

TO MY SISTER

妹至帖

Just as the Sino-Japanese War was drawing to a close and the Japanese were retreating, civil war took hold of China. Li Chi-Nian was in charge of transporting the national treasures from the Forbidden City south to the Kuomintang controlled capital in the south, Nanjing. But as he travelled across the great expanse of China's inland, he lost the thing most precious in all the world, his family.

Sixty years later, two brothers separated in war, a sister lost in the Kuomintang's retreat from the mainland, a daughter who cannot connect with her father, a young man who escaped death, a lawyer haunted by his childhood memories and a mysterious figure, a shadow that has followed the passage of time... This is the family, long lost. But one thing still connects them, one of ancient China's most exquisite and mysterious pieces of calligraphy, *To My Sister* by Wang Xizhi. But how exactly? How can seventeen beautifully written Chinese characters, faded by the hands of time, bring together these people after so many decades apart?

Yen Yun-Nung 嚴云農

Yen Yun-Nung graduated from National Chengchi University. *To My Sister* is his first novel, although he previously published a novelised version of the 2011 blockbuster *Seediq Bale*, Taiwan's most expensive film production. As well as writing novels, Yen works as a music producer and has written lyrics to over three hundred popular songs. The theme song to the 2008 hit film *Cape No. 7*, for which he wrote the words, won the Forty-fifth Golden Horse for best original song.



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By Yen Yun-Nung. Translated by Katherine Blacka Rose.

Chapter 2: Inescapable Memories

The humid afternoon wind could not blow rain from the dark clouds above.

The trill of cicadas singing their hearts out in the tree in the back alley drifted in through the windows and made listeners drowsy. A man who fixes window screens drove past, advertising his services with a recorded message on a bullhorn poking out of the front window of his truck. The repeated slogan was loud full of static. It was hard to imagine he would get much attention at this hour. Even if there were people with torn screens, they would wait until after siesta to deal with them.

15-year-old Li Chiao was looking out the window. The apartment building across from her blocked most of the overcast sky from view. Skies that couldn't decide whether to rain or not aggravated her.

'Ugh. It's so muggy I can't concentrate.'

She put her fan down and reached for her cup of black tea, finishing half the glass in one gulp before using her sleeve to wipe the condensed water off the table. 'Might as well give up.' She flipped her half-read textbook closed. The ice cubes in her glass made a beautiful sound as they bumped together, but it did nothing to lighten her mood. She pulled the electric fan over to her and angled it up, so it blew under her. She watched her shirt inflate. The cool breeze against her sweat-drenched skin felt unbelievably refreshing.

'Grandpa won't buy me an air conditioner, even though I'm studying for my exams. He's so cheap!' Li Chiao touched her sticky arm, and made a face.

'Why wasn't I born into a family with money?' She complained to herself.

'Then I could have air conditioning every day for as long as I wanted.'

'And I would have a maid to make me smoothies.'

'And I could have all the clothes I'd ever need.'

'And I could have a horse.'

'And best of all, I wouldn't need to take these stupid entry exams.' Why should people with money not need to take entry exams? It didn't make any sense, but she didn't dwell on it. She thought only of the hot wind blowing over her body. There was a certain degree of pleasure in feeling the sweat evaporate off her tiny breasts.

'I wonder what Mom bought my brother to eat?'

She yawned. Her mood was more suffocating than the weather.

It was Saturday afternoon and Mom had taken her brother out for the weekend. Li Chiao would normally have gone with them, but she was instead stuck at home studying for the high school entrance exam.

'So you can't come out then?'

Before he set off, Li Chiao's brother had called to gloat. It made her angry just thinking about it. 'Ha ha, sucks for you. Mom said she's going to take me to buy new sneakers after lunch.'

'Didn't you just get a pair?'

'But the new Jordan fives just came out!'

'You're disgusting. Why is Mom being so nice to you?'

'Grandpa gives you spending money. Don't think I don't know.'

'Only if I pass the exam, all right?'

'Are you really memorising the *Pictorial Atlas of the Palace Museum*? Holy crap!'

'I'm not like you; my life is actually hard.'

'Grandpa tried to get me to memorise that stuff too, but I wasn't gonna do it. He's crazy, who cares about all that dead people's stuff?!'

'If you had the balls, you'd say that to his face!'

'Heh heh.'

'You just like being a jerk. No wonder you're always getting scolded.'

'At least I'm not the one turning into an antique... Oh, here comes Mom. I'll show you my new shoes when I get back, you're gonna be jealous.'

'Don't be such a jerk.'

'Ha ha ha, just run along and study, little stew-dent—stewed in your own misery.'

'Screw you!'

The memory of her brother's obnoxious voice brought a smile to her face.

Ever since her parents' divorce, Li Chiao only saw her brother occasionally on the weekends. He was only in second grade when she first moved out of her father's house; now he was already in middle school. She had made fun of his voice as it changed through puberty, said that he quacked like a duck. He would retaliate by raising himself up to show how big he'd grown.

'Look at you now, you're shorter than me!'

Though they didn't live together, their relationship was still good.

When they were together, they spent a lot of their time competing over whose life was better, but even more time complaining over whose was worse. Li Chiao griped about living conditions being worse with just her mother there, while her brother couldn't handle the pressure of living with their father. Though their father worked at the National Palace Museum and was hardly around, their retired grandfather was home every day, and kept a close watch on her brother's education. Even after her brother's homework was done, there were extra lessons on ancient history.

'You will carry on your father and grandfather's example, understand?' Her brother loved imitating Grandpa's manner. During the War, Grandpa had been on the team that transported national treasures from the Forbidden City in Beijing to Taipei. He had been a Fellow at the Academia Sinica and a renowned Forbidden City expert.

'You know, many of our country's greatest treasures were stolen by foreigners during the war. We must find a way to bring back what our ancestors left us...'

'Wow. You sound exactly like him.' Li Chiao found her brother's grizzled-old-man imitation hilarious. And he'd just started growing facial hair, so he looked the part a bit.

'Please. Of course I sound like him, I've heard it all a million times!' he said. 'I don't want to end up in the National Palace Museum. It's like it wasn't enough for Grandpa just to send Dad out there forever; he has to make me into an exhibit as well.'

'It can't be that bad.'

'You have no idea how hard Grandpa pushes me. It's not fair. Why doesn't he push you?'

'Because I'm a girl, idiot.'

'So what? I think that you'd make a great antique.'

'How is that?'

'Seriously, you work hard at whatever Grandpa tells you to do, even if it's Japanese or whatever.'

'I spend so little time with him, I don't want to hurt his feelings.'

'But he's never ever hard on you,' her brother said. 'You're his favourite.'

'And what, Mom doesn't favour you? Buying you whatever you want?'

'Whatever. Grandpa plays favourites.'

'No, Mom plays favourites.' The two were sniping at each other.

'Okay, okay. Truce.' Her brother suddenly sounded hurt.

'But really, I still don't get it. Why does our family have to be apart?'

Really, how come? Why can't our family just be like we were before?

She sat at her desk, thinking about her brother's question. Then she lifted her head and drained the last drops of her tea.

Why did Mom and Dad have to get divorced?

Six years ago, the day Li Chiao and her mother moved into this old apartment, Li Chiao threw a fit. That was in the spring of 1984.

'Why does it have to be me?' She cried to her mother. 'Why are the two of us being driven out?' Li Chiao was deeply attached to the old house in Shuanghsi. She had her own stand-alone house with a courtyard full of flowers, neighbors' kids to play with, and a brother she teased but loved. Even with a serious grandfather and a mostly-absent father, Li Chiao didn't have anything to complain about. She couldn't understand what the adults' problem was, why their totally ordinary happiness couldn't just continue as it was.

'I'm so sorry. You're all I have left...'

She remembered her mother had stayed silent for a long time before she said this. It sounded impassive, like she were talking to herself. But that was the moment when Li Chiao stopped crying, because she realised for the first time that her mother, whom she always thought could do anything, could herself be helpless.

From then on, Li Chiao lived sparingly, at least compared to her life before. Her mother worked in a library; it was a stable job, but only brought in enough to get by. Li Chiao didn't understand why her mother worked so hard every day and didn't use the child support her father paid them.

'That money is for you to go to school and get married.'

That was always her mother's answer to the question. But when she turned her head, Li Chiao also caught one more sentence:

'Your father and I agreed on it...'

What did she say? A young Li Chiao couldn't tell if she had heard right.

Her mother's tone seemed offhand, yet there was something in her words suggesting she intentionally left a clue for Li Chiao to find. That single, short sentence echoed in Li Chiao's imagination, and gave her a vague feeling that there was something behind her father's divorce, some secret she should understand but had no way to expose.

'Ugh, growing up sucks.'

Li Chiao stretched her arms as she sat on her chair. She didn't know why, but she was particularly restless today, and one eyelid twitched uncontrollably. She gently slapped her own cheeks to wake herself up and read a few more lines from her textbook. But she just couldn't concentrate; instead, her mind was flooded with memories of her old family life, most of them trivial, yet so vivid at the same time.

Will my brother come to visit me? All this studying meant she hadn't seen him for quite a while. The heartless little runt... All he could think about was buying shoes. It wouldn't occur to him to buy his sister a smoothie.

Li Chiao glared up at the clock. It was 2:44 p.m. Would she have to wait until later when the weather cooled down to get back to her book? Would she have to wait until after her test before she could be free? Would she have to grow up before her mother's life would be less difficult?

Waiting. Why must she wait for everything?

Li Chiao drifted on the tide of her thoughts, distracted by the confusing images running through her head. She floated further and further away from reality, until even the ringing of the living room phone did not bring her back for several moments.

'Oh, the phone.' As if planned, the phone stopped ringing the minute she flew across the living room and grabbed the receiver, and the rain that had been holding off all day finally came down in buckets.

The sound of falling raindrops echoed loudly in her ears. The storm continued into the evening, cooling the earth as the air cried. Li Chiao had no idea that the rain would wash away the foundations of her own world as well.

Li Chiao waited for her mother for hours, but when the door opened just before dinner it was her grandfather who walked in. Dripping with rain, he walked right to her and hugged her, his expression contorted in pain. His body shivered as it absorbed warmth from hers.

'Grandpa, what's wrong? Why are you here?' She couldn't recall him ever holding her like this – cold, humourless, with a feeling of desperation.

'There was an accident,' he said after a long silence. Maybe the long pause was an adult trick. 'My poor child, we need to go to the hospital...'

'How come?' Li Chiao asked, confused. 'I'm not sick.'

'Your mother and brother were in a car accident... We need to go... see them.'

'What?' The disaster was so great, Li Chiao didn't know how to react.

Such a vast sorrow felt totally unreal, like an overcoat that had been thrown on top of her. She was taken to the hospital, where her grandfather went to settle the more complex issue. Who was responsible? You don't know? What are you police for? Grandpa began to argue with several uniformed men. Doctors walked back and forth, but no one took her to see her mother and brother, and no one told her what had happened.

What about Dad? Where's Dad? Amid the confusion, nobody paid attention to Li Chiao and her growing anxiety. As she listened to her grandfather's argument, she slowly began to realise how serious it was.

It appeared her mother and brother were not coming back.

She stood next to her grandfather as a thick fear poured over her. Her mind went blank, as if the world had forgotten about her, and she'd forgotten it. She couldn't stop recalling how she hadn't gotten to the phone in time.

'Was it Mom? Or my brother?' she mumbled. It had to have been one of the two.

'Were they calling to ask if I wanted a smoothie...' She bitterly regretted having let herself daydream.

Maybe if she had picked up the call in time, her mother's car wouldn't have crashed.

'They were calling to ask if I wanted a smoothie...' She did her best to keep the tears back as reality started to sink in.

'They were calling to ask if I wanted a smoothie...' She kept repeating the same phrase until she finally realised she should be more upset.

'They were calling to ask if I wanted a smoothie!'

She quietly left Grandpa's side and sat in the stairwell to cry. No one knew about this phone call, but that click followed by the silence on the other end of the line was haunting her.

Li Chiao kept hearing it amidst the memory of the pouring rain.

Inside that memory, the rain never stopped falling, and her remorse never eased.

From that moment on, she hated the sound of the phone.

She was afraid she would again miss the last message that her mother and brother had left for her before they left this world.

She hated the summer.

Hated the rain.

And she hated smoothies even more.

Day Five December 9, 2009

On the plane to Kyoto, Li Chiao raised herself halfway in her business class seat and asked the stewardess for a second glass of red wine. The massive jet engine hummed loudly in the background, like a singer who was pushing too hard, making his listeners' ears ring.

Takakura was sitting to her right in the aisle seat. He didn't drink alcohol, only water, and every few minutes would steal a glance at his watch, using his handkerchief to wipe nonexistent sweat off of his face.

'Are you afraid that time's going to stop?' Li Chiao couldn't stand his neurotic movements.

'Sorry, I just don't like flying.'

'Oh, really?' Li Chiao took a sip of her wine as she spoke to Takakura, who sat rigidly in his seat. 'What are you afraid of? The worst that could happen is that we fall out of the sky and are blown into smithereens. It's a poetic way to go.'

'Ms Li Chiao, you have an enlightened mind.' Takakura's head didn't move. 'Pardon me if I haven't reached the same heights.'

'So lawyers really are this dull...'

Li Chiao shrugged and turned her attention to the duty free magazine in her hand. The alcohol had made her a little light-headed.

Chu Hua spent three days in an oxygen tent under observation until her condition stabilised. Then Kakakura arranged for her to be transferred with her physicians' approval to another hospital, where a different team took responsibility for her treatment.

'Don't worry, Ms Li. The doctors we found are all specialists in Anderson's Disease. They will take the best possible care of your aunt.' Working with Takakura once again allowed Li Chiao to experience Japanese efficiency and respect for protocol: none of her time was wasted between the submission of her request and their response, but she was required to sign a memorandum of understanding first, so that the transaction could be legally protected. There was no ambiguous language and no room for interpretation. It was something she both admired and hated.

The new hospital was located in Wangfujing district in Beijing, and looked just like a villa. Its ambiance was completely different than the previous hospital's. It was quiet and clean, the facilities all looked new, the air felt fresh, and classical music played in the background at just the right volume to maintain a certain atmosphere without causing any annoyance.

The doctor who came to receive Li Chiao was both amiable, professional, and spoke tactfully. Even the nurses were extremely friendly. Most of the patients and visitors were members of the upper class, and the hospital had much stricter rules about conduct and quality of service. Here, the final authority was the patient's bank account, not the bullying medical staff.

Chu Hua was placed in a luxurious single room, bright and spacious, with an open window facing South. It was nicer than most apartments, with postmodern oil paintings on the wall and several music options available. One who didn't know any better might think it were part of some fancy hotel.

'We hope Ms Li is satisfied with our service, and understands that she doesn't need to worry about anything.'

Seeing Chu Hua on the nice bed with a nurse by her side the whole time made it feel like she wasn't even sick anymore – more like she was sleeping.

'We have already started looking for matching livers through our global network. We should be able to find a suitable donor very soon, but we will need Ms Li to cooperate when the time comes.'

The seats in business class were very roomy. Ten thousand feet above ground, Li Chiao sighed heavily as she faced the windowpane. So far the Japanese had been true to their word, and perhaps even better.

After all, they wanted *Sister's Arrival* back.

She stared out the window. The music playing in her headphones didn't even enter her head.

Don't mistake their magnanimity for grace, she reminded herself.

Li Chiao had plenty of experience interacting with the Japanese, and understood their cultural characteristics, just like the perfect 90-degree bow. They were polite because they were repressed; that repression led to stolidity, and stolidity came out in their obsession with haggling over every

detail of an interaction. All personal interactions were calculated with incredible clarity. They weren't like the Chinese, who cared about intention and treated people as they wished to. This frequently made apparently simple affairs complicated.

But Takakura was one of the more unusual Japanese people Li Chiao had met. She didn't like the look in his eye, sharp, yet also hesitant, like an assassin uncertain of whether to strike or withdraw. Nor was the target of his enmity ever clear – sometimes it felt like Li Chiao herself was, other times not.

All she could think was that Takakura was a strange bird. Luckily their agreement was one of mutual benefit, and once it was over, she probably wouldn't have to see him again. Or at least that's what she told herself to keep from backing out of the deal.

'Ms Li...'

The plane had just come out of a interval of turbulence. As soon as calm returned, Kakakura broke the silence between them.

'Huh?' Li Qiao took off her headphones.

'There are some documents we need to go over before we arrive in Kyoto. You can take this time to look at them.'

'Documents?'

'Concerning Li Wang'an.'

Li Chiao turned to look at Takakura, but said nothing. His face looked pale. She had heard him ask the stewardess for water to take medicine, but didn't think anything of it. She figured it was probably for some boring reason.

'They are all in the computer.' His notebook was already open. 'Take it and see.'

Mr Li Wang'an. The name differed from her father's by only one character, yet for some reason it sounded strange. She put down her tray table with one hand and took the computer from Takakura with the other, as she tried to appear prepared for what lay ahead.

Ms Li has an enlightened mind.

These had been Takakura's words, so there was no room to fall short on their agreement. She finished her wine and straightened herself in her chair just as the plane made a sudden, sharp drop downward, causing some of the passengers to cry out in surprise.

Li Chiao felt like her seatbelt was holding her too tightly. Amidst her terror, she closed the laptop with an air of nonchalance, unconsciously leaning close to Takakura. Takakura reacted violently, grasping the hand rest tightly, which caused his handkerchief to fall to the ground. He wanted to reach for it, but it was too close to Li Chiao, and too far even if he reached. Li Chiao saw him, looked down to find the object, and bent down to help him pick it up.

'If you touch it, I will kill you...'

Li Chiao hadn't expected to hear these words snarled at her. They had come out involuntarily in Japanese, and were spoken from between his teeth in a twisted voice.

'What did you say?' Her hand stopped in the air in an unnatural position.

'Eh....' Takakura stumbled, returning back into Chinese. 'I'll get it, don't worry.'