

Winner of
the Cultural
Medallion



UNDER THE BED, CONFUSION

WONG
MENG
VOON

Translated by
HOWARD
GOLDBLATT

STORIES

Under the Bed, Confusion

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Stories

WONG MENG VOON

UNDER THE BED,
CONFUSION



Translated from the Chinese by Howard Goldblatt

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For my beloved daughter,
Dr. Wong Yin Mei

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Under the Bed, Confusion

IT WAS A deeply moving story, one that occurred half a century ago.

It all began in a durian plantation in the Malayan state of Pahang, on the edge of a lush, primeval jungle.

After dinner, I set out with my uncle for his plantation, where we would spend the night in his hut on stilts. Only ten at the time, I loved nothing more than adventure. He hadn't wanted to go at first, since the durian harvest was still far away. Only when the pervasive fragrance attracted unruly kids and vagrants, who would steal the best fruit, did the owner of the plantation stand guard in his hut twenty-four hours a day. No one would willingly subject himself to the hordes of mosquitoes during the off-season. My uncle, who was not a warm, caring person, had only agreed to take me as a favour to my mother, and put an end to my whining and begging.

We shuffled noisily along the mountain path.

Gorgeous pink clouds accompanied the sun as it hovered above the mountains. The perfume of wildflowers assailed our nostrils from all sides; the smell was rich enough to intoxicate even mountain children.

The deeper we went into the mountains, the darker it grew. The long unused path was nearly overgrown with couch grass, which my uncle beat with a branch as we walked—to startle hidden snakes, he said. Letting down your guard could result in you being bitten

by one of the lithe creatures, which would soon have your family praying for the return of your departed spirit.

When we eventually reached our destination, we saw that the hut's door was wide open, but we didn't think much of it. The empty hut was furnished with a plank bed, a rectangular wooden pillow and a kerosene lamp resting on a small table. The water vat was bone dry, so my uncle went outside to draw water from a well off to the left. After cleaning the vat, he filled it with water—to wash up the next morning, he said.

It was a moonless night, the darkness punctuated by flickering glow worms.

We wasted no time in climbing under our mosquito nets. The oppressive silence was unsettling. No droning insects, no chirping cicadas, only the vigorous chorus of the mosquito philharmonic—buzz buzz buzz—plus the occasional croak of a nearby frog and, farther away, the screech of a monkey.

I was getting drowsy, when two loud noises—thump thump—made my eyes snap open. Someone was pounding on the door. I quickly sat up and saw that my uncle was looking guardedly at the door.

The pounding stopped abruptly and we were surrounded by still air.

But then—thump...thump...thump...crash. The door flew open and standing in the doorway was a big, dark creature. By the light of the kerosene lantern, we saw what it was: whoa, a huge, wild boar! Hairy and snorting through its nose, it was easily twice the size of most pigs, maybe even three times. It headed straight for the bed.

Aiya! I shouted fearfully and nearly rolled off my bed.

Then I heard a bang! A blast from a hunting rifle.

The boar squealed and began to shudder. Bang! Uncle fired again, but this time there was no sound from the boar, which stopped

shuddering, just before it thudded to the floor in a pool of blood.

“Aha, we're in luck,” my uncle said happily, squeezing laughter out from between his gold-capped teeth. “We'll take it home with us tomorrow and sell it for a good price.”

I was so frightened, I think my heart nearly stopped beating. I wanted to laugh happily like my uncle, but I couldn't. Truth is, I felt like crying.

I barely had time to think before we spotted a brood of young boars at the door, and one by one, they filed in. I shouted again, but this time it came from the thrill of seeing those tiny creatures. They scurried under the bed, whimpered once or twice, and came right back out, looking confused. That's when they discovered the body of their mother. They rushed over and tunnelled under her chest and abdomen, searching for her stiffened teats. They tried to force their way in to suckle. But coming away empty, they left her side, one after the other, and fell to the bloodstained floor. After a moment they stood up again and whimpered, but now there was sadness in the sound. When they saw us get off the bed and start towards them, they ran back to their mother, frightened, and instinctively snuggled up against her.

We got down on our hands and knees and looked under the bed. There we saw a cushion of faded leaves and soft, scattered grass.

Joss Stick Number 18,475

KIM IL-HEE WAS only twelve that year. The Korean War had erupted, and amid the winds of war, he had somehow made it out alive. Once the war was over, he moved in with his grandmother, who lived in a small town near Baekdu Mountain.

Early each morning, Kim got up and lit a single joss stick, as his grandmother had asked him to do, offering up a prayer for the health and well-being of his parents. They had disappeared during the civil war, and their whereabouts, or whether they'd even survived or not, were unknown. Living in an atheistic nation hadn't had an effect on his grandmother, who was incapable of abandoning beliefs she'd held for sixty years. No need to ask where they'd gotten their hands on joss sticks.

Kim burned one of those joss sticks every day, religiously.

By his thirty-second birthday, he had burned 7,300 sticks. His grandmother had died more than twelve years earlier from the lingering effects of internal injuries suffered in the war, and was now with her deceased husband, who had been killed by an enemy artillery shell. But the loss of his grandmother did not stop Kim from offering daily benedictions for his parents. Concern for their safety gnawed at his heart.

Kim continued to burn one of those joss sticks every day, religiously.

By his fifty-second year, he had burned 14,600 sticks. Although he had become a senior Party cadre, he could not forget his parents' faces or the sound of their voices. His clearest memory was of a devastating flood during his childhood, when the entire village had been underwater. He'd taken refuge atop the thatched roof, holding onto a hardwood beam for dear life. As his grip slowly loosened, he was in danger of being swept away by the raging waters. His father, who was braving the waters to save lives, swam up, snatched him out of danger, and took him to higher ground. Three generations of the family wept, and the incident comprised one of his most recurrent memories.

Kim continued to burn one of those joss sticks every day, religiously.

By his sixty-second birthday, he had burned 18,250 joss sticks. That day, the Red Cross brought exciting news: his parents were alive and well, and were living in a farming village not far from the South Korean capital. A swift calculation told him that they were both well into their nineties. But they were alive, for which he offered thanks to heaven!

In May, Kim received permission to travel to Seoul as part of a Pyongyang family reunion group. He was deliriously happy, and wished he could have flown to the South that very day to pay filial respects to his parents. Ah, they were all Koreans, so why was it harder to cross the 38th Parallel than to reach the moon?

On the morning of 15 August 2000, Kim lit joss stick number 18,475. Properly dressed, he sat up straight and offered a silent prayer, unable to contain his joy over the prospect of being reunited with his parents, who hadn't been out of his thoughts a single day in more than half a century.

Shortly before noon, Kim and his ninety-nine travelling companions landed in Seoul, South Korea. He was holding a yellowing

black-and-white photograph of three people: a happy, young couple with an innocent boy-child in their arms. His mother was a beautiful Korean woman. Quietly he waited for the moment to arrive.

As the travellers entered the meeting place, a waiting crowd of hundreds stood as one, and chaos erupted with shouts of “Eomeoni!” and “Abeoji!” and the heartrending sound of weeping.

At last he spotted an old person with white hair in a wheelchair within a circle of people. Someone pointed to the woman in the wheelchair for him. He rushed up and looked into the eyes of the old woman. With his voice breaking from grief and joy, he said, “Is it you, Eomeoni?”

The old woman tried to rise from her wheelchair. Despite her blurred vision, she seemed to recognise her son, who was himself an elderly man, her own flesh and blood, whose name had been on her lips every day.

Kim reached out and took his mother’s dry, cracked hands in his, and as his legs gave out, he fell slowly to his knees, his face awash with tears. He looked into his mother’s face. In his mind Eomeoni was now even more of a Korean beauty than before!

Kim stood up, looked around, and asked loudly, “Where’s Abeoji? Why isn’t he here? Does he have trouble getting around?”

No one would give him a straight answer.

The Red Cross arranged a car for Kim to ride out to the suburbs to see his father, the first meeting in half a century. It was what he had prayed for every day, for which he had burned 18,475 joss sticks, and for which he had managed to cross a barrier whose passage was more arduous than reaching the moon. But no matter, he must see his father.

There was no one to greet him when he arrived, so he ran frantically into the room. Abeoji was not there. In his place was

a photograph on the wall—a kindly, smiling old man behind the curling smoke of a lit joss stick.

The Happy Vulture

THE SUN IS suspended above the depression between two mountains in the west. The air is hot and dry. Clouds on all sides are blood red.

As I dip down low, I spot what looks like an abandoned village a short distance away. I create air currents when my wings are in motion, in no way inferior to those stirred up by a small military helicopter as it settles on the ground.

Thank heavens I was born in Africa, where the people are more lowly than the rats in an advanced society. Civil wars claim the lives of people every day, at least those who haven't already starved to death; that means a plentiful supply of meat for me, which is why I'm so robust and healthy. I pity those poor people who are worn down by the need to survive and care for their children.

Look there! A little black girl. She's scooping dirty water from a hole in the ground with a tin can in her emaciated right hand. Ten years old and naked as the day she was born! More shameless even than a bird, which at least covers its nakedness with feathers!

As I gaze down at her frail, wobbly, little body and at her dead eyes, experience tells me that luck is with me—by nightfall a hearty meal will await me.

Although she is skin and bones, what meat remains on her youthful body will be fresh and tender.

A vulture soars as the sun sets.

The girl tips her head back to drink the few drops of filthy water, smacks her lips, and staggers over to a rubbish heap to forage with trembling hands. You moron! Do you really expect to find something edible in that pile of bone fragments we've left behind?

I've had my eyes on that little girl for some time. I have nothing but loathing for her little black mama. A family of seven, five of whom have already fed us by starving to death. The mama doted on her young daughter, willing to succumb to hunger in order to save for her every crumb of food she could find. Worst of all, she kept a close watch over her daughter, thwarting all my attempts to reach her, and sending me flying away in defeat.

But now the time is ripe, and there is no longer anyone to protect her. Let's see where you can hide this time, you little devil!

Yesterday her mama died of hunger, died right next to the rubbish heap, died with her daughter in her arms, fearful to the end that we vultures would swoop down and take her away. I had to laugh. Now that you're like the clay bodhisattva that foolishly tried to ford a river, what makes you think you can still protect your daughter?

Naturally, her mama was my first course. You have to eat a corpse fast, before it rots and the opportunity is wasted. Her flesh was dry and tough, painful to eat, and hard to digest. I left her bones scattered on and around the rubbish heap.

Now I've settled to the ground and am face to face with the little girl.

She's still foraging amid the rubbish, but half-heartedly, frequently keeling over, then scrambling to right herself. Clearly, the strength in her arms and legs is gone, and she can't stop quaking. She finds a bone at last and quickly begins to gnaw on it. Her lips tremble; there

is no life in her eyes. She is reduced to a blank existence. Ha, you little fool, how you seem to enjoy your dear departed mother's bone!

The bone offers up nothing that can be counted as food. All is lost. She struggles to her feet and picks up the tin can. Not a drop of water.

Wracked by spasms, this time she gives out and falls to the ground for the last time. I'm ecstatic. Beginning to drool, I close the distance between us, one hop at a time.

A Book and Some Chives

EVEN THOUGH SHE was blind in both eyes, the image of her son was indelibly etched in her mind. His every frown, his every laugh, his gestures and movements, and especially the determined way he bit his lip when he was in a fix, were impossible to forget.

At this moment her son was kneeling in front of an executioner not far from her, biting his lip. Along with several other youths, he had been condemned as a counter-revolutionary and was about to be shot.

Her son's head had been shaved; his hands were tied behind him.

All this, she learned from a neighbour's daughter, who had helped her over to the execution ground.

Very soon a gunshot would ring out, a bullet would shatter her son's skull, and a young heart would stop beating forever. He was only nineteen.

The June sun beat down upon the execution ground, but in her mind the air seemed to congeal, with clouds of gloom covering the land.

That the cruelest scene in a parent's life was about to be played out was inconceivable to her, and yet she was to be the first victim of that cruelty. Who could have imagined that her beloved son, on whom she depended to survive, was about to have his life snuffed out by a bullet?

A friend of her son had told her how it had all happened, for her blindness had kept her in the dark.

Everything had changed the previous morning. Her beloved son, Wang Weiling, had somehow found the courage to stand in front of a line of more than twenty rumbling tanks, arms outstretched, a school bag in one hand, a plastic bag in the other, as if he were holding Libra's scales.

"Stop," he shouted, "Stop! Don't go any further, you mustn't kill your fellow citizens, you mustn't stain the ground with the blood of the nation's young..."

The tanks slowed down and finally stopped altogether.

"A student demonstration is a patriotic act. Patriotism is not a crime!" Wang Weiling shouted.

The armoured troops never expected to encounter someone who so bravely looked death in the face, and did not know how to deal with the situation. They could neither advance nor back down.

Wang Weiling set his bags down on the ground and began the arduous climb up onto the leading tank, where he pleaded hoarsely, "Don't fire on the students. They're still young, just like you, young and defenceless."

"Get down," shouted an officer who rose out of the hatch on a tank in the rear. "We're getting on the move again."

Wang Weiling refused to move, underscoring his righteous stance by holding his arms out.

"Swing to the right and keep moving!" the officer commanded.

The tanks started up again.

Wang Weiling jumped down and landed awkwardly on top of his bags. A book fell out of his school bag. It was Qu Yuan's *Encountering Sorrow*. A bunch of chives slipped out of his torn

plastic bag. He picked them up.

By the time he was back on his feet, the tanks had skirted him to the right.

Demonstrating students and tents filled Tiananmen Square. The cacophony of rumbling tanks, small arms fusillades and cannon fire sent people stampeding for their lives. Those who could not run fast enough were crushed by tanks, cut down by machine guns, or killed by cannon fire; bloody corpses littered the area.

Before Wang Weiling could run after the tanks, he was whisked away by some youngsters who dragged him down a lane, where they were nearly run over by speeding bicycles.

They had not gotten far before they were stopped by two secret policemen, who immediately arrested Wang Weiling.

Choosing not to resist, Wang calmly handed his bags to a friend to deliver to his mother. "*Encountering Sorrow* is my favourite book," he said. "I bought these chives for my mother a while ago. Chive omelettes are her favourite. Today is her birthday."

They had only taken a few steps when Wang turned and said to his friend, "Please tell my mother not to grieve if something happens to me. Tell her that her unfilial son wants her to take care of herself, since I may not be around to do it..."

Wang Weiling's eyes were red. He bit his lip till it bled.

Her thoughts were shattered by the sound of a gunshot. So sad, so shrill, so cruel. Her sixth sense told her that her son's head had been the target of that gunshot.

The blind old woman teetered for a moment before falling backwards and foaming at the mouth.

The stories in *Under the Bed, Confusion* sketch a vast array of characters: from an aging coffee shop assistant struggling on her first day at work to a multimillionaire obsessed with crossing the fourth hurdle; from a dissident doctor exiled on the island of Pulau Tekong to a pampered, carefree mutt. Using elements of the fantastical and the satirical, this collection of mini-fiction probes Singapore's underbelly with sarcastic wit, revealing darkly humorous and philosophical insights into the many facets of her people's collective psyche.

WONG MENG VOON is a writer, editor and academic who has written eleven books of short stories and mini-fiction in Chinese. For his contribution to Singaporean literature and the Chinese mini-fiction form, he was awarded Singapore's Cultural Medallion in 1981, the S.E.A. Write Award and China's Lifelong Achievement for World Chinese Mini-stories Award. He has also been awarded the Translation Prize by the National Book Development Council of Singapore.

HOWARD GOLDBLATT has translated nearly all major Chinese contemporary novelists and more than thirty novels and short story collections by writers from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. His translations of Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem*, Su Tong's *The Boat to Redemption* and co-translation of Bi Feiyu's *Three Sisters* have all won the Man Asian Literary Prize.



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