

# BURNING BRIGHT

## 寂光與烈焰

A man wakes up in a prison cell, his body aching and his memory totally gone, just at the very moment someone comes to get him out. His saviour is a street racer and a con man, and he is as suspicious of his charge's amnesia as our protagonist is of him. The terror and the courage that come with total memory loss drive the protagonist to stick with him – if only he could remember who he is.

Eventually, he finds evidence of a name – Yan Ying – that appears to be his. He's told that he is also a street racer, and an even bigger hustler than his partner. Though he remembers nothing about driving, his partner is taking him to a race in the desert anyway. In an effort to trigger a recall, our protagonist dives into the practice of racing, and unearths everything he can about his own past. He tries re-building his own story, until one day he discovers that the name Yan Ying might not be his at all. Reclamation may lie in deeper, more dangerous stimuli.

The book that took author Cheng Ying-Shu five years and a racing license to write transports the reader on a red-lined ride into the empty deserts of the mind, where every sharp curve and sudden precipice threaten to throw us into the unknown.

### Cheng Ying-Shu 成英姝

One of Taiwan's most celebrated authors, Cheng Ying-Shu is a master of multiple genres, including fiction, essays, and reviews. She has been a star of Taiwan's literary world since 1994, when her short story collection *The Princess Did Not Sleep All Night* broke on the scene to critical acclaim. Her previous works include the prize-winning novel *A Cappella Requiem* and *The Male Soubret*, the story of a hermaphroditic courtesan in early Taiwan. She's also made a splash with her photography collections, as well as her non-fiction book on Tarot augury and psychology, *The Hand of God*.



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By Cheng Ying-Shu. Translated by Petula Parris.

The man stared in apparent disbelief, eyes piercing and alert, like a bird of prey. “Yan Ying?” the man cried out. “*Yan Ying...*” He repeated the name to himself, almost certain it must be his own.

Yet his heart sank the moment he realized he felt no connection with it whatsoever.

He desperately wanted to question the man, if just to shed some light – even the faintest glimmer would do – onto the total blankness of his mind. But asking questions was too strenuous a task right now. His head was pounding so much he wished he could dig his eyes from their sockets before they exploded. His body screamed with pain, and his tongue flat-out ignored every order to speak. The skin and flesh of his face smarted like freshly kneaded dough, and his skeleton felt like it might fly into pieces at any minute.

The man walked on ahead, paying him no attention, as if even a quick glance back in his direction risked being too charitable. One leg felt dull and heavy as he struggled to keep up. At first sight, he had thought the man scrawny. But now, from behind, he saw he was in fact tall, lean, and broad-shouldered. The contours of a muscular physique pressed against the man’s tailored shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbow.

He lumbered on as the man kept up his brisk pace, almost skipping down a flight of stairs. Though his hearing was muffled by a constant buzzing in his ears, he could clearly make out the distinct tapping of the man’s polished leather shoes on the ground. *Maybe I’m hallucinating*, he thought.

He had been utterly disoriented ever since coming around. The weight of his head continually dragged him down like a bowling ball. An unpleasant sensation lingered in his chest, and he was careful to fill his lungs no more than two-thirds full, lest he collapse in spasms of pain. Yet what suffocated him most was not the pain in his chest, but the pressure in his skull. He had no memories or recollections, and he found this barrenness intolerable. Adding to this distress, of course, was the realization that he had woken up in a prison cell.

Losing your memory is not a pleasant experience. Yet in his numbness, the rational panic response – to not knowing who or where you are, or what on earth has taken place – had still to kick in. What he was experiencing was more instinctive: the frustration of being unable to get his brain to move when he tried to recall something, anything. Forgetting even trivial things can be irksome – a person’s name, some snippet of gossip you meant to share, or that joke you were dying to tell. You have it on the tip of your tongue, and your mind goes blank. And here he was having forgotten his entire goddamned life!

Panic can often bring about hyper-vigilance and fear, which gradually transform into all-out rage. But there was no one on whom to unleash any anger – no remembered faces, no names, just an anonymous figure who had come to liberate him.

Once they were outside, the starless, soot-colored sky told him it was nighttime. He climbed into the car and gently set his head against the window, taking comfort in finally having something to prop up his throbbing skull. Through the corner of his eye, he saw his reflection in the glass, blurry and faceless.

The dimly lit landmarks they passed were completely alien. When their obscurity started to get to him, he was shocked how familiar irritability felt. Even so, the sensation was fleeting, and slipped away before he could comprehend anything more by it.

Maneuvering the steering wheel with one hand, the man loosened his navy blue tie and tossed it onto the back seat. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, took one between his teeth, and lit it before lowering the car window an inch. "Fu told me to come get you out. Well, he didn't actually say who it would be...He'd taken care of everything by the time I arrived. Boy, was I surprised to see you!" The man paused to chuckle, his eyes gleaming in the darkness like a nocturnal animal. "And I thought nothing could surprise me these days!"

His passenger was silent. He had questions to ask, but was unsure of even how much he wanted to know. He waited for the man to say more, but nothing came.

He ascertained from what had just been said that he and the driver already knew each other. He was pondering the merits of disclosing his amnesia, when he became aware of a warm liquid running from his nose. He raised a hand to it: blood. His T-shirt, too, was covered with blotches of dark red. Up until this moment, it had not crossed his mind that there might be anything untoward in his appearance, not having been near a mirror since coming round. He noted how his liberator had failed to take any notice of – let alone express concern for – his injuries, and from this concluded that he and the man could hardly be close. After spending some time to choose his words carefully, he finally opened his mouth: "I should probably know who you are...and this is going to sound strange...but I don't remember anything. It's freaking me out...But, hey, I'm sure it's just a temporary thing. So...would you mind if I asked your name?"

The driver turned on him with a cold, intense stare, his thick eyebrows furrowed in a menacing frown. His passenger recoiled, and then panicked that he had said the wrong thing. "I'm dead serious," he said hastily. "If I knew your name before, what's the harm in a gentle reminder?" The passenger's head fell back onto the window with a clunk as he massaged his eye sockets and mumbled. "It's not much fun sounding retarded, you know..."

"Duan Fei," the man said tersely.

There was a silence before the passenger realized this was a reply to his question.

"That's new. Not a name I recognize." He tilted his head to one side and thought, despondently, how these two syllables sounded as irrelevant to him as his own name had moments earlier.

The driver shook his head slowly, which his passenger interpreted as either bemusement or deep contemplation. The streetlights took turns to illuminate the driver's face as the sides of his mouth grew tense. Or was it in fact a smile?

"I was about to ask where the hell you'd been these past five years. How come we never heard anything...But I figured you'd probably want to tell me yourself and, if not...Well, then what would be the point in asking?" The man tossed his cigarette stub and wound up the car window. "And here you are telling me you don't even know yourself!"

"Five years? So it's five years since you last saw me?"

The man remained silent, suggesting an answer in the affirmative.

He longed to take a deep breath, but his sinuses had swollen and his body frantically objected whenever he allowed his ribs to expand. He split one breath into a series of shorter inhalations. "Well, that's good," he said, his voice strained and sarcastic. "If I know you saw me five years ago, that's already a piece in the puzzle!" He gazed out the car window. "Where are we?"

Duan Fei glanced back at him, a smile darting across his lips. "This is where my partner and I started racing for bucks six, seven years ago. Right here on these mountain roads..."

"Oh..." he mumbled, signaling his lack of interest.

"We started out small. Never won much to begin with. Then we made a point of challenging the rubbish drivers in their flashy cars. My partner was quite the provocateur. That's one of his innate talents really, working people up...We strung those imbeciles right on. We'd let them win something small first so they'd up the stakes. Some nights we'd walk away with a good few hundred thousand..."

There was something mesmerizing about the tone and rhythm of Duan Fei's sonorous voice, which seemed to resonate even when he spoke in a whisper. Every now and again he'd glance back at his passenger, offering up a sly, short-lived smile.

"Sometimes the losers didn't want to cough up, which brings us to another talent my partner

had. He always knew how to...or should I say enjoyed...yes, he *enjoyed* getting people to pay. The only problem was that he could get a little heavy-handed, and he put somebody in the hospital. Turned out that somebody was the county magistrate's only son, just twenty years old. Couldn't even get his dick up anymore, let alone move his legs. So naturally his father set out to avenge him."

Duan Fei stopped speaking and turned to look at his passenger once more. It could have just been a reflex, or gauging his reaction.

"Anyway, who'd have known that my partner had been out using my name instead of his own? So you don't need to ask who the county magistrate sent his henchman after..."

"Why?" his passenger asked.

"Why what?"

"Why was he going around using your name?"

"You tell me..." Duan Fei said, curling up the corners of his mouth. A light glinted in his dark eyes, but again the passenger was not sure if it was supposed to be mocking or intimidating.

"You want me to guess? Well, I'd say it's easy to be brave when you're unaccountable." The passenger spoke softly, closing his eyes.

"I see. So *that's* how it works..." Duan Fei arched his eyebrows before falling silent.

Something about Duan Fei's silence ruffled his passenger's confidence, cancelling out the initial satisfaction he had felt from having given such an insightful answer.

"So you know who I'm talking about?" Duan Fei suddenly blurted out.

"How would I? I told you, I don't remember anything—" The passenger tried to quell the anger rising in his throat. Fortunately, Duan Fei interrupted him before he could go on.

"It was you."

Not quite comprehending, the passenger slackened his jaw as he slowly processed Duan Fei's words. "You mean to say, we're enemies?" he asked, trying in earnest to make sense of the situation.

"Well, not exactly," Duan Fei said coolly. "Believe me, you've done a lot worse."

*This cannot be happening*, the passenger told himself. He thought to pinch his arm to see if he were dreaming, only to realize immediately the futility of the idea: *What's the point of pinching yourself when your whole body hurts?* He started to feel dizzy.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Why, where do you want to go?"

"How do I know?"

"Well, I'll give you two options. You can come with me and stop the questions. Or get out right now, and do whatever the hell you want."

"Huh?" his passenger replied, neither option appealing.

"To be honest, I don't give a shit what you decide. I've got my own decisions to make. I also have two options, you see. Do I keep driving, or do I take you back to jail?"

"But I don't—"

Duan Fei cut him short. "Are you deaf? I'm talking about *my* options. You can deal with your own problems yourself."

"You're being a bit harsh..."

Duan Fei let out a bewildered sigh.

"Don't you remember what got you locked up in the first place?"

His passenger didn't bother replying. How could he remember? He would have responded with a nonchalant shrug, but didn't have the energy.

"So I guess you'll be surprised to learn that this wasn't your first time?"

"First time doing what?" his passenger asked confusedly.

Duan Fei glanced around once again, seemingly clocking his passenger's expression.

"Well, lucky you for not remembering," Duan Fei said dryly. "If I were you I'd prefer not to remember too."

"I guess you're right. Can't be anything good, can it? Considering it landed me in jail."

Duan Fei shook his head and smiled, "You make it sound like none of this has anything to do

with you!”

“Well, you’re right...I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’d like to say I’m upset, but I can’t.”

“Is that so?”

*Well, not exactly*, the passenger said to himself. He knew he should feel bothered by all this, and in some ways he was, since even in his impaired state he could tell that the situation looked dire. The problem was the alarm bells in his mind were sounding out in slow motion, his mind moving like a slug travelling leisurely along its slippery trail of slime. He wished he could evoke just a few memories, something to prove that his current stupor was a simple malfunction – some kind of performance by his normal, quick-witted self, rather than the way he actually was.

He wearily transferred his attention to the mounting tightness in his chest. There was also a persistent drumming in his head that, though inaudible, rattled his brain like a ship in rough seas.

His thoughts were rudely interrupted by a sudden, shrill noise. Before he realized what the sound was, he saw Duan Fei shift his weight to one side, heave his backside off the seat, and retrieve a mobile phone from his pocket.

After a gruff “Hello,” Duan Fei’s tone softened. “I went there this afternoon...Well, I always say treat others as you’d like to be treated, eh? His wife is a right handful, I couldn’t exactly send you morons there, could I? It was better I went myself. Anyway, turns out I was lucky. By the time I arrived, she’d already driven off in her new Escalade. She ended up completely losing control and trashed a whole row of parked cars! I mean, what kind of bloke gives his wife a Cadillac Escalade for her birthday? He’s not right in the head. And now even his daughter blames me for what happened...What? No, I couldn’t get a word in edgeways. He just waved me away, told me to get lost...He said he couldn’t cope with any more bad news...What? No, who do you think I am? How am I supposed to remember everything? No, I can’t look just now. I’m driving...I’m a good 160 kilometers from Zhangjiakou. I’ll reply to you later. Oh, and make sure Li speaks to Customs in the morning...Right then...”

Not meaning to eavesdrop, the passenger still felt pangs of jealousy as Duan Fei’s conversation washed past him. He envied Duan Fei’s ability to make sense of everything and converse in such a relaxed, knowing manner, capacities that his passenger found totally beyond reach.

The passenger noticed how Duan Fei’s mood oscillated between carefree laughter and plaintive sighs. When the call was finished, Duan Fei stared ahead motionlessly for several seconds, before looking down at his phone and scrolling around between glances up at the road ahead. His thumb hovered above a number, as if about to call, but he threw the phone into the glove box. As if sensing he was being watched, he turned around and greeted his passenger with a half-smile.

“I figured you must be a driver, from what you were saying just now...” his passenger said.

Duan Fei’s eyes lit up keenly. He opened them wide, looking his passenger straight in the eye. “You mean a racing driver? No, I’m a businessman, thanks.”

“What do I know?” his passenger replied sullenly. “I don’t remember anything. Anyway, it’s all right for you, knowing exactly what’s going on...It must feel good to breeze through all your problems without any worries.”

“Says who?” Duan Fei retorted, blinking. “I never know what the hell I’m doing, let alone breezing through any problems. Believe me I’ve got more than enough to worry about!” When he had finished speaking, Duan Fei burst out laughing.

There was something totally authentic – captivating even – about Duan Fei’s uninhibited laughter. His passenger wished he could smile and laugh like that himself, immediately putting people at ease. Yet he also detected something else: a kind of nervous static humming in the background, like a warning.

The car turned into a petrol station and Duan Fei got out. Immediately, the passenger opened the glove box and started to rummage around, his hands trembling. He had no idea what he was looking for; he simply hoped he might happen upon something that would trigger his memory. He heard an abrupt, high-pitched ring, the same as before, and froze. The eerie blue light of Duan Fei’s phone screen glowed in the darkness, displaying the caller’s name: Fu. Hadn’t Duan Fei mentioned Fu

just now — the one who had sent him to the jail to pick him up? Without thinking, he answered the phone, lowering his voice.

“Hello?”

“Did you get him?” the caller asked.

Silence.

“So good news or bad?”

Was this a question? Should he say something? He didn't dare, even if he had known what to say. He kicked himself for having picked up the phone, but still wanted to know what the caller had to say. Hunching down, he peered out of the car window, but couldn't see Duan Fei anywhere. He must have walked into the store.

“So have you changed your mind about doing the race then? Look, I'm pulling out all the stops for you here. If I were you, I'd be crying my eyes out in gratitude! As for the car...you won't believe what I've got for you. You're going to love it! Humph...you know what? You're just too full of yourself. Nothing's ever good enough for you...You make it look like you couldn't care, but you still can't say no to nice things, can you? That much I know! Anyway...we're running out of time. You'd better make your mind up fast!”

The phone went dead. The passenger looked up, his heart racing, only to see Duan Fei walking straight toward him. He tossed the phone back into the glove box in a hurry. It started to ring again.

His natural reflex was to pick it back up, but Duan Fei got there first. *Shit*, he thought. If Fu was on the other end, Duan Fei would inevitably find out what had just happened.

“Yes? I'm in the petrol station...Come on, what time is it? Well then check through the details again...No, that was from before I went to Germany.” Duan Fei sighed, massaging his brow. He walked away from the car to finish the conversation.

When he returned, a cigarette dangled from his mouth. He was frowning at his phone, scrolling back and forth. His passenger began to panic. “You answered my phone!” Duan Fei remarked, looking up.

Mortified, his passenger hung his head and mumbled an apology.

“So what did Fu have to say?”

Duan Fei held his gaze — not with his trademark hawkish stare, but this time more affectionately, with softly creased brows.

Whenever the passenger found himself caught in Duan Fei's line of vision, he was overcome by an urge to confess, or ask advice. Yet he could never quite bring himself to speak, and his mouth just opened and shut like a wretched-looking fish on a chopping block. He thought back on the phone call with Fu. He understood the first question, about picking him up from jail, but the rest of it was a mystery.

He shrugged and coughed a few times, not as a distraction or to elicit pity, but because his insides had been churning ever since he stepped into the car. He had avoided coughing until now, wary of the pain it was likely to inflict, even as something thick and viscous blocked his airway. By now he couldn't help it.

“God, you are just unbelievable!” said Duan Fei, wagging an index finger at him and scowling. It looked more like playacting than a genuine reproach.

“Answering someone else's phone is really going too far. But I'll let you off this time because, if I'm honest, you saved me some hassle. This stuff is a pain in the ass...I don't know what to say and it's killing me...So tell me what you said to him.”

“Nothing. He thought it was you,” the passenger said quietly.

Duan Fei's mouth twitched at the sides, the blacks of his eyes glimmering like moonlight on a quivering lake. The passenger felt his face burn under Duan Fei's gaze. He knew by now that Duan Fei was good at looking people straight in the eye. Sometimes his gaze was neutral, but he could run anywhere on the scale from tender to chilling. The passenger suddenly understood that he was the exact opposite of Duan Fei: looking people in the eye and being the focus of another's stare made him extremely queasy. *Well, that's useful*, he thought to himself. *I suppose that can pass as some kind of*

*recollection*

Another thought surfaced in his mind. He was essentially destitute. He had no money or phone. Just a sweaty, blood-caked T-shirt and a pair of ripped jeans. He had already been through his pockets, and had even taken off his shoes to check for anything hidden inside. He had no idea who or where he was, and the only reason he had felt reasonably safe until now was that he was not alone. He had assumed, quite innocently, that his companion must have some natural desire – or perhaps even a duty – to look after him. Now, all of a sudden, he felt acutely aware of how exposed he was. *How could I have been so complacent?* he asked himself. *Suppose Duan Fei were to leave me right now, and why shouldn't he?* He blamed his lack of apprehension on his physical distractions – the dizziness, the headaches, the constant pain...But now he was clear: Duan Fei was his only lifeline, and he couldn't afford to let him go. He told himself to stop being stubborn and start taking things more seriously. He needed to keep the man happy.