

CHOPSTICKS

筷：怪談競演奇物語

Five authors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan come together to write a tale of fantasy and intrigue based on the theme of “chopsticks”. In the miraculous stories that unfold, chopsticks become much more than eating utensils; they are also family treasures, as well as conduits to divine power.

Chopsticks: simple, ingenious, essential. A central and utterly unremarkable feature of life in East Asia. A symbol so powerful it is almost invisible – that is, until five authors from Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong invoke it as a central theme for five wild stories of fantasy and intrigue.

Japanese author Mitsuda Shinzo opens the tale with the story of a young schoolboy who is seen at lunchtime performing a wish ritual before a pair of chopsticks stuck into his rice (an action considered strictly taboo in East Asia, as vertical chopsticks resemble graveside joss sticks). The 84-day ritual promises to bring a response from the spirits, but the boy and his classmates must be careful what they wish for.

Taiwanese author Xerses echoes the schoolyard setting in her chapter, in which a boy who wears a pair of coral chopsticks around his neck finds himself the center of female attention. Under the female protagonist’s searching eye, his relationship to his chopsticks – and the divine power they store – does not stay secret for long.

Hong Kong writer JeTauZi turns things even darker in her tale of a famous YouTuber who is poisoned while livestreaming, and his girlfriend’s quest to uncover his killer. But all three stories come to a surprising climax in Xiao Xiang Shen’s fourth chapter, which weaves all three stories together in a single tale of dark intrigue that ends with a bitter twist. Finally, award-winning author Chan Ho-Kei brings everything back to his native Hong Kong, rewriting history and transforming the backstory into a masterpiece of science fiction,



Category: Fantasy

Publisher: Apex

Date: 2/2020

Rights contact:

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Pages: 416

Length: 226,602 characters

(approx. 147,000 words in English)

Rights sold: Korean (Gimm-Young), Japanese (Kobunsha), Vietnamese (Phuong Nam)

cosmic entities, and Lovecraftian horror.

Mitsuda Shinzo 三津田信三

A long-time aficionado of horror films and novels, Japanese author Mitsuda Shinzo is known for stories that imbue horror and local folklore into the crime fiction genre. His *Tojio Genya* series of stories have earned him a wide readership across many age groups, as well as multiple prize nominations. His novel *Like a Sinking Water Demon* won the tenth Honkaku Mystery Award.

Xerses 薛西斯

Xerses is one of the most exciting young novelists in Taiwan's science fiction/mystery community. Deeply inspired by Shimada Soji's *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, Xerses is dedicated to incorporating the finest logical intrigue into her stories. Her novel *Lotus Reborn* won a Bronze Medal in the 2013 Kadokawa Fiction Awards, and *Avalon's Quest* was shortlisted for the 2015 Soji Shimada Mystery Award.

JeTauZi 夜透紫

Author, intercultural studies specialist, and confirmed cat lady, JeTauZi has written novels, stories, and scripts for children's TV shows and mobile games. In 2011, her fantasy story "The Spirit of the Word" won a bronze medal in the Kadokawa Fiction Awards. She's written multiple long novels in several genres, including detective fiction and horror.

Xiao Xiang Shen 瀟湘神

Novelist and VR game designer Xiao Xiang Shen is a member of the Taipei Legend Studio and an avid researcher of local folklore whose work brings the mystical side of urban spaces to life. His short story "Taipei Scrolls" won a bronze medal in the short story category at the Kadokawa Fiction Awards in 2012, as well as the King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize in 2014. He has written multiple novels set in Taiwan during the Japanese Occupation, as well as a compendium of Taiwanese demons, which became the basis for a well-known virtual reality game.

Chan Ho-Kei 陳浩基

Chan Ho-Kei was born and raised in Hong Kong. He has worked as software engineer, scriptwriter, game designer, and editor of comic magazines. His writing career started in 2008 at the age of thirty-three, with the short story “The Case of Jack and the Beanstalk”, which was shortlisted for the Mystery Writers of Taiwan Award. He went on to win the award again the following year with “The Locked Room of Bluebeard”. In 2011, Chan’s first novel, *The Man Who Sold the World*, won the Soji Shimada Mystery Award. His subsequent works, including *The Borrowed*, have been translated into multiple languages, include English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Italian, Dutch, Italian, Vietnamese, Thai, Indonesian, and Hebrew.

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By Mitsuda Shinzo, Xerses, JeTauZi, Xiao Xiang Shen, Chan Ho-Kei

Translated by Mike Day

2. The Coral's Bones

Now *this* is a surprise.

That was the first thought that flashed through my mind when Mr. Fish opened up the door.

He wore a baggy black T-shirt and worn blue jeans. He looked young, almost like a student. If I hadn't known, I would never have taken him for a warlock.

Just one thing about him seemed slightly strange: the big, angry red mark that ran up one forearm, disappearing beneath his cuff. I don't think I had ever seen such a bright red birthmark. It writhed like a dying fish that had sunk its teeth into his wrist and refused to let go.

"Come in."

The rickety ceiling lamp in the hallway flickered, and I remembered what my friend had said: if you're determined to meet this man, do it in broad daylight, when the yang energy is at its most intense, and the ghosts can't get at you.

The room was so small a single long table and two wooden armchairs almost filled it. There was no air conditioner, yet I sensed a chill in the air. The light was dim, so I couldn't see what was in the two black cases by the window.

I had pictured a dark den of mysticism filled with swirling incense smoke, but the room was tidy and cheerless, with no hint of the occult.

The warlock strolled back to the big wooden armchair, sat, and slowly looked me over. There was a cold, sober look in his eyes suggesting that he was sizing me up, but I didn't feel threatened. Beneath his cold, weighty gaze, I even felt he might be threatened by me.

"Please, sit. Can I get you some tea?"

"No, thanks."

He unhurriedly made a pot of tea nevertheless, and just as I was about to say "no thank you" again, tipped the little teapot and filled his cup.

"I'm sorry. I haven't had a good night's sleep in almost two months, so I need to drink tea to stay awake. I don't sleep much at the best of times, and right now it's high season. Bull demons and serpent devils come at me the instant my eyes close." I noticed the black bags beneath his eyes. He yawned wide, then asked, "What's your name?"

From the instant I arrived, he'd given off a cocky aura, as if to say, *I don't need you as much as you need me.*

"My last name is Cheng."

"Miss Cheng." He gave a small nod. "You can call me Master Hailin – that's 'hai' for ocean, and 'lin' for fish scale. My spiritual name." His eyes darted all around as if in search of something. "Better not use your real name here. *They* might hear. And trust me, that kind of trouble we don't need."

I nodded hurriedly. I had heard he had a long list of rules.

Last winter, a friend had told me about Mr. Fish.

At first, the name had struck me as funny: "Mr. Fish?" I didn't know then that his spiritual name was 'fish scale' – I guess that's where the name came from, if it wasn't the birthmark on his arm.

Most in his line of work kept a low profile, relying on word of mouth to bring in customers. I had been lucky enough to hear of him from a friend who had suffered a spell of terrible luck after getting on a spirit's bad side: three in the family had taken ill, and two died. They had gone to more than ten masters, but none had been able to help.

Then they went to see Mr. Fish, who set things straight in three days. When I heard this, I knew Mr. Fish was the man for the job.

"What can I do for you today, Miss Cheng?"

"Well, you see, I'm getting married at the end of the year...."

Suddenly, he looked uneasy.

"Don't tell me you're here to have me calculate your eight birth characters and pick an auspicious wedding date."

"Huh?"

"Tell me that isn't it. I'm no good at that stuff."

I said nothing.

"Let me be straight with you: I'm only good at one thing." It was then that I noticed the full-color price list pressed beneath the placemat. At first glance, it looked like the menu at a hole-in-the-wall snack bar. He lifted a finger and stabbed it directly down at the last item on the list: "This."

Exorcism.

"If ghosts are giving you trouble, I'll get them off your back, guaranteed. Other than that, I'm useless."

Useless – quite a way to describe yourself.

But come to think of it, maybe he laid his cards on the table because he was just that confident as an exorcist.

"If you want to get your fortune told, if you need to pick a wedding date, I can send you to people who do that." As he spoke, he pulled a cell phone from his pocket. The screen flashed to life, showing a riotously colorful background picture, a flock of a parrots fluttering over a tropical forest. I knew those parrots: they were characters in *Cosmic Forest*, a virtual pet game, my two-year-old niece's favorite.

“No need,” I promptly interrupted. “To tell the truth... I came to you because I’ve got problems ordinary human effort can’t fix. I’m getting married soon, and there are things I need to sort out before starting a family.”

“Oh?” This seemed to catch him off guard. “Sure thing, I get it, plenty of people come to me for that. But your case seems... special. Has it occurred to you you might be imagining things?”

“Meaning?”

“Your energy is pure. An evil spirit wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole.”

“How do you know my energy is pure?”

“Warm, sunny yang energy radiates out within a meter of you. Any sane demon would be frightened out of its wits. People who get possessed are deficient in yang energy. You can tell just by looking that they’re about to kick the bucket.”

Judging by the big black bags beneath his eyes, I wondered if he was talking about himself.

“I’ve been to many masters, and about half have said the same thing.”

“Oh, so only half are wrong. Things in the occult industry are looking up!” he exclaimed, seeming pleased, but his eyes quickly narrowed again. “Then what are you here for? There’s no need to be so... I mean, do you believe in spirits, or don’t you?”

I forced a smile. “I don’t know – you tell me. But this has been going on for fifteen years now. I’ve seen plenty of inexplicable things. I can’t rest until this is settled once and for all.”

“You should know I’m not a medium, and I’m not a travel agent to the spirit world.” Seeing he hadn’t succeeded in shaking my determination, he sighed, spread his hands in despair, and said, “Okay! I’ll try to help. As long as you know going in that exorcism is the only thing I’m good at.”

“No problem. I believe in you.” I promptly added, “It has to do with a pair of chopsticks.”

“Chopsticks?” I could see he was taken aback. After a moment, he asked, “Are you sure this is in my area?”

“That’s just what I was about to ask you.”

I’d spent plenty of time pondering how to start the story.

Should I be direct, get straight to the point? That might make things easier. But I decided to start with the part that meant the most to me – the way we met. So I explained to Mr. Fish:

In junior high, the kids called me Six-One. Strange, right?

That’s because my astrological bone weight (a system of DIY fortunetelling in which a heavier weight meant a better fate) was six taels, one mace.

I have no idea what junior high students are into these days, but in my time, superstitions were all the rage. My bone weight of six taels and a mace made me a schoolyard legend. No one else was even in my league.

But fortunetelling was child's play – spirit writing and spirit summoning games were the real thrill. I went to a Christian school, and the teachers were not amused by our games. They doled out harsh punishments to anyone caught playing them, but we didn't let that stop us. We defied authority to prove our courage.

I was no exception, but it wasn't that I was an especially bold or rebellious kid. My friends just dragged me into it. When it came to these games, clear battle lines were drawn between boys and girls – I was the only girl the boys let into their group. They said they needed some feminine yin energy to balance things out, but the real reason was that it got boring playing with just boys, and I was a tomboy anyway....These were their excuses, but we all knew the real reason: Six taels and a mace. With me in the group, it was safe to play the games.

So I don't know if that's in the scope of your services, but as far as the ancients were concerned, my birth characters put me right up there with kings and emperors.

Fortunetellers would take down my birth date, run some calculations and say, "Look what we have here, a dog fatter than a pig." In ancient times, pigs were symbols of a family's wealth and were supposed to be fat, but people didn't waste resources fattening up their dogs, just as they didn't waste resources on their daughters, pinning their hopes on their sons instead. What the fortunetellers meant was that if a boy had the same eight birth characters as me, he'd be sure to become the sort of person people looked up to – it was too bad I was a girl.

I burst out laughing every time I told the tale, not because the fortunetellers' ideas about gender were a hundred years out of date, but because, setting aside all the talk about dogs, pigs, and emperors, the real use of having "six taels and a mace" was playing spirit-summoning games.

The games had many rules, but the most important of all was to be respectful. The games began with what we called an invocation, and ended with a banishment ritual. From the beginning to the end, every detail had to be just so.

Whether there was really anything paranormal going on, I'm still not sure. We gave the games whimsical names like "Immortal of the Coin" and "Immortal of the Pen" – whatever it was we summoned, we never thought they were *real* spirits.

Once, just to be brats, we played Immortal of the Coin in the school chapel.

But once the game began, no matter what we asked, the coin kept circling the same three characters. The characters seemed to be a name, but it wasn't the name of anyone in class. We were all bewildered. Then one of my friends had a flash of inspiration, and asked it, "Coin spirit, coin spirit, is this your name?"

The coin did an abrupt turn and slid to the character "yes".

We were practically jumping for joy. We couldn't believe how smart we were. We were getting ready to ask it another question when the coin started moving again, dragging our hands with it, doing wild circles around two characters, "help" and "me". This struck fear into us: what on earth was going on? We cried out repeatedly, "Spirit, be gone!" But nothing we did helped. I tried to pull my hand away, but it was stuck. The coin circled faster and faster, tearing a hole in the paper.

Just then, the solemn sound of singing resounded in the chapel.

It was the same recorded hymn that played at six o'clock each day. At almost exactly that moment, the coin started to slow, and finally stopped.

We stood stock still. No one dared pull their hand away. Tears rolled down the cheeks of a few of my fainthearted friends.

I lifted my eyes to the altar and saw the setting sun shining through the stained-glass window, bathing the golden cross in a shaft of glistening light. There we were, summoning spirits in full view of the Lord. When I think of it, I still get shivers.

Looking back on it now, I think it was probably just one of my friends messing around, but either way, the fad for spirit-summoning games came to an end that day.

Next, a fad for online urban legends swept through the school.

The winter of my third year in junior high, the girls in class got into chopstick magic.

It worked like this: you secretly switched one stick of your pair of chopsticks with that of the boy you liked. If you kept it up for three months and he didn't find out, you'd end up together, guaranteed.

The idea seemed to be that since chopsticks came in pairs, they had the power to pair people up. Junior high school girls like to dream about their future loves, and chopstick magic had plenty of true believers. The unique thing about love spells is that they have many meticulous steps, but they aren't as dangerous as spirit-summoning spells. You could say the toil and trouble take the place of the danger, and the spirits are satisfied.

But love magic wasn't all that big of a bother, if you asked me. Back then, most of us had chopsticks engraved with whirling spiral patterns. Every pair was pretty much the same, except that some were engraved with the words "Present from the PTA", so it wasn't hard to switch your chopsticks with someone else's. It just seemed too easy. Even eraser spells, where you wrote the name of your crush on an eraser and ground it down until it disappeared, seemed more legitimate to me.

So I was surprised to see my friends taking the chopstick magic so seriously.

"In case you hadn't noticed, all chopsticks are pretty much the same. Switching one pair for another is too easy. If that were all it took, no one in the world would end up with a broken heart."

This flippant comment drew opposition from all sides. Pointing their fingers in my face, they fumed, "Six, you've got a heart of stone and the imagination of a stick! That's why boys never bring you flowers. They only use you for their games."

By the way, the girls all called me Six, as if it was too much trouble to say my full nickname.

I didn't mind giving up a mace if it meant gaining the girls' friendship.

"Nah, I'm just the levelheaded type."

"Then why not try it?"

"What?"

"If it's so easy, give it a try."

“Is it the type of thing you can just try?”

“If you don’t believe in it, it can’t hurt, can it?”

The took out an attendance sheet and struck out the names of boys who had already been targeted. It went without saying that I didn’t believe in love spells, but when they explained, “we pick targets by drawing names,” and I looked over the list of names that hadn’t been sloppily stricken through, I felt my enthusiasm draining away – sorry to say it, but the juiciest fruits had already been picked, and the leftovers didn’t whet my appetite.

But I was too proud to back down now.

Even if the chances were a million to one, I was determined to pick a boy I could live with. I broke in hurriedly, “Wait, wait, no drawing names. Let me pick.”

“Ooh, scared?”

“No. To make it a fair test, we should pick a tough target.”

“Okay. Then who?”

Right away, I knew.

In three years, we’d barely exchanged a word. The one time we did talk, it was under very eerie circumstances.

Back when the fad for spirit-summoning games was in full swing, I stayed after class one day with a boy called the King and his court, to play a game we called “Occult Coin Toss”.

It was a little like a gambling game. We played with a bowl and three ten-yuan coins painted red on one side. It was easy to find a way to spend them because the value was so low.

First, you spread a layer of paste over the heads side, and when it dried, you brushed on a thin layer of red watercolor paint. When the paint dried, you spread on another layer of paste – that way, the color wouldn’t rub off, but it would peel away easily when you were done. The reason for going to all this trouble was that, if you didn’t get all the paint off, the “coin spirit” would haunt you forever.

After deciding who would go first, we would take turns tossing coins, going around the table clockwise. Whoever turned up three red heads would get to ask the coin spirit a question. The spirit wouldn’t respond right away, but by the end of the day, it would make the answer known in one way or another. You had to respectfully thank the coin spirit and spend that coin as quickly as you could.

The boys brought the coin and the bowl. Since they’d dragged me in to play spiritual bouncer, I got to go first.

The red evening light spilled over the coins, making it tough to tell which sides were the red ones. I had always loved being in the spotlight, and part of me wanted to be the first to turn up three red heads.

Then, *whoosh*, the classroom door flew open, and there he stood.

He must have been surprised to see us squatting down around the podium, playing what seemed to be a gambling game. His eyes widened, and he timidly took two steps back. I knew his

name. I'd always thought of him as the shy, quiet type. We'd never been in a discussion group together, and we didn't talk outside of class.

Our class had forty kids in it, so it wasn't too big, but it wasn't small either. Social life worked more smoothly when we split into cliques, dividing like a hydra again and again, until everyone belonged somewhere. Some flitted nimbly between groups, while others stayed where they started. A few never really felt at home or found their people, so they naturally formed a group of outcasts. Junior high was like the Serengeti – a dangerous place to be left behind. Those who failed to make even temporary friends fell prey to bullies.

These unspoken rules of school life applied to everyone from the age of eight to the age of eighteen, so we all had a certain finely tuned ability to tell at a glance which group someone belonged to. But for some reason, I can't remember which pack he was part of.

Was it because he was a boy? I definitely knew the lay of the land when it came to the girls' territory, but with the boys, maybe my eye wasn't as sharp.

In a flash, the King and his court had risen to their feet.

As one, they wordlessly stared him down.

What that silence meant, I didn't understand then.

The King, the one who'd asked me to join the game, suddenly spoke up: "Game over."

The King hesitated, and finally said, "We didn't even finish the first round. The game never started." Then he held out his hand to me. "Give me the coins back. I'll get rid of them."

I was a little miffed. They were picking on him for no reason – what had he ever done to hurt them? I didn't really care if we kept playing or not, but the new boy just stood there, looking ill at ease. So I said, "No, I want to keep playing."

"What's your problem?"

"We already invoked the spirit. If we quit now, the consequences are on you."

Daggers in his eyes, he spat, "Fine." Then he and the other boys all ran from the room. I yelled, "Hey! How am I supposed to play if you guys all leave?" But like a pack of startled animals, they vanished, leaving me and the new boy staring at each other across the empty room.

"What a bunch of losers! And you call yourselves Kings!" I shouted into the hall.

The boy stood behind me as I bellowed. A moment later, he said in a low voice, "You should stay away from games like these."

I spun, fixing him with a death stare. I was angry. I'd stuck up for him, and he had the nerve to lecture me.

Now that the other boys were gone, I was at a loss for what to do. Finally, I said stiffly, "The game has started. It's too late to quit."

"Can you teach me how to play?" he asked.

I explained that the group would take turns tossing coins, and the one chosen by the spirit would turn up three red heads.

He thought a moment, then sat down beside the podium and said, “Okay, let’s play.”

“What?”

“Two players is enough, isn’t it?”

As far as I knew, there was no hard and fast rule about the number of players. I almost said, one is enough, I’ll just keep tossing until I get three heads.

And if I didn’t, that was fine too. After all, six taels and a mace.

But the boy said, “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

He deliberately took a soft tone, as if to comfort me, but it only annoyed me even more.

Then he took the coins from my hands and tossed them into the bowl.

Tails, tails, tails. I already regretted letting him play. He lifted his head and looked at me as if to say, it’s your turn. I tossed the coins: three reds. Game over.

He stood up and said, “So that’s it?”

Without waiting for me to respond, he turned and squeezed through the narrow aisles, reaching his desk and rifling through the drawer – so he’d come to fetch a forgotten book. In the doorway, he turned, waved to me, said “bye,” and disappeared down the hallway.

And that was the last word we spoke for several semesters.

At a time like that, wouldn’t you think a boy would ask a girl, want me to walk you home? Even if our paths parted, he could have at least walked me to the school gates. I couldn’t help being a bit peeved, but at the same time, he seemed like a decent guy, and he was cuter than the King.

Soon, every girl in class knew I was scheming to steal his chopsticks.

They seemed upset, even jealous, and I realized maybe he wasn’t as unpopular as I’d thought.

I asked the other girls, “Is he okay?” Since the day of the coin toss game, I’d been keeping an eye on him, worried the other boys might freeze him out of school social life, but as far as I could see, there was no need for me to stick my nose in.

Between classes, he would sit in his seat, silently reading. At lunchtime, he would leave the classroom, and when school let out, he would gather his books and leave. He didn’t hang around longer than he had to. As far as I could tell, he wasn’t close to anyone, but he wasn’t being bullied, either.

He seemed to live inside an invisible barrier. He couldn’t leave, and other people couldn’t get in.

When I told the others how the King turned and ran that day, they all sank into silence. Finally, someone said, “Of course the King doesn’t want to play the coin game with him. He’s cursed.”

“What?”

“He went to the same elementary school as us, and the kids in his class called him ‘the Angel.’ Want to know why?”

It wasn’t bad as nicknames went, but the other kids all snickered when they heard it. My friend went on, “Because one time, his mom ran to school in a panic, saying there was a spirit set on snatching him away, so he wasn’t supposed to run or take part in any other activities. After

that, people took to calling him the Angel, saying the spirits wanted to kidnap him and bring him back to heaven!”

“What kind of spirits?”

“Who knows? But they didn’t sound like friendly ones,” said my friend. “The family is into some kooky mumbo-jumbo. Seems like that’s what his mom meant by the ‘spirits.’ She ended up in the hospital. Some kind of curse, they say. Pretty freaky stuff.”

They talked over one another, the stories growing more and more outlandish. I glanced to where he sat in the corner of the classroom, nose buried in a book.

“So tell us, Six, does it have to be him?”

“No one will blame you if you change your mind.”

All eyes were on me.

“What’s there to be afraid of?” Raising my voice, I declared, “Maybe you forgot, I’ve got six taels and a mace!”

I was lying when I said I had no fear, but if I backed down now, I’d be just like the King and his cronies.

Backing up my big talk turned out to be tough. I crept over to his desk, rifled through his things and found a lunchbox, but no chopsticks. That was strange. How did he eat his lunch? Come to think of it, I’d never seen him eating at all. He just disappeared for a while at lunchtime.

But I didn’t give up easily. Whatever he brought for lunch, unless it was raw veggies or something, he’d have to warm it up, wouldn’t he? So I switched strategies: I would bring a boxed lunch from home, creep into the kitchen at lunchtime, and wait to ambush him.

It might seem strange to call it an “ambush.” To tell the truth, there was no need to hide. But when he finally appeared in the kitchen, he took a careful look around, as if fearing someone might dart out from a darkened corner. For the time being, I had to stay in the shadows.

Once he was sure he was alone, he rolled up his sleeves, slipped on a kitchen mitt, and pulled out his lunchbox as I poked my head out from my hiding place.

Unable to bear the suspense, I let out a loud cry, outing myself.

When our eyes met, he leapt into the air, and the lunchbox clattered loudly to the ground. Luckily, it was sturdily built and survived the fall. Without so much as a glance in my direction, he flung off the kitchen mitt, gathered his things in his arms and ran for dear life.

I cried after him, “Hey! Wait!”

He froze, and pretending I hadn’t seen anything, I asked in a gentle voice, “Are you okay? Are your things okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Funny, I’ve never seen you eating in the classroom.”

He thought for a moment, and seemed to decide it would be rude to completely ignore me. "I like to eat outside. There's a nice breeze."

"Where? Let me go with you."

He flashed an awkward grimace. I was mortified too, to be honest, but determined not to give in. I managed to stand my ground, and in the end, he caved, giving up his monopoly on the school's secret spots.

"On the rooftop, beneath the banyan tree in the courtyard, or behind the auditorium."

To tell the truth, I didn't really care where. "Can I go?"

He hesitated a moment, but finally nodded. I let out the breath I'd been holding in. He'd given me a perfectly above-board reason to be on his tail.

In back of the auditorium, a row of green trees cast a pool of deep shadow. People always sat at the stone tables beneath the tree to talk, but at lunchtime the crowd thinned because the falling leaves made it an inconvenient place to eat. But he didn't seem to mind. He found an open seat and sat down, and I hurriedly gathered my skirt and sat down beside him. I was about to get my boxed lunch out when I remembered I'd left my chopsticks in the classroom. But then I noticed he was empty-handed, too. Could it be he'd also forgotten his chopsticks?

I lifted my head and looked at him, and to my surprise, he suddenly slid a hand beneath his collar.

I have to say I never saw that coming.

He didn't keep his chopsticks in a box or a bag. Instead, they hung around his neck, hooked on a chain.

As he pulled out the chopsticks, he eyed me coolly, as if to confirm something.

I felt like a trapped animal. I didn't dare move a muscle. His gaze seemed somehow threatening, but he quickly turned his head, pulled his boxed lunch from its purple cloth cover, and carefully wiped his chopsticks clean.

Maybe I was just overthinking things. My pounding heart gradually slowed, and I remembered my mission.

I secretly eyed his chopsticks. They were stunningly beautiful, that was for sure, painted shining bright crimson with swirling whirlpool-like decorations. The heads and tails of the chopsticks were tipped in silver, with holes punched through the silver heads where the chain slid in.

Beside this magnificent pair of chopsticks, his lunch looked pathetic: a little lump of white rice, boiled greens, and a small, shriveled tomato – no meat, not even a boiled egg. He was already skinny, so I didn't think he was dieting. I wondered to myself, was his family really that poor?

He shoveled in two mouthfuls of rice, raised his head, saw that I hadn't even opened my lunchbox, and shot me a puzzled look. Afraid he'd think I was looking down on his meager lunch, I hurriedly explained, "I forgot to bring my chopsticks."

"Then go back to the classroom and eat there."

“No! I’m so hungry I can’t move.” I flashed an ingratiating smile: “When you’re finished, can you lend me yours?”

“Sorry.” He didn’t even pause to think. “I can’t lend out my chopsticks.”

“Why not?” I couldn’t remember ever being shot down like that, and it caught me off guard. But I was still more surprised by what he said next:

“Because they’re magical.”

I stared at him blankly. Without waiting for me to come to my senses, he pointed to the tomato in his lunchbox and said, “If you’re hungry, why don’t you eat this?”

“Well... okay, then I’ll share my food with you, too.”

“No thanks.”

“It’s no big deal, really! Won’t you go hungry if I eat your tomato?” My lunchbox was filled with leftovers from yesterday’s dinner, but it made for a big, sumptuous lunch.

“I’m vegetarian. I can’t stand skipping out on us.

“I don’t like taking naps,” he said with a grimace, “but if you come back to the classroom and you don’t at least lay your head down on your desk, people think you’re weird. I guess they assume I’m in some kind of club, but no one has ever asked.”

At first glance, he seemed too naïve to play tricks, but it turned out he was deliberately fooling all of us.

Before long, I started ditching break time with him, and it turned out no one cared. The only things we had to watch out for were the teachers and hall monitors lying in wait along the way. One time, we crossed paths with a teacher, and to my surprise, he coolly lied, “The teacher told us to go to the office and help copy handouts.” A few quick questions – what grade are you in, what class? – and we were in the clear. He had pulled that off so smoothly I was sure he had experience.

Like blood-hungry sharks, junior high students can detect any whiff of a budding relationship, and rumors about us spread quickly through the girls’ gossip grapevine. But we hardly ever saw each other, except at lunch. He wasn’t in any clubs, and didn’t stay after to study. When the bell rang at the end of the day, he disappeared. I asked him to study together few times, but he refused.

He said, “If I’m late getting home, my mom will be mad.”

I remembered the rumors about him – he had a kooky, superstitious mom who had ended up in the hospital – and it just slipped out: “But isn’t your mom in the hospital?”

He froze. Obviously, he’d hadn’t known I knew. Right away, I regretted opening my big mouth. But then he said, “She came home two years ago. We live with my grandparents, but they’re old, and they don’t get along with my mom, so I’m the one who has to take care of her.”

“Must be a pain.”

“It’s not that bad. I just do what I have to.”

“Is your mom okay? What does she have?”

“Nothing strange.” He flashed a small smile. “Cancer.”

His expression seemed to say he knew about the rumors I'd heard. I didn't bring it up again. But once I got to know him better, I did get a good look at his chopsticks.

His chopsticks were special, nothing like the metal chopsticks with the spiral pattern you could get anywhere. The thickness hardly changed at all from head to tail, and they were just a tiny bit shorter than regular chopsticks. Chopsticks like that were a rare sight these days. But the biggest problem, as far as I was concerned, was what they were made of.

Their hue was deep, deep crimson. The fine pattern that adorned the heads looked like countless bloody whirlpools that could suck you in if you stared for too long. Smoothed by wear, they had a glossy gleam, but they didn't shine so brightly that it hurt to look. I didn't think they were made of metal or plastic, but it was hard to believe bamboo or wood could shine like that.

One day, unable to hold back, I asked, "You've got a really special pair of chopsticks – what are they made of?"

"Oh. I guess you can't tell by looking, but they're made of coral."

"Wow, you can make chopsticks out of coral?"

"Sure you can. You can make them out of bone and animal tusks, so why not? Coral, sounds like some kind of precious stone, but actually it isn't worth much."

"But I've never heard of chopsticks made of coral."

"Actually, coral doesn't make a good material for chopsticks. It's hard to find a piece the right size." He softly ran his hand down the length of a chopstick as he said, "You have to make each one from a single piece, so it has to be at least this long. Little pieces won't cut it."

"Are pieces this size hard to come by?"

"Not really. But when you find a piece the right size, instead of making chopsticks out of it, you'd be better off selling it, or making something else from it. It's the same way with jade. You've never seen a pair of chopsticks made of jade, have you?"

This went a little over my head, but it didn't make the chopsticks any less beautiful. I leaned in close to get a look at the subtle details of the coral, but just then, I noticed something strange.

"The two chopsticks are made out of different kinds of coral, aren't they?"

"Erm... well, yes." He seemed caught off guard. "Impressive. How'd you figure it out?"

"Oh, it's just that one is a little darker than the other."

The deep crimson hue penetrated to the coral's core. It was such an intense, deep hue it made me uneasy. When I looked very closely, it was obvious that the two pieces had different textures.

"Why is that?" I asked, mystified. I made a hand gesture in the air. "Pieces of coral aren't *that* thin, are they? If you found a long enough piece, couldn't you make two chopsticks out of it?"

Pointing to the darker one, he said, "One of them got, uh... mislaid, so it had to be replaced."

"Mislaid?"

"Right." He forced a smile. "The colors are different. That's just the way it is."

"Well, I think they're both beautiful."

"Really?"

He seemed pleased with the praise, and flashed a shy smile.

"I found the new piece of coral myself."

He was cute when he smiled. The cloud of gloom around him seemed to disperse. If he learned how to use that smile, he'd have no trouble getting girls. My heart began beating faster, and I thought to myself, it's a good thing all the other girls know I'm the new challenger.

With these thoughts filling up my head, I never thought to ask the obvious: How did a middle school kid get his hands on such a precious piece of coral?

Knowing the chopsticks were made of coral, I gave up completely on switching them with a different pair. To be start with, it would be impossible to find one that matched. And since the chopsticks hung around his neck, except when he ate, it would be impossible to get them away from him, unless he fainted, or I pulled off an elaborate heist.

I could have given in. I could have apologized to my friends, admitted I couldn't pull it off, let them laugh and gotten it over with. But I was at my most ambitious at that age, and I refused to surrender. If storming the gates won't work, I thought, I would sneak in by a side road.

At the end of each month, the boys were separated from the girls, and the teachers carried out an extremely strict uniform inspection. It took about an hour, start to finish. We had to remember not to wear makeup or earrings or shoes that didn't fit the regulations, and to remove any nail polish we might have put on.

Needless to say, necklaces weren't allowed.

Since this was a Christian school, being caught wearing a Daoist amulet was a surefire way to get a scolding. Amulets were often confiscated, so most of us remembered to take them off before the inspections. No doubt he took his chopsticks off, too.

On inspection day, we were all on our best behavior. No one wore any extra accessories, and I'm sure he slipped his necklace off when the teacher came into class. The boys went out into the hall and lined up. From time to time, we heard the teacher scolding someone. As the others pressed their faces against the glass, I crept over to his desk and unzipped his bag.

I hesitated: was I really going to go through with this?

The world went silent, and I heard only the sound of my pounding heart. The palms of my hands were slick with sweat. I silently repeated to myself, if you get caught, all you have to do is apologize. If I didn't try today, I'd have to wait another month.

I still couldn't think of any way to switch out the chopsticks, but say they were to disappear – he'd have no choice but to get new ones. And whatever kind they he replaced them with, they'd have to make an easier target than these. When the time came, I could even put on a big show of giving him a new pair as a gift.

I pulled his chopsticks from the purple cloth cover, slipped them into my jacket pocket, and sauntered back to my seat. Heart pounding, I gently caressed the chopsticks in my pocket, starting with the silver tips, which gave my fingertips an icy jolt. I slid my

fingers further down, feeling the full length of the chopsticks, which were mostly smooth but with a bit of the grit of the raw material.

The boys filed back inside, and it was our turn. It always took longer to inspect the girls, with our frilly, flowery outfits. By the time the inspection was over, it was already ten minutes into first period. It was the first time I'd ever committed a theft, and I was a bundle of nerves. I looked him up and down and down and up, but he didn't seem to notice. His eyes stayed fixed on the formula the teacher had written on the board.

I couldn't focus on class, my mind filled with thoughts of arriving home at the end of the day and admiring the spoils. My concentration was shot. The hours inched past, and the bell rang, and then, to my surprise, he strode right up to me and stopped.

That was odd. Except at lunch, we barely ever talked.

Overcome by guilt, I didn't dare look him in the eye.

He asked calmly, "Would you give my chopsticks back?"

"Wh... what?"

"I saw you take them." Seeing I was about to deny it, he immediately added, "I was watching from the hall the whole time."

I'd never stolen anything before in my life, so I had no idea what a thief was supposed to do when caught. Warm waves of embarrassment and fear washed over me.

I'd been planning on coming right out and apologizing, thinking that would set things straight. But now that I'd been caught, I realized what a terrible mess I was in. His expressionless face was like the sea before a storm. He was angry, no doubt about it. I should have seen it coming. He kept his chopsticks with him constantly, tied around his neck, and he'd only taken them off at the last second before the inspection. How had I ever imagined it would be easy to make off with his prized chopsticks and replace them with another pair?

Trembling all over, I pulled out the chopsticks, and he wordlessly extended a hand. Our fingertips touched for an instant, and I was struck by the urge to apologize, but when I opened my mouth, only a mushy string of sounds came out, and tears spilled from my eyes.

It's over, it's over, a voice inside me kept saying. It's all over, now that you're crying. I rarely cried, so I didn't know how to hold back tears. I opened my mouth and tried to explain, but all that came out of were spurts of sound and air.

Now he was the one who was flustered. His tense expression immediately loosened up.

"It's okay. Just give them back." He kept comforting me, but the tears wouldn't stop. Shame burned inside me. Some of the other students turned to stare as he hastily pulled me toward the hallway. I wanted to apologize, but the words wouldn't come. Still, he seemed to understand, urging, "Forget it, it's fine."

In the end, he realized he couldn't keep me from crying. He leaned in close, reached out and gently stroked the back of my head. There was a bit of distance between us at first, but he eased my head onto his shoulder and ran his fingers through my hair. He smelled of soap and incense. Between the clean, calming scent of him and the warm, soft feel of his body next to mine, I felt surrounded by relief.

He realized I'd quit crying and gently pulled away his hand, drew back a bit, craned his neck and looking me straight in the eyes.

"All better?"

I said nothing.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

It was plain to see I was a thief, so why was he apologizing? I inwardly felt awful, but I could barely form words. Somehow, I linked the sounds together, grunting out, "M-mint candy..."

"Huh?"

"Got any... m-mint candy?"

He froze for a few seconds, then shook his head.

"Then... got any... ch-change?" He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out several ten-yuan coins. I declared in a snotty whine, "I'm going to the store to buy some mint candy."

He said nothing, but followed obediently to the store, where we bought a pack of mint candy. Inside the transparent plastic packaging, the sugary ice-blue orbs sparkled like stars in the night sky. I ripped open the bag, popped a candy in my mouth, and offered one to him, but he waved my hand away.

The bell rang, but since my eyes were red and swollen, I wanted to wait a while longer to go back inside. He silently walked with me to the shady tree behind the shop, where we leaned back against the stone wall. I popped three mint candies in my mouth at once, and finally I could breathe again.

"I'm sorry."

"Forget about it."

I pressed a candy into his palm.

"Whenever I'm sad or angry, I have a mint candy, and I feel better right away. Try it."

He smiled. "I'm not angry anymore."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Okay."

"Where did you learn to do that?"

"What?"

"That thing with my hair." I continued, probing, "You do that with all the girls, don't you? That's how you got so good at it."

"No, that isn't it." Suddenly, he went on the defensive. "I said my mom is sick, didn't I? When she feels bad, she cries and carries on. I do what I did with you, and she's all better, just like that."

Coming from anyone else, I would have called it a lie, but for some reason, I believed him.

“If that’s all, I’ve got a question for you. Is that okay?” I nodded. “Why did you steal my chopsticks?”

I was at a loss. I thought since he said to forget about it, he’d actually forgotten about it.

“It is because I told you they’re made out of coral? But they aren’t worth anything.”

“No! It isn’t that! I...” Knowing he had it completely wrong, I wanted to explain, but I definitely couldn’t tell the truth, which was that I wanted the chopsticks to cast a love spell on him.

Seeing the awkward look on my face, he asked, “Are you too embarrassed to say?”

“Yes.” I glanced at him cautiously. “Would it be okay if I didn’t?”

“No.”

I thought I’d be able to squeak by, but to my surprise, he insisted. “Those chopsticks are important to me. If you don’t tell me why you took them, I’ll be scarred forever. I don’t want that. I don’t want to have to hate you.”

With these words, I knew I wouldn’t be able to wriggle out of it. If I didn’t spill the beans, the relationship between us would be ruined. It would be better to let him laugh at me for being childish and superstitious than lose him.

Head hanging, I said in a small voice, “I made a bet.”

He seemed shocked, and hurt. “If this is all a game to you guys...”

“No!” I broke in. “I heard that if you have a crush on someone, and you switch your chopsticks with theirs, they’ll like you back.”

He froze, eyes wide, and said nothing.

I knew right away he’d misunderstood me. This definitely made things awkward. Couldn’t he just say something? Here I was confessing my crush – did he have to leave me hanging? I cried, “No, don’t get me wrong, it isn’t that I like you!”

“Oh...” As if waking from a dream, he murmured indistinctly, “Then...?”

“I didn’t believe it, so I made a bet with the girls. I’d steal your chopsticks, and nothing would happen, and everyone would know the urban legend was a lie.”

“But why me?”

“Because...”

Come to think of it, why him?

Deep down, I knew, but I didn’t want to say.

“...I drew your name.”

A strange expression crossed his face.

A moment went by. He took a big breath and burst out laughing.

To my own surprise, a flame of irritation flared to life inside me.

“So would you lend me your chopsticks, at least one?” I begged shamelessly, “Please, I promise I won’t use it, I just want to show it to everybody, because if I win, they have to run errands for me all next semester.”

Of course, it was a lie. The girls amused themselves by going to the store together after class. Only the boys would be entertained by such a stupid bet. But since he had nearly no friends in class, boys or girls, he didn't know better, and swallowed the story whole.

"I don't blame you. It wasn't your fault for picking my name. But...I'm sorry, I can't lend you my chopsticks."

"Name your conditions."

"That isn't it." He shook his head and said, "There's a spirit living in them, so I can't lend them out."

A possessed pair of chopsticks. Now this was interesting.

Now I remembered that he'd said something similar the first time he showed me the chopsticks, but I'd forgotten all about it. It was almost surreal to hear him tell such a farfetched story with a straight face.

He patiently explained, "The chopsticks are antiques. They've been passed down in the family for a thousand years. There's a spirit living in them. The spirit's name is 'Wang the Immortal.'"