room he regretted it. Fuck! Where did your fists go? His fists were balled tight enough to bleed! A reserved man casually spitting out a graceful remark like that, how could

he turn around? As a matter of fact, what he really wanted to say was only one word, one explosive word: Bitches!

City lights are rationed, his ration had vanished.

For the sake of today, God knows how much he had paid! In the army, he had already climbed to regimental rank, and he had dreamed of being a general! But for her, he left the army. He wanted to give her a surprise; to fulfill a man's duty: Having served in the military for 12 years, and been married for 9 years, wasn't his retirement what she'd lived for day and night? How many times had she cried on the phone? However, now, he was retired, and he found himself homeless.

At that very moment words couldn't express the awkwardness and mortification Miao Qingqing was suffering from. Just as if she had been thrown into a prison made out of saliva—and the bed was her cell! The phrase “keep going” had nailed her to the stocks.

Miao Qingqing and Zou Zhigang were woodenly putting on their clothes, and waiting for the man to pronounce sentence. They were more or less scared from the bottom of their hearts, but their fear could not be spoken out loud. Emotion is too exalted to be desecrated. However, in the bottom of their hearts there were two words nipping and suffocating them like a pair of pliers: military marriage!

According to Chinese law, Miao is a military spouse; therefore Ren can accuse them and have them prosecuted!

Zou's legs shook uncontrollably, as if he was holding back his piss. Miao saw it and said, “You . . . go now.”

Zou aimlessly paced around the room, pretending to be relaxed.

“Qingqing, I meant what I have said. What's done is done. He can do whatever he wants to.”

“You're not afraid. . .?” Miao's eyes softened.

“Well, I certainly hope for a peaceful solution. Whatever he wants, he can name it. Qingqing, I hope you remember that I love you, and I do not admit this is immoral. Don’t you see the times we’re living in?” Zou avoided the word “afraid”.

“That’s good. Now you call him in and tell him that,” Miao said.

“I tell him that?”

“Yes, you say it. ”

“That is. . .inappropriate, isn’t it?”

“Are you a man?”

“Yes. ”

“Stealing is stealing, and stolen is stolen. I’d rather he came and beat me up! What he just said shows complete contempt! It’s the biggest humiliation in the world! It’s spitting right into our faces, don’t you understand?!” Miao snapped.

At such a critical point, one cannot rely on one’s “good taste”. Even when a man’s suit is nicely tailored and his necktie beautifully knotted, he may, when facing a crisis, become what’s called a white pewter lance—shiny but useless.

“Get out, you!” Miao flared.

In the early hours of the morning Miao found Ren under a street lamp at the corner of the main street.

“Go home, will you?” Miao said.

“Yeah, I wanted to go home. But I got lost and now I don’t know where my home is,” Ren said, mocking himself.

Miao jumped in front of her man, and burst into tears. “I’m not begging for your forgiveness. Just go home and get some sleep. And then, whatever. . .you want to do. ”

Ren patted his shoulder. “You see this? A soldier’s bed IS his

back. ”

But Miao knew what he really meant: The bed is DIRTY.

“I won’t embarrass you. I...changed the sheets...Curse at me please. But, you and I have been married for nine years, during which you have only come back seven times. The total time we’ve spent together is 86 days and nine hours. . .What on earth do you want?” Miao muttered.

“I will be a prisoner only once in my lifetime. I won’t do it again, never. You. . .go back,” Ren said.

Two

A month later, Miao Qingqing accidentally ran into Ren Qiufeng in the Baihua (meaning “hundred flowers”) Department Store.

Ren was picking out candies at the sweets counter. He picked out some and had the salesgirl weigh them, and then changed his mind and picked out some others, and changed his mind again. The salesgirl slammed the scale on the counter and got mad. “Forget it! I won’t sell you any!” Ren went to the clocks and watches counter on the second floor. He picked out one after another; examined them, and made some frivolous remarks, but still wasn’t buying. “Are you buying or not? If not, get out!” The salesgirl demanded. Ren turned his back on her.

Miao watched her man in surprise, and thought, “He can’t be crazy, can he?”

Ren was trying on clothes on the third floor while Miao was wondering. He tried on a suit and posed in the mirror. “Too small,” he said.

“Too big,” he tried on another one. “Still not good, the color isn’t right,” he commented on the third suit while turning left and right in front of the mirror. When he got to the fifth suit the salesman didn’t say anything, but his face turned black. When it came to the sixth, the salesman stared at him, mouth open, with fire in his eyes. But Ren said calmly, as if he didn’t notice the black face and flame, “Sorry, none that I like.” The salesman got in Ren’s face. “You tried this on and tried that on. You tried on every single one of them. Are you fucking around with me?!”

“I want it. I’ll buy it. How much is it?” Miao had had enough and ran to the counter.

Ren turned a blind eye to her and left. Miao chased after him to the gate and gasped, “You have a mental problem? Are you crazy?”

“Why? I can’t come to this department store?” Ren said coldly.

“What, what is it you want? How did you know he’s the general manager of this store?” Miao blurted out.

“Who? Ah, you’re talking about, that rabbit?! Now I understand,” Ren said slowly after a moment. “What a small world!” He suddenly laughed.

“You’re already here, drop the act will you?!” Miao yelled in exasperation.

“In that case I really have to meet him,” Ren retorted. He walked back towards the store.

“It’s all my fault. Slice me up or chop my head off as you see fit!” Miao rushed to pull him back, while a crowd of onlookers was gathering.

“Don’t worry. I won’t touch him. Not a finger. I only want to . . .ask for some advice.”

“You are shameless!” Miao became even more furious when she

heard him say “ask for advice”.

Ren ignored her and walked back into the store. In the lobby he stopped a young man and asked him some questions, and then went directly up the stairs.

Zou Zhigang was sitting behind a large executive desk in his general manager’s office on the fifth floor. He was wondering why someone would just come in without knocking?! In a split second he realized that this was THE man. He’d seen the man’s pictures. A ghost of panic grew in his eyes.

Ren gazed fixedly at Zou. Gradually, Zou felt spikes growing out of his chair.

“What. . .what do you want?” Zou asked.

Ren settled himself comfortably into the couch facing the desk, lit a cigarette and inhaled.

“You are the general manager?”

“Yes, yes I am. ”

“Good, you’re good. I have investigated 13 medium-sized and above department stores in the city, and the customer service attitude in your store is one of the best. ”

Zou was dumbstruck!

“After seeing your store, I have full confidence. By the way, how did you meet Qingqing?” Ren said unhurriedly.

Zou didn’t want to talk about this but he had to.

“At. . .at a. . .at a conference. ”

“At a conference. Fabulous! What a successful conference! You must go to more conferences. ”

Zou’s face crumpled into a dried eggplant, like a thief seized red-handed, a spineless mama’s boy.

“Let me ask you one more question. Do you know what a soldier is?” Ren asked.

Zou began to sweat, the beads of sweat appearing all over his face, like a sudden case of chickenpox.

“You can have a meeting in bed, great! But your time to suffer is coming soon,” Ren shouted through clenched teeth.

Zou had been on thorns. Desperately wanting to get out of the awkward situation, he really needed to speak from a position of superiority. But he didn’t know how to get to the vantage point he needed.

Zou straightened his upper body a little bit. “What’s done is done. You...will you quote a price?” he braced himself to say.

“Businessman, let me tell you something: Not everything on earth is for sale! You remember my words: Soon it is going to be your turn to suffer,” Ren stood up and spoke deliberately.

Outside of the store Ren saw Miao still standing there, dazed, like a stunned rabbit. He strode towards her.

“I met him. Not too bad a guy. You know why I wanted to meet him?” He pointed his finger in the opposite direction. “Just so you know, I retired; see that building, now that has become my new battle-front.”

The building he pointed at was a state-owned department store about to go bankrupt.

Three

IT was Qi Kangmin who dragged Ren Qiufeng into business.

There are many theorists among people who are small potatoes but love to “set the world to rights”. In their small drawer of ideas they have saved many of their ambitions, the ambitions that aren’t for realization but only for comment and criticism. Qi Kangmin was one of those people.

Qi was an associate professor at the Central Business College. His lectures were popular but not his personality. He was presumptuous, claiming to have read the most books of anyone on earth. But with so many professors in the college, how can you be the most of anything? So he was still only an associate professor.

Professor Qi not only thought; he practiced, too. He was the first one in the Business College to plunge into the sea of business. For a period of time people would often see him at the gates of different organizations and enterprises, carrying a ratty bag he used to hold his lecture papers, and asking everybody he ran into: Do you need steel? What about aluminum ingots? After an entire year, after wearing out three pairs of shoes, and being hospitalized five times for alcohol poisoning, he hadn’t sold even a needle. After a year in business he hadn’t made a penny and his fifty-thousand in investments—his life savings—had all been swindled. . . He had to quit. Well, he said in self-mockery, it seems I only know how to sell my mouth.

On that day, the homeless Ren, and his two heavy duffel bags, came to find Qi.

“The bird has flown away? I must congratulate you,” Qi said abruptly.

“Congratulate me on what?” Ren only felt like swearing.

“Your liberation,” Qi said, laughing.

“You too?”

“Last year, ever since she escaped to the south, I’ve been liberated,” Qi said unconcernedly. “Feel the pain here?” Qi touched a finger to his chest.

“Strongly, like a blast from a Tommy gun, close range.”

“The Chinese nation lives on spirit. After ten years of reforms, people have enough to eat, and the society has developed from a unitary system to pluralism, thus spiritual issues have become a serious problem. This is a kind of periodic social disease. In the near future China will experience a high tide of mental sicknesses, mass divorce will arise. You and I are just one step ahead. What about your job arrangements?” Qi said.

“Haven’t made the final decision yet,” Ren said.

Qi’s eyes shone immediately.

“Then I have to give you some advice. In China you know, the 1930s and 40s were the time for generals, when the battlefield was on the fields of war; in the 50s and 60s the battlefield moved to the rice fields, where China produced the Communist Party’s model peasants, Chen Yonggui, Dong Jiageng, and Xing Yanzi; when it came to the 60s and 70s, the battlefield was on the city squares, it was the time of big-character posters; while the 1980s was the diploma era, when you had to fight in examination rooms; now we’re in the 90s, and do you know where the battlefield will be in the 90s, or even the next century? —Let me tell you, it’s going to be in business!” Qi said.

“Kangmin, you told me in a letter about your wife having eloped with a foreign businessman. You must really hate businessmen. You aren’t trying to persuade me to go into business, are you?” Ren said with a wry smile on his face.

“That’s exactly what I mean. Didn’t I tell you in that same letter,

that in the commodity age, if one doesn't want to be controlled by commodities, he'll have to control commodities," Qi said seriously.

"Do you think that I have potential?" Ren asked after thinking a moment.

"Sure you do. "

A month later, Ren got the appointment.

He was appointed to a department store on the verge of bankruptcy. He didn't expect that trouble would find him on the first day of work.

After only 10 minutes in his new office, courthouse officials knocked on his door even before his chair was warmed up. They were two courthouse police in uniform. One of them waved a summons that had a big official stamp on it in front of Ren.

"You must be general manager Zhen?" one of the court police asked.

"I'm general manager Ren. "

"Whatever your last name is, are you the legal representative of this store?"

"Yes, I am. But I only. . ."

"As long as you're the legal representative, you must come with us. Somebody sued you. "

Ren stood up.

"It can't be true. I took office only just now. What are the charges?" Ren was totally lost.

"I'm just a courthouse policeman. I do what I'm told to do. You sign here, and then come with us. You'll find out when you get there," the man put the summons on the desk in front of Ren.

It happened just like that. The first day on job, Ren Qiufeng had been taken away by the court police. The police car flashed and whis-

bled, and people watched.

Four

SHANGGUAN Yunni, Jiang Xue, and Tao Xiaotao stood in amazement and watched as the police car drove away. The three girls were graduating students of the Business College. They had only decided to take the internship at this department store because of their mentor Qi Kangmin's enthusiastic recommendation. In Qi's mouth, Ren was almost a "living god". Who would have expected to see the embarrassing scene of this "living god" being pushed into a police car on the first day of their internship! The girls weren't sure: should they cancel the internship, or should they just go to the department store across the street?

Ren was unexpectedly released after six hours. Somebody had sued the department store over a debt owed by Ren's predecessor. As the new legal representative, even though he had just come into office, Ren had to take responsibility for it. However, by three in the afternoon, the Economic Tribunal Chief Judge had received a call, and had let him go.

Ren felt bad. It was Qi's repeated advocacy that eventually seduced Ren into taking the road into business. As a retired officer, the local Party Organization Department had offered him two options: One was the deputy director of a District Administration for Industry and Commerce; the other was the general manager of this bankrupt emporium. It was his choice. But Qi had talked and talked for three days and nights, got more and more excited, until Ren was determined to be the one who would create a commercial empire in central China. And yet such hassle on the

first day of taking office really infuriated him!

Again before his chair had even warmed up the three girls rushed upstairs, feet pounding, and pushed open the door, Shangguan entered the room first.

“Are you Ren Qiufeng?” Shangguan asked bluntly.

“Yes, I am.”

“We just came to tell you that we’re not going to take the internship here,” Shangguan said.

“Sit down, sit down please,” Ren took a quick look at the three girls.

“No, thank you. We only came to tell you this. We have to go,” Shangguan said.

“I know. You’re from the Business College, right? I know your professor, Qi,” Ren said.

“Yes, we’re from the Business College. The very reason we wanted to come to tell you this was because Mr. Qi asked us to take the internship here,” Shangguan said.

“If you really want to go, I won’t stop you. But since you’re already here, give me just one minute,” Ren said.

The three girls looked at each other for a moment, and then Shangguan said firmly, “Well, *ONE* minute.”

Ren gave each of the girls a glass of water.

“True, an emporium like this, it’s not just you, even I wouldn’t have wanted to work here. However, what if it was another department store, I mean, a world-class one, the best in China? Would you be willing to then?” Ren said calmly.

The best in China, does it exist? The girls were stupefied.

“You know the land beneath your feet? This area was already an