

FANG SI-CHI'S FIRST LOVE PARADISE

房思琪的初戀樂園

* Over one million copies sold globally

The most influential book of Taiwan's #MeToo movement, this is a sobering tale of pedophilia, sexual assault, and structural inequality in upper-class Taiwanese society, intensified by Lin Yi-Han's brilliant stream-of-consciousness style. Based on a true story.

The most influential book of Taiwan's #MeToo movement, *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise* is a chilling tale of pedophilia, sexual assault, and structural inequality in upper-class Taiwanese society. Author Lin Yi-Han's intense stream-of-consciousness narrative style brings us directly into the young minds that are targeted, displaying before their and our very eyes how sexual assault can shatter human life, and how far unequal social institutions will go to hide the damage and protect abusers.

Thirteen-year-old Fang Si-Chi lives with her family in an upscale apartment complex in Kaohsiung. The families around her form a tight community of care, comfort, and extreme privilege, their children attending the best schools and enrichment programs together, and helping their parents with charity events. Si-Chi's mental quickness attracts the attention of Mr. Li, a cram school literature teacher and fellow resident held in high esteem by the entire community for his erudition. When he offers to tutor Si-Chi privately, she and her parents happily accept, not knowing that they have let a wolf in the door.

The tale, told from three different perspectives in three segments entitled "Paradise", "Paradise Lost", and "Paradise Regained", brings us into the minds of Si-Chi, her once-bosom friend Liu Yi-Ting, and of the abuser himself. But this is no fetishizing *Lolita* – it's a first-hand,



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inside-and-out witnessing of both the long-lasting trauma of sexual abuse and the power structures that keep it hidden.

Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise was Lin Yi-Han's gift to the world before she took her own life. As a work of both literature and literary activism, the book lives on to inspire readers and raise consciousness all over the world.

Lin Yi-Han 林奕含

Lin Yi-Han is an author from southern Taiwan. During her lifetime, she was a dedicated advocate for the de-stigmatization of mental illness. Shortly after publishing her first novel, *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise*, she committed suicide.



FANG SI-CHI'S FIRST LOVE PARADISE

By Lin Yi-Han

Translated by Jenna Tang

Paradise

Liu Yi-Ting knew the best thing about being a child was that nobody would take her words seriously. She could boast, break her promises, even lie. The things that come out of a child's mouth are often naked truths. Most adults, reacting instinctively out of self-defense, might reassure themselves: "What do kids even know!" Thus, children learn to tell the truth selectively. This freedom of self-expression allows them to grow up.

The only time Liu Yi-Ting ever got scolded for her words was at a restaurant in a highrise hotel. These tedious adult gatherings always came with uninteresting delicacies. At this particular meal, a sea cucumber lay on the big porcelain plate like a long turd deep in the toilet that the maid had scrubbed to a brilliant shine. Liu Yi-Ting let the sea cucumber slide in and out of her mouth, and then spit it back on her plate. Soon she was giggling audibly. Her mother asked what was so funny. "It's a secret," she replied. When her mother raised her voice and asked again, Liu Yi-Ting said, "It's like giving a blowjob." Infuriated, her mother made her stand by the wall as punishment. When Fang Si-Chi said she wanted to stand next to her friend, Mama Liu softened her tone and turned to exchange pleasantries with Mama Fang. Liu Yi-Ting knew that compliments like "What a well-mannered young lady your daughter is!" were just throwaway phrases. Their families lived in the same apartment building, on the same floor. Yi-Ting often knocked on the Fang family's door in her pajamas and slippers, and no matter what she had in her hands, be it fast food or workbooks, Mama Fang always welcomed her. They often joked that Yi-Ting was like a long-lost daughter. The girls could while away a whole night with just a piece of Kleenex. They were on the cusp of turning into full adults, but they never had to hide their stuffed animals from each other. They didn't have to pretend that the only games they cared for anymore were poker and chess.

Yi-Ting and Si-Chi stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the floor-to-ceiling window. Si-Chi mouthed a question, "Why did you even say that?" Yi-Ting silently replied, "It just sounded smarter than saying it looked like poop." It would take Liu Yi-Ting many years to understand that using a word you barely understood was an absolute crime. It was like saying *I love you* to someone you didn't love at all. Si-Chi pursed her lips, gestured and said there were so many boats about to return to Kaohsiung port below. Each of the whale-like cargo ships was led by a tiny shrimp of a boat. Various big and small boats aligned with each other, squeezing out V-shaped waves. The whole of Kaohsiung port resembled a blue blouse being ironed, smoothed over back and forth. The view made them feel sentimental and sad. They were soulmates who shared the infinite beauty of existence with one another.



The adults let them have desserts at the dining table. Si-Chi passed Yi-Ting the flag-shaped, hard maltose candy for her ice cream, but Yi-Ting refused and mouthed, "Don't give me something you don't want!" Si-Chi was offended, her lips trembling as she mouthed back, "You know how much I like maltose!" Yi-Ting replied, "I really don't want it!" The maltose began to melt on Si-Chi's fingers, so she sucked on them. Yi-Ting began to laugh, mouthing, "You look horrible!" Si-Chi was about to snap back that *she* was the one who looked terrible, but decided to swallow those words along with the sugar in her mouth so she didn't hurt Yi-Ting. Yi-Ting noticed this and burst out laughing. A desert was suddenly smeared on the tablecloth, where a group of strange dwarves sang and danced silently in circles.

Grandpa Chien said to them, "My little sweethearts, what's on your mind?" Yi-Ting hated when people called them "little sweethearts". She hated this calculated kindness that was actually full of pity. Mama Wu said, "Kids these days hit puberty the minute they're born." Auntie Chen said, "Oh, we're about to hit menopause!" Teacher Li added, "They're not like us. We can't even grow a single pimple!" Everyone began to spout laughter, their *hahahahahahaha* tossed all over the table. The topic of faded youth was a can-can dance the girls never got invited to. The most faithful circle was still the most exclusive. Eventually, Liu Yi-Ting understood that it was they who still had youth to lose, not the adults.

From that day on they became even closer, just like a clump of hard maltose candy, and would remain so forever.

One spring, several local households contacted the neighborhood committee to fund and offer bowls of hot sticky tangyuan to the homeless at the Lantern Festival. Their building stood out in the school district. When they rode past that area on a scooter, lines and lines of Greek pillars would rush by quickly in their field of vision. Liu Yi-Ting's classmates often stood by and mocked her for living in "The Grand Palace of Kaohsiung". She whined to herself like a dog in the rain. What do you even know? she thought. That's my home! After hearing what her classmates had said, even though she was allowed to wear her own clothes to school once a week, she put on her uniform and same pair of sneakers instead, regardless of whether she had P.E. class that day. She resented having to change her shoes because she'd grown.

Several mamas gathered together to talk about the tangyuan gathering. Grandma Wu noted: "The Lantern Festival happens to be on the weekend, let the kids do it!" The mamas agreed that children should start learning about charity from a young age. Yi-Ting got chills when she heard this. It was like a hand reached into her stomach and struck a match, engraving a few lines of poetry. She didn't know what the word "charity" meant. She read in the dictionary, "'Charity' is kindness and benevolence without judging others. The Emperor Jianwen of Liang's inscription for the Stele of Wu Commandery: 'Morals arise from kindness and stem from spiritual intuition.'" No matter how Yi-Ting looked at it, these definitions seemed quite different from what the mamas were saying.

Liu Yi-Ting had learned at an early age that the best feeling you could have came with the knowledge that you would be rewarded if you tried hard enough. This idea made her happy no



matter how hard she worked. She tutored her classmates in their homework, let them copy her notes, did their calligraphy assignments, and made arts and crafts for them. In her efforts she always acted very agreeably, without a sense of mercy or superiority. Her workbook got passed around, copied by various hands. Some people's handwriting was like smooth bubbles being blown out; some were like lumps or curvy raw noodles. Every time her workbook made it back to her, she fantasized about different children being born from her notebook, each with a distinctive face. Whenever someone asked to copy Fang Si-Chi's homework, Si-Chi suggested they take Yi-Ting's assignment instead. "Her homework gets around." They would look at each other and smile; they didn't need anyone else to understand.

Winter lingered that year, and it remained very cold during the Lantern Festival. They put up the tent at the side of the avenue. The first child who arrived was assigned to scoop salty broth for everyone, and the second to add savory tangyuan; the third child was responsible for pouring sweet broth, and so Yi-Ting, who came fourth, was made responsible for adding sweet tangyuan. The tangyuan were obedient; once puffed, they floated up and would be ready to be dumped into the bowls. The red bean broth made the pudgy faces of the tangyuan seem fitful and pouty. What did it mean to learn about charity? Or kindness? Or benevolence, or sympathy? These questions jumbled together in Yi-Ting's mind. People gradually streamed in, their faces wrinkled by the cold wind. The first guest to arrive was an older gentleman wearing clothes that were little more than rags. When the wind blew again, the tattered cloth fluttered in the air like the paper streamers hanging at the bottom of an advertisement. The older gentleman stumbled towards them, looking exceptionally fragile. She then thought, oh, I don't have the right to think of them in this way. All right, it's my turn, three tangyuan per bowl. Grandpa, please sit over there, wherever you want. Teacher Li had told her three was an auspicious number, a good number, he really was erudite.

The crowd was bigger than they expected. Her thoughts about people receiving handouts, how shameful that was, simply faded away without any metaphors. She just greeted people and scooped food for them. At one point, a commotion arose at the front of the line: a middle-aged man was asking if he could get two extra tangyuan. Kwei, the boy responsible for scooping salty tangyuan, suddenly froze, his face hardened by the cold wind, or by the question itself. Yi-Ting heard him respond, "That's not something I can decide!" The man quietly moved along, his silence like a gemstone sunk in the noise of the red silk, heavier than ever, pressing down on them. Yi-Ting felt scared; she knew that they did prepare extra tangyuan, but she also didn't want to make Kwei look like a bad guy. Once Yi-Ting received the next bowl, she got distracted. She later realized that she had given the man an extra tangyuan – an unconscious mistake. As she glanced back, she realized that Kwei was looking at her.

Another auntie took a plastic bag to the occasion. Unlike the rest of them, she didn't smell like the garbage piles left behind after a typhoon. She came and said she would like to take the food away and eat at her place. Yi-Ting remembered the smell of the mess from a typhoon. She had passed by those garbage piles in a car; although she might've forgotten how the scene looked, her nose remembered everything. Yes, these stranger uncles and aunts were swine bent over in



their pens, emitting the smell of a flowing, polluted river. I can't think about this anymore. This auntie had a home, she wasn't a homeless person. Stop thinking.

Another auntie asked them for clothes. This time, Kwei spoke up immediately and with confidence, replying, "Auntie, we only provide tangyuan. Only tangyuan. Yes, we can give you more of these, but that's all." The auntie paused as if in a trance, perhaps calculating whether the calories of extra tangyuan equaled the warmth of more clothes. Still visibly dazed, she carried two big bowls away into another tent. The tent became more and more crowded, faces turning red as if shy in the projected light cutting through the red canvas.

Si-Chi was the good-looking one. She took the guests to their seats and gathered the trash from the surroundings. Yi-Ting called Si-Chi to replace her temporarily, claiming that she hadn't been able to use the toilet since the morning. Si-Chi said, "Okay, but you'll have to help me a bit later."

Yi-Ting walked the two blocks back home. The ceiling of the lobby was as high as Heaven. Before she entered the lobby bathroom, she saw Teacher Li's wife scolding their daughter, Hsi-Hsi, who was sitting on the sofa in the corridor leading to the bathroom. Yi-Ting took a quick glimpse and saw that a bowl of tangyuan was on the coffee table in front of the sofa. The tangyuan were on top of each other, overflowing from the pink plastic bowl. She only heard Hsi-Hsi cry out, "Some of the people who came weren't even homeless." Yi-Ting suddenly panicked. She rushed into the bathroom and looked in the mirror at her flat nose scattered with freckles, her nearly square face. Si-Chi always told her that she never got tired of looking at her, and then she would reply, "You're just saying that because it looks like a loaf of Chinese Northeastern flatbread, and you're getting hungry." The frames of the mirrors in the lobby bathroom were Baroque-style gold with carved flowers. At her height, her reflection in this mirror looked like a bust portrait from that era. No matter how she straightened her back, she couldn't see her breasts. She quickly washed her face, thinking how bad this would look like if somebody came in and saw all this! A child who didn't look like much to begin with posing in front of a mirror. How old was Hsi-Hsi? She seemed to be two or three years younger than she and Si-Chi. Teacher Li was such a legendary person! When she left the bathroom, she didn't see mother or daughter, and the bowl of tangyuan was long gone.

Against the back of the sofa were two heads of curly hair, one red and one gray, wispy as clouds. The redhead had to be Auntie Chang, who lived on the tenth floor. Who the gray head of hair belonged to was unknown. That kind of gray resembled precious metal, and Yi-Ting was unable to discern if it was gray in entirety, or rather white strands intertwined with black hair. Black and white equaled gray, after all, and Yi-Ting was passionate about the theory of colors. That was probably why she couldn't manage the piano. The more black-and-white something was, the easier it was for there to be mistakes.

The older women bowed their heads, practically disappearing into the sofa, their voices suddenly rise, like an eagle leaving its aerie – the raptor opening its beak to cry, the prey dropping from its mouth. Such a young, beautiful wife, why would he hit her like that? Auntie Chang lowered her voice, "They say he only hit her where others can't see."

"How did you even find out about it?"



"Oh, I introduced the cleaning lady to them."

"So, the maids can't even keep their mouths shut, how come Chien Sheng-Sheng never intervenes? That girl joined the family less than two years ago."

"Old Chien only cares about his business, nothing else."

Yi-Ting couldn't listen to this anymore. She felt as if she were the one being abused.

Squinting against the cold, Yi-Ting tiptoed back into the street. The bitter wind pierced her face like an acupuncture treatment that a non-believer in Chinese medicine might resort to after no success with Western medicine. She remembered how Yi-Wen started wearing a turtleneck while the weather was still warm. She was hiding both her bruised skin and skin that had yet to be bruised. Liu Yi-Ting felt like she had aged a lot in one day, had been overcooked by time.

Suddenly, Si-Chi came in sight. "Liu Yi-Ting, I thought you promised to help me? But I couldn't find you anywhere, so I ended up coming back alone."

"I was having a stomachache," Yi-Ting replied, while thinking what a lame excuse that was. She changed the topic and asked Si-Chi if she was also back for the toilet. With tears in her eyes, Si-Chi silently mouthed that she was trying to go back and change into fresh clothes. She shouldn't have worn the new coat on such a cold day. Look at those people, they wore so little. "I thought I was being a very bad person," Si-Chi said.

Yi-Ting hugged her tightly and said, "It's not your fault, you couldn't fit into the old one." She then added, "Kids grow very fast!" The remark made both of them burst out laughing and fall into each other. The end of the beautiful Lantern Festival.

Chien Sheng-Sheng's family was especially rich. The octogenarian's family business had gotten wealthy during the period of Taiwan's strongest economic growth. They were one of the richest families in this building, and well known for their money throughout the country. Their son had arrived late, and Chien Yi-Wei was Liu Yi-Ting and Fang Si-Chi's favorite "big brother" to bump into in the elevator. In a way, it showed how much Yi-Ting and Si-Chi wanted to grow up quickly, subconsciously thinking about seeing him again, praising him for his good looks. Both girls ranked their neighbors secretly. Top place went to Teacher Li, with his deep eyes and arched eyebrows carrying a hint of melancholy, his demeanor literary and intellectual, spiritual and scholarly. Yi-Wei came in second, he who spoke with a rare and authentic American East Coast accent, so tall he could reach the sky. Some men wore glasses as if simply collecting dust with their lenses; others wore thin, silvery frames as if seducing others to climb onto them. Some were tall, but seemed prematurely overgrown, and some were like wind and rainforests. The girls never put kids their age onto their list; how could you talk about Proust with someone who only reads *Youth Literary*?

Chien Yi-Wei wasn't young anymore; he was in his forties. Yi-Wen, his wife, was only in her twenties, and also came from wealth. Hsu Yi-Wen had been a Ph.D. student in comparative literature before marriage disrupted her academic career. She had a smooth oval face, big eyes, and long eyelashes; her eyes were so big that she constantly appeared shocked, and her eyelashes so long that they seemed capable of sustaining heavy weights. Her nose was so straight, it was as though spending a year in the US not only improved her English, but also helped her grow a



straighter nose like the Americans. Her skin was as pale as that of a fairy tale princess, with a hint of rosy glow. Long before she had grown into a woman, she had often been asked how she did her eye makeup. She would then reply that those were just her natural eyelashes. One day, Yi-Ting stared closely at Si-Chi's face and said, "You look a lot like Yi-Wen. Or actually, it's Yi-Wen who looks like you." Si-Chi waved it away and said: "No more jokes." The next time Si-Chi met Yi-Wen in the elevator, she took another look, and for the first time, she realized that Yi-Wen and herself both shared this face that very much resembled a tender lamb.

Chien Yi-Wei had a spectacular family background, with universal appeal and an air of American gallantry, without the American world-police self-centeredness. In the beginning, Hsu Yi-Wen had felt wary; how could he still be unmarried at his age? Chien Yi-Wei explained: "Most of the women who approached me only wanted my money. I preferred looking for someone who also came from money, and you're the kindest, most beautiful woman I've ever met...." and so on. He used every single line from the Love Bible verbatim. Yi-Wen thought the explanation was too straightforward, but nonetheless it kind of made sense to her.

Chien Yi-Wei said Hsu Yi-Wen had a beauty beyond compare. A delighted Yi-Wen responded, you're making quite a poetic mixing of metaphors. Inside, she laughed and thought that was the best line she'd ever heard him say. A smile flickered across her face as her happiness bubbled over. Yi-Wei was obsessed – a woman who corrected his grammar. Simply sitting there, Yi-Wen looked like one of the women on the covers of romance novels that sold for as little as 49 New Taiwan dollars at convenience stores. Stunning like a goddess, lifting him with her radiance.

One day, Yi-Wei took her out yet again for sushi. Yi-Wen had a petite figure and a small appetite, and a sushi dinner was one of the few occasions in which Yi-Wei could see her eating something in one big bite. After the last dish was served, before the chef cleaned up and left, Yi-Wen sensed something was amiss, as if she were lifting a mouthful of raw ginger despite knowing it was too spicy for her. No way. Without kneeling, Yi-Wei said plainly, "You'll marry me soon, won't you?"

Yi-Wen had heard many confessions of love, but that was her first proposal – if an imperative sentence could count as such. She ran her fingers through her hair, as if that might actually help untangle her feelings. They had been dating for just over two months. Did commands also count as promises? Yi-Wen said, "Mr. Chien, I'll have to think about it." Immediately she realized how stupid she was: they had been the only two customers at the restaurant that entire night. When Yi-Wei slowly removed a velvet jewelry box from his bag, and Yi-Wen raised her voice for the first time, "No, Yi-Wei, don't show that to me, otherwise you'll start thinking that I'm marrying you only for what's inside that box." And then she regretted it, her face as red as the chef's grilled prawns.

Yi-Wei laughed and paused. "If you think you might accept this in the future, then fine. You even called me by my full name." He put away the box, while Yi-Wen's face remained flushed in embarrassment.

What changed her mind completely, Yi-Wen thought, was seeing him try to surprise her after she finished her classes the day the typhoon arrived. When she stepped through the school



gate, she noticed his tall shadow standing against the headlights of a black car, holding a huge umbrella that trembled in the gusting wind. The two headlights looked like two bright antennae, rain like mosquitos and flies frolicking in the light. The light felt her out with its fingers, pierced her with its sharp gaze. She ran towards him, her rain boots splashing through puddles and producing tiny waves. “I’m really sorry, I didn’t know you would come, if I had known I would’ve...our school floods...a lot.”

In the car, she noticed that his blue dress pants were so wet they looked indigo all the way to his calves, and his leather shoes had deepened from latte to pure Americano. She thought about the folk tale about the lovers at Blue Bridge. The one about the man at the bridge, who insisted on waiting for the woman despite the coming flood, so he eventually held the pillar of the bridge and drowned. Yi-Wen told herself right away that “tugging at the heartstrings” was a very strong expression. Shortly thereafter, they were engaged.

After they got married, Hsu Yi-Wen moved in with Yi-Wei and his family. His parents occupied the penthouse, while Yi-Wei and Yi-Wen took the floor below. During this time, Yi-Ting and Si-Chi often went upstairs to borrow books, which Yi-Wen had aplenty. Yi-Wen would squat down to their eye level and tell them, “I have lots more books in my belly.” Old Mrs. Chien, watching TV in the living room, would say, “The belly is for having babies, not for shelving books.” The TV was so loud they didn’t know how old Mrs. Chien even heard them speaking. Yi-Ting watched a light extinguish in Yi-Wen’s eyes.

Yi-Wen read to them all the time. Listening to Yi-Wen read in Mandarin, Yi-Ting felt the crispness of the words like munching on fresh cabbage, each word a single bite with nary a wasted scrap. She started to realize that Yi-Wen was reading not only to them, but to herself. And so Yi-Ting and Si-Chi went upstairs even more frequently. They used one sentence from Du Fu’s poem to describe their “conspiracy” with Yi-Wen: *“In full spring shall we come back home again.”* The girls were a sailcloth over the beautiful, determined, and audacious Yi-Wen, sheltering her, pushing her, and covering her desire, covering her so closely to make the shape of her desire even more apparent. Every time Yi-Wei finished work and got back home, he would joke as he hung up his suit, “You’re making my wife a nanny again.” His clothes were just like the person who wore them, emitting the scent of freshness. Just one look from those eyes was like a promise of paradise.

For a while, they were reading Dostoevsky. Following Yi-Wen, they read chronologically. When they started reading *The Brothers Karamazov*, Yi-Wen said, “Remember Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* and Duke Myshkin in *The Idiot*? They were just like Smerdyakov. They all had epilepsy. Dostoevsky had it himself. This was to say, Dostoevsky thought that those who were closest to Christianity were the most natural humans, yet they didn’t have a place in society. That was also to say, only the non-socialized were real humans. Do you both understand the difference between being a hermit and being antisocial?” Years later, Liu Yi-Ting still couldn’t understand why Yi-Wen would be willing to tell children that much at their age. How would she teach them about Dostoevsky when they hadn’t even started reading Giddens Ko or Hiyawu? Maybe she was compensating for something? Did Yi-Wen hope they would get the message that she had failed to



understand at their age? Did she hope they would be able to make a connection to the knowledge that she thought they actually needed?

One day, Yi-Wen told them that Teacher Li, who lived downstairs, knew they had been reading Dostoevsky recently. He said that Murakami once arrogantly claimed that very few people in the world could recite all three Karamazov brothers' names. The next time they bumped into each other, he would test them. Dmitri, Ivan, and Alexei. "Why didn't Si-Chi recite with us?" Yi-Ting wondered.

At that moment, Yi-Wei came home. Yi-Wen looked over to the door, as though she could see the key chewing in the lock with that screeching sound. She glanced at the paper bag in Yi-Wei's hand, her gaze carrying both the rain of mercy and the light of doubt. She said, "That's my favorite cake! But your mother asked me to eat less."

Yi-Wei looked at Yi-Wen and laughed. His smile rippled his face like a pebble tossed in a pond. He said, "You mean this? Oh, it's only for the kids." Yi-Ting and Si-Chi were thrilled, but tried to stay calm. They shouldn't behave like monsters. "We were just reading Dostoevsky. Dmitri, Ivan, and Alexei."

Yi-Wei smiled even wider. "Little girls shouldn't take food from strangers, so I might as well eat it all myself."

Yi-Wen snatched the paper bag and said, "Stop teasing them." Yi-Ting noticed that the moment Yi-Wen touched Yi-Wei's hand, a strange expression appeared on her face. Yi-Ting had thought that it might be the shyness of a newlywed bride, just like their feigned indifference toward the food. Food, facial expressions, and personalities are deeply connected. She later learned that Yi-Wei nurtured a little beast inside of Yi-Wen called fear, which at that moment was dashing against the fence that was Yi-Wen's face. It was a montage of pain she saw. Years later, after Yi-Ting and Si-Chi entered high school and left home, they heard that Yi-Wei had beaten Yi-Wen so hard during her pregnancy that she lost her baby. Old Mrs. Chien wanted grandsons the most. Dmitri, Ivan, and Alexei.

That day, they gathered around the table and ate cake like it was someone's birthday. Yi-Wei talked about his work in the stock market, but the girls thought it sounded like he was going to the supermarket; he said stock time, the girls thought he asked them what time it was; he said human resources and they thought he was talking about human virtues and morality. They enjoyed being treated as adults, but they liked even more to turn back into children again after being adults for a while. Suddenly, Yi-Wei said, "Si-Chi does look like Yi-Wen. Look, so alike! The eyebrows, the profile, and the elegance." Yi-Ting felt left out. The extravagant house and beautiful people in front of her looked like a family. Yi-Ting was indignant; she knew so much more than any child in the world, but she would never understand how it felt to be a woman aware of her own beauty, walking on the street and holding her head low.

Soon it was time to enter high school. While most of the students in their neighborhood had decided to stay in their hometown, Mama Liu and Mama Fang were talking about sending Yi-Ting and Si-Chi to Taipei. They could live in the same apartment and take care of each other. The girls were watching TV in the living room, finding the TV programs ever more interesting after a



long, stressful entrance exam. Mama Liu said, Teacher Li told me he usually spends half the week in Taipei, so the girls could contact him if they needed help. Yi-Ting noticed that Si-Chi slumped even more, as if her mama's sentences were crushing her. Si-Chi mouthed to Yi-Ting, "Would you really want to go to Taipei?"

Yi-Ting said, "Yeah, I would love to. There are so many movie theaters there!"

The decision was then settled by their mamas. The only thing they had yet to decide was whether to stay at the Liu family's house or the Fang family's house in Taipei.

The girls brought only a few suitcases with them. When they arrived at the apartment, dust was flying everywhere, drifting in the sunbeam that entered through the little window of their room. Several cardboard boxes lay on the floor, looking more homesick than either of them. They took their underwear out, one piece after another. But most of what they brought were books. The sunlight inside the apartment spoke the language of silence, the kind that healthy people wouldn't even dare to acknowledge. Yi-Ting broke the silence as though she were cutting open a box, "Thank god we share books, otherwise these boxes would be double the weight. Too bad we can't share our textbooks." Si-Chi was as still and silent as the air around them. When Yi-Ting approached her, she saw that tears were tumbling and boiling in Si-Chi's eyes. "Why are you crying?" she asked.

"Yi-Ting, would you be mad at me if I told you that I'm Teacher Li's girlfriend?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's exactly as it sounds."

"What do you mean, *his girlfriend*?"

"Just what I said."

"When did this start?"

"I forget."

"Do our moms know?"

"No."

"How far have you two gone?"

"We've done everything, even stuff we shouldn't be doing."

"Oh my god, Fang Si-Chi, he has a wife, he has Hsi-Hsi, what do you think you're doing? You're so disgusting, get away from me!"

Si-Chi stared at Yi-Ting, her tears growing from seeds to beans. She suddenly lost it, wailing so hard that she seemed to reveal everything, letting it all out.

"Fang Si-Chi, you know how much I admire Teacher Li, why are you taking him away from me?"

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to. Don't say sorry to me."

"But I am sorry."

"How much older than us is Teacher Li?"

"Thirty-seven years."

"Oh my gosh, you're just so disgusting, I can't even talk to you anymore."



Liu Yi-Ting felt awful at the start of their first year in high school. Si-Chi stayed out most of the time without coming home. When she was home, she wailed. Through the wall, Yi-Ting could hear Si-Chi burying her face in the pillow and screaming every night. The cotton wool began to shed from the pillow, and Yi-Ting could hear the scream turn silent like sediment settling in a water glass. They had once been twin spirits. It wasn't like one of them loved Fitzgerald while the other muddled through her feelings for Hemingway; rather, they both fell in love with Fitzgerald and hated Hemingway for the exact same reasons. It wasn't like one could fill in a sentence the other forgot, but rather they would forget the exact same paragraph together. Sometimes, in the afternoon, Teacher Li would pick Si-Chi up downstairs at their apartment. Yi-Ting would peek from the curtains at the gleaming yellow roof of the taxi, her cheeks burning hot. Teacher Li had a bald spot on the top of his head, which Yi-Ting would never be able to see clearly from any other angle. Si-Chi's hairline was straight as a highway. If you drove along it, it would lead to the most sinister truth in the world. Every time Si-Chi pulled her pale little calves into the taxi and slammed the door, Yi-Ting felt like someone had just slapped her.

"How long are you two going to keep this up?"

"I don't know."

"Are you hoping that he'll get a divorce?"

"No."

"You know this won't last, right?"

"Yeah, I know. He— He said that I'll fall in love with other boys, then we'll end this. I— I'm in so much pain."

"I thought you were enjoying yourself."

"Please don't talk to me like that! If I died, would you be sad?"

"Are you going to commit suicide? How? Are you going to jump off the building? Can you not jump from my family's building?"

They had once been twins of the mind, spirit, and soul. Back then, whenever Yi-Wen read to them, Yi-Wen would blurt out that she envied their friendship. Together, they would reply that they were actually envious of Yi-Wen and Yi-Wei's relationship. Yi-Wen then said, "Falling in love, well, that kind of love is different. Plato said humans are looking for the other half of themselves that they lost; which is to say, two people come together as one to be complete, but once they're put together, they become solitary again. Do you understand? For girls like you, it doesn't matter what you lack, or what you have but don't need. Because you are each other's mirror. Only if you never become one will you never be alone."

Around noon one day that summer, Fang Si-Chi had skipped classes three days in a row without coming home. The bugs and birds outside were screeching. If you were to stand under the big banyan tree and listen to the cicadas, their chirps would tremble so much in the air that they would wrinkle your skin. With the cicadas hidden from sight, it was as if the banyan tree was singing. *Won—wonwonwonwon, Won—wonwonwonwon.* Yi-Ting realized that her phone was buzzing.

The teacher turned from the podium. "Whose cell phone is *in heat*?"

Under her desk, Yi-Ting flipped her phone open: an unknown number. She hung up.



Won— wonwonwonwon. Dammit, let me hang up again. They're calling me again!

Her teacher's expression turned sincere, and he suggested, "If it's urgent, then pick it up."

"Teacher, it's not urgent at all. Okay, they're calling me again, I'm sorry, Teacher, I need to head out for a bit."

It was from a police station at some lake out on Yangmingshan two hours away from the city. Yi-Ting took a taxi up the mountain, her heart winding like the path that led to the station. She thought the shape of the mountain looked like a Christmas tree. As children, they had always stood on their tiptoes to grab the star from the top of the tree; it had been one of the things she remembered most from vacation. Si-Chi was on the mountain, in the police station? Yi-Ting felt her heart stand on tiptoes. When she got out of the taxi, a police officer quickly approached and checked if she was Miss Liu Yi-Ting. Yes. "We found your friend up on the mountain." Yi-Ting thought, *found*, what an ominous word.

The police asked, "Has she always been like this?" What's going on with her? The police station was huge, and Yi-Ting couldn't locate Si-Chi just by looking around. Unless – unless – unless *that* was her? Si-Chi's hair was clotted together, covering half of her face; her face was flaking from sunburn and bitten all over by mosquitos and bugs. Her cheeks sank inward, her lips swollen and scabbed. She smelled like one of those homeless people they had met during the Lantern Festival many years ago. Oh my gosh, why did they handcuff her? The police looked at her with surprise and said, "Isn't it obvious?" Yi-Ting squatted and brushed the hair away from one side of Si-Chi's face. Si-Chi's neck looked like it was about to crack in half, her eyes wide open, the mucus and saliva dripping down onto her clothes. Just then, Fang Si-Chi blurted out, "Haha!"

Liu Yi-Ting couldn't understand what the doctor was talking about. But she knew that it meant Si-Chi had gone insane. Mama Fang said there was no way they could take care of Si-Chi's needs at home, nor could they even let her stay in Kaohsiung. There were several doctors living in the same building as the family. Si-Chi couldn't stay in Taipei either; there were too many doctor parents from the elite class she attended. Mama Fang compromised by sending Si-Chi to a mental health center in Taichung. Yi-Ting thought about Taiwan, their island, folded in half, Taipei and Kaohsiung being the peaks, with Taichung as the valley. And at that moment, Si-Chi had fallen into the valley. Yi-Ting's soulmate.

From that day on, Yi-Ting often jerked awake in her sleep with tears streaming down her face, and waited to hear weeping from the other side of the wall to echo her own. Mama Fang never even came to Taipei to gather Si-Chi's belongings. After the end of the semester, Yi-Ting finally opened the door to Si-Chi's room. She stroked the stuffed animal on Si-Chi's bedside, a tiny pink sheep, touched the stationery set identical to her own, and smoothed over the school number embroidered on Si-Chi's uniform. It felt like running her hands over the stone wall of an ancient ruin and suddenly touching a piece of hardened gum; it was like forgetting one simple word in a lecture that is life. Yi-Ting knew something had gone wrong. She wondered when their paths had started to diverge; now they were in two completely different worlds. They used to move in parallel, living side by side. And then Si-Chi somehow took a crooked path.



Yi-Ting wilted as she stood in the middle of Si-Chi's bedroom. It looked exactly like her own. She realized that from then on, she would look like someone who had lost their child in an amusement park. Yi-Ting cried for a long time before noticing a pink notebook lying on the desk. Next to the diary was a fountain pen with an open cap. *This must be her diary.* Yi-Ting had never seen Si-Chi write with such messy penmanship. It must have been something she had planned to keep private. The pages had turned soft and wrinkled from too much handling, which made it hard for Yi-Ting to just peek through. In the diary, Si-Chi had added footnotes to diary entries she had written long ago. The main content was in blue, while the footnotes were written in red, just like how Si-Chi did her homework. The first page Yi-Ting read was written several days before Si-Chi was found on the mountain. There was only one line: Today, it rained again, the weather report is always lying. But this sentence wasn't what Yi-Ting was looking for. She wanted to find out when things had taken a wrong turn for Si-Chi. She decided to start from the beginning. And then she found it on the first page.

In blue: "I have to write this down so the ink can dilute my feelings, otherwise I'll go crazy. I took my essay downstairs for Teacher Li to correct it. He took out his thing and forced me against the wall. Teacher Li said nine words: 'If that's no good, why don't you use your mouth?' I spit out six words: 'I can't. I don't know how.' And then he stuffed it in my mouth. It felt like drowning. When I was able to talk again, I told Teacher Li: 'I'm sorry.' It felt like I just failed my homework, even though it was not my homework. Teacher Li asked if I would bring another essay to him next week. I lifted my head and felt like I could see through the ceiling, and could see my mama shooting the breeze with her friends, talking about my accomplishments at school. I know that whenever I don't know how to respond to adults, it's better to say yes. I saw the ceiling roll and tumble like ocean waves past Teacher Li's shoulder. That moment was like accidentally ripping a dress when I was little. He said, 'This is how Teacher shows you he loves you, do you understand?' He got it wrong, I'm not the kind of little kid who would mistake a penis for a popsicle. We both worshipped Teacher Li. We said that we wanted a husband like him when we grew up. Sometimes when the joke went on for too long, we'd say we wished he was our husband. After thinking for days, I've figured out the only way forward. I can't just *like* Teacher Li, I have to *love* him. Your lover can do anything to you, right? Thoughts are such powerful things! I'm a counterfeit of my past self. I have to love Teacher Li or I'll be in too much pain."

In red: "Why did I say I didn't know how? What if I didn't want to? What if I told you that you couldn't? I didn't realize until now that everything can be boiled down to the first scene: He forced himself inside of me, and I apologized for it."

Yi-Ting continued reading like a child nibbling on cookies; no matter how careful she was, there would always be more crumbs on the floor than in her mouth. She finally understood. Every pore on her body was suffocating, her eyes staring blankly through a veil of tears. So much noise in the room – she was bawling – wailing like a crow shot by a hunter's arrow and falling from the sky, entangled in its own screaming. But nobody hunts crows to begin with. *Why didn't you tell me, Si-Chi?* Staring at the date, Yi-Ting saw it was five years ago in the fall, the year Auntie Chang's daughter finally got married. That was around the time when Yi-Wen first moved into



their apartment building, and Yi-Wei started beating her. Five years ago, Yi-Ting and Si-Chi were only thirteen.

The story needs to be told again from the beginning.

Paradise Lost

Fang Si-Chi and Liu Yi-Ting had been neighbors for a long time. The seventh floor was at awkward height: jumping off could mean death, paralysis, or just broken arms and legs. Theirs was the era of name-brand schools and elite classes, which they had attended since they were very little, but they weren't like the neighbors' kids who could travel abroad whenever they liked. "It's hard enough to spend our whole lives mastering Chinese," they said. They seldom talked about their feelings. Si-Chi knew that it came off as hostile and threatening for a porcelain doll of a girl like herself to show off her intelligence. As for Yi-Ting, she knew that people would think an ugly girl acting all smart was just plain crazy. Thankfully they had each other, otherwise they both would have been suffocated by their knowledge of this world. They read the poet Baudelaire instead of the Baudelaire from *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. They found out about arsenic from *Madame Bovary* and not the famous Hong Kong movie *Hail the Judge*. This was how different they were from other kids their age.

When Lee Kuo-Hua and his family moved into this building, they visited all their upstairs and downstairs neighbors. They also brought a vase-like porcelain urn of an expensive seafood dish called Buddha's Temptation to every household. With one hand around the urn and the other holding their daughter Hsi-Hsi's hand, Teacher Li's wife looked like she was more afraid of losing the urn than her daughter. When they visited the Fang family, they saw rows and rows of books lining the wall. Lee Kuo-Hua perused the spines of the books and complimented Mr. and Mrs. Fang's literary tastes. Teacher Li told them that after teaching in the cram school for so long, all that seemed to matter to his students was improving a grade by a few more points or how fast they could finish a test. "And I'm but a lowly teacher."

Mrs. Fang immediately replied with humility and pride, "These books aren't ours, they're our daughter's."

Teacher Li asked, "How old is your daughter?" That year, the girls were twelve years old, freshly graduated from elementary school. Teacher Li objected, "But this must be a college student's bookshelf! Where's your daughter?" Si-Chi wasn't at home at the time, she had gone over to Yi-Ting's place. After several days, Teacher Li visited the Liu family, where he also found a row of books on the wall. His brownish-red fingers ran over the spines of the books as if playing a flourish on a piano. He complimented the Liu family in the same fashion. But there wasn't an opportunity to introduce Yi-Ting to him either because she happened to be over at Si-Chi's place that day. After Teacher Li's daughter Hsi-Hsi went back home, she stood on top of her bed and gestured with her hands on the wall: "Mommy, can you also get me a bookshelf?"



Young Mr. Chien from the penthouse was getting married. The family invited everyone they knew in the building. It was said that the bride was introduced to young Mr. Chien by Auntie Chang on the tenth floor. Auntie Chang had just married her daughter off to someone else, and so she went on matchmaking right after that. Si-Chi knocked on the Liu family's door, asking if they were ready. Yi-Ting answered the door in a fluffy pink dress, looking like she had been crammed into it. Si-Chi thought she looked ridiculous, but also felt a surge of pain and pity for her. Yi-Ting must have fussed for a long time before figuring out what she could wear to the wedding. Yi-Ting saw Si-Chi's look and said, I already told my mama that dresses are not for me. "What if I outshine the bride?" Si-Chi understood that Yi-Ting was joking to let her know that there was nothing to worry about. She could finally unclench her insides.

