

FISH EYE

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Following clues found in a letter, a struggling writer begins investigating a case that has gone cold for thirty years: a murder involving a missing human cornea and a poisoning incident at a high school. Soon, however, he becomes entangled in the convoluted relationships and dark secrets of a wealthy family, and at the heart of it all – a murderous tendency that is passed from one generation to the next.

Yeh Sheng-Chiu, a struggling writer suffering from an eye condition, accepts a new commission from a book editor. Following the leads in a mysterious letter, Yeh begins to investigate a murder case that's been cold for thirty years, hoping to write a true crime story that will revive his ailing career.

The letter tells the horrific tale of a blind and infertile woman, raised in darkness, who, after receiving an organ transplant from an executed prisoner, not only regains her sight, but also her womb. Moreover, the woman begins receiving portents of death in the form of a static-like haze that clouds her vision.

Though the letter reads like fiction, certain details are connected to a child-killer case from thirty years past – personal details that would not have been unavailable to the general public. Why would anyone take such pains to hide these facts within a fictional tale?

The trail of clues leads Yeh Sheng-Chiu to an elite high school in Taitung, where, three years earlier, a poisoning incident had occurred. The circumstances surrounding the incident, as well as the complex family relations of a mysterious cross-dressing student named Hua Pai-Yueh, all echo elements of the brutal murder case. Complicating matters are a pair of twins as different as night and day, a mistress hoping to gain a fortune after bearing a child, a student who poisons a friend for no apparent reason, and a barren mother who becomes a copy-cat killer, each carrying secrets they are



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reluctant to reveal. Before long, what started as a fact-finding trip lands Yeh Sheng-Chiu in a morass of unsolved mysteries.

Fish Eye, the latest novel from best-selling author Xerxes, draws source material from one of Taiwan's most shocking death-penalty cases: the Chen-Kao Lien-Yeh murders, carried out with poisoned candy. Blending reality and fiction, Xerxes imaginatively enters the mind of the notorious female killer, challenging our conceptions of motherhood with a disturbing question: "Is it true that every mother must love her child? Or, might she choose not to love this living thing that tortured her for nine months before being painfully expelled from her body?"

Xerxes 薛西斯

Xerxes is one of the most exciting young novelists on Taiwan's science fiction/mystery scene. Deeply inspired by Soji Shimada's *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, Xerxes is dedicated to incorporating intrigue and exacting deduction 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 Kavalan Soji Shimada Mystery Award. Her previous collaboration with Mitsuda Shinzo, JeTauZi, Xiao Xiang Shen, and Chan Ho-Kei – *Chopsticks* – has sold rights in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, and Russia.

FISH EYE

By Xerses

Translated by Roddy Flagg

Chapter 2

Yeh Sheng-chiu neatly folded the pages along the original creases and returned them to the envelope. Kan couldn't wait: "What do you think?"

"About what? Do you want him to write for Century Literature?"

"No, I don't mean if you think it's good or not. I'm interested in your overall impression of the piece. I mean, what was the first thing it made you think. Was there anything you noticed?"

Seeing Yeh still confused, Kan explained: "There is something in particular I have in mind, of course. But I want to hear what you think. You're a writer, you'll have a different point of view."

Yeh had no option but to remove the pages from the envelope again. He skimmed through them a few times more.

But extra readings wouldn't change anything. It was always the same – his first impression would be his last. It was like writing a Chinese character: there was an order to the strokes, a structure. A structure he could see at a glance.

"Okay. The first thing I really noticed was..."

He took the two pages and placed them on the table, each as far from the other as possible. "I think the protagonist changes between these two pages."

"How do you mean?"

The question was a little pointed and Yeh could tell he wasn't giving the answers the other man hoped for. But Kan had retrieved the two pages and was reading them himself, comparing them, as if checking a lottery win.

"But why?" Kan asked, louder now: "At the end the woman says she's got someone else's eyes and womb! It's matches up with earlier... Sorry, I don't get it. You think there's a mystery in here to solve?"

"I'm not saying there's a clue in there or anything," sighed Yeh. "In terms of the narrative, it's obviously the same character. But I think the author had different people – or whatever – in mind when writing the two sections. For me, the protagonist in the first half doesn't feel like a real person."

Kan waited, wide-eyed, for Yeh's further explanation. And so, Yeh had to go on: "It's a ghost story, yes. But the first half of it doesn't feel real. And when I say that, I'm not saying the ability to predict death is unrealistic. I mean how it's written, the vocabulary. In the second half you've got a farmhouse, neighbors, trucks, the police, all that. It gives you a sense that the woman is living in the real world. Some village in the south, probably, somewhere like that."

“But that’s missing from the first half. It could be anywhere. Could be set in the mountains in 16th century Japan, you wouldn’t know. You only get modern terms as the twist in the plot approaches. The organ transplants, all that. That’s something else I noticed, actually. Look, at the start it makes you want to ask ‘Where are her eyes?’ and ‘Why are her eyes missing?’ It made me think of some monstrous thing with its eyes removed, just two black holes where they should be.”

Kan nodded fast and hard, clearly in full agreement.

“But then the writing shifts and it becomes more realistic. Now it’s just a ‘cornea transplant’. That does away with the eyeless monster; our protagonist turns out to have undergone eye surgery. And it’s even clearer in the second half. Take out the supernatural powers and you’ve lost any sense of the weird.”

“I think in the second half the author is thinking of a real person, he’s got a model in mind. And because it’s a real person, the monstrous aspect gets dropped. Of course, I’ve no way of knowing if he’s started basing it on a real person or he’s come up with a more plausible invention. The first half is different, though. I don’t really know what he’s trying to say. It might even be an analogy for something? But the story’s got several different things going on, all mixed up.”

Yeh’s expounding of his views had left him thirsty. He finished his coffee, now cold and bitter, in a single gulp.

Kan’s face, screwed up in concentration as he listened, finally relaxed and he took a deep breath, as if he had been the one doing the talking. And then, he laughed and clapped. “I knew it! I knew an author would look at it differently. I’d never thought of looking at it that way. Sheng-chiu, that was fascinating!”

“So, what do you think?” Yeh asked. “Will you share your considered view as an experienced professional journalist?”

“Naturally. A fair trade is only fair.” Kan leaned across the table, as if about to impart some secret, and whispered: “My first impression of the letter was completely different. A million miles from yours! What I was interested in was the executed criminal they took the organs from. It says they took a womb. That means it was a woman, right?”

Yeh didn’t see the point: “So?”

Kan laughed. “My friend, do you know how many women have been executed in Taiwan since the civil war?”

It wasn’t a question Yeh had given much thought and Kan did not wait for an answer: “Ignoring political cases, five. There have been almost five hundred executions in those seventy years. But only five of them were women.”

It was a lot less than Yeh had expected. Not that he was an advocate for gender equality in the matter, but the imbalance was a bit of a shock. For a moment, he even felt a little guilty. *Are we men born law-breakers?*

But that only lasted a moment. *I haven’t killed anyone*, he thought. *I’m not even an arsonist*. The guilt faded as fast as it had come.

Kan continued: "And if there are only five of them, I thought, maybe one of them was the basis for the woman in the story. And if so, which one?" With so few candidates, he was saying, it wouldn't be hard to check. "And I happen to know a thing or two about murderesses."

"Oh yes. I've heard you're a big fan."

"I prefer to say I have an interest in their cases, thank you," Kan corrected, a little annoyed: "The first big case I covered, back in 95, was Pan Shu-ming. Does the name ring any bells?"

It did, but Yeh couldn't recall any details. Kan sighed. "You won't have, I know. How old would you have been? Ten, if that? The papers called her the Black Widow. She was a clever one. She could manipulate men into situations where she could kill them, as easy as that. She'd find a new man and kill off the old one."

"So is she the woman in the story?"

"No, she wasn't sentenced to death. Actually, now I think about it, she might be out by now." Kan paused a moment, then went on: "I'll always remember something she said when she was arrested. She said: 'I wasn't scared to see the police at my door. I was happy.'"

"I guess once you're arrested, it's over. You don't have to spend your life in fear."

"For some, yes. But not for her. The last man she'd killed was this big strong type. Former special forces. She'd killed him and dumped the body in a mountain gorge. But then she'd got worried: what if she hadn't really killed him? She used to have nightmares about him knocking on the door. So, when the police turned up, she could be one hundred percent sure he was dead. And that was the best possible news she could have got."

It was a tragic sort of happiness. She was more scared of a man than the risk of the death penalty. A man like that perhaps deserved to die, Yeh Sheng-chiu thought to himself. But he couldn't say that, so instead he said: "It's a kind of positive thinking, I suppose."

"Positive thinking?" Kan chuckled: "So was your idea. Anyway, ever since covering the Pan Shu-ming case I've had a particular interest in cases involving female murderers. I can't quite explain why. They just work differently to the men. Sometimes I even find myself understanding them."

"How so?"

"I don't mean I agree with murder. But some cases make me think that in the same situation, I might do the same thing. That even if you gave them another chance to live their lives, they'd commit the same crimes, because to do so is in their own best interests. Women always know what's in their best interests, I feel. And if they kill, it's because it's in their interests to do so. I don't mean that it'll make them rich or anything. Just that they don't believe there are any other options."

"You sound as if you think men just go about killing at random." Yeh laughed a little: "Are you sure you're not being a chauvinist? If I was going to kill anyone, it would mean it was in my own interest too."

Kan took this as a cue to bring Yeh up to speed on his findings. After the Pan Shu-ming case, Kan had covered a number of other female murderers. None of them fit, though, as none had been sentenced to death: Taiwan stopped executing women sometime prior to the 1990s. At that

point, Kan was only a rookie reporter on the local news beat. He had some vague memories of the older cases, but had had to refer back to the archives.

There weren't many cases that fit the bill, and he'd soon found one which matched the details in the story.

Kuo Lien-tzu. Executed 1989.

In the autumn of 1986, the Pingtung township of Fangliao was rocked by a series of child murders. Kuo Lien-tzu, a woman in her thirties, was found to have laced candies with potassium cyanate purchased from a pharmacy and lured seven children into consuming the poison. The motive: years of distress and resentment at being unable to have children after suffering uterine fibroids. The sight and sound of her neighbor's happy children playing in the street filled her with jealousy and rage until, eventually, she was driven to murder.

Kan immediately knew he could be on the right trail: Just like Kuo, the ghost in the story was unable to have children. But what really got the hairs on the back of his neck going was something that happened after the execution.

Kuo's mother, Kuo Chin-kuei, had complained her daughter's corneas had been stolen.

There was only one short report on the matter, with no indication of what happened next. But if there was a model for the executed criminal in the story, there was no doubt: it had to be Kuo Lien-tzu.

"So?" Yeh was confused as to exactly what Kan was driving at with the extended explanation: "That would mean the author referred to Kuo's case, sure. But is there anything else special about the case?"

"I simply had to know if Kuo's corneas really were taken or not. I made a few phone calls to consult with some retired colleagues, to see if any of them had covered the story."

The glint in Kan's eyes made it clear he had hit paydirt and Yeh had to admit he was getting interested himself. Noticing Kan's mug was empty, he waved at a server for a refill.

"I found a few who remembered covering the story, but none of them could recall anything about stolen corneas. I mean, it wouldn't have been a big thing. But one of them suggested I call the Tainan morgue and ask who would have been working back then. Any executions would end up being sent there, maybe someone would remember something.

"So, I gave them a call. I figured I might as well try my luck. And guess what? I spoke to the director and he knew exactly what I was talking about! He was working there, back in the 80s. He was in his early thirties at the time, a junior functionary. He said Kuo Lien-tzu's mother raised merry hell over it. She kept demanding the prosecutors exhume the body to check and the municipal government had to get involved. He said it was still the most farcical case he'd ever seen, even thirty years later."

"And? Were her corneas missing?"

"Who knows! They exhumed the body, sure enough. But it had been buried for over a month, in August. When they dug it up anything that was going to rot already had!"

What would it feel like? To have my eyes rot? Yeh instinctively reached out to press at the edges of his eyes. Still there, still firm. *Things can rot from the inside out though, can't they? Maybe there's something in there already soft and stinking.*

Kan, unaware of Yeh's concerns, gave an "and there's more" smile. "But I did hear one interesting thing."

"What?"

"I told the guy at the morgue a little about what's in the story and he got a proper fright. It turns out he'd seen Kuo's body. And, he said, there was a birthmark on the left side of her belly, just like the woman in the story. In the shape of a lotus, next to a big long scar. Put the birthmark and the scar together and you could say it looked like a flower. But it was more like a scorpion, he said, all legs and tail and terrifying. So he remembered it very well."

The image had Yeh shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"So who wrote the story, then? A relative of Kuo Lien-tzu?"

The corneas being stolen was one thing, but the birthmark another entirely. That wasn't something you could find in a newspaper archive. It had to be someone who had tracked down the medical records or prison records. Or, someone who knew Kuo personally.

"I don't know. All I do know is that this isn't some random made-up story. At the very least the author has to be someone who knew Kuo Lien-tzu personally. But that means there's something else I can't make sense of."

"Which is?"

"Remember I said she couldn't have kids, because she'd had uterine fibroids. That was why she poisoned the neighbor's kids. The big scar on her belly mentioned in the story was from the operation to remove the tumor."

Yeh Sheng-chiu could barely handle a laser drilling tiny holes in his corneas. He couldn't imagine having his stomach sliced open. *Who could let that be done to themselves?* He kept on imagining Japanese samurai committing seppuku by disemboweling themselves.

He had to ask: "Is that the only way to treat uterine fibroids? An operation?"

It sounded like he was asking Kan to answer from personal experience. As if Kan had once had a tumor growing on his uterus. Kan shook his head, the bug-in-the-mouth look of disgust on his face mirroring Yeh's. "I don't know. But when they operated on Kuo they removed the entire womb."

"Huh? The whole thing? Wait, you mean..."

"No. That can't have anything to do with the transplant in the story. The uterine fibroids were more than a decade before the murders."

Yeh referred back to the story. Sure enough, that was the case. The wound on the woman's belly was described as stitched, healed - and you might sew a corpse up after removing an organ, but it wouldn't heal, would it?

But if that was the case, something in the story didn't make sense.

"But if Kuo had her womb removed ten-odd years back, where did the womb the ghost woman got come from? Whose was it?"

They fell silent. The story just got stranger the more they thought about it.

Maybe they didn't need to overthink it. The author must have simply made it up. But why? Why include it in the story? If the author knew of a concealed birthmark and the scar, why didn't they know her womb had been removed?

"Honestly, I don't even know if you *can* transplant a womb!" And that sort of ended the topic. Yeh hurried to get the discussion back to the publishing industry: "So why did you bring me the story? What would you like me to do with it?"

"I want you to investigate it."

"Me?" It was such a shock that Yeh had to laugh. "Am I such a bad novelist you're suggesting a change of career?"

"Don't get mad! It's not a career change. I'm not saying as an investigative journalist. I've already said I'm worried about you – I'm tired of watching you obsess over every last detail of your novels. Think of it as some time off. Take the story and look into any aspect of it that you find interesting. I'll cover your expenses."

"A free lunch? I don't believe in them."

"Good, you're not getting one. Write up the investigation as a journal. We'll serialize it online. Or whatever, it doesn't have to be a journal. Write whatever you feel like! You could write a novel, essays, anything. As long as you start with Kuo Lien-tsu and work out from there."

"Why me? I'm not a crime writer."

"Who says you aren't? *Embers of Spring* was a murder mystery, wasn't it? Not that I understood the ending..."

"Why didn't you ask me about it then?"

"We'd only just met, and I'd only just started working as an editor. I was scared you'd think I was no good." Kan laughed at himself, a little embarrassed. "So, who did kill the hero's brother?"

"Whoever you want it to be!" Yeh said, unwilling to engage.

A moment later he spoke again: "Look, what exactly do you want me to investigate? Surely you don't really think there's a murderer out there who knows in advance who's going to die?"

"I'm keeping an open mind." Kan said, as if talking of tomorrow's weather. But it's fascinating, don't you think? Anyway, I'm not looking for crime reporting or a murder investigation. I want a story. Tell a good story, get the readers interested. That's all I need. Kuo Lien-tsu's case is shocking, but there's no mystery there. It's already solved. If I just wanted another documentary account I could ask anyone and it wouldn't come out any different."

Yeh did not miss the implication: "A documentary account? Is someone already writing one?"