

AWAITING THE MOON

待月記

This is the story of outsiders looking out for each other, a novel that perfectly embodies the ancient Chinese phrase: “Only the wronged ever get together.” Ching-Yueh is an engineer, whose job was ensuring that the cell phones his company made broke after a certain period. Angry disillusionment is compounded by sickness: his eyes become so sensitive to light that daylight exposure is painful, and constant torment drives him to thoughts of suicide. His posts on Facebook catch the attention of Feng, a college classmate who hiked with him on the Outing Club, and she decides to take emergency action.

This brave, forthright, and completely socially inept young woman infiltrates Ching-Yueh’s apartment, incapacitates him with a stun gun, and drives him into the mountains. If Ching-Yueh really wants to die, she says, let’s make a survival game out of it like we always said we would, and he can at least die well. He follows along with her, and the two begin their fight for survival in the wild – one depressed and passive, yet struggling to stay alive, the other energetic and active, yet persistently courting death.

Liu Dan-Chiu’s brilliantly eccentric characters shine with a rebellious energy that charges the novel with life and inspires a dark humor. The world as seen through Ching-Yueh’s tortured eyes explodes with contradiction and absurdity, and the drama of marginalization that plays out between him, Feng, and the world they try to abandon will feel painfully vivid. While the world of the narrative might feel most familiar to younger readers, the direct, hard-hitting prose will surely capture anyone’s attention.

Liu Dan-Chiu 柳丹秋

Originally a theater major, Liu Dan-Chiu integrates the language of the internet with the language of literature. Her blog-form novella “Upstream,” which upended stereotypical views of the *otaku* lifestyle, garnered significant attention from the reading public and won the first TSMC Literature Award in 2011. Liu is currently a doctoral candidate in Japan.



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By Liu Dan-Chiu

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Feng pulled up in front of the apartment block the address had led her to. A seven-story building, no concierge, glass doors locked tight. She parked and hung around outside for a while. Nobody came in or out.

This wasn't a problem she'd anticipated.

She turned to the intercom, found the button for Ching-Yueh's apartment and tried pressing it. No response.

What if she was blowing it all out of proportion? What if she had the wrong apartment? What if some passing busybody asked what she was up to.... Negative thoughts welled up as usual and she forced them back down. If she'd gotten it wrong it would mean an embarrassment at worst. And she'd endured more than enough of those. Hadn't she already been through the worst?

Having reassured herself, Feng took a deep breath and started jabbing the intercom button, yelling upwards as she did so:

"Hey! Li Ching-Yueh! Boss! Can you hear me? It's me, Meibo. I know you're up there! Open the door! Let me up!"

No response.

"If you don't, I'll just keep shouting and shouting until your neighbors call the police." That did the trick. The lock clicked open, and Feng walked through the lobby and into the elevator, where she pressed the button for the fourth floor. On arriving she left the wheelchair in the elevator and offered up a silent prayer for success.

She walked to the apartment. Her target had opened his door a crack and stood behind it, waiting.

"Hey, boss!" He made no sound, so she went on: "Long time no see!"

"Meibo. What are you making all that racket for?"

"Not my fault you didn't open the door quicker. For all I knew it was already too late. Why didn't you reply to me?"

"What, to that screed you sent me? You're lucky I even read all that nonsense."

"It wasn't nonsense. I was worried."

"Worry's not much use any more, the way things are."

"Well, you clearly want someone to worry about you, or you wouldn't be posting it all up on Facebook."

"You think it's all for show, just like the rest of them." His tone was ominous. "You can all wait and see, but it's not for show this time."

"That's not what I think. I know the charcoal and pan are for real. Why else would I have come?"

“Fine. Then worry. Worry all you want. Let’s see you change my mind. Or maybe you’ve got some better method?”

He stood aside. Feng stepped past and found herself in gloom.

This was her first visit to the home of her frequently yet unsuccessfully suicidal friend, and she soon saw how far he’d gone. Flattened cardboard boxes blocked the windows; an unlit fluorescent tube seemed to have been obscured with cellophane; the only light came from a laptop screen. In that dim glow she made out a cluttered coffee table: electrical tape, scissors, a mobile phone, instant noodle containers, dark glasses, swimming goggles and several pairs of spectacles.

On the floor were bags of charcoal, strips of torn towel, and stainless steel pans. All the essentials for suicide by carbon monoxide.

“Those are the mountaineering club’s pans.”

“What if they are?”

“I remember using them. I miss that.”

“I wash my shoes in them now.”

Feng changed the topic: “I’m not here to try and change your mind, but we had an arrangement, remember? Like I said in my message, we promised each other we’d do the northern section of the Central Range together.”

“And?”

“Well, you keep on saying you want to die, but I think you should keep that promise before you do. I’ve got all the gear ready, all you need to do is get in the car. Assuming we get back safely, you can live or die. Your choice.”

Ching-Yueh gave a lengthy sigh. “Well, that’s a different approach to the doctors and therapists, at least. But I’m all set to light the charcoal here. If you wanted us to do that together, I might be interested. That was the first thing I thought when I saw you’d sent me a message.” An odd smile came to his lips. “I actually thought that was quite likely. I can better understand now what you were doing back then....”

Feng cut him off: “I’m here – I’m here today to ask you to come to the mountains.”

“If you’re just going to go on about that, forget it. Go home.”

“I...I’ve got some of our photos from back then. Maybe if you looked through them you’d remember how much you enjoyed it?” She rummaged through her backpack.

“Then leave them on the table on your way out.”

A sudden agony seized Ching-Yueh. He collapsed, limbs jerking in uncontrollable spasms.

Feng took huge, panicked breaths, an electric stun gun in her hand.

She swiftly carried out her plan of action, taping up first his mouth, and then his hands and feet with trembling fingers. Once he was immobilized she found something with which to prop open the door and went outside to call the elevator. Fortunately it was still waiting on the same floor, the wheelchair safe inside.

Back in the apartment, she unfolded the collapsible wheelchair and hoisted Ching-Yueh onto the seat. It had been ages since she’d manhandled anyone like this – back in her

mountaineering days she'd helped carry other club members who'd succumbed to altitude sickness, and she had moved her father about during his recovery. Ching-Yueh seemed heavier than all of them, but she managed to wrestle him into position. She added a facemask, dark glasses and a baseball cap to cover his features and found a halfway respectable pair of sneakers for his feet. Finally, she draped a coat over his legs to hide the taped wrists.

She made sure the windows were closed and the gas and water off, then looked for his medicines. It wasn't hard – the place was littered with blister packs and dropper bottles of eye medicine. There was no time to look at them carefully, so she just swept them into her bag.

Last of all the computer. She felt sure she would be the only one responding to yet another of Ching-Yueh's suicide messages, but just in case... She opened Facebook and referred to her draft as she typed:

I haven't been thinking very clearly lately, but I've changed my mind. I'm going to spend some time alone to work things out. Don't worry if you can't reach me. I'm just going to go away and try and forget about myself for a while.

Even getting out of the building went quite smoothly, in that they didn't run into anyone. Getting down the two steps from the elevator and getting Ching-Yueh into the car was difficult, though. She was coming to realize just how much a pain the lack of disabled access infrastructure could be.

By the time she'd fixed him there in the passenger seat, mummy-like under layer upon layer of tape, she was drenched, soaked through with sweat. She collapsed limp and exhausted into the driver's seat.

She gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Don't worry, you know exactly where we're going," she said.

"Off we go then."

This was the message she'd written him:

Hey, it's Meibo. Long time no see. I'll skip the formalities: I've seen what's been happening, and I wanted to ask if you remembered our promise to go north together? We both thought it'd be the perfect place to be laid to rest, so whoever lived longest would scatter the other's ashes from a mountain top.

In case you've forgotten, let me persuade you: if you really can't go on, we'll head up there and do Bear Grylls: Survival Game for real. You remember how we used to love watching it and talking about trying it ourselves one day, to see if it was all rubbish or not? Well, this is our chance. I don't think you really want to end it all, but I do think you need to obliterate your current self so you can have a whole new start. But you just can't see how. I think a survival experience will do. And if you're keen, I'll come along.

I wouldn't suggest this to anyone else, just you. You know your stuff, and even if something does go wrong, you'll be better off than you are now. You'll be where you wanted to be laid to rest.

If you go ahead with your plans – think about whoever has to clean up after you, think about the apartment. All that's just going to make you hate yourself even more.

I know the nights are tough and it's hard to think. So, I hope you take one morning, when you feel a bit calmer and the sun's shining, to think about it and reply.

I mean what I say – I'll stand by your side till the end. Go through your whole friends list, there's no one more loyal than me.

2

Ching-Yueh had met Meibo through the university mountaineering club and hadn't liked her at first. She had an odd habit of calling all the men "sir," regardless of age or seniority, and he was sure it was a full six months before she learned to tell him apart from the others. It was a particular blue bandana printed with a map of Antarctica that he realized was his distinguishing feature. He always wore it, and if Meibo ever came looking for him in the cool of evening, when he'd put a woolen hat on over it, she'd walk right past him and wander, lost, around whatever mountain hamlet they had stopped at.

Meibo's freakish inability to recognize faces, along with her other oddities, made her headache for the team. But in the end, she was kept around as a kind of mascot. They even gave her a nickname: she was such a nag, always lecturing them or telling them it was time for bed at eight in the evening, they started to shut down her every instruction with an English "maybe", a mocking distortion of Meibo, and "Maybe" became her name. But some of the girls thought this was cruel, so "Maybe" became "Maple", which returned to Chinese as "Feng" for an instant boost of femininity.

Only Ching-Yueh stuck to calling her Meibo. As far as he was concerned, Feng was far too young and pretty a name for such an old crank, even an old crank disguised as a young woman. He shuddered so violently at the thought of calling her such a feminine name that his feet skittered about the floor. And she was easily the most troublesome member of the mountaineering team he led, one of the four making up the club. Not that he ever objected to being stuck with the weirdo. And over time she became a regular at the back of the group, preventing stragglers from falling too far behind.

For four years they climbed mountains together, until Ching-Yueh finished his postgrad and went off to national service and employment. By now, it had been five years since they'd last seen each other. Ching-Yueh couldn't imagine how the stickler for rules then become his abductor now. But she had always been an odd one, and he found himself surprised but not scared. Also curious as to what she had planned. He'd have been even more curious, had he not been taped firmly to the passenger seat and unable to resolve a certain pressing issue. He started to struggle.

"Stop moving about, you'll distract me."

Feng glanced away from the road for a second to check the tape was holding fast. Head-shaking. Struggling.

"What's wrong? Not happy?"

More head-shaking.

“No? So what would you rather do?”

They were on a twisting mountain road. With nobody nearby to hear any screams of complaint, Feng reached over and pulled the tape from his mouth.

“My eyes! Are you trying to kill me?!”

“What’s up?”

“You know! You read Facebook, you must know I can’t stand sunlight. And you’ve taken me for a drive in the middle of the day!”

“Oh, I remember something about that. And you can’t let yourself get worked up, either, can you? Aren’t you getting worked up now?”

“Whose fault is that!? And you’ve taped my hands to my legs, they should be by my side. My eye pressure’s going up, and my head is splitting! Find somewhere shady to stop, quick!”

His complaints worked. Feng swung over to the side of the road, took out a penknife and cut through the tape, Ching-Yueh helping by frantically tearing it off as she went. Once she’d folded the blade and placed it safely in her bag he threw a punch at her shoulder, sending her head bouncing off the side window.

They both screamed in pain.

“What did you do that for?” she yelled.

“To get even!”

Ching-Yueh pulled his cap low over his eyes and exited the car, ignoring luxuriant silvergrass and wild cotton as he stumbled to the shade of a nearby tree and collapsed.

Feng staggered along behind, sighing as she sat beside him.

All was silent, bar the constant chirping of the cicadas surrounding.

Finally he spoke. “So...how have things been?”

“The usual.”

“How’s your dad? Still climbing?”

“Not any more, his back’s not up to it.” She paused a moment. “And you? Have you still been getting out there?”

“You think I can go up a mountain like this?”

“Why not?”

“I can barely get out of the house.”

“That’s just what you think.”

“That’s what everyone says, as if my thoughts aren’t important. What are we, apart from thoughts?”

She had no reply to that.

“Well? I’m asking you a question! Fine, change the topic.” He tried to think of something else to say, but his head was jangling, as if half the cicadas of summer had been lured inside and locked in there. “Your dad still climbing?”

She just stared at him.

“Did I just ask that?”

“At least you noticed.”

They both burst out in a long, loud bout of laughter.

“Hey, you actually electrocuted me! We finally see each other again and you hit me with an electric baton. That was awful!”

“What else could I do? You knew perfectly well I can’t persuade anyone of anything and you still told me to try.”

The old camaraderie soon returned. She reported on her plans for their trip, and he listened, almost as if he still understood. Feng explained that to avoid being spotted she’d brought them to Xindian and planned to continue on the highway to Yilan before turning onto the cross-country route for Lishan. It would be the old route, entering the mountains from Siyuan in search of a place to play their survival game.

Back then he’d had his heart set on the glacier cirque between the northern and central peaks of Nanhu Mountain – what mountaineer wouldn’t? But that was a popular spot and offered no cover. Any attempt to live up there would result in a quick arrest by the park rangers. And anyway, there wouldn’t be much food to be found up there in the cold of the plateau, and anything you did find was likely to be a protected species. So unless they wanted to dine meal after meal on the endangered mountain willowherb, they’d need to find a forest. She was thinking of somewhere like the spruce forests around the base camp on Cloud Ridge; the northern area of Nanhu Northern Peak; the forests around the Taosai River. All these were options. The problem was there were too many climbers around Cloud Ridge, and she wasn’t sure the water in the other locations would be safe to drink.

Ching-Yueh managed to muster an idea of his own, just to show he was listening. “What about somewhere around Mabishan?”

Feng nodded, indicating this was a good idea. It was one of Taiwan’s hundred highest mountains and there would be climbers passing through, but it was remote and steep terrain. Lose yourself in the forest and there was little chance of being found. Again, they’d need to make sure there was water. But they could head there, identify a clear landmark as a regular meeting point, then go their own ways to live off the land.

Ching-Yueh didn’t object to the plan. But how would they decide the game was over?

“When one of us dies, obviously.”

“So what if we end up living happily out there and there’s no reason to come back. We’ll just go on like that forever?”

Ching-Yueh did feel Feng had failed to consider certain practical matters. Foremost, Facebook. He was a heavy user, recording every breath in a post. He lived on Facebook and would die on Facebook. A long absence would soon raise suspicion. Feng explained the smokescreen already put in place.

Next, his girlfriend. Everyone else might be put off by a paragraph or two on Facebook, but if he didn’t keep in touch with his girlfriend she would know something was up. The best thing, he said, was for him to phone her and think of some way to put her off. He asked for Feng’s phone, saying he would make the call in private.

But Feng looked unconvinced. “I’m coming with you,” he promised her. “We’re old friends, can’t you trust me?”

That seemed to hit the mark. After a moment's further consideration she handed over her phone.

When she'd walked off Ching-Yueh dialed his girlfriend's phone number.

"Hey, it's me." Then lowering his voice: "I'm in a weird situation."

3

It was after he started employment that Ching-Yueh really began to hate the world. He had been an engineer before depression forced him to quit, developing systems to ensure mobile phone components failed at the appropriate time. The company's products had to survive the clumsy handling of the user, yet could never last into a happy old age and a natural end. Rather, they had to pass away still tragically young, shortly after the warranty expired. His department was responsible for making that happen. In short, they were a department of destruction, guaranteeing the company would never want for work.

More plainly put, he specialized in manufacturing garbage.

"Manufacturing garbage? You don't have to make it sound that bad...."

So said his colleague. They were on a factory visit at the time, and his colleague pointed through the glass at the production line below.

"Our work gives all of those people down there jobs. If our products didn't break, they'd have to stop the lines and nobody could afford to eat. It might seem like we're destroying things, but actually we're creating something we don't get to see: food on the table."

"Food on the table. You've hit on a universal truth there. We eat, we wash the dishes, we eat again. Life's just a never-ending sink of dirty dishes. There's nothing more pointless in life than washing dishes, apart from life itself."

"What a poet you are. Why have you got to be like this all the time? Heard of the donut test? Show an optimist a donut and he sees a donut; show a pessimist a donut and he sees the hole. Why not think about all the delicious food in those dishes?"

His colleague wasn't a bad person, but when he got going it was like talking to some old university lecturer drone on. Ching-Yueh suspected that if he were to crack his skull open, he'd find a full-page advert for the company's products.

"Doesn't matter how tasty the food is, it turns into shit just the same. It's like washing dishes, all garbage. You shit it out, it gets recycled, then you eat it all up again. How did that Qing poet put it? 'The petals fall to mud, to grow anew'? It's sickening. Why have flowers in the first place? No flowers, no petals. Just have them stick to the tree forever. Wouldn't it be better if time just stopped? Why do they have to fall? And what we produce: mobile phones, the pinnacle of garbage. Two hundred times out of a hundred they're just used to talk nonsense, or for Facebook or WhatsApp. Garbage information, garbage emotions. Every day we write out a pile of garbage and swap it back and forth, yours for mine, mine for yours. We might as well be sifting through garbage cans. What's the point, to prove that matter can't be created or destroyed? Why all that effort? Why not just keep all our garbage to ourselves and be happy with it?"

“Don’t you use Facebook or WhatsApp?”

“I do.”

“So why say all that?”

“The fact I use them doesn’t mean it’s right. There’s plenty of things we know we shouldn’t do, but we happily keep on doing anyway. Like jerking off.”

“Fuck off, now you’re just being crude.”

“Yeah, fuck off! But you make an excellent point – I know I shouldn’t be crude and I do it anyway. There’s some biological imperative, a self-destruct program written in our genes just like the one we write into our products. It triggers itself when the population gets too large. All we have to do is eliminate all forms of activity beyond playing on our phones, and humanity will march bravely and deliberately to its destruction. And what’s incredible is that we don’t even realize it. We’ve started to view it as some kind of obligation, to think we have to follow what our friends are doing and swap garbage with them. When we’re in a queue, at a bus stop, on a train, we’ve got to check in. It’s like we’ve got no option but to help the time pass. As if time will just stop without our help. And then time does pass and nobody’s happy about it, because all that’s happened is we’ve gotten older. If we’ve absolutely got to do something, why not hook us up to turbines. We can run on a hamster wheel and generate some power. Actually, someone should develop a power-generating app and put it on Facebook and Twitter and Google and so on. The harder you type, the faster it goes. Or collect the electricity from all those neurons firing when you go online. We wouldn’t need any new nuclear power plants then. But nobody thinks of this. Probably even us engineers have rotted our brains with our phones, just like I have. We’ll still have to use nuclear power. Or coal and gas. We’ll pump all the oil, burn all the forests, then the greenhouse effect will destroy the planet. And as it explodes, assuming the Internet still works, everyone will still be glued to their screens. ‘Ooh, the sky’s full of lovely blood-red flames from here, check out the pic.’ Fuck this shitty island and this shitty world.”

“I completely disagree, apart from the last bit. Fuck this shitty island and this shitty world.”

“You can’t join in if you don’t agree. Fuck you too.”

They clinked glasses and downed their drinks. Ching-Yueh could easily have continued for another two hours, but his audience couldn’t. Despite his efforts to play along, it was plain to Ching-Yueh that his colleague wished desperately for him to shut up.

But this was the problem: His head was crammed full of garbage and eventually it was sure to explode.

All at once his right eye went dark.

He’d expected all that garbage to burst out sooner or later. But not from the eyes.