

# CASEY AND HIS GAS SHOP

## 卡西與他們的瓦斯店

\* 2021 Openbook Award

*In early 2000s Taiwan, where household stoves and local restaurants alike run on propane cylinders rather than piped-in gas, Casey and his sometimes-friends, sometime-competitors in the propane delivery business are the threads that stitch together the thoroughly human, and often messy, history of one decade in a small town.*

At the start of the new millennium, Casey moves to his mother's hometown and takes over operation of a local propane cylinder delivery service. In small-town Taiwan, where there is no piped-in gas, propane cylinders are the lifeblood of home kitchens and the restaurant industry alike. Timely delivery of the cylinders demands that delivery drivers know every back alley and shortcut in town, and since all day they're in and out of homes and businesses, they are often privy to tidbits of information and accidental observations that others will never know.

Initially, outsider Casey stands out like a sore thumb in the small town, and becomes the object of various unfounded rumors. One day, a Mrs. Fang simultaneously requests deliveries from all three of the town's propane delivery services. In the ensuing brouhaha, only the perceptive Casey realizes the root of the problem: Mrs. Fang is suffering from sudden onset dementia. Fortunately, she still remembers her son's telephone number, and thus Casey is able to call in the assistance she requires. From this day forward, the townspeople begin to accept Casey as one of their own.

The motley occurrences in the lives of Casey and his amiable competitors become the backbone for the story of an entire town, the rise and fall of the propane delivery industry bookending this nostalgic portrayal of life in early 2000s Taiwan. While the propane cylinders require significant muscle to heft, this fictional peek inside



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a male-dominated industry has no shortage of strong female characters in the wives of Casey and his cohort. True partners through thick and thin, they not only keep the home fires burning for their hard-working husbands, but also stand ready to work their feminine magic on the most vexing business problems.

## Hao Ni-Er 郝妮爾

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# CASEY AND HIS GAS SHOP

By Hao Ni-Er

Translated by Jenna Tang

## Casey and Them

*Even elementary school teachers shared the gossip with their students: “Old Wu literally just sold his gas shop to Casey Chen, an outsider.”*

## Casey

When Casey first arrived in Yuanshan, the news spread immediately. Yuanshan is a small town in Yilan, with stores and residential areas close together. Most neighbors know each other, and anyone not from here will be discussed throughout the neighborhood.

Casey’s mother was from here. After getting married, she moved to Taichung and has rarely gone back to hometown since. Having Casey made it difficult for her to commute for long hours.

One time, Casey’s family drove all the way to Taipei, and almost made it to Yilan, but Casey’s mother couldn’t stop vomiting on the endless winding roads to the point where Casey’s father had no choice but to drive back to Taipei and find the closest hospital to put her on a drip.

After Casey’s maternal grandparents passed away, his family stopped going back to Yilan.

Casey remembered very little about Yilan. The one memory he kept fresh in his mind was his mother talking about how natural and high quality the water in Yuanshan is. “Everyone says beauties come from Yuanshan. That’s because good water nourishes them.” That was all Casey remembered, though he didn’t know why. At age twenty-three, he traveled all around Taiwan island with his bike. When he passed by Yilan, he purposefully made a detour to Yuanshan, lasciviously thinking: “If I bump into three beautiful girls, I’ll settle down here.”

At that time, he had nothing to tie him down. He had just broken up with his girlfriend, whom he had been with for years, because she had gotten pregnant. He remembered that was how she started the conversation that day: “Actually, I don’t know if this child is my husband’s or yours.” Hearing it, Casey broke out in a cold sweat, fearing that she would ask him to take responsibility for their divorce. Fortunately, all that he had to pay for at that time was their coffee. In the end, his girlfriend decided to stay with her husband.

After graduating from a five-year junior college program, Casey rode his bike to work every day. He shared meals at home with his family and had no particular hobbies. He found no reasons to spend money, and even took a few part-time jobs after work. Within five years, he

saved a million New Taiwan Dollars. He had been longing to travel around the island on his bike, but kept postponing the trip because of this girlfriend.

She had been Casey's junior high school classmate. She is, so far, Casey's first and only woman. Several years after their graduation, they met each other again at an alumni gathering, and stayed in touch afterward. Even so, sexual desire wasn't really present for Casey, and it felt to him more like going to class. It wasn't until his girlfriend married someone else that they started having regular sex.

That year, they were both twenty years old. His girlfriend came out with the news that she planned to marry a guy she met through a blind date. When Casey heard this, he was halfway undressed already.

"Are you not even feeling *a bit* jealous?" she asked him, wrapping herself in the quilt. Casey thought: "Jealous?" and tilted his head, deep in contemplation. His girlfriend took his silence as an admission, and her heart burst with joy, thinking that she was a woman who was *owned* by two men. That afternoon, she put more effort into the sex. After they finished, she said: "Next week, same time, be punctual!" After hearing her say that, Casey suddenly couldn't recall the reasons why he liked this person.

Finally, there was no more "next week". He didn't need to be punctual. The day after their breakup, he immediately changed the components and saddle of his five-year-old bicycle, and spent two weeks closing his job. He had no concrete travel plans, only the desire to start his trip on a cool day. Little did he expect that a big earthquake would interrupt all this.

That night, Casey fell out of bed, at first thinking he was too dizzy from his sleep, otherwise, *how come the entire world is shaking?* His head was still muddled, but an animalistic instinct made him spring out of the room, scream for his parents, and pull them out of their house. It was not until then that he was certain that this wasn't an illusion – the entire world was indeed shaking. People began to gather in the street, some of them looking around suspiciously, as though it might be a nightmare from which they hadn't yet awakened.

Casey and his parents stood outside of their house for the entire night. Intermittent aftershocks made them feel like a fish trapped in a fish tank being held in the hands of a rushed traveler.

When the sky began to brighten, everyone returned fearfully to their homes, carefully checking for damage caused by the disaster. When Casey entered their garage, he found the roof of his father's car deeply dented by a fallen metal shelf. By coincidence, his bicycle, which stood in the triangular gap between the shelves and the car remained unscathed. Casey felt an electric tingle rise up his body. While his parents continued to check the house for damage, he packed up and slung his backpack on his shoulder. He told them, "I'm heading out today." Then, as though he were unsure, he repeated: "Today. Time to go today."

In those days, Casey wasn't looking for stability. He was looking for experiences. He didn't believe he would see or experience anything else by staying in one place.

During his biking trip around the island, he stopped wherever labor was needed. In the aftermath of the earthquake, no one cared who you were or where you were from; if someone

yelled *Over here!* people would come to their aid. Casey had a young man's body, and cut a bold figure (a deep tan, a backpack, long, tousled hair and a bike), and store owners often treated him to free meals or to a night's stay. He continued on that way, traveling and stopping, for almost two months before he hit Yilan.

When he arrived, it was November. Yilan had been considerably less affected by the earthquake than other parts of the island. The wound caused by the disaster was lighter, and the streets were quiet and peaceful. Riding along the riverbank, he could even spot several people squatting by the shore, beating their clothes with a wooden bat. The *dong-dong-dong* of residents washing their clothes by the river was the only sound he heard apart from the turning of his bicycle's gears.

The afternoon quiet in Yilan made him feel like he was overly noisy. At the same time, he also noticed how very exhausted he was, after two months of continuous labor and adventures. Such a slow and peaceful pace here gave him no more energy to pedal himself forward. At first, he considered having lunch somewhere, then hopping on a train to close up his half-island loop. "If I bump into three beautiful girls in a row," he thought deviously, "Or if it's really like what mom described, then I'll stay."

In the end, what kept Casey in Yuanshan was not a person, but the local rice noodles.

Casey's mother was from Yuanshan, but she never once mentioned how delicious Yuanshan's fish ball rice noodles are – and not just the fish balls, but also the thick rice noodles and the squares of fried tofu steeped in broth! The first taste was new and refreshing, and the flavors got richer with every bite. Casey ordered it at three eateries in a row, eating and drinking broth until the bowl was empty. At that moment, he made up his mind to stay here.

The townspeople felt affinity toward this big boy who knew the difference between Yuanshan district in Taipei and Yuanshan town in Yilan. Casey snagged a job at a gas station and rented a three-bedroom apartment that cost him three thousand NTD every month. (Though he had spent the past twenty years living at home, he was still aware that such rent was an extremely good deal.) He could see mountains and sea from his apartment window. After he tried out a variety of local delicacies, he began to look for good food elsewhere. His mother had taken care of his meals during the past twenty years, and during his two-month biking trip, he ate whatever he could find and wasn't too picky. He never knew that he could have so many choices outside of home.

The second week he worked at the gas station, Casey noticed a middle-aged man who drove a huat-tsai truck had been parking in front of the steakhouse across the street several days in a row and staring directly at him. On the eighth day, the man finally drove his car over, and by then, Casey knew that he was definitely not here for refueling. The driver was probably here for him.

"Are you really Casey? Is that your real name?" the man asked directly.

Casey simply nodded.

"Are you mixed-raced?"

Casey shook his head.

“Are you Indigenous?”

Casey said he wasn't.

The man continued: “You're well built. Do you work out?” Casey began to ignore him and turned himself away to refuel another sedan. The man didn't protest, and waited silently to one side for more than an hour before approaching Casey timidly and asking: “I heard you have some savings....”

It wasn't clear from whom the man had heard about this. Was it Casey's landlord? Or maybe the lady who owned the rice noodle eatery, or the owner of the gas station? For a twenty-five-year-old to have saved over a million NTD (and from part-time jobs, no less) was practically headline news in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and everyone in the neighborhood already knew about it. And him, still willing to hide in a tiny gas station, earning minimum wage? Everyone praised Casey for being a promising young man, but no one ever asked him why, because most Taiwanese, in both the north and the south, prefer talking behind someone's back than addressing them face-to-face.

Casey thought the man was trying to borrow money from him, so he began looking for excuses. But then he heard him ask: “How can you achieve something significant if you're living off other people? Have you ever thought of running a business yourself?”

*Not really*, Casey thought to himself.

A few weeks later, Casey became the most famous young guy in all of Yuanshan.

Nobody knew what the man said to Casey that night. Even Casey's landlord – confusion written on his face – said to others: “He called me up all of a sudden asking to end our contract. I asked where he planned to live, and he said ‘in the store’. I wasn't hearing wrong, this brat has a store now!”

Casey sent most of his savings to the man, only keeping a small amount to himself. The news traveled quickly throughout Yuanshan, until even elementary school teachers shared the gossip with their students: “Old Wu literally just sold his gas shop to Casey Chen, an outsider.”

A middle-aged lady who came to the Gama Grocery Store to buy eggs also chatted about it with the neighbors: “How much did you say?”

“Two million? All of it? In cash?”

“I think it's more than that. He lives by himself, spending very little money. He must have saved a good amount in the past few months.”

“No matter what, that store is...”

“Exactly! The previous store owner negotiated with Old Wu for one million, and complained that it was overpriced already!”

Another woman who liked dropping by the local temple to chat particularly enjoyed this topic. Every morning, after she had taken an offering of fruit to the temple, she said in Hokkien to anyone who would listen: “We're so close to the end of the world, and we still have foolish kids like this.” It was 1999, a year when rumors about the imminent end of the world traveled far and wide. Even in a tiny town like Yuanshan, strange, mysterious stories abounded.

On December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999, the streets of Yuanshan were extremely quiet. Everyone hid in their houses and watched TV (rumor had it that if the TV screen went dark, that must be the omen

of doomsday). Meanwhile, Casey rode around town in a gas truck gifted to him by Old Wu, silently congratulating himself for having taken driving lessons on a manual transmission, so he had no issues handling the truck.

Casey drove from the side of the mountain all the way to downtown, thinking how amusing the town is: though it didn't look small on the map, almost everyone seemed to have decided to cram into one area, one home right next to another. So, the minute one left the downtown area, Yuanshan became an uninhabited cave. If he were to spot a pig or a flock of ducks crossing the street, he wouldn't be surprised at all.

Deep in the night, he parked the truck near his gas shop. Before he turned off the car, he took a glance at the time: 00:09, nine minutes past doomsday. Casey suddenly realized that it was his birthday – January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000, the first day of his twenty-fourth year. All lay quiet around him; only streetlights were lit up. A faint lonesomeness settled over him. It was not because of his birthday, which he never celebrated. Having been away from home for so long, this was the first time he felt homesick. He dropped everything at hand, entered the store, and called his parents. He knew they hadn't fallen asleep yet.

Casey's dad picked up the call right away, and after saying "Wei, Hello" immediately yelled to his mom: "It's Casey!" Mom took over the phone and babbled for a while. All Casey said was that he had settled down in Yuanshan. His mom, not surprised in the least, replied simply: "Then bring some fish balls back home next time? You're coming back for Lunar New Year, no?" Just as Casey thought. *How could a daughter of Yilan not know about Yuanshan fish balls?* Casey resented her not telling him about them earlier. He kept replying *okay, okay*, then added: "I'm just busy with work."

"You found a job?"

"Yeah." Casey replied.

Mom understood her son's personality very well; if he didn't volunteer information, she wouldn't ask first. Before hanging up the phone, Casey told her that he took over a gas shop recently.

"What? Took over what?" His dad inquired loudly. Over the speaker, his dad sounded flustered, as though he ran from a far distance.

"A gas shop." Casey said again.

Over the following five minutes on the phone, Casey could almost see his parents laughing so hard to a point they teared up.

"This kid..." His mother was talking to his dad, forcing out a sentence through her laughter. "This kid just told me he took over a gas shop." He heard his dad laugh so hard he kicked a table over, then replied: "I knew it, I knew it, who would travel around the island with his bank book and a stamp?" They went back and forth with each other, then spoke to him again: "Then take care, if the store gets too busy, then don't come home." When Casey was about to hang up, his mom then burst out asking: "Oh, and what's the name of your gas shop?"

"Fiver's Gas." replied Casey.

"So outdated."



“I didn’t name the store. It was from the previous owner.”

“Oh come on, show some ambition,” Casey’s father said as he grabbed the receiver. “They passed the store to you, why not give it a more catchy name?”

“Like what?” asked Casey.

“How do I know?” replied his dad.

“Calling it ‘Casey’s Gas’ would be much more interesting than Sixer’s or Seven’s,” said mom. They burst out laughing again before Casey could speak, then suddenly hung up.

Casey lowered his head and stared at his fingers, which were stained black from the last few weeks of taking over the store. Every day, he was learning how to write receipts, pump gas at the distributor, repaint the gas cylinders, install water heating pipes, and so on. Old Wu’s storefront was unbearably small, and business wasn’t really booming, but Casey still hadn’t taken a break.

The day when Casey officially took over the store and paid his last installment, the *Fiver’s Gas* sign, which had only been hanging for a few years, was taken down. They replaced it with a sign reading “Casey’s Gas” – white characters on a blue field, printed in a cute font just like the one used for cartoons, making it extra noticeable.

That same day, Old Wu and his family took Casey out for dinner at the “Smooooothing” Goose restaurant in Yilan. He ordered a table full of dishes. He patted Casey’s shoulder and said: “After this meal, you’ll become a real Yilan resident!”

## **Wang Zi-Jian**

When he was young, Wang Zi-Jian hated his name. During his student days, when the class had to exchange and grade each other’s exam papers, his classmates liked erasing the last character of his name and replacing it with a homophone meaning “trash”. There were several people who especially enjoyed making fun of his name, but after he fought them a couple times, they became close friends. There had been six in total including Wang Zi-Jian, all high school graduates now pushing fifty. One had passed away at twenty in a car accident, while another grew distant from the rest of them due to him coming out of the closet (In that era, no one had even heard the term “gay”). The four who remained all got married and had kids. They drank in place of each other during their weddings. After Wang Zi-Jian was the first to have children, he inadvertently became the big brother figure among the four; they shortened his name to *Wangzi*, meaning “Prince”.

Over time, Wangzi gradually forgot that annoying version of his name. Just like the pranks they did when they were still students, he thought it was nothing but a vestige of teenage sensitivity, not worth paying too much attention to. He might never know that the reason his eldest daughter became so rebellious was because of his own name.

“Who even gave you a name like Wang-Zi noodles?” his daughter wondered.

What was worse was that her father looked very much like the cartoon character on Wang-Zi instant noodles: curly hair, round face with a cap on the head. It was also because after



the millennium year in particular, his eldest daughter entered junior high school and came to an age when she thought the whole world orbited around her. She was deeply concerned that her classmates would find out how much her father resembled the cartoon character, and warned him repeatedly not to pick her up at school.

A disgruntled Wangzi asked his wife: "Is it because I stink of gas?"

His wife replied, "If you really want to try guessing what's in the head of a kid that age, you'll never fall asleep."

Sure enough, Wangzi really couldn't fall asleep, and turned over and over in bed the whole night. He still went to his daughter's school the next day to pick her up. Her attempts to avoid him were deeply upsetting. He concluded: "It must be because her classmates' parents all drive sedans, while I'm the only one having a gas truck." His embarrassment turned to anger: it had taken so much effort to develop the business from just one truck to a storefront, and now, his daughter despises him? Neither could swallow their pride long enough to talk to the other, and in the last few months, they only spoke on a handful of occasions.

It was around the millennium when the natural gas business in Taiwan reached its peak. However, Wangzi's business slowed, in large part because more and more people were investing in the industry.

Even though the work itself looked torturous, for anyone who had started a few years earlier, it was definitely a winning business. Profit margins from selling gas were higher than what most people expected. After deducting the material cost of cylinders, annual testing expenses, and the liquified natural gas in the cylinder, the sale of one gas cylinder brought in a few hundred dollars back when times were good; for a hard worker, it wasn't difficult to net ten thousand dollars in a day. But this was also the source of the problem: ever since the government allowed private individuals to apply for business licenses, the barriers to entering the gas business dropped greatly. Many people lowered their costs by simply renting a huat-tsai truck and heading straight to the factory to pump their gas cylinders so they could save on storefront rent and employee salaries. Thus, these business owners were able to sell their gas at the lowest price possible and earn the best profits.

Wangzi's regular customers disappeared one after another. After all, nobody really paid attention to the quality of gas. The entire county of Yilan had only a few gas shops, and it was all about price and service. During the economic depression, self-respect was worthless. In the end, even service became insignificant.

Besides all this, there was another reason why Wangzi's business became shaky: the emergence of electric water heaters.

The previous decade witnessed a huge number of young people poisoned by carbon monoxide. College students and young people just starting to work never checked if the apartments they rented were following fire safety laws. Many of their landlords installed water heaters inside the bathrooms in order to free up more rooms to rent.

Wangzi could still remember seeing a section in the daily newspapers reporting on all the young people who passed away without even knowing why. Electric water heaters were on the

rise then, and became more popular after the millennium. In a very short time, all the buildings began prohibiting the use of gas cylinders in apartments both new and old, and replacing them with “a more secure and aesthetic electric water heater.”

“How hot can it get? It can do nothing but casually let people take lukewarm showers. In winter, it’s no fucking use at all.” Wangzi complained about the news every day as he watched his business being stolen by running gas trucks and electric water heaters. In the end, most of his clients came from the old-style apartment buildings.

For a gas salesman, hearing “old apartment” is enough to make you weak in the knees. It meant shouldering a gas cylinder slowly up the stairs, one step after another, while you listened to your own joints popping and wearing away. When he was young, Wangzi was fearless, but now he was in his forties. While that might not seem like much for most people, for someone who had been in the gas industry for decades, it was fatal, especially for one who had nothing saved for retirement and can hardly pay the storefront rent each month. On top of all this, all his eldest daughter could offer were jeers, like: “Baba, you should retire and enjoy your life now.”

Boiling with frustration, he wanted to snap back: “Fucking enjoy life. If I retire, our entire family will eat nothing but Northwest wind.”

It wasn’t just his eldest daughter. He also had a second daughter in elementary school, as well as a young son. Doing the math in his head, he figured he would need to toil for at least ten more years to support them. So he continued delivering gas to households three hundred and sixty-five days a year. He didn’t even dare take a day off for the Lunar New Year, afraid that if he missed one call, he’d lose another customer.

It was August, which was unbearably hot. A disappointed Wangzi shifted between news channels and sighed. He thought: *At least I didn’t ask my wife to come with me today.* Normally, she would go with him to pick up calls and do accounting. But once summer came, almost every household took cold showers, and they rarely used their gas, so he let her enjoy the summer vacation. For him to be morose on his own felt at least less desolate than the two of them sighing and being depressed together.

It was so hot that day that the entire shop was becoming a steam mirage. Wangzi felt drowsy, even when there was a call for him he thought it was an illusion. It took him a while to pick it up. He answered weakly: “Guo-Shen Gas, how many cylinders and how much weight?” No answer came from the other end. He asked again – only silence. He got annoyed, thinking it was a prank call, and was about to hang up when the person on the other end began to speak in a slow voice, one long, belabored “I...” The voice was so fragile, Wangzi had to ask again. Finally, he realized: this is Grandma Fang!

Fifteen years in the gas industry had left Wangzi with all the occupational injuries one can name. On the other hand, he also acquired all the abilities of a “professional gasman”. At the height of his success at Guo-Shen Gas, he learned every alley and road in all of Yuanshan. Even the phone numbers in this area, the number of people in each household – he knew it all like the back of his hand.

The number was from the Fang family, originally from Hunan province in China. The head of the household, Grandpa Fang, was overbearing. He hardly ever left his house, but his reputation traveled far and wide. He was especially fond of calling for food delivery, then making the courier stay and listen to him talk about this and that. Grandpa Fang always started with “Where does your original family live?” and ended with “Our family has a lot of houses back in Hunan.”

When Wangzi was younger, he insisted that he was “from Hubei” in order to get the client, but in fact, both his grandparents were from Yilan. As a child, he heard his father describe how the Wang family accompanied Wu Sha (one of the earliest Chinese settlers) to Yilan. But Wangzi could make up anything in order to make a living. When Grandpa Fang heard it, he began to order gas often. After several deliveries, Wangzi could almost recite the entire Fang family tree.

The Fang family has a son and a daughter. The last time Wangzi delivered gas cylinders to them was three or four years ago, and he had wondered why they stopped ordering. Passing by their house, he caught sight of a Fiver’s Gas truck parked right outside the front door.

Fiver’s Gas started off with a single gas truck. The year Old Wu started his business, he advertised that he could deliver gas to any household in ten minutes. If he was late, he would take off fifty dollars per minute. In an instant, he attracted a good number of clients. Looking from a distance, Wangzi realized that even his old clients had been claimed by Old Wu. It put him in an extremely bad mood that day, and he closed his shop before the sky turned dark.

Getting a call from an old client felt bittersweet. Had he become a backup option? Still, best to speak gently to Grandma and inquire what she needed. Surprisingly, it was not a call to order gas. Grandma Fang was stuttering, her words emerging without order. He caught “gas from yesterday”, “money”, “my son said”, and “Fiver’s Gas”. Wangzi had to ask her to repeat herself three times before he finally understood what was going on. A hundred thousand dollars in cash that had been sitting on her table had disappeared. None of the children were by her side, and the only person coming in and out of the house yesterday was someone from Fiver’s Gas.

Hearing the news, Wangzi snorted. In earlier days, Fiver’s Gas took away so much of his business with a single gas truck, didn’t open a store until two years ago, and then sold that just last year to an outsider at a sky-high price. *They even changed the name of the store, what was his name again? Caca? Based on the order of events, it must have been Caca who took away their money. What a fool. Spending all his savings to invest in a shitty store. If he really wanted to get into the gas business, he should have come to me – Guo-Sheng Gas, the oldest provider in all of Yuanshan.* At the thought of this, Wangzi became more and more upset. *How could a brand like Fiver’s Gas be worth several million dollars?*

Grandma Fang said she was sure what happened and who took the money, but she didn’t have any evidence. She also mentioned that the sum of money was urgent for her son’s business, and she was afraid to get into an argument with him. She didn’t want to bring this to the police or make any drama, so she decided to come to Wangzi for help.

In the early years, Wangzi was willing to stick around and chat with the homeowner after installing even a single tank of gas, just to keep business healthy. He even rounded off the change

when calculating his costs. But as he aged, he lost all enthusiasm. All he wanted right now was to quickly end this call.

“Grandma Fang, listen to me,” said Wangzi. “Just call Caca Gas later. Yeah, it’s the same as Fiver’s. Aiyo, they’re the same store! Just tell him you have cameras at home, and you haven’t looked at any of the tapes. Ask him if he spotted anyone suspicious or anything else strange when he delivered the gas yesterday. Just don’t tell him that you suspect him, understand? Let me tell you, this way, your money will be home tomorrow.”

“But our house doesn’t have any cameras!” Grandma Fang sounded desperate.

“I know, just pretend...”

“My son is getting the money this afternoon!”

“Just call him. If he still has his conscience, he’ll understand...”

“A hundred thousand dollars! Oh my...” Grandma Fang began to sob.

An anxious Wangzi replied: “Just trust what I’m telling you.”

That was the only call he got during the entire day.

That week, Wangzi said to whomever he met: *That owner of Caca Gas isn’t a good person.* He told his wife, his daughters, his son, and even the owner of the eatery. No more calls came from Grandma Fang, and he figured things had probably been taken care of. But then, after several days, the Fang family called him again, this time even more nervous. Wangzi got it right away: someone had fallen down! Although he couldn’t quite make it all out, he presumed that it was Grandpa Fang, who had been in a wheelchair after having a stroke. If he weren’t a hundred years old yet, he was definitely in his nineties, so a fall could be significant.

Wangzi tossed the phone aside, got into his huat-tsai truck and hurried off, speeding all the way to the Fang household. Before parking, he noticed another gas truck parked opposite – it was Caca’s truck – oh, that’s right, Casey’s Gas. Are enemies bound to meet on a narrow road?

Then again, how could someone be in the gas business for such a long time without making any enemies? Wangzi had trained himself to fear nothing. Besides, he had done nothing wrong at all.

“Hey, Prince.” Casey saw Wangzi from a distance and hailed him by the name his friends used. This softened Wangzi a little bit, but he still cast a dirty look at Casey before inquiring: “Did Grandma Fang also call you? Why are you still standing here? Why don’t you go in right away?”

“But I’ve pressed the doorbell several times already...”

“Are you a fool? You know how old she is, and you’re pressing the doorbell? You could stand here all day and nobody would answer,” Wangzi said as he led Casey to the backyard of the house, which wasn’t locked at all. *Strange. Didn’t this kid just deliver gas several days ago? How could he not know that their gas cylinders go in the backyard, and that their back door is always wide open?* But he didn’t have time to ask. He opened the door and entered, hastily looking for Grandpa Fang. Casey followed along behind him like an obedient student.

Leading Casey, Wangzi murmured: “I expect from your age that you just acted on impulse. Don’t do something bad like this. Yuanshan is only the size of a booger, so good news and bad will spread out to every household in a night....” Before he could finish his remark, he turned to find

that Casey had gone. He didn't have time to be upset; he had to find Grandpa Fang, but there was nobody inside. What if he fell somewhere on the second floor or even higher—

"Prince, there's nobody in the house!" Just when Wangzi was getting more concerned, Casey walked down the stairs from the second floor and reported that he had looked around the house already. Thoughts swirled in Wangzi's head. *It must be the neighbors. They probably took Grandpa Fang to the hospital?* At the thought of this, the tightness in his chest began to dissipate, but then Casey asked again: "Should I change it now?" He sounded hesitant, like an apprentice.

"Change what?" Wangzi asked.

"The gas," replied Casey.

"Who asked you to change it?"

"Grandma Fang...."

Though Casey tried his best to hold back, his eyes still brimmed with incredulous questions, as though Wangzi was intentionally provoking him.

"Grandma Fang called you?" Wangzi asked.

Casey nodded. "Twenty kilos, one cylinder."

Feeling something awry, Wangzi headed to the backyard and lifted up a cylinder. It was brand new. What was printed on the cylinder wasn't Guo-Shen or Casey's logos, it was just a line of cell phone numbers. Obviously it must be from some young bastard who runs their business on the road.

Looking around, Wangzi said to Casey: "Sometimes there is still a lot of gas left, but these elders don't know how to check it. When they lose the hot water, they assume they've run out of gas. But a lot of things can cause the hot water to fail; they might need to change the battery of the water heater, and sometimes it's the pipes. But those bastards...once they lift the cylinder, they'll get an idea of how much gas is left. Then they lie to the elders and claim it's empty. You see, with gas left in this cylinder, when we take it back to the distributor, they'll calculate it accurately and pay us back. Some people will steal even this bullshit amount of money. How come Taiwan is still livable with these people...." Old Wu had never spoken like this, which grabbed Casey's attention. He kept nodding in agreement.

But then, the real problem was: a whole new gas cylinder, an empty house, a disappeared grandma, her phone calls to two separate gas shops.... What happened to the Fang family?

Wangzi didn't dare think about it. His palms were drenched in cold sweat. Just then, he heard Casey cry out from just outside the door. Wangzi stood up immediately, and an electric surge of pain struck his body – he'd thrown out his back! The pain was so intense Wangzi couldn't even speak, and he stood where he was without moving. At a glance, he saw Casey enter from the back door, hugging a wet, dirty, brown puppy.

"Aiya, Prince, look at this puppy, he fell into the ditch!" said Casey.

"The Fuck you screaming over such bullshit for, motherfucker...." Supporting his lower back, Wangzi looked around for a place to sit down. He caught sight of a plastic chair at the entrance and strenuously made his way over. At the same time, the sound of an old woman's nagging came in from outside the door. He immediately recognized the voice. Slowly, carefully he

turned his neck, and asked the person who entered from the backyard: “Grandma Fang, where have you been?”

Before he could turn around completely, a big arm was there to support him, and a thick voice full of warmth asked: “Prince, something wrong with your waist?”

Wangzi looked up to find Peanut standing right next to him. “I just threw out my back,” he replied.

Peanut’s Gas shop was in Yilan city. Sometimes, he delivered all the way to Yuanshan. When he first started his business, he made a trip all the way to Guo-Shen Gas, greeted Wangzi politely and paid his respects. He was just a few years younger than Wangzi, but referred to him as an elder and always made sure to save face for him. Wangzi was especially fond of him.

Wangzi asked: “How come you’re with Grandma Fang? Did she call every gas shop in the phone book?” As Peanut helped him sit down, he threw a meaningful glance around the room instead of replying directly.

The two of them watched Grandma Fang take the puppy from Casey and stroke its dirty, messy hair lovingly, without a touch of nervousness. They were both confused.

To add to their confusion, Grandma Fang suddenly tugged on Casey’s arm, saying: “You’re back? You must be hungry. We have some food left in the fridge....” She began to lead Casey into the house.

“Grandma Fang, are there any gas cylinders you want me to change?” Casey asked.

“Gas?” Grandma Fang lifted her head to look at Casey, then turned to Wangzi and Peanut and nodded. “Time to change the gas? Then you call them for me, the number is 039....” She spelled out Guo-Shen Gas’s number, baffling Wangzi even further. “Grandma Fang,” said Wangzi, “Is there no hot water? Let me take a look. This cylinder is still new. You just changed it.”

“Oh, did you just change it?” Grandma Fang handed the puppy to Casey, then fumbled for her wallet, asking: “How much is it?”

Befuddled, Wangzi asked: “Are you not feeling well?”

Hearing this, Grandma Fang’s expression darkened, replying: “I’m as good as new!” then turned to Casey: “Come on, let’s go home.” She put her wallet back as if nothing had happened and kept dragging Casey.

Just as Wangzi and Peanut were feeling utterly lost, Casey’s expression changed from doubtful to gentle, as if he suddenly realized what was going on. He took Grandma Fang’s hand.

“What are you doing?” Wangzi asked Casey quietly.

Casey made a face at Wangzi and Peanut instead of replying. But the two of them still didn’t get it.

Inside the house, Casey tentatively asked Grandma Fang: “You haven’t called us for a while?”

“I thought you were busy,” said Grandma Fang.

“I thought you forgot my phone number?” Casey continued asking.

“I wouldn’t forget your phone number, 0939—” As she spoke, Casey took out his Nokia phone and dialed the number.



Peanut caught on to what was happening. He asked Wangzi: “This guy was the one who took over Old Wu’s store?”

Wangzi nodded, still bewildered.

“I thought he was stupid. He’s actually pretty smart.” said Peanut.

*Smart how?* Wangzi just couldn’t understand.

Once the call connected, Casey spoke at a measured pace. “Hello! Is this Mr. Fang? Your mother is here with us. Oh, no, please don’t misunderstand, I’m from the gas shop, nothing really happened. The puppy fell into the ditch, but he’s fine now, just a bit dirty.... You have been away from home for a while? If work allows, would you come back home for a few days?”

Casey took a look at Grandma Fang. She was in the kitchen, squatting in front of the fridge, looking for something, completely indifferent to what was happening in the living room. Even so, Casey lowered his voice and said: “Your mother might be...”

### **Fang Hsiang-Jun**

There were three time slots in a day when Fang Hsiang-Jun could take a break: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. However, unlike breakfast, his lunches and dinners didn’t have a fixed schedule. Today, for instance, he had to wait until 3 p.m. to dig in for lunch. Early in the morning, their foreman yelled: “We’re gonna get some weather pretty soon, so everybody toughens up and let’s get today’s work done by nightfall.”

Fang Hsiang-Jun often joked with others that the only advantage to working “up the mountain” was that it’s much cooler there. But the temperature “up the mountain” and “in the mountain cave” are also extremely different. After several years, Fang Hsiang-Jun would finally understand that he would feel the heat inside the mountain cave not just during the decade of his work, but in the future to come: whenever he drove into any tunnel, despite being in the car and having the temperature as low as possible, he would still find himself drenched in sweat, as though a soldier with battlefield experience, whose muscles tense up at the sound of explosions. Whenever he entered a tunnel, the air became so stifling that he felt he was going to catch on fire. Even now, as Fang Hsiang-Jun sat outside of the tunnel and ate a cold, stale, flavorless bento, the sight of a mountain cave not far from him put him in an uncontrollable sweat.

Having worked in the construction sites for so many years, he had gotten used to the exhaustion from work but had never been able to resolve the pain caused by his family.

When he first joined the construction of the XueShan Mountain tunnel, everyone came with revolutionary sentiments as though they were to make a worldly miracle happen. But the construction delays and the sight of all those tidy supervisors who had never set foot in the cave, and who constantly “guaranteeing” the citizens that all the procedures will be finalized “in time”, made all the workers unhappy. Then the citizens founded a “construction supervising team”, ostensibly to supervise construction, but really as a way to put pressure on the workers.



A few days ago, someone mentioned seeing Hsiang-Jun's wife on the "construction supervising team" on TV.

"It's that woman who stands at the forefront, the one who holds the microphone!"

"Maybe you've mistaken her as someone else?"

Nobody dared to ask Fang Hsiang-Jun, and he didn't dare ask his wife. The two of them hadn't spoken in a while, and Fang Hsiang-Jun didn't even dare go home.

Whenever Fang Hsiang-Jun headed down the mountain, he heard passersby discussing the progress of the tunnel, and likewise the customers at the breakfast shop, the street vendor of *A String of Hearts*, the owner of the grocery shop, news anchors.... Everyone wanted to know when they would finish it.

"Once the XueShan Mountain tunnel opens, the distance between Yilan and Taipei will be three times less. The business owners of the public transports would be ready to launch their business for this route. In the future, between these two cities..." No matter which channel he changed to, he found news anchors energetically reading out reports about the tunnel.

At the beginning, the pressure wasn't that intense. But gradually, construction workers began to go home more rarely as they rushed for progress day and night, often spending the night at the dormitory in order to get back to work on time. They only took a few days off per month. Though seemingly driven by public opinions, the workers themselves were anxious to finish this construction that continued day and night without limits. In their dreams, they heard the sound of falling and shattering rocks.