

Afternoon Tea by Qiu Shanshan:

Translated from the Chinese

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As she was walking her bike, Tian Mei absentmindedly looked up and noticed that the sky had cleared. The dense clouds had all been torn into thin strips, as if by an unseen hand. The sunlight penetrated between those threadlike strips, illuminating what was below. She thought about the overcast that had just passed. While she was thinking, the front wheel of her bicycle hit something. As the object came into view, it turned out to be the back of a sedan. A beautiful, maroon sedan. A head immediately poked out the window and sternly stared at Tian Mei. Tian Mei felt it would be best to slow down, not wanting to hit another car.

The security guard stopped the car at the gate, and the car blocked the gate. Tian Mei was just able to slide through behind the guard, and she heard a man in the car impatiently complain, "I rent one of your offices but don't get a parking spot?" Tian Mei glanced over and found that the man's face was a bit familiar. That face, stretched out towards the driver's, seemed to be distracted by Tian Mei, and then used an even more impatient tone to ask, "How is your business run? Isn't this a cultured place?"

Tian Mei realized that this was certainly one of those people who rented space in their newspaper's building. Of the 17 floors in their tower, 10 were rented out. Only the 7 floors

stretching furthest into the sky were their own. She locked her bike up in the shed, but her mind was caught up in that look. Where had she seen him? She had certainly seen him. At an interview? Or... Tian Mei's mind was numb. The maroon sedan that had previously been obstructed came in, drove right by Tian Mei and slide into the underground garage. Tian Mei could see that the man had already gotten out of his car and was walking towards the tower.

They ran into each other again in the elevator. Tian Mei determined that she did in fact know him. Many times, Tian Mei would come across a familiar person but wouldn't realize, and after a while they would call out her name. So this time Tian Mei decided to take the initiative and greet him. She nodded her head and said hello. The man was startled, but he also nodded and said hello. The man hit the button for the seventh floor and quickly got off the elevator.

As he was walking out the elevator, he looked back as if he wanted to say something, but in the end he didn't say anything. The elevator door closed. As soon as the door closed, Tian Mei remembered who the man was, he was that guy, to be specific, he was that man she rejected ten years earlier.

That was when Tian Mei had just returned from her reeducation in the countryside, 25 and still without a spouse. Her parents were worried, so they pressured her to start dating, throwing her into a lifestyle that went around and around like a carousel. She saw one man, then saw another, but it was always the same, nothing ever stuck. There were only one or two that after meeting for the first time she saw again a second time, which is to say, for a moment he became significant, and for a while the man she had just met again by chance was one of them.

At that time, he was a middle school physics teacher. It should be said that he and her were a good match, or at least he satisfied her parents requirements: he was two years older than

her, he studied science and engineering and their families were from the same region. But what she didn't understand was why whenever they were together they never had anything to say. At the time, Tian Mei worried that if they already didn't have anything to say, then as a married couple would they ever talk? So, she rejected him. The person who introduced them told her that he was very angry, and that he believed Tian Mei had an irrational attitude towards marriage. He also felt that feelings were something that could be nurtured. When Tian Mei heard this she was surprised, in her heart she felt a little remorse, and also a little regret.

Two years earlier, she finally married her husband, having decided to marry him because he always made her having something to say. Having something to say indicated that the two of them were fated to be together, and that there was attraction between them. But what Tian Mei didn't realize was that you could run out of things to say, and after 15 years of marriage they had finally said everything they could say to each other, or at least all the good things, leaving only fighting words. With so many fighting words, they had to choose but to divorce. This was something that Tian Mei never expected.

The next day at lunchtime, Tian Mei saw that man again in the building's cafeteria. He was buying food at the window, and when he saw her he nodded. He quickly went with another man and sat at a table adjacent to the window. Tian Mei realized he had used the same meal card that she had. Their newspaper had opened a beautiful cafeteria in the building, and because it was so good, many workers from other companies happily went to eat there. The cafeteria, which was after profit, welcomed all without exception.

Because she had to finish editing the layout of a page, Tian Mei was late to lunch that day. She sat alone, eating wonton soup and editing a draft. Actually, editing the draft wasn't for

work, she just didn't want to be embarrassed. Close by, the man was going on and on about something, what seemed to be his companies business, real estate and stuff like that.

Because she remembered who he was, Tian Mei didn't dare say hello. When the man was done eating, he put his bowl aside and the other man, obviously his subordinate, took them to be washed. The man lowered his cigarette and casually turned to Tian Mei to say, "You work at the newspaper office?" Tian Mei nodded. He seemed to know who she was, she thought.

The man pointed at the paper and said, "I rented half a floor under yours." Tian Mei nodded. The man when on, "If you get the chance, come over for a bit." Tian Mei nodded. Other than nodding, she didn't seem able to do anything else.

The man left. From his shadow she could tell that he had filled out since the last time.

All afternoon, Tian Mei sat in her office lost in thought. The office faced south, and the late afternoon sun shown in at such an angle that it made people feel discontented. The top floor of their newspaper building had a tea shop, where the sunlight was certainly better, and she wondered was the spot by the French window taken...?

For so many years, specifically since she had moved to this office, Tian Mei's heart always had only one yearning, which was to one day take afternoon tea with a sentimental man in the tea shop on the top floor. This man would have to know her, but not so well that he didn't care anymore. Moreover, he had to be able to talk at her level, which was to say he had to have a bit of culture. They would sit in the tea room and aimlessly talk, enjoying the sunlight and the leisure. But owing to the lack of a male protagonist, this simple wish was never fulfilled.

Actually, in the past other people had invited her to have tea, but each and every time she was disappointed. Her date always knew that she had divorced, and it was clear that they had

invited her with those hopeful intentions. It was too much, too sour, too rough. Tian Mei wanted to go with a man who had no utilitarian intention.

Now, Tian Mei thought, this male protagonist had suddenly appeared. From every point of view, the man from today was the perfect man to enter the scene she longed for. He knew her, but he didn't know her anymore. He was once a teacher, so he couldn't be uncultured, he has worked away from home and his experiences couldn't be few and far between.

She just didn't know, would he be willing? She once rejected him, once embarrassed him, but since that was ten years prior, Tian Mei felt that any and all resentment should have vanished. Besides, today he was managing quite well... at the very least, from what she could observe, he shouldn't care. In general, those riding a wave of success are more magnanimous. Didn't he say hello to her today? She couldn't say for sure whether or not he wanted to know how her life has been recently, or whether or not he feels remorse over her past rejection? Although, this could also give him a certain kind of pleasure...

Of course, today obviously wouldn't do, even though the sunlight was great. They just saw each other again, it was too soon. It would be best to wait until they had seen each other a few more times and knew each other just a little more. Since they are now working in the same building, thought Tian Mei, they will have many opportunities to see each other. She could wait until whenever she was brave enough, then she would give him a call and go down to meet him.

But once Tian Mei came up with this plan, she suddenly realized that he hadn't given her his phone number, all he said was that when she had time she should go visit. As for the company he worked for and how to contact him, she had no idea, they had forgotten to exchange business cards.

At this time, a young woman holding a stack of letters came into her office and jokingly said, “Ms. Tian, you got so many letters.”

Tian Mei stood up to take the letters and laughed, “Sadly they are all for Editor Tian, not for me.”

Without missing a beat, the young woman intoned, “Did you hear? Our Ms. Tian is waiting for a letter.”

Tian Mei added, “Not just a letter, also a person.”

Everybody laughed. Their office always had a more or less relaxed atmosphere because most of the people there were young. After her divorce, Tian Mei exhorted herself to not let other people say that after divorce a woman’s temperament is ruined, so she was always extremely mindful of her attitude and made a point of talking and laughing with all those young people. Even if something made her mad, she would always show restraint. Sure enough, everybody said that Ms. Tian didn’t seem anything like like a divorced woman.

But what nobody knew was that many times when Tian Mei home alone, she would cry.

After a few days, about two days, Tian Mei came across that man in the elevator again. This time was special, there was a small child at his side. Tian Mei casually asked, “Is this your kid?” The man shook his head, and laughed meaningfully, “My kid...” There were many people on the elevator, and he didn’t say anything else.

That tone, Tian Mei thought, was it as if to say, “My kid, even I don’t know where my kid is.” Or, “My kid, how can I see him?” Or it could even mean, “How could my kid be this young?” Or “How could my kid be this old?”

Tian Mei couldn't figure out which one it was. But Tian Mei could tell that his family life must not be all that great. He takes all his meals at the cafeteria, even dinner. Could his job keep him that busy? This was for the best, Tian Mei selfishly thought, for if his family life was harmonious, he would be reluctant to leave, and wouldn't happily linger away from home.

But this time that they met, other than saying a few trifling words about that kid, they didn't say anything else. More to the point, they didn't exchange business cards. Later on, they met in the elevator again a few times, and she realized the man was always to work on time. But they never said more than three words to each other, and sometimes they never even said anything, just nodding. Because he worked in the 7th floor, he always arrived quickly, and she didn't have any reason to go to the 7th floor herself. She always stayed on the elevator until it reached the 15th floor.

This trapped Tian Mei's desire in her heart, with almost no actual progress.

In the flash of an eye, the weekend arrived. To Tian Mei, the weekend meant the beginning of her second job. She wanted to put her all into being a mother. Her daughter was in her sixth year of elementary school, which was a very difficult time. So in the two and a half days of the weekend, Tian Mei boldly arranged everything for her. Friday evening was lute class; Saturday morning was composition class; in the afternoon she did homework; on Sunday mornings she went to math class. The only down time was Sunday afternoon.

So that her daughter would not grow weary, she always planned fun things for this half day. After class they would first go to McDonalds, then mother and daughter would stroll through the shops and Tian Mei would buy this and that for her daughter, without needing any

justification. After strolling through the shops, they would eat dinner, maybe her daughter's favorite stir-fried river snails or spicy crabs.

But this Sunday evening Tian Mei had no choice but to take her daughter to the newspaper office for dinner. She was responsible for a page-long special, "Everyday People Under the Eaves." They had already solicited the first round of articles, and the number of responses had far exceed their expectations, consequently they had to work overtime. Her daughter understood, and although she was unhappy she still went along.

Mother and daughter arrived at the cafeteria, which during the weekend felt a little cold. She had just purchased their meals and sat down when the man entered. Tian Mei was using her hands to tear at chicken leg, and because her hands were soaked in oil she asked her daughter to get her a napkin out of her bag. Her daughter took forever and still couldn't find one, but the man walked over and handed one to her. Tian Mei raised her head and looked at him, completely unprepared and a little nervous, she even forgot to thank him.

The man was very calm. He laughed and went to buy something to eat. Then, he casually walked over and sat with mother and daughter. He didn't ask if she was her daughter, he pretty much could tell that she was. He said, "What's this? This weekend you're eating at the cafeteria?" Tian Mei responded, "This cafeteria is clean." Immediately after saying this, Tian Mei asked herself, what kind of reason is this? If you want somewhere clean, your home should be even cleaner. Therefore, she quickly added, "This evening I have to work overtime."

Then she asked him, "You guys are also working overtime?"

She had finally brought the topic of conversation back to him. The man said, "Working overtime doesn't make a difference to us, if there's something to do, we just have to do it." She

noted, “It seems to me that your company doesn’t have that many workers.” The man agreed, “True, we never have more than 10 people, I don’t like to deal with anything larger.” The man continued confidently, “But our few people turn into an average annual profit far greater than those large companies with all their people.” Tian Mei could tell that he had been pretty successful. Still, she didn’t envy him at all. Working at the newspaper office had one advantage, because she had seen every kind of bird, and every which way they could fly, she could no longer be jealous. She said, “I can see that you’re pretty busy.” The man agreed, “Definitely, I have to attend to every issue personally. It’s just like Mao Zedong said, ‘Where the broom does not reach, the dust will not run away by itself.’”

In this brief moment, Tian Mei was elated. The use of this quote made her feel warm.

Her daughter watched her with a strange look, unable to understand what had been said that was so funny. Tian Mei really wanted to continue to talk about his life, for example, had he married? But her daughter had interrupted them.

Her daughter was always very guarded against the men she talked to, especially men who made her happy. One time, she went so far as to say, “Mom, stop searching, you make enough money on your own.” To her daughter, if her mom was to remarry, it would certainly be for economic reasons. Sometimes, Tian Mei felt very hurt by this, as if her daughter didn’t care at all about her feelings. She was already 40 years old. But when she really thought about it, it was her own fault, and she always forgave her daughter.

The man seemed to understand, he didn’t say anything else. He quickly finished eating and left.

When she left the newspaper office, it was already 10:00, and Tian Mei was extraordinarily tired. Her daughter had already been picked up by her father, and she was alone once again. At the end of every weekend, Tian Mei felt that her body and soul were completely worn out, as if her physical and emotional energy were overdrawn. At such times, her heart always felt pickled, and she really longed to have somebody to talk to, somebody who could take afternoon tea with her the next day. When her daughter was about to be picked up, she had asked, “Mom, did you really have to work overtime today? It wasn’t a date with that man, was it?” She angrily chastised her daughter, “If it was a date, so what? Where did you learn to talk back to me like this?” Tian Mei felt dejected, her daughter was worried that if Tian Mei was dating, she wouldn’t have anybody to spend time with herself.

Outside the building, Tian Mei was surprised to see that man, he was standing at the exit to the parking lot talking with another man. Tian Mei wanted to say hello to him, but as the words reached her mouth, she suddenly realized that she had no idea how to address him. To call out his name wouldn’t be appropriate, they weren’t that close yet, so it would be best to call him manager so-and-so. This was both respectful and sufficiently distanced. But the problem was, she couldn’t remember his name. The first time they met she had remembered his given name. He was called Jianxia so-and-so, named after one of the knight errants of which his father had been such a fan, but she couldn’t remember his surname. Zhou Jianxia? That didn’t seem right. Zhao Jianxia? That didn’t seem right either. Sun Jianxia? That also didn’t seem right. Xu Jianxia... even that didn’t seem right. Because she couldn’t remember his surname, she gave up on the thought of greeting him. Alone, she exited the gate. The traffic had diminished, and Tian Mei looked towards the sky, her heart a bit more at ease.

A car slowly came up from behind and slowed down. Tian Mei got on the curve to let the car pass, but the car continued to slide by at a crawl. It was not until Tian Mei looked over that the car accelerated into the distance. Tian Mei could see that the driver was that man, and she was immediately unhappy. When he saw her, he should have rolled down the window, stretched out his head and offered her a ride. In that case, Tian Mei would get in the car without hesitation, she was extraordinarily tired and really hoped for someone to drive her home.

But Tian Mei could only sigh.

She took two steps, then gave up her plan of taking the bus, hailed a cab and enjoyed the feeling of being driven home by someone, even if this someone was a stranger.

The days went by one by one, and although Tian Mei and that man continued to come across each other, their communication didn't advance. To Tian Mei, it seemed that he still doesn't want to talk to her. Otherwise, why hadn't he given her a business card? It could also be that he was still brooding over past events. Or even, well, as an important man, why would he want to rekindle forlorn relations with a woman who turned him down, much less with a woman with whom the relationship had never been very good?

Tian Mei understood this, but she was still a little vexed. Each and every time they came across each other, Tian Mei was consumed by one obsession: what in the world was his name? She had already tried more than 20 surnames, but not a single one felt right. There was one time she was certain he was called Sun Jianxia, but the next time she saw his face, she changed her mind again. Tian Mei just wished she could search through an entire dictionary of names.

Because she couldn't remember his name, in her heart Tian Mei's hope of taking afternoon tea with him had weakened. She didn't think she could she could have tea with someone she didn't know.

But one day, things finally changed.

The way things changed was like this. At noon, they came across each other in the cafeteria. The man arrived first, and Tian Mei arrived second. Tian Mei saw him, and nodded casually as usual, as if they were old acquaintances. The man purchased a meal and sat down across from her.

After the man sat down, she said to Tian Mei, "There's one thing, I always wanted to ask you." Tian Mei asked, "What's that?" The man hesitated. Tian Mei thought, he wouldn't ask why she rejected him all those years ago, would he? That isn't something that can be explained in one or two words. As she was thinking, she suddenly said what she had always wanted to say to him, "Why don't we go to the tea shop at the top floor? It's a nice place, let's go up there and we can talk." The man immediately agreed, therefore the two decided to meet in the tea shop at 4:00 in the afternoon.

Although the weather wasn't especially good, it was still good enough for Tian Mei. There were many clouds, and the sun occasionally stepped out leisurely from behind the clouds to look down into the shop. But for some unknown reason, Tian Mei didn't feel the excitement she had expected, instead she felt very uneasy. She repeatedly asked herself, what does he want to ask her? Which is to say, does he really have something to say? Or is it an excuse to talk to her? Talk about what? An old event or today?

Tian Mei thought that it would be best if he was like her, only interested in finding somebody to drink tea with.

Regardless, Tian Mei decided to go a bit early in order to take the spot by the window. The afternoon tea she had imagined was always taken at that spot, it faced west, and the late afternoon sun illuminated it perfectly.

However, when Tian Mei actually sat down at that spot, and when she was sitting across from the man, she didn't feel anything. Her mind was completely occupied by one specific question, what was his name? What on Earth was his name? Tian Mei decided that before she had figured this out, she wouldn't allow the conversation to go any further.

The waitress came over and asked them what type of tea they would like to drink. Tian Mei asked the man what his opinion was, and he in turn asked her. She ordered a pot of biluochun tea.

The man said, "It seems you editors all like to drink tea?"

Tian Mei nodded, "That's right."

"The man asked, "You've been well all these years?"

Tian Mei said, "I've been okay."

The tea was served. In the transparent glass cup, the leaves were still coiled, with only a little green hue showing through. Tian Mei held it in her hand and illuminated it with the sunlight, watching the leaves gracefully brandish, and gradually open, which inspired feeling in Tian Mei's heart. She said, "I love to watch tea leaves open up." Hearing this, the man also held a cup up for a look. He was about to say something, but his cellphone rang. The man apologized and answered it.

Tian Mei felt a little disappointed. When taking afternoon tea, one should not allow oneself to be interrupted by a phone call. She turned her head and looked out the window, far and wide there was nothing but buildings, both tall and short, forming one wide sheet of gray. They could not be illuminated in such a way as to make them warm and bright, not even by the midday sun. Once the man has finished his phone call, she thought, she will suggest that they both turn off their cellphones. But she could hear that the man on the other end of the line was worried, something had probably come up at their company.

The man hung up his phone and apologized. Tian Mei asked, "Is everything okay?" The man nodded, "It's no big deal. There were a few problems at a site inspection." Suddenly, Tian Mei felt she couldn't suggest that they turn off their cellphones. Instead, she quickly said, "We still haven't exchanged business cards." The man nodded, "That's true, I kept forgetting." As the man talked, he fingered through his wallet, but after a quick search he said, "Sorry, I've used them all up. How's this, I'll write one for you."

The man tore a piece of paper and skillfully wrote three long strings of arabic numbers. "My office number, my extension, and also my cellphone number." But the surname that Tian Mei longed to see hadn't appeared. Feigning disinterest, she said "What about your full name and company?" The man lowered his head and continued to write. He wrote his company's name and was about to write his own when his cellphone rang again. This time, the man didn't even apologize, he quickly took the call and his brow immediately wrinkled.

From what Tian Mei could hear, it was the same problem as that which had made him scratch his head a moment ago. It seemed that he would have to leave immediately.

Tian Mei held the tea cup up and looked at it closely, all the leaves had opened, and the stems and veins on them could be seen clearly. It was as if they had returned to their sunlit hills.

Such high quality tea, with no choice but to drink it alone.