

DON'T DIE AGAIN

你不能再死一次

Li Hai-Yen's father was sent to prison for the murder of her high school classmate. Fourteen years later, a shockingly similar murder takes place in her hometown, and Li Hai-Yen, now a journalist, returns to confront her painful past, and uncover the truth before the killer can strike again.

Li Hai-Yen has finally returned to Peachgrove Town. Fourteen years ago, the body of her friend Ting Hsiao-Chuan was found lying naked beneath a peach tree in her family's orchard. Her father, who had become an alcoholic in the wake of her mother's death, was hastily convicted of the crime. Unable to escape the label of "murderer's daughter", Li Hai-Yen left Peachgrove to start a new life, and did her best to forget everything about her past. Now, the corpse of another young woman has been discovered in an orchard in Peachgrove, and nearly every detail of the crime scene matches the original murder. Is it the work of a copycat killer? Or, was Li Hai-Yen's father wrongly convicted, and is the original killer active once more?

Drawn back to Peachgrove by the murder, Li Hai-Yen, now a reporter, encounters Ting Hsiao-Chuan's high school sweetheart, Sung Tung-Nien, now a police officer. Each has their own reasons for seeking the truth, and, as they revisit their traumatic past, so, too, must they revisit the pain each left buried behind them. The murderer has sworn he will strike again in seven days, and, soon, another girl goes missing from the town. Past and present intermingle as the two sleuths, each burdened with pain and regret, race against time to crack the case before another body is found.

For every crime there is the victim and the accused; but they are not the only ones whose lives are forever altered. More than a decade after the murder of her friend and the imprisonment of her father, Li Hai-Yen searches for the answers that could redeem them all: victim, accused, and herself, as well.



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By Chen Xue

Translated by Jim Weldon

Prelude

The pinkish haze could be seen from a long way off, the leaves on the trees rustling where a light breeze had blown across the thin mist, a whirl of petals drifting on the wind. The grove was everywhere a riot of peach blossom; various items hung in the branches of the tree with the richest burst of flowers. Highest, on the tip of the topmost branch, was a white sailor suit, thin and light, flapping in the wind like a flag, its whiteness all the more eye-catching against the pink of the blossom. When the eye followed the fluttering of the sailor suit to the left, a blue pleated skirt could be seen hanging from another branch. To the right hung a pair of white underpants and a white undershirt. Below them, a pink backpack was hooked in the branches, then further down still, a pair of long, white socks, one higher, one lower. The tree had become a display stand for all a young girl's personal things.

The blossom, where it had fallen on the short turf formed a carpet of petals, and in its center bloomed the face of a young girl. Her exquisite features were finely carved as any statue. A pair of white gym shoes had been placed by her side.

The girl's eyes were closed, faint scratches apparent on her pallid face; beads of dew settled on her long, curling lashes; a slight redness blushing at the very tip of her straight nose; petals scattered here and there across her cheeks, and one peach blossom landed square between her parted lips. She appeared at first glance to be sleeping, but closer inspection revealed the purplish red marks of strangulation around her neck.

Her plump cheeks were still child-like. Her long hair hung down straight from behind the pristine white of her ears to her breast. The girl was completely naked. Blossom had fallen on her body; here and there between the petals, spread across her breasts, belly and sides, were a number of open wounds of various sizes, some deeper, others not, blood already coagulated.

The young woman's two arms were spread wide at her sides, palms facing up, cupping the petals that had settled there.

There were a number of people gathered around the girl, and more hurrying over from away off. They included uniformed police officers scurrying back and forth, plainclothes detectives dashing about, forensics specialists squatting in their coveralls. Others had begun to surround the scene with yellow barrier tape, or point cameras all about, or run out long tape measures here and there, or unpack an array of boxes and test tubes, swabs and tweezers, or don transparent surgical gloves and mark various spots around the body. Each person had their allotted task and busied themselves around the girl with their various equipment. A police siren

could be heard in the distance, and further off still, a crowd was beginning to surge in the direction of the scene.

“She looks like she’s sleeping.”

“Like a painting.”

“So beautiful.”

“A beauty like that is terrifying.”

Snatches of speech drifted over. The tang of fresh blood mingled with the scent of peach blossom to make a heady stench. One of the younger police officers started to retch.

There were people trying to push through the barrier tape. Someone was shouting, but the words were muffled.

Part One: The Home-Comers

1.

Li Hai-Yen could always remember that house on a stretch of flat ground to the west side of Peachgrove town. When she was a child, the area was not yet built up and there were few neighbors. It was a long walk to the shops or market. Her grandfather had built the detached house on a patch of waste ground, and planted the grove of peach blossom trees and the orchard. After her grandfather died and her father took the place on, he spent a good deal of time refurbishing, rebuilding the house using traditional methods so it was both brand-new and old-style, all to his own painstaking design. Her father dug up the abandoned orchard, keeping only a small cottage and a plot of land on which he planted vegetables. He kept the peach blossom grove with its dozens of trees in neatly serried ranks. In blossom time, it was an expanse of pinks, a sight to delight the eye.

There was a road running by the house that went into town. They were on the outskirts here; there was a bus, but whenever her parents had business in town, they would drive the family car. In the evenings, the sound of the car returning could be heard from a long way off. She would often stand at the window looking out at the grove of peach blossom trees, seeing their full bloom in spring, then when the season was past, watching the blossom drift down on the wind, until the whole ground was thickly carpeted. Her mother would gather the fallen blossom. When she asked what for, her mother replied that it was just that she thought it was so pretty, it seemed a shame to leave it laying on the ground.

Sometimes she would bring classmates back to play, especially those days when she had been practicing with the choir. Those were the days she most looked forward to, everyone practicing hard, and then returning on the bus together. There was still a long walk to her house after they got off the bus, but they would be in high spirits, singing as they walked. She sang alto. One of their pieces had a female solo, the most important section of the whole song. She would always hold her breath during that part to put all her energy into listening to the voice of the

soloist as it rose above the others. It was a sound that seemed to have come down from Heaven. When that girl sang, it would fill every corner of Hai-Yen's mind, creating a world filled with scenes and stories, illustrating the emotions of the song. The piece was called "Swallow's Song".

Hai-Yen recalled the day of the inter-school competition. The choir had traveled to the venue by bus, and she had brewed a big flask of malva nut tea in readiness, and brought loquat syrup, too, for the soloist to take, as she remembered the girl had told her she would get a sore throat if she took a chill. She had to sing the solo, and they were going to be in a real pickle if she lost her voice. When Hai-Yen gave her the flask of medicinal tea, the girl rewarded her with a warm and gentle smile.

Their performance that day was a great success, and the entire audience cheered for the girl. Her rich voice had started out low, then steadily took flight following the melody, until the high notes soared graceful as any swallow. She seemed to expend no effort at all when she sang, as if all she needed to do was open her mouth and keep breathing and the notes would come out. Her voice rang and reverberated around the great spaces of the performance hall. Hai-Yen was intoxicated by the sound.

O Swallow, hear me sing this song my beloved, my darling; listen as I tell these things to you, my Swallow;

O Swallow, how you are joyous, warm and full of life; how your smile glitters like the shining stars;

The bend of your brows and the shine of your eyes, your fine neck and hair so long; you are my girl, o Swallow;

O Swallow, don't forget your promise, don't change your heart; I am yours and you are my Swallow.

It was the last time she ever heard the girl sing.

They won the competition and they were all full of praise for the girl as they rode the bus back to their school. When they arrived, the girl's boyfriend was waiting for her at the school gates. She chatted with them a while, and then the girl said, "We'll be off, then. Don't forget, I've come round your house today to do our homework together!" The girl gave Hai-Yen a wink. This was an understanding they had: whenever the girl had a date with her boyfriend, Hai-Yen served as her excuse for arriving home late. Hai-Yen enjoyed the time she spent with the couple, even if it was only a few minutes. She felt so happy as the three of them chatted together outside the school gates.

Not long after the competition, the girl went out to meet her boyfriend one night but disappeared en route. Two days later, she was found lying dead in the peach blossom grove at Hai-Yen's house. Her father was awoken from his drunken sleep by the police knocking at the door of the cottage. They soon discovered a blood-stained fruit knife in the cottage, and her father became a suspect, and was arrested on the spot.

Hai-Yen's whole world fell apart overnight.

She recalled how someone had once said to her that peach blossom could cause demonic possession. Perhaps her father had been possessed.

Yes, there in the peach blossom grove, a girl had died, the pretty girl who sang “Swallow’s Song”, and everyone in town said it was her father who had killed her, though Hai-Yen did not want to believe it.

Deep in the night, she seemed to hear “Swallow’s Song”. She rose and went to look out the window. The bare grove lay wreathed in night mist. Someone had said there was a mist the night the girl died. The mist had enveloped the girl’s naked body, wrapping it like a thin film, as if to protect her and prevent anyone spying on her.

The girl’s name was Ting Hsiao-Chuan.

The peach blossom grove, her father, Ting Hsiao-Chuan, the “Swallow’s Song”, how had these things become linked? She could not think clearly. Her head was a mess. She was interviewed by the police time and again: what happened that day? Had Ting Hsiao-Chuan visited your house before? Were you friends with Ting Hsiao-Chuan?

In her confusion, Hai-Yen did not know how to answer. Any responses she gave might make her father’s situation worse. All she was sure of was that her father could not have killed anyone. Even when drunk, he had never been cruel. The one cruel thing he had ever done was to slowly destroy himself with drink. She knew her father was trying to numb himself; could that be enough to turn him? Suddenly, she was no longer so sure. Increasingly, she felt there was likely a side to her father that she did not know, not that she would ever have expected that side to be so dark and twisted.

She had sat beside the girl at school. Their families had come together to watch them performing with the choir. Sometimes, Hai-Yen had a vague feeling that she ought to have been the one to be killed. She was, after all, daughter of the owner of the peach grove, and she had slept there, lying on a bed of peach blossom.

Yet, it had not been her.

Oh Swallow, who was it that smothered your song, stopped up your breath, made a corpse of you, so that now you cannot answer these questions? Hai-Yen held her breath and concentrated, waiting for the sound of song to carry on the air, waiting for those answers that would never come.

She sometimes lay wake in the night and saw her father’s face right up close before her – a face long since turned to dejection and despair, even madness, in the wake of her mother’s death – and it would seem unfamiliar, even frightening. Her father said he had not killed anyone; all he had done was get drunk. Her father contested the charges against him with a crazed energy. He changed his lawyer, and would speak to no one else. He claimed his previous lawyer had tricked him into confessing. He said his mental state was normal. He said he was innocent of any crime.

Hai-Yen wanted to shout out loud that if her father drank all the time, it was only because he was so sad. He would never kill anyone; the crazed look on his face was not cruelty, it was despair.

Whether despair might drive a man to kill, she did not know.

She did not know then that she would never see her father again.

2.

Li Hai-Yen always carried a black notebook when she conducted an interview, a small pad that could be held easily enough in one hand. Even when everyone else started using digital recorders, or using their phones to record speech and video, Hai-Yen still carried her notebook, quickly jotting down what her interviewee said.

She liked to hear directly and then immediately write down what was said to her. It was a type of first-hand record that allowed intuitive insights. Even if it only amounted to a few jotted words, she could get to the core of every utterance. She did not trust memory, in much the same way as she did not trust voice recordings, afraid that all of the recording paraphernalia would prevent her experiencing an authentic impression of the actuality. Her interview technique came across as old-school, but perhaps because she was writing rapidly in her notebook and not constantly staring into her interviewee's eyes, when she did occasionally look up, she would find they had lowered their guard and were willing to talk more freely. Her notebook became a protective screen, her camouflage; she let her ears do the work instead of her eyes, every word listened to with such careful attention was heard more clearly; its tone and timbre, the vibrations of the throat and the movements of lips and teeth; each thing left unsaid, every stumble and mumble or sudden change of subject, every evasion, deliberate or unconscious. It was like listening to music and being able to catch each shift in tone or duff note as it happened.

She was a reporter; her work entailed asking questions, looking, listening, recording, and then taking something out of these that went beyond the words spoken. For many reasons, this was the path she had chosen.

Li Hai-Yen, thirty years old, with a secret hidden beneath her slight and pretty exterior. She had done various jobs after graduating university until, after she passed the hiring exam for the newspaper, she started out on the community news beat. After reporting on a murder that caused a sensation, the paper promoted her to specialist reporter and she chose to write about crime. That mainly entailed interviewing the families of the victims, the investigating officers, the lawyers and prosecutors, and so forth. She also on occasion had the opportunity to interview the criminals themselves. Her reporting went in-depth and garnered a number of awards. Her editor thought she was a natural. She would write about a case from a variety of angles, by and large absent any bias and free of the influence of online discussions or the views presented in other media. She had her own style and her own point of view. The newspaper valued her reporting highly, and largely gave her a free hand when it came to selecting her subject matter. She could come and go from work as she pleased. She was a slow writer, dragging a story out until her editor was fit to explode, but then, at the last moment before her deadline, she would turn in yet another outstanding piece.

There was no requirement for her to be at the office every day, but when she did come by, she would bring coffee for everyone. She bought some for the editor-in-chief, the general editor, and the two sub-editors on her team, and would smile and refuse when they tried to pay her, telling them the coffee shop was downstairs in her building and the owner always gave her a discount. As the only woman on her team, she felt she had to work harder than anyone else. Sometimes the effort she put in and her driven character meant she put too much into the job. Often, she would come to the end of a series of interviews feeling on the point of collapse, still a long way short of where she wanted to be, and everything all in a muddle. It was enough to make her doubt herself, though in the end she always proved herself capable.

“Getting to the Truth, Seeing Human Nature” was the promotional blurb the newspaper put under her byline. Given her self-doubts, she found it ironic, but she accepted it. And why not? She had never lasted much more than six months at any of the many other jobs she had tried. The newspaper had become her refuge from the storm, the place she belonged. She looked at it like this: she was always going to make mistakes, so why at least make them in a place she liked?

Did she really like the newspaper? Or crime reporting? She wasn’t sure if it was liking, or dependency, or some other thing she couldn’t understand, that compelled her to do this work that brought her into contact with other people who had been impacted by murder.

She wanted to know how the “others” thought, how they lived, how they got on with what was left of their lives. By “others”, she meant people like herself who had had this particular experience. Did they still have a way to live well after the death of someone close to them? Were they constantly nagged by the feeling they had done something wrong, or that there was something they had failed to do? Had regret become the dominant theme of the remainder of their days? A murder could well destroy a family, or several families, entirely. What became of those left living? Did the feelings of those families differ greatly whether the cases were solved or unsolved? These were all things she wanted to know. Most of all, she wanted to know why the killers did it, but it was often difficult to find any clear proof of motive when investigating murder. Most cases involved disputes over money or love; whether the crime was premeditated or committed on impulse, the conclusions drawn were sometimes so simplistic it was baffling.

Were any of them like her?

Whether she interviewed people three months after a murder, six months, or a year later, none of them seemed normal. Still grieving, perhaps drowning their sorrows, many became cold and detached, unwilling to talk. Of course, there were also the occasional big-hearted types who despite their own pain were now volunteering, working with victim support groups. But Li Hai-Yen knew all of this was part of the struggle, a front that one put up because the pain and shadow of death remained. One either gave up entirely on life and left things to run their course, or became hyperactive, as if every minute must be spent proving one was already out the other side.

Just like she did.

She had buried that past where she had been a girl called Chou Chia-Chun.

She had lived in a simple family. Her father was a manager at an international trading business, her mother a housewife. The year Chou Chia-Chun turned twelve, her paternal grandfather died. Her father resigned from his job and took her and her mother back to his hometown, to live in the three-story house there. Her mother ran the house while her father played the stock markets. Neither went out to work, so they spent a lot of time together as a family. Her father had a lot of friends in the nearby town and became involved in all sorts of charity and community work. The peach grove was splendid when in bloom and sometimes people would come out from town just to look at it. Her father set up a few coffee tables there and would attend to anyone coming to enjoy the flowers. Her father also set about refurbishing the house, turning it into a place with real character. The three of them lived in a little world of their own, a utopian idyll out of an old folk tale.

One day, when Chou Chia-Chun was fifteen, her mother was stricken by a sudden sharp pain in her stomach. She was found to be in the late stages of pancreatic cancer. Her father spent every penny they had on treatments, but just three months later her mother died. After her mother passed away, her father broke down completely. He started to drink and steadily lost all will to live, until in the end he was drinking practically from the first moment he woke. He spent his days hanging around the peach grove. He no longer had anything to do with the neighbors. He did not work. He did not tend to the peach grove. He became like a zombie, his hair a mess and his face filthy. He would sometimes sleep in the little cottage out by the grove, reeking of booze like some homeless person.

Li Hai-Yen, then still called Chou Chia-Chun, cooked for herself, and looked after her father as well. She took the bus by herself to and from school, and there was still the housework to do when she got home. Her life was a complete shambles but all she could do was grit her teeth and carry on. And then, in spring, when she was sixteen, Ting Hsiao-Chuan went missing. Two days later, the police appeared at school to inform her that her father, Chou Fu, had been arrested and they wanted to take her in for questioning. She was at the police station for quite some time before she was finally able to see her father. While she was waiting, she heard an officer say a farmer had passed by their peach grove that morning and found the girl's naked body there under the trees. The deceased was the same girl who had been missing for two days, Ting Hsiao-Chuan. Blood on Chou Chia-Chun's father matched that of the dead girl, and he was arrested at once.

There was plenty of evidence pointing to his guilt: they had bloodstains, a weapon, and fingerprints. Her father had been lying dead drunk in the cottage, and was still unconscious when the police came to arrest him. He said he did not remember meeting any schoolgirl, and that he had not gone into the peach blossom grove, but no one nearby could back up his alibi. The body had been discovered in his peach grove and he was the person closest to the crime scene.

Ting Hsiao-Chuan was well-known as one of the prettiest girls at their high school. When giving testimony, a classmate said that a number of students had gone to Chou Chia-Chun's house for her birthday, Ting Hsiao-Chuan included. Forensic evidence indicated Ting Hsiao-Chuan had not been sexually assaulted. One of the medical examiners suggested this was because Chou Fu had been too drunk to perform the act. There was also speculation that, broken by grief, Chou Fu

had begun hallucinating, which led him to abduct Ting Hsiao-Chun, and he had probably stabbed her when she resisted. Ting Hsiao-Chuan's family said the girl had spoken a few days previously about visiting the Chou's grove to enjoy the peach blossom, and they had agreed to go together as a family. None of them had ever imagined anything happening to her. Some female neighbors also reported being harassed by Chou Fu. When drunk, Chou Fu would often mistake women in the street for his late wife and start pulling and tugging at them. All of this testimony made Chou Fu's case more difficult.

Chou Fu himself gave a number of conflicting statements. He went from saying he was drunk and remembered nothing, to saying he maybe remembered, to then confessing to the crime. Later, he retracted his confession and claimed the police had forced it out of him. Then he said he had only confessed because his lawyer had misled him in an attempt to construct a mental incapacity defense. After that, he stuck firmly by his story that he had been drunk, but had not committed the murder.

The retraction of his confession did little to help his case, and the prosecution continued to pursue a heavy sentence.

After the arrest of her father, public opinion swirled around Chou Chia-Chun like a rising tide. There were stories in the news every day, and all sorts of rumors and accusations made their way through the town. Their home address was leaked, and a photograph of her father was published. Chou Chia-Chun's life became a living hell. "The murderer's daughter" became her only name.

At school, in town, wherever she went, tongues were wagging. If they didn't say anything to her face, they were cursing her behind her back. A number of reporters camped outside the house for the duration of the investigation. When she went into school, she would find slips of paper on her desk with things like "murderer", "weirdo" and "freak" written on them. One time, she was surrounded by classmates in the toilets and pelted with trash. Someone threw a stone through one of the windows at home. Words were spray-painted on their gate, on the walls, and on the ground: "a life for a life"; "blood debts are paid in blood".

What did it mean to be the daughter of a murderer? She did not know what to think, or what to do. She wasn't the killer, but she was being held responsible. Her father was a murderer, and she must share the guilt. What could she do to make up for it? The father she loved had murdered her best friend. To what degree was she responsible? She wanted to speak up when people said things, but when she thought of the terrible demise of Ting Hsiao-Chuan, and her grieving family, she felt she had no right to complain of injustice.

"Blood debts are paid in blood", but how?

Everywhere she heard people say how horribly Ting Hsiao-Chuan had died, how her father was a beast, how he had murdered in cold blood. Had her father really committed murder? Why? The details of the murder were not known, and she could not even begin to imagine what might have happened in the cottage that night. If her father had been holding Ting Hsiao-Chuan there for two days, why hadn't she found out? There had been a distance between her and her father for some time, and she had been afraid to go near the stinking cottage. She was busy

cooking and doing the laundry, and hadn't had the energy to badger him about bathing and combing his hair. The man curled up in the corner of the cottage, his chin covered in stubble and hair a mess, drinking every day, throwing up, and bursting into tears without warning – it had been a long time since she dared come face to face that man, because there was nothing left in his bloodshot eyes that she recognized.

Her father had not yet stood trial, but the world had already sentenced him to death.