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XI
NI
ER



THE
EARNEST
MASK

STORIES

Translated by HOWARD GOLDBLATT
and SYLVIA LI-CHUN LIN

The Earnest Mask

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Stories

XI NI ER
THE
EARNEST
MASK



Translated from the Chinese by
Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin

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PART ONE

1980s

Laid-off Day

LEAPING OUT OF bed, I picked up the alarm clock and checked it. I'd forgotten to set it again last night.

7.43 am. Father was sitting with his legs crossed, reading the paper. Luckily my younger sister had already gotten breakfast ready for him.

"Morning, Pa. Where's Second Sister?"

"She just left for school." Father adjusted his glasses. "By the way, she said she won't be back for lunch today."

"I see." I walked out back to wash up before changing into my school uniform.

7.52 am. "Pa, it's time to go to work."

"Work?" He put down the paper. "Right. I almost forgot. I'll be travelling today. Er—I'm going to Jurong, so there's no need to leave so early."

He got to his feet and picked up his briefcase and keys.

"Is Xiaobao up yet? Has last night's fever broken?"

"He's much better. I've asked Aunty Lan next door to buy some antelope horn from a herbal shop to make soup for him this afternoon."

"Well, that makes me feel better." He shut the door.

"You forgot your file folder, Pa." He was getting more absent-minded by the day.

“And this.” I handed him his lighter.

“Don’t be late for school.” He rubbed my head.

• • •

1.03 pm. I was bored to tears on the bus. When it stopped, people crowded in like refugees, some pushing, some shoving and others piling in like sardines—the picture of humanity’s multitudes.

As the bus drove down Orchard Road, I spotted Father sitting on a stone bench in the shade of an angsana tree.

He was smoking and had a worry-laden face. It was rare to see him like that.

I wanted to call out, but quickly changed my mind; there were too many people on the bus and too many cars on the road.

Wasn’t he supposed to be in Jurong on business? Then how did he end up there, sitting so leisurely?

Maybe he was waiting for someone—that had to be it.

• • •

1.37 pm. I finally made it home.

I ran into Uncle Wang, Father’s colleague, the moment I was on the stairs.

“How are you, Uncle Wang? Here to see my pa?” I went up to greet him.

“I’m glad to see you, First Sister. How come your pa isn’t home?”

“He went to the office. Will you come up for a cup of tea?” I pulled him in; he was no stranger in our house. In fact, when Mother had passed away a few years before, he’d done a great deal to help us during the mourning period. He was also the one who’d gotten Father his job.

“It’s been a long time, Uncle Wang. We wish you’d come over more often,” I said.

“Tied up with too many odds and ends,” he said, displaying a helpless smile.

“But—” The smile was gone. “First Sister, has your pa talked to you about work recently?”

“He has, actually. He’s very happy with the job.” Why had he asked that?

“You know, the papers are full of it.” He looked uncomfortable. “I guess I might as well come straight to the point. We had another round of downsizing at the company recently because of the economy and new management. And your pa was one of those who got laid off. Everyone expressed how surprised they were. But there was nothing any of us could do, since we weren’t in charge.” He paused and touched the tip of his nose, before taking an envelope out of his briefcase.

“Here, this is for your father, a token of good will from everyone.”

Dazed, I saw nothing but a blur before me.

• • •

Ring, ring. 7.30 pm. Second Sister went to open the door.

“Pa’s back.”

“Hey, look what I’ve got here.”

“I know—it’s home-style chicken,” Xiaobao blurted out.

“Are you feeling better?” Father picked him up and touched his forehead.

Xiaobao nodded.

“Today must have been payday, Pa,” Second Sister exclaimed.

“Wrong. Pa got a raise,” Xiaobao corrected her.

“You’re both so smart.” Father laughed heartily.

“Say, First Sister, go prepare some condensed milk for everyone. We’re celebrating.”

I walked back to my room to pick up the envelope. Father was setting the table. I walked up to him.

“Pa—” It was all I could say.

“What’s wrong? No more milk?”

“No, Pa—” I fought to control myself. “Uncle Wang came around earlier today. He brought this, from everyone at the company.”

I handed him the envelope.

He froze, with the stunned look of someone who’d been unmasked, before collapsing against the window.

I didn’t dare look at him.

Outside the window was a dreary scene.

Of the Dragon Tribe

1

SO WE SMOKED with leather bags tucked under our arms and girls’ hands in ours as we hung out at a bowling alley because it made us look cool.

So we didn’t have to worry too much about the excessively red report cards.

Maybe we’d grow sexy beards like Charles Bronson.

(You probably want to grow up to be an engineer, right, child?)

No.

2

So we spoke with soft voices and smiled.

So we lived phony lives, all wearing the same expression.

We drank tall glasses of iced lemon tea at fast food restaurants.

With expressionless eyes, we stared into an afternoon that had lost its seduction.

Thoughts of home suddenly arose.

(Do you want to study abroad, child?)

No.

3

So we stood forlornly in a corner at the dance checking out the scantily clad girls who were dancing their hearts out. We lit one cigarette after another—

Made them burn. Then,
Burned ourselves.

So someone knew we'd just turned twenty—after all, the backs of our heads had been shaved clean.

(Have you thought about going into business, child?)

No.

4

So we panicked and ran off in all directions.

Time chased after us.

Our faces were twisted into a popular style.

We didn't like roaming the streets but had no choice; we were dressed like Bohemians but had no girls hanging onto us. Dusk was still swirling around Orchard Road.

Finally we were lost in the jarring echoes of steel and cement.

(Life isn't too bad, is it, child?)

No, it is bad.

5

So we began to quake out of constant fear that our days would be stifled to the point of suffocation.

We continued to smoke, slowly.

We continued to roam the streets, and went to fast food restaurants.

We seemed to have been forgotten by society. Maybe it's a phase.

(Please let it be so.)

But we were about to lose faith.

(You're utterly hopeless, child.)

Oh.

Five-Spice Fermented Tofu

THIS ALL HAPPENED several years ago.

My car was flying down Changi Road as a question swirled in my head: should I stop by Grandma's place?

I had lived with my mother's mother until I'd gotten married and moved out, partly to avoid judgemental looks from uncles and aunts, and partly to preempt any possible conflicts between Grandma and my wife, who was eager to have her own place.

Naturally I was reluctant to leave Grandma.

A while ago I learned from a cousin that they were celebrating Grandma's seventieth birthday and I ought to be there. But today I was on my way to Changi Hospital to visit my boss and have him sign some documents, and I didn't want to spend too much time with Grandma while I was on official business.

• • •

I parked in an alley when I got to Changi Tenth Milestone, before heading to a provision shop across the street.

Since I hadn't planned ahead for the visit, I thought it might be better to have some things delivered.

"Hey, it's Ah Gui," the storeowner called out when he saw me.

"To what do we owe this honour—you must be doing well."

I gave him a reluctant smile.

"Very funny," I said in jest. "It's you who's doing well." I picked out some daily necessities and some of Grandma's favourite snacks, and asked him to deliver them.

"Consider it done. Hey, Xiongzai, take these over to Ah Gui's house when you get a moment."

"Which house is it?"

"The one around the corner, Third Great Uncle's."

Obviously it had been too long since I'd last been there; otherwise, the young man would have recognised me.

• • •

The owner's son was dragging a skinny boy through the door as I was about to leave.

"Pa, I caught this brat stealing stuff from the warehouse out back. See here, he took some five-spice fermented tofu."

The boy was cowering to the side when the owner grabbed him with one hand and raised the other to slap him.

"Hey, not so fast, boss." I went up and stopped him. "Hurting a kid is a bad idea. Besides, you haven't lost anything. I'll take him back to his parents."

So I took the boy away, as if I were snatching a chick out of the clutches of a hawk.

The boy put up no resistance as we crossed the street, whereupon he retrieved a bicycle that was bigger than him from the overgrown weeds by the roadside.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

He pointed to a narrow alley.

"Why did you take that?" I held him by the hand.

“For my grandma.”

“Who else is there in your family?”

“Grandpa.”

“Only Grandpa?” That surprised me.

He nodded.

“Why only spiced tofu?”

“It’s Grandma’s favourite.”

“I see. I’d like to meet them.”

• • •

I followed him in my car, though he didn’t show any sign of running away. His scrawny frame straddled the bicycle, one leg sticking through the triangular space to reach the pedal on the other side, his body rising and falling as he rode down the path.

When we got to a three-way junction, he jumped off and parked the bike by a rundown kiosk.

I realised this was Jalan Tiga Ratus Cemetery once I got out and looked around.

He stood outside the kiosk with his head down, looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Is this it?”

He nodded.

“Take me to meet your grandma.”

He walked on ahead, meandering between the graves and tombstones, before coming to a stop.

It was the grave of an old woman, in front of which lay a small bouquet of frangipanis. Was the woman in the grave the boy’s grandma?

He stood there with his head bowed.

“Come, take me to meet your grandpa.” I walked up and lay my arm on his fragile shoulder.

“No, I’m afraid.” He was trembling slightly, his eyes moist.

I checked the date on the tombstone against my watch. Today was the anniversary of the old woman’s death. Not knowing what to say, I stood there silently.

“Go pick up two jars of five-spice fermented tofu at the shop. Can you remember that? They’ll have been paid for.”

That was all I could do. I waved for him to go home before driving back to the provision shop.

• • •

“Say, boss. I took the boy back to his family. He stole the jar because he’d lost his money. By the way, they need two more and here’s the money for them.”

“Ai, there’s no need to do that. It’s nothing.”

“Has my order been delivered yet?”

“Not yet. Is it urgent?”

“No, but I think I ought to take the stuff over myself. Looks like you’re busy around here.” I patted him on the shoulder, and then something occurred to me.

“Oh, and put a jar of five-spice fermented tofu in there. It’s my grandma’s favourite too.”

A Trivial Matter

WE WERE HAVING an animated conversation along the way.

It was particularly enjoyable to talk about our reunion in Genting Highlands that year.

We were plunged into the abyss of reminiscence.

He blurted out after a while, "How's the kid? Still suffering from coughing fits?"

"He's fine. Xiaobao is doing fine. Ma's taking good care of him." I crawled back from the edge of recollection.

We were quiet for the remainder of the trip.

The car sped down the expressway, going over the speed limit.

"Maybe you should slow down a bit." I hadn't wanted to distract him from driving, but we were going faster and faster, and I felt I had to say something.

"Oh—" He looked at me, as if he had something to say.

But what should we be saying? It had been two years since we'd last seen each other. Were we expected to bring up all our sorrowful thoughts?

Let it go. Nothing could come of it anyway. Besides, he had a lot to do on this trip home. Besides claiming the money owed him from a few years back, he needed to drum up business for Father, buy some local goods, go on matchmaking dates, check out the house, and

visit friends and relatives. Maybe even up and get married. Maybe.

This was all beyond me. All I knew and was familiar with were the people and events of two years earlier.

Clouds and smoke in the sky above the expressway ahead constantly changed, but the sea off to the side was calm and peaceful.

"So many changes. In only a few years." Was he talking to himself, or to me?

"Nothing really changes. What's different is how you feel inside," I said casually.

"So how's everything? It's been two years, and over there in Indonesia—"

"I shouldn't have gone." He looked troubled.

"Someone had to go and take care of Father's business. Besides—"

I understood the importance of having a good career and a good match in marriage. That was the whole point of a lifetime of toil, wasn't it?

"Go do what you have to do," I said nonchalantly.

He slowed down as if engrossed in his own thoughts.

"Bear to the left. It's faster if we take Beach Road."

• • •

At a traffic light, he turned sideways and said softly, "Want to watch a movie at Prince Theatre?"

"I don't think so. Didn't we make an appointment with Xiaoliu?"

Honk. The light turned green. We made a left turn and drove straight. All around us were bustling crowds and the nonstop flow of traffic. The sky hung low, threatening rain.

"How's Xiaobao?" He mentioned the kid again.

"He's fine, just fine." I didn't want him to know too much.

“I’ll find time to see him.”

“Better not. You’re too busy.” I made it sound like a rejection.

The car turned into a carpark before we reached Elgin Bridge.

People outside the elevator wore anxious faces; those inside wore impatient expressions. Then everyone scattered as if running from a disaster.

I felt lost as we stood outside the law firm of Lau and Teo.

The receptionist said that Xiaoliu was with a client, so we sat on the sofa. I flipped through a magazine, not knowing what else to do.

Ring. I jumped, jolted by the jarring ringing of a telephone on the receptionist’s desk.

We can go in now? I see. The last office on the left. Thank you.

I took a deep breath and followed him in.

“Ha ha. Sorry to keep you waiting, Xiaolin. Come in.”

Everyone sat down, somewhat ill at ease.

“You don’t really have to do this, you know,” Xiaoliu spread his hands and said. I could tell that none of us looked particularly happy. Xiaoliu continued, “I’m sure you made the decision after thinking long and hard. But it’s a trivial matter. It’s a common occurrence these days, and my colleague specialises in handling such matters. Nothing surprises me any more. Did you bring all the documents? Good. That should make everything easy.” He picked up the phone.

“Attorney Teo, please. Yes.” The sound of a call being transferred. “Hello, Paul? This is Xiaoliu. I’ve got another divorce case for you, old schoolmates of mine. Yes, the quicker the better. Oh, Paul, use the third fee on the chart. Good, excellent. I’ll send them over right away.”

When we left the conference room, I took a look outside before entering another office. It was raining. My vision was blurred.

Returning a Knife

I’VE SEEN AND heard it all in my years of experience as a shop assistant.

Take something that happened recently: an elderly woman came up to the counter to return something she’d bought.

“You’ve already used this knife for some time, madam. You can’t return it now.”

“But it has a gloomy feel. Using it brings a repellent chill to my heart!”

“Oh, my, madam, look, this brand and model are extremely popular.”

“I know, I know that. But it’s been used to kill many people.”

“That’s not possible. It’s the latest design.”

“I tell you, it’s killed people...”

“You’ve seen that with your own eyes?”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t be here if I had.”

“I think you’d better watch what you say, or the police might want to have a word with you.”

“But my husband and my young brother’s whole family were killed.”

“Whole family! Are you serious? Have you reported it?”

“No. It wouldn’t do any good... The murderers have also twisted the truth...”

“I see—”

I didn’t know what to say. When she saw that I had no intention of accepting the return, the old woman walked away, disappointed.

As she was leaving, I couldn't help thinking that a little knife like that could not possibly have killed all those people, so I called after her, "Madam, where did all that happen?"

"Nanking."

"What's that, on Nankin Street?"

I crouched down and took a similar knife out of the display case and studied it carefully. I saw nothing special or unusual. The blade was shinier than most, I guess. That, and there was a row of simple words: Made in Japan.

The Picnic

MOTHER WAS SHOUTING impatiently in the living room, and I knew that Wu Guo Liang had called. Seven thirty, same place. Another dinner to welcome his Japanese friends. Don't go, Mother muttered. She seldom interfered in my affairs, but she absolutely hated social events like these, especially when there were Japanese guests involved, and even more when the host was shifty Wu Guo Liang, who did business with them.

"Shifty" was what Mother called him. He and I had been schoolmates years before, playing together on the beach, bare-assed naked, shifty—no, childhood friend. After secondary school he'd continued his education in Japan, and had returned home to live in grand style.

After not seeing each other for such a long time, there was lots to talk about, and tonight was no exception. His Japanese guest started reminiscing about their schooldays.

"Do you remember the picnic we had that time? The one in Kobe."

"Ha ha, I do, I sure do. That was great fun, wasn't it? Did you know that we stole some plump chickens from a nearby farm that day?"

"You make it sound easy. Was it?"

"It sure was. We took exactly eight."

"They were delicious," Guo Liang recalled fondly.

“Back at school we made plans to do it again, this time as an ‘experiment’ with chickens from the experimental farm, but our group leader refused to let us do it.”

“How come?” I asked, puzzled.

“Because it was our home, and you don’t do things like that at your own place.”

“Ah,” I said, “I see.” I turned to that friend of his, and to sound him out, said, “Actually, you did something like that before, but on an even bigger scale.”

“Really? Where was that?”

“Yes, really. In China.”

“China? What were the numbers like?”

“Eight years.”

The Japanese guest had nothing more to say. His face turned bright red, even though we were only drinking weak Chinese tea.

The Sense of a Distant Journey

I WAS ON a domestic flight heading east for a schoolmate’s wedding when it dawned on me that I’d forgotten to call Mother and tell her that my flight back to Singapore would be delayed.

It was nine o’clock when I landed at Changi Airport. Mother said she’d been waiting since five that afternoon, which made me feel guilty. If I’d forgotten to tell her I’d changed the return date, would she have stayed there, waiting three days for my return?

I’d only been back twice since leaving three years earlier. And each time I marvelled at how cruel time was, like bleach turning Mother’s full head of black hair a silvery grey.

Putting down my suitcase, I shook out the kinks in my body and gave her a hug, only to notice that she was much slighter than before. Gone were the days when I had to look up at her face as I begged her to let me go on a school excursion.

As usual, she’d prepared a tableful of my favourite childhood dishes, as if to make up for what had been lost between us over the past few years.

The long flight had taken away my appetite, but I managed to try every dish, so as not to disappoint her. To her, a big meal was a major event and the best way for mother and son to communicate emotionally, especially given the great distance of time and space

between us, including an unbridgeable generation gap.

It was late but she was still awake, likely too excited to fall asleep.

“I want to take another look at you.” She patted me on the knee.

“Or you’ll vanish without a trace once your old friends show up.”

I smiled unhappily.

Then she took out a vanity case, part of her dowry from years ago, and gently opened it to retrieve a bundle of letters, which she flipped through carefully.

“See here, these are your letters. I’m so afraid I might lose them.”

My goodness! I’d written those letters hastily—in the car, in a restaurant, or in urgent need of money. Nothing but formulaic pleasantries or weather reports. I didn’t know how to express in simple language other matters, such as the openness of society over there, or the complex scientific principles in my textbooks.

I’d spent less than half an hour on the letters, but she treasured them so much that she’d kept them in neat chronological order.

“Xidi, you’re so lazy. These are all the letters you wrote in three years, but you must have been busy with school, so it’s understandable.”

I forced a nod.

“Here, look at this one.” She put on her reading glasses and pointed to one of the letters. “This is the longest, written in the first summer after you left. It’s, let me see, it’s about buying textbooks. I counted, about four hundred words, including the crossed-out ones.”

I hung my head.

“And here, this is the most recent one.” She removed her pillow and picked up a postcard with the Statue of Liberty on it, saying happily, “I look at this one any time I can’t sleep. Even though I can’t understand some of the words, the picture is pretty.”

She flashed me an embarrassed smile when she had finished.

I couldn’t find anything to say. After a long time, I slowly looked up and saw the shadow of her aging silvery whiteness flickering in the corners of my eyes.

I’ll stay home with her tomorrow.

In this Singapore Literature Prize-winning collection of stories, an aging Japanese ex-soldier, ignorant about the horrors of the Japanese Occupation, returns to Singapore for a nostalgic visit; a young boy's sole contact with his father consists of a weekly meeting at McDonald's; and a hopeful employee tries to win over his tumour-stricken boss with traditional Chinese medicine. Set against the backdrop of Singapore's rapid development from the 1980s to the early 2000s, the poignant and witty stories in *The Earnest Mask* peel back the veneer of official history, revealing flashes of the personal stories buried beneath.

Chia Hwee Pheng has published eight books in Chinese under the pen name, **XI NI ER**. He has received the S.E.A. Write Award and the National Book Development Council of Singapore's Book Award. In 2008, he was awarded Singapore's Cultural Medallion and his collected short stories won the Singapore Literature Prize. Currently he serves as president of the Singapore Association of Writers. This is his first book to be translated into English.

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