

THE THIEF

小偷

One week, Ms. Wang's fifth-grade classroom erupts in protest. "Teacher, I can't find my gold pen!" "Where did my lunch money go?" "I just put money on my bus pass, and it disappeared!" A string of precious objects goes missing, beginning with young Jade's favorite gold pen, which is found soon after in her classmate Yonghe's desk. The head student is convinced Yonghe stole the pen, and in the flurry of events that follow, groups form and tempers begin to rise.

Each individual chapter focuses on one student, so everyone has a chance to tell his or her story. But who is telling the truth? Who deserves to be right? Wang Shu-Fen weaves a web of hearsay reminiscent of Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, in which everyone has a story that is complete, yet completely personal.

Former elementary school teacher Wang recreates for us the world of growing minds and hearts, whose society is no less complicated, nor any less fascinating than that of adults.

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The wildly creative and capable Wang Shu-Fen has taught art, hosted for television, and even acted as principal of a national elementary school. A gifted storyteller, she has written poems, essays, and stories for children, including *Chun-Wei Goes to Elementary School*, *An Idiot Like Me*, and over fifty other titles.

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Illustrator Hsu Chih-Hung is a freelance illustrator who has contributed work to magazines and books. He is especially adept at crafty portrayals of old urban and suburban Taiwanese living spaces. His works include *Before Sunset*, *The Diary Blues*, and others.



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2. JADE

Jade had been on the move ever since she could remember. And as anyone who's ever packed up their lives and moved can testify, something goes missing every time you do. After so many moves, many things had been lost and by now, little remained. Gone, bit by bit, until Jade was left with nothing. Not even a friend to call her own.

There was no time to get to know the other kids, or if she knew them to become close. No, Jade couldn't remember ever having had a friend.

But this time, Jade had a plan. And it was going to start with a pen.

As Jade's family started to pack up again for the umpteenth time to move to their umpteenth new apartment, Jade went to a drawer and took out a pen. Her aunt had picked it up for free from the shopping mall and had given it to her the last time they had been to visit. Her cousin couldn't care less for a cheap little thing like that, but Jade took it gladly. She tore open a new notebook, wrapped it along with the pen and placed it carefully in her bag. She was going to give them to the richest girl in her class the next day at school.

The plan went better than Jade could have hoped. The next day, the usually somewhat snotty little princess smiled warmly and presented Jade with a shiny silver purse in return. "You're moving? What a shame we didn't get to spend more time together. And you'll miss my birthday party next weekend. What a pity."

A pity? Jade didn't think so. She was delighted. This present was perfect. She was going to invest it. This was only the start of her new game, which she was going to call the Grand Gift Swap.

The purse went to the class president of her new school, for which she received a box of colored pens. This Jade then gave to the most popular girl in the class, who to Jade's surprise, organized for a group of girls to club together and buy Jade a really big present. Jade opened the beautifully decorated box to reveal a stationery set which included the cutest pair of scissors, a stapler and a set of colored pens, including one in gold.

Jade was most satisfied. The gold pen came with her every day to school. She had only been at her new school for a month, but buoyed by her success, she began weaving elaborate stories, without thinking of the potential consequences. "I went to Disneyland Tokyo over the summer holidays. They had all kinds of colored pens there, gold, silver, cream, I bought one of each! They're perfect for writing cards."

Her new classmates were friendly. There was only one girl called Snow who wasn't so nice. Snow was always interrogating her. Was she writing a detective story, or did she just want to prove she was smart in front of the others? Deep in her heart, Jade thought she might actually hate Snow.

Jade had just finished her description of her trip to Disneyland when Snow cut in: "What bus did you take? My aunt says they have special colored buses."

"Wake up!" Jade replied, "It was baking hot. We took a taxi straight to the entrance." She then paused, before adding, "Why would I have got all sweaty walking to the stop just to take a silly colored bus? Wake up."

Wake up. This was Jade's new favorite phrase. But maybe she was really saying it to herself. Should she be the one to wake up? And yet, was it really that bad to dream of a better life for herself? Everyone had the right to do that, to imagine for themselves the dignity and respect they deserved.

The Grand Gift Swap. The whole point of this game she had invented was to prove to herself that at all times she had at least one friend who would swap presents with her. Even if it was all fake. The power of the imagination was important, especially for a girl like Jade. She was always among strangers, so she had to imagine herself surrounded by camaraderie and glamor. These parting gifts were her way of pretending she had real friends.

Why did it have to be like this? Jade had given the question some thought. Why couldn't she be like other transfer students? Was it because she'd had to move too many times before?

Jade knew the answer.

Back in third grade, she took a liking to the class monitor. She always wore her hair in pigtails. Whenever Jade drew close, she could always catch a whiff of soap. She was clean and neat, and drew the cutest cartoons.

Like so many in her class, Jade gathered around the class monitor's desk after class, when she would field requests. The class monitor only had time to draw one picture a day, so they had to wait their turn. Over the course of some weeks, Jade built up a small collection of tiny pieces of paper, ripped from her notebook and decorated in the clean, precise lines of the class monitor's pen. When Jade brought the paper to her nose, she could still detect that same faint smell of soap.

But Jade didn't often have any blank paper to give her, so she saved up all her spare coins over the course of a week and bought a thin pink notebook with only ten sheets in it. When her turn came again, she offered the class monitor a sheet of pink paper. But the class monitor was very particular when it came to her drawing. It had to be just right. If she made a mistake, she would scrunch up the entire sheet of paper and throw it on the floor. Before long, Jade had torn out every last piece of paper from her notebook. The class monitor was drawing on the last one.

"I won't give away a drawing I'm not satisfied with," she said sweetly. "In case you take it home and put it in the bin."

"We wouldn't dare!" her classmates cried.

The girl raised her eyebrows proudly, lowered her head and got back to her drawing. "Amazing!" "So cute!" The praise was constant. Once finished, she presented the drawing to Jade. Honored, Jade took it and walked back to her seat, along with the cover of her empty notebook. She was so happy she could explode.

But she didn't have any more money for paper. The next day, she asked Mei, who sat beside her, if she could have a piece from her powder blue notebook. "No, it's new," Mei replied, "and today's my turn for a picture."

But Jade desperately wanted another picture. Her parents never bought her books, so every day, once her homework was done, she laid out the pictures on her desk and made up her own stories. "How can such a sweet girl be so good at drawing?" she sighed. "And so generous that she just gives them away?"

Her turn was approaching again, and this time, she wanted a picture of a goddess. But still, she didn't have any paper.

When the day came, Jade sheepishly handed the class monitor an old calendar. "There weren't any nice notebooks in my local store," she apologized. "Could you draw on this instead?"

The girl looked up and her brow wrinkled. "I've never drawn on a calendar before. We always recycle ours." Jade waited. The girl's brow was still scrunched up, as if she had to think of what to draw, something to match the cheap paper. At that moment someone grabbed the class monitor's sleeve and pulled her up. "Come on, let's go outside." At that, the girls giggled and crowded out of the classroom.

Jade felt so ashamed. She had insulted the class monitor. It was as if she'd pulled a dirty piece of paper from the garbage and presented it to a goddess to draw on.

From that day on, Jade never asked the girl to draw for her again. She didn't deserve it.

A few months later, Jade moved to yet another new school. This time, she decided not to tell her classmates what her parents really did, and whether consciously or not, led them to believe instead that her family was rich, always going abroad for holidays, that her drawers were stuffed with souvenirs from faraway lands. But she knew that the more she lied, the more she risked discovery, so she was on constant alert to say as little as possible and not to let people too close.

In her current class, the girl Jade worshipped was called Faye. Every time she got close, Jade could detect the aroma of flowers in Faye's hair. She smelled so good it made Jade dizzy. Jade was desperate to get Faye to notice her and like her. After school, Jade would pretend that she just happened to be passing by as Faye and Snow were chatting. She would add a few words, say anything to join in. And soon, that warm feeling returned.

Faye came from a good family. Her pencil case was beautiful and made out of something called leather, although Jade didn't know what that was. Faye used a pen decorated with the loveliest little pictures.

"Where did you get that?" Jade asked.

"I don't know, I forgot," Faye answered casually. "The Louvre in Paris I think."

Luckily, Jade too had a beautiful pen, a gold one. She could be Faye's equal. She was determined to become best of friends with Faye before she had to move again. She would go to Faye's house to play and Faye would show off all her nice things. But there was no way she was going let that meanie Snow come along.

Jade hoped and prayed that Snow would be the one to have to transfer to another school. Or that she might do something so bad that Faye would finally see that Snow was not that kind of girl you should be friends with, but Jade was as loyal as could be and would always stay by Faye's side. If she had to change schools again, Faye could always call her and complain. Jade sighed. A girl like Faye probably didn't have anything to complain about.

"Where's my Japanese pen?!"

Jade had only just finished telling Faye about it when she turned back and saw that her pen was gone. At that moment, Snow's voice sang above the rest, "Oh Jannis, how come you have the same kind of pen in your pencil case?"

Huh? Jannis wouldn't have stolen it from me, surely? Why would a boy steal my golden pen? But Faye had no such doubts. She was convinced of Jannis's guilt. He had Jade's "stolen goods". Had Jannis been mean to Faye in the past? That would never do!

In fact, Jade wasn't too concerned. The pen hadn't been stolen, after all. But she was happy to go along with whatever Faye said. That way Faye would know what a loyal friend she really was, and Jade wouldn't be left with nothing. No, she would still be able to call the class's sweetest-smelling goddess her friend. She wouldn't make the same mistake as last time when she betrayed the class monitor, nor would she let her first real, beautiful friendship slip away from her.

That's why a few days later, when Nathan cried out in class: "My five hundred *yuan*! It's gone!" she knew exactly what to do. She looked straight at Jannis and gave him a nasty look. That's what Faye would have wanted her to do.

3. NATHAN

"My prayers were answered?" Nathan couldn't believe his luck. He was so happy he could barely breathe. He'd gotten away with it! This was better than the time he found the secret coins, and even

then, he'd been stuck on that level for days.

"God has taken pity on me," Nathan thought, "he knows how hard life is. He sent me an angel." He rolled across his bed, grabbed a comic from under his pillow and began reading. His father wasn't home; he was working the night shift and wouldn't be back until just before daybreak.

Nathan knew that calling his life hard was a bit of an exaggeration. But who didn't exaggerate from time to time? His father was the worst. "Kids these days are like little emperors. When I was young, we had to fend for ourselves."

And then Pa would start on his *One Thousand and One Stories of My Terrible Childhood*, about how he used to have to come home straight from school to help his parents with their deliveries, or how he wouldn't get to eat until late, and then have to start on his homework. And yet he was still at the top of his class for every test, his wall covered in certificates and awards. Are you sure you haven't been memorizing morality tales, Pa? Nathan would think to himself. All to teach your son a lesson. And, according to your logic, shouldn't you be successful by now? How come you're still just the manager of a warehouse? Or are you proof that there's no point in wasting all that energy on homework?

Of course, Nathan never said this to his father directly. He knew his family wasn't rich, but his father kept them clothed and fed, and was open-minded in his own way. He regularly gave up his weekends, his only chance to rest, to take them to the cinema or for picnics in the countryside.

It was really only his tendency to nag that Nathan didn't like. He must have had dreams of success. Maybe he really did win all those awards when he was young? But hard work doesn't always get results; that's life. Weren't the bestseller lists full of books that said so? So what was the point of trying?

When it came to computer games, that was a different matter. He was quite happy to devote himself to those. "Computer games are more real than real life," he used to say to his friends.

"Geek," they'd reply with a roll of their eyes. But he didn't care. He'd even thank them for the compliment.

When was it that he first fell in love with computer games? He couldn't remember. But he would never forget playing dodgeball in third grade. Every time, the class jock Michael would throw the ball right at him on purpose. Nathan would trudge out of the circle, cursing his short, fat body.

Why did Michael single him out like that? Nathan guessed it started with the time at the beginning of third grade that Michael had asked him to play basketball with him. Their classes had been restructured at the start of term and he didn't know the other kids too well. In their old class, Michael sat just behind Nathan, but after the summer he had grown a full head taller, and so now he had been placed at the back of the class. Nathan was still in the first row.

"Nathan, let's play ball." But Nathan ignored him, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on his comic. He had borrowed it from the manga library and he had to finish it that day, or he would be fined.

Michael was furious. He turned and went to his seat, where he stroked his ball and stewed.

When Michael tried again the next day, Nathan replied, "I twisted my ankle yesterday." He wasn't lying. He had fallen on the stairs at home the night before while carrying a pile of comics.

But Michael didn't believe him. "If you don't want to play with me, just say. Forget it, I'll play with someone else. You're too short anyway, you'll never get the ball in the basket." He ran away, holding tight to the ball. Nathan watched him go, stunned.

Nathan could feel a loud buzzing in his brain. Sure, he always knew that he was short. He used to stand in front of the mirror making faces and lamenting the fact that he was probably never going to be tall, given that both of his parents were tiny. But he couldn't remember anyone ever saying it to his face. He had been born this way, it wasn't something he had wished upon himself. "What's so great about being tall?" Nathan asked himself. Boys reached puberty later than girls; he remembered reading that in a comic. Some boys took until high school to reach their full height.

At first Nathan had managed to comfort himself in this way, to be at ease with his height. But Michael never asked him to play ball again. Back in second grade they had exchanged comics, but now Michael had new friends. He would call to them to go play ball after class, and pretty much ignored Nathan. Then, when Michael became class president, he started targeting Nathan during dodgeball, like wanted to kill him.

“Nathan!” the girls on his team cried in exasperation as they watched him get knocked out first again. “Why don’t you run?”

Why do you have to keep attacking me, Michael? Nathan’s dissatisfaction with his own body turned to fury. But when he realized he was powerless to change it, all he could do was hide.

Nathan took refuge in comics, and in his new purpose in life: computer games. No one cared how tall or fat you were in a computer game. You could be piggy or lean like a wolf, but as long as you found the treasure, you could beat the game and be crowned king.

“Why don’t you go outside and play sports?” his mother asked him one day.

“I don’t want to,” he replied, not taking his eyes from the screen. His father was still at work and usually his mother was too busy cooking to care that he was playing.

As if being good at sports was everything? Nathan wanted to say.

He kept his grades firmly in the middle, so that his father wouldn’t nag. That way he still got his pocket money, which was just enough to save up and buy the latest games. He was now in fifth grade and still waiting for the promised growth spurt that came with puberty. But he didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was getting to the next level. These days, you could chat online as you played, and he’d met lots of new friends that way. Of course, they’d never met in real life, but with so many people to talk to, who had time to remember the way Michael aimed the ball at him during dodgeball?

No, he had other things to focus on. There was a new, hot game out, just released last week. It was also really difficult, and after only a few days, he got stuck. He played for hours, but wasn’t getting anywhere. “Buy coins,” his online friends said. You could pass any level with coins, he knew that, but five hundred *yuan* was a lot of money. How could he ask his parents for that much? Forget it.

But the heavens were smiling on him.

“We’ll be collecting next month’s lunch money soon,” announced his teacher, Mr. Wang.

Five hundred *yuan* total. Nathan decided he could go without lunch for the next month and use the money to buy the coins he needed instead. Who would have guessed that on Monday, Jannis would steal Jade’s pen?

What was the point in stealing a pen? Nathan couldn’t understand it. But he did realize this was also an opportunity. He seemed to remember reading about a similar scheme in a comic book. First, he decided to embellish the story somewhat to his parents. Instead of a pen, someone had stolen Jade’s money. His parents shook their heads and decried the end of civilization as they knew it. No one would have done such a thing when they were at school. Then Nathan added to the lie by saying that they all knew who the thief was, but that they didn’t have the evidence to prove it.

“It’s hard to verify that sort of thing,” his mother said. “Bank notes don’t have signatures, after all. Keep your lunch money safe.”

It hadn’t been his intention for Jannis to take the blame when he reported his money “missing” to the teacher. But in the moment, neither the students nor their teacher had doubted that someone had done it. His teacher sent a note home to his father to apologize.

His father gave him another five hundred Taiwan dollars as compensation.

“I’m going to talk to your teacher at the next parents’ evening!” his mother cried. “This is unacceptable.”

Nathan smiled as he concentrated on his game. What luck! He was finally done with that level. Now he could relax, and keep playing.