

THE GIRL AND THE WOODCUTTER

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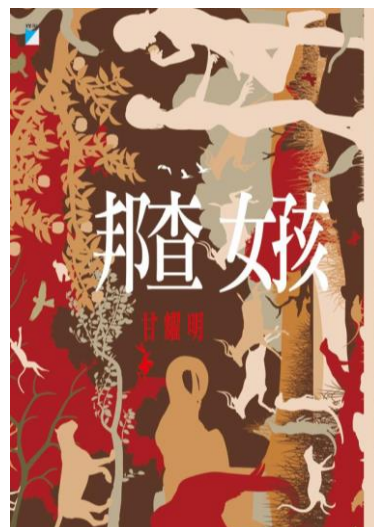
* Winner of the 2015 Taiwan Literary Award

1970s Hualien. The story starts when eighteen-year old waitress A-Hsia decides she is going to elope with the taciturn Pacilo, despite the fact that they barely know each other. Pacilo takes her back up the mountain and only then does she realise he is a woodcutter by trade. She decides to stay in the poor mountain community, and she and Pacilo resurrect a derelict local school. Together they encounter scars left by history, as well as many warm hearts. But only once the school is built are they really tested, and they are forced to reflect on what has brought them up into the mountains in the first place...

The Girl and the Woodcutter represents a new phase in Kan Yao-Ming's creative output. His easy and unaffected prose brings to life the harsh realities of Taiwan's mountain communities during a period of rapid development and social change. Itself a break in the history of the country, Kan's writing is a perfect mixture of the realist and fantastical, a journey back that strikes right at our hearts in the present day.

Kan Yao-Ming 甘耀明

Kan Yao-Ming is hailed as Taiwan's foremost 'Neo Nativist' writer, successfully mixing farce, tall tales, folk legend and collective memories to create his own uniquely magic realist world. Like a magician of words, he writes with a highly experimental but always accessible style. Kan's reputation was first built on two collections of short stories, *The Mysterious Train*, and *The School of the Water Spirit*. His short fiction has won numerous awards and is often chosen for 'Best of the Year' anthologies. His first novel *Killing Ghosts* became Taiwan's most talked-about Chinese novel in 2009, selling over 10,000 copies, a huge number for a domestic literary novel. It won both the China Times Open Book Award, the Taipei Book Fair Award, and was chosen as the Chinese Book of the Year by the country's leading online bookstore.



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THE GIRL AND THE WOODCUTTER

By Kan Yao-Ming. Translated by David van der Peet.

Pacilo made his way out of Hualien, pulling Ku A-Hsia along with his cold hands. The two of them almost looked like refugees.

After dark, they reached the bridge, where they were planning to spend the night.

Ku A-Hsia knew that Pacilo wasn't dumb, because he was standing right on a rock in the creek, hands cupped into a funnel over his mouth, screaming at the water's edge at the top of his lungs. The bank was wide, and the air filled with the rushing of water, the howling of wind, and the hooting of night birds. A few minutes went by, and suddenly a six-car train charged across the bridge overhead, the deafening blow of its whistle reverberating between the arches. But soon, all that could be heard again was the sound of the swiftly flowing water. Realising the futility of his effort, Pacilo took a break from his hollering. Ku A-Hsia asked him who he was calling, and whether he wanted her to help him with the shouting. Yet, apart from the faint glimmer of the train flickering over the horizon, the wilderness about them was completely devoid of anything that might arrest one's eyes.

Ku A-Hsia was tired and hungry, and so she decided to forage for some food. Climbing over the embankment, she came to a nearby paddy field. The silvergrass was wilted, but below it hardy weeds were thriving. But to her knowing eye, these weren't just weeds—she quickly discerned edible herbs and vegetables, recognising them like delicious old friends: endive, black nightshade, and fireweed.

As she kept pulling them out in handfuls, she soon discovered even more edible plants: rabbit milk weed, water chickweed, and red tassel flower. Gathering them up with her head bent low, she proceeded until bumping, brow first, into a betel nut palm. 'Ouch! So this is where you've been hiding,' she exclaimed, swiftly picking up a few betel sheaths from the ground under the tree. As she scrambled back up the sloped embankment, she accidentally noticed giant African snails munching star jelly growing among the gravel, and without much ado, she took both back with her.

A chef in the wilderness, she now folded the betel sheaths into a deep, quadrangular dish and placed the herbs and vegetables inside it. The snails were a bit more trouble. Smashing their shells with a small rock, she took out the edible bodies and rubbed off the slime with ash. The innards she tossed into the creek. Immediately, swarms of river prawns and minnows came swimming into the shallows and started nibbling at the entrails. Ku A-Hsia sprinkled some salt into the water, and when the shrimps and fish were paralysed by the salinity, she unceremoniously fished them out.

She put the betel sheath dish in front of Pacilo. With the blazing campfire between them, he busied himself chewing a steamed bun that had gone hard and cold. His jaws were hurting with the effort, and there was a wry smile on his face as he looked at the assorted ingredients in the dish. To him, it looked more like an aquarium than food, with the fish swimming around between the herbs and the live prawns fighting over the snail meat. Even the Japanese made sure the fish were dead when preparing sashimi!

Seeing his hesitation, Ku A-Hsia started a funny little dialogue in which she played both Pacilo and herself, giving voice to his inner thoughts and then replying as herself.

'Uh-oh! Fancy that... playing house... real girly stuff,' she imitated his way of talking.

Then, in her own voice, 'How right you are! Looks like a proper mess of a meal. But maybe we can wait a bit, and it'll turn into something different.'

'Different? You mean, the fish and the shrimp are gonna commit suicide and gut themselves, and then get so angry that their temperature rises and rises until they are cooked? Only a damn savage would eat food like this. Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't call you a 'damn savage,' you dumb Ami girl!'

'Actually, I'm a Pangcah.'

'What's the difference? Do you really think you'll ever make anyone a good wife?'

'Who knows? But you shouldn't talk like that, it makes me all shy.' At this point, Ku A-Hsia couldn't help laughing out loud. 'You know, 'Pangcah' is our own name for our tribe. My grandmother says it's a very old word for 'Ami people.' How old exactly? Well, back then the trees were still awake and could walk around, and there was a kind of bird we called Pako that would turn into a vegetable fern when coming to rest in the valleys. There was also a snake called Oway that'd get so mad that all its scales would stand up on end. Then it was so touched by the sight of a cloud that it turned into a rotang palm. Oh, and in those days a fish named Lokot crawled onto dry land, where it fell asleep and was transformed into a nest fern. That was also the time when a very weird looking fish called Palingad secretly fell in love with the cool breeze, and jumped ashore to dance with it. And Alikakay the Giant shed black tears, and where it hit the ground, saplings sprouted from the earth. How long ago was all this? Granny says it's so far in the ancient past that it's like when you have many different dreams in the same night, and the next morning when you wake up, the only dream you remember is the very last one. No one remembers the first dream. It's completely beyond recall.'

'Wow, that's deep!'

'Of course it is! The earth is alive. Our whole planet is a dream, one of the most wonderful and richest dreams in the universe.'

Removing her gaze from the flames, she saw that Pacilo was looking at her. Her eyes shining even brighter than the fire, she declared, hardly believing that she was saying it out loud, 'I dreamed of you, a long time ago. It might even have been my first ever dream, reaching back to the days when the fish Palingad came onshore and turned into a screw pine.'

'Oh, really?'

'That's right, because I'm the cool breeze, and you fall in love with me, turning into a tree so you can dance with me.'

'Yeah, like that's gonna happen.'

'I'll show you, then. I'll show you how the water plants dance with each other!'

The firelight was playing on his face, his head sheepishly bent down as he continued to gnaw the rock hard bun. At this point, the most magical scene began to play out before his eyes. Ku A-Hsia picked up the long-handled spatula and used it to poke around in the campfire. As the stirred flames flared up, she extracted several glowing hot pebbles and shoveled them into the betel sheath aquarium. In no time at all, the water began to boil and, voila, the soup was ready. The fish and shrimp were cooked so quickly that they were done before they even knew it. That was the famous Pangcah 'stone hot pot.'

Pacilo lifted the soup dish to his lips and drank a mouthful. And then he drank it all up without setting the dish down even once, even though he paid for it by scalding his mouth. Ku A-Hsia was delighted, leaving them both in good spirits. After partaking of the hot soup, she felt the warmth surging through her body, forming a protective shield against the cold.

Pacilo also felt warm now. He pulled a stick from the pile of firewood and tied a rock to it with a rope. Then he hit the sandy ground several times with this makeshift axe to see whether the stone was properly fastened. Ku A-Hsia had seen pictures in a book showing Stone Age people using this kind of hatchet. Now Pacilo, axe in hand, walked over to a rotten looking piece of driftwood. He struck it a few times, making the weeds growing on its surface sway back and forth. At the same time, a bunch of little critters like moles and cockroaches came running out of their hiding places. It was bishopwood, a kind of hardwood, but this piece was already rotten to the core. He tried

another piece of driftwood, but while it was fragrant, Formosan hinoki was too soft for his purposes. A short and fibrous camphor bole had been rendered useless by tossing about in the river for too long. What he needed was something much harder. Moving outside the range of the firelight, Pacilo kept searching with Ku A-Hsia at his heels, carrying a torch for light.

Next he spotted a Taiwan hemlock that was half submerged in the water, and using his stone axe, he hit the fractured surface with full gale force. The hemlock seemed to shiver into life, and the whole ground shuddered along with it: a deep and booming tremor that even drowned out the sound of the rushing waters for a few seconds. Ku A-Hsia felt her whole body go numb with the sensation of it, her head resonating with its power. Pacilo had found a giant mallet with which to pound the earth! She understood. This was how he was going to shake the river into consciousness, and find the partner he'd been searching for for so long. At that moment, a four-car train thundered across the bridge above, but the rumbling of its wheels was almost entirely obscured by the profound vibration of the earth. In apparent silence, the train, gleaming faintly, glided towards the horizon. The stars in the firmament were oscillating ever so gently, and Ku A-Hsia recalled what her grandmother had told her, 'Back then, during the harvest festival, our forebears would fling the Alipaonay, the fireflies, towards heaven, and they turned into the Milky Way.'

Pacilo struck again, and the river water was splashing furiously as the earth droned again with its bottomless voice. Ku A-Hsia felt her knees go weak with the shock. Unable to stay on her feet, she grabbed Pacilo as she fell forward. It was their first embrace, but it was far from a pleasant surprise: she, screaming, he, pushing her away. In the process, the stone axe briefly ended up in Ku A-Hsia's hand, a veritable trophy of their tussle, before Pacilo snatched it back roughly.

Ku A-Hsia, however, was not to be intimidated. Drawing the spatula she was wearing at her back, she bellowed, 'Put it down!'

Pacilo released the axe. Clenching his fists tightly, he tried to open his mouth and say something.

'Aunt Lan Lan was right, you men are all afraid of this,' Ku A-Hsia was waving the spatula in an intimidating manner. 'And now, if you please, tell me your name.'

At that moment, something came crawling out of the water, with movements as quiet as death. Stealthy and sinister it looked, and its eyes were fierce.

Trying to speak before a stranger required a terrible effort for Pacilo, and a rush of emotions made his throat tighten up. He desperately wanted to stop the thing crawling out of the river from attacking Ku A-Hsia, but he couldn't make a sound. He wanted to warn her to stop brandishing the spatula, because it would only madden the monster. Yet he simply couldn't utter a word.

Ku A-Hsia thought that something had got stuck in Pacilo's throat, because his face had the appearance of an irritated puffer fish. She took a step forward and patted his back to dislodge the food, but that was a mistake. Interpreting her move as an attack, the sandy-haired bag of wet bones came on like a hurricane, still moving without making even the hint of a sound. It was a yellowish dog with a wolfish streak, feral and ferocious. Answering the call of the earth, it crossed the stream to meet its master. For years it was left alone by the riverside whenever Pacilo made the journey into the city.

But all Ku A-Hsia saw was a yellow rubber band that suddenly came flying towards her, so fast that her scream didn't even have the time to leave her throat before she was pushed into the river, hands and legs flailing wildly. Only then did her voice find release in a loud screech. It was Pacilo who pulled her out of the water. She was terrified, her curly hair sticking to her brow in the most unattractive fashion, looking like she was closer to death than life. Ku A-Hsia was so cold she was shivering violently. She hurriedly took off her wet clothes, and threw on the dry garments Pacilo handed her. At first she could have jumped straight into the fire for some heat, but before long warmth returned to her body, and she saw Pacilo laughing across from her on the other side of the fire. The dog, after having shaken the water off its fur a few times, was eating the cooked fish and shrimps straight from the dish. Ku A-Hsia was angry because Pacilo had seen her naked.

When her anger was just about to boil over, Pacilo beat on some rocks to garner her attention. Each about the size of an egg, he had written five strangely distorted and incomplete characters to spell out 'I am Liu Cheng-Kuang.' On another four stones, he had inscribed an introduction for the dog, 'He is Lang Pang.' Her chin resting on her knees, hands rubbing her own feet to stay warm, Ku A-Hsia looked at the hard-to-read characters, deciphering them with some difficulty through the wavering hot air of the fire, as if viewing some runes of magic. Liu Cheng-Kuang kept on writing, and every time he had finished carving a character on a stone, he'd chuck it into the campfire.

'Don't provoke the dog,' Pacilo said with another four rocks (one of the characters was actually written phonetically), tossing them into the fire one by one.

Ku A-Hsia also picked up three rocks. She wrote her name on them and showed them to him.

'Kou Ao-Hsia,' he said. The first words he said were her name.

'Ku A-Hsia,' she said.

'Ku Ao-Hsia,' he enunciated carefully, body bent forward.

'Ku A-Hsia,' she repeated

'Ku A-Hsia.' This time he got it right, and he clapped his hands to applaud himself.

That evening, Pacilo fished the hot rocks out of the fire and buried them in the sand. They slept in the warm and sandy spot, sharing a sleeping bag. Bashfully, Ku A-Hsia slept with her back towards Pacilo. She barely heard the last city-bound train go over the bridge before slumber found her. In her sleep, she could still hear the sound of the rocks gradually cooling in the ground, and she dreamed that they were talking to her. The mountains used the rocks to talk to the river, the ocean used the pebbles to talk with the shore, and the ancestors were using their myths to communicate with their descendants. And she was using her dreams to talk with herself. The night was full of the wildest dreams.

The next morning, their bodies were covered with sand, and the whispering rocks from the preceding night had turned into the Mugua River. Lifting her head, Ku A-Hsia saw Taiwan's third highest peak, Mount Chilai, rising above the river's source, its summit covered with snow that was tinted orange in the early sunlight, contrasting with the azure sky. Without knowing why, she waved her hand in salute to the crest standing 3,607 meters tall in its indigo magnificence.

'Let's go! Come home with me,' Pacilo said slowly as he pushed his bicycle up the embankment.

Happiness flooded Ku A-Hsia's heart as she heard him say these words. Not only had this man not deserted her in the night, now he even wanted to take her with him. As to where they were going, she couldn't have cared less. The sun would shine wherever they went.

Dark Forces

Lying in a coffin proved to be an experience that was hard to forget. Hard and cold it felt.

And it wasn't even a real coffin, but a two-by-two metre ropeway cart, the kind suspended from a sturdy cable and used for traversing valleys. Ku A-Hsia was extremely tired after sleeping very fitfully the previous night, never falling into deep sleep. Then morning broke. A few scattered stars were still glimmering in the purplish sky, and a burgundy rosefinch on top of the cart was ruffling its tail feathers. A crow was croaking somewhere. A bone-piercing wind began to blow, against which the sleeping bag was of no avail. The cold stunned her into remembering why she had spent the night in a ropeway cart.

After leaving the Mugua River, Pacilo and her had made their way south the previous day, and kept going until it got dark. Switching on the bike light, they had passed through an aboriginal settlement and soon come to Molisaka, a logging village. From there, they continued to follow the forest railway up into the mountains. Riding along the road illuminated by the bicycle's headlight, they came to a checkpoint after another three kilometres. The police officer shone his flashlight straight into Pacilo's face, making no attempt to be polite. Pacilo took off his safari hat to show his

face, and then pushed Ku A-Hsia into the ropeway cart.

As the cart began to move, Pacilo handed Ku A-Hsia his hat, fastened his bike to the side of the cart, and waved her goodbye while the dog was barking his farewell. Ku A-Hsia felt she had been sold down the river. She was unable to open the cart's wooden door, which was locked from the outside, and below her was the deep valley through which a strong wind was howling. Shivering and huddled in a corner, she felt her legs turn to jelly, not knowing what would happen next. Eventually, the cart came to a halt at the Takuan settlement, some 1,500 meters above sea level, where the ropeway operator pulled her out of the cart. It had been the last ride of the day.

The night was dark, and the only light in the village came from a few kerosene lamps. Now and then a dog would bark, or an owl would hoot, but other than that the place seemed dead. Her legs still wobbly, she half walked, half hobbled the short distance up the village road, but the doors of the buildings were closed, whether shops, homes, or the generator room. She returned to the ropeway cart, whose door was still open. The confined space that she had dubbed a 'coffin' had a multiplication table carved into its wooden planks and was filled with piss stains and cigarette butts. She selected the cleaner side of the cart to lie down. Then she plucked the mikado pheasant feather from the safari hat and played with it. With only the cold and wailing wind for company, she kept teetering on the edge of consciousness, never finding more than a light sleep and confused dreams. Making it to the next morning was an ordeal.

When dawn was about to break, Ku A-Hsia opened her eyes as the harsh wind was battering the door. She was sick with exhaustion, and the blood throbbing in her veins felt heavy and thick. Raising her head with an effort, she perceived that several young children were looking in through the window, all vying for a better view. In the dim light, she couldn't make out the expressions on their faces.

They started kicking the door and making a ruckus. One voice declared, 'What a pity she didn't croak. Else we'd get to see a corpse.' Then, louder, 'And she's a girl!'

'A girl who gets to sleep outside. She's so lucky.'

'She's so dark. And look at her curly hair and flat nose.'

'She's just plain ugly. Looks like an evil spirit.' That was a bigger kid talking. His name was Chao Min.

There was nothing Ku A-Hsia hated more than people calling her ugly. She sprang up from the planks and started pulling Chao Min's short hair. With a bang and a crash, the boy tumbled into the cart, falling right onto the piss-stained floor. Not in the least embarrassed, he bared his teeth in a broad grin and pronounced that pulling hair was a good way of massaging the scalp. Ku A-Hsia let go of him. There was no point in quarreling with the kid. Also, she abruptly became aware of the bitter cold: without the sleeping bag wrapped around her, she was cruelly exposed.

The ropeway operator appeared on the scene, a man of sixty with shortly cropped white hair whom everybody called Master A-Hai. He shone a powerful flashlight at Ku A-Hsia to confirm her identity, and then went to the generator room to fetch an enamel thermos bottle with a peony design on it. He never went anywhere without that bottle when on duty. Now he poured some hot ginger tea for Ku A-Hsia and handed the cup to her. She drank, and gradually felt the warmth creeping up from her feet. She emerged from the cart.

'How am I supposed to get down the mountain,' she asked—a somewhat silly question.

'Get back inside,' Master A-Hai pointed at the cart.

Having only just left the coffin, Ku A-Hsia thought that there was no way she was going to crawl back in there in a hurry. Instead, she asked where else she might go. The mountains looked high, the skies wide, and everything was utterly strange and unfamiliar.

'Chukang Resort,' Master A-Hai said. He noticed the lapel of Ku A-Hsia's dress was embroidered with a peculiar fish design, and also took in the blue feather attached to her safari hat.

The hat was from Pacilo, and the clothes she was wearing were the ones Pacilo had given her

after rescuing her from the river. Now Ku A-Hsia's destiny was driving her towards the Chukuang Resort. Yet its name—signifying Chrysanthemum Harbour—sounded so strange that she didn't have the courage make straight for it, but rather allowed herself to drift along and let fate decide.

Day had broken, and the rays of the morning sun illuminated the wide earth. The last stars had faded from the sky above Mount Kashe, and the steep ridges of the Central Mountain Range were outlined sharply against the bright sunlight. Day in, day out, twenty-seven pupils would pile into the ropeway cart and be taken to school down the mountain. It took Master A-Hai just one look to know which kids hadn't arrived yet. He picked up an iron bar and with it beat a piece of track rail suspended from the eaves of the generator room. The sharp, clanging sound echoed among Takuan Village's sixty-eight single-storey wooden houses. After a few minutes, a child with eyes still puffy with sleep turned up and wriggled into the cart. Another kid, wearing an oversized khaki uniform with trousers wrinkled like cooked dumpling skin, was shoved in by his mother, still pretty much asleep. Even the other kids, who repeatedly pinched his nose, couldn't rouse him from his slumber.

With everybody on board, the diesel generator kicked into gear, and the steel cable began to quiver as the wheels started gliding along it with a swooshing sound. The ropeway would take them from an elevation of almost one and a half kilometers down to a point about two hundred and sixty meters above sea level. From there, they'd walk another three kilometers along the railroad track to Senjung Elementary School. As always, some of the children were screaming with fear or delight, while others were singing songs to comfort and calm themselves. Ku A-Hsia took a few steps towards the ropeway's wooden platform. She could see the cart slowly gliding out of sight, disappearing into the glaring gold of the sunlight reflected by the clouds and mists wafting across the expanse of the river valley.

When the cart was gone, and her nightmare over for the time being, she turned around towards the village. An empty logging train was about to start its journey up to the forests at even higher elevations, and at the blowing of its whistle, the loggers jumped onto the wagons. Ku A-Hsia followed their example, thinking that since the Chukang Resort wasn't exactly the last choice on her list, she might as well make it her first.

After chugging through the village, the train rode through commercial timberland, its destination being the Lintien Logging Station high up in the Central Mountain Range. Formerly, under the Japanese, this was known as the Morisaka Forestry, meaning something like 'Slope of Verdant Forestland.' As the site of the logging command post, the Chukang Resort used to be the most prosperous in the whole area. Nowadays, it produced Bear Brand Apple Jam and bad-tasting coffee, and operated as a rundown hotel that was mostly a meeting point for local drunks.

The owner of the resort, Ma Hai, loved the view from the windows looking east. On early winter mornings, at around six thirty, when the first sunlight played on the twigs and branches of the bare apple trees, slowly evaporating the myriad drops of night dew, many a soft sigh would issue from his tranquil heart. Whenever the day's first logging train rumbled past the gate of Chukang Resort, the engine dragging ten empty flat freight cars behind it, the drops of dew on the apple trees would tremble slightly and flicker with refracted light. He thought of the song *Apple Blossom*, performed by Yang Yen, and in his mind's eye he saw the trees blossoming in spring, or laden heavily with fruit in fall.

Suddenly, the sound of Ku A-Hsia knocking gently at the door reached his ears. 'Who can that be?' Ma Hai wondered. Most lumberjacks would walk straight in without bothering to knock, treating the door so roughly that he had to repair it as often as ten times in a single year. And even if they did rap on the door, it sounded much louder than this. Even kids banging on the door for fun and then running away laughing showed more gusto, more thud and boom.

'Where did you get that hat?' Ma Hai asked when he saw the safari hat in Ku A-Hsia's hand.

'Liu Cheng-Kuang gave it to me. He got me here, but I've no idea where he's gone off to now.' She

mentioned the name in a circumspect fashion, and then put on the hat at a jaunty angle. She looked a bit droll, with the broad brim almost completely obscuring her eyes.

'You talked to him?'

'A little. Actually, Pacilo and I didn't say an awful lot to each other.'

'Pacilo? You called him Bread-fruit Tree?' Ma Hai laughed out loud.

'Yes. All the kids in Hualien called him that.'

'He's kind of autistic, that one. Never talks. You've made him open up,' Ma Hai said, and added, 'Welcome to Chukang Resort.'

He invited Ku A-Hsia to take a seat. The most popular seats were in the direction of the mountain valley, where a fire burned in the fireplace almost all year round, fed with litchi charcoal so that the entire building was filled with a beguiling fragrance. What breakfast the kitchen offered had already been finished by the loggers who were staying at the resort and had just left for work, so Ma Hai prepared a simple Western style breakfast for Ku A-Hsia, consisting of some cookies with apple jam and a cup of black coffee. She devoured all the cookies, thinking them quite delicious, but found the black coffee not to her taste—too bitter without cream and sugar. Without further ado, Ma Hai drank it himself.

'This is bad coffee, so you have to drink it slowly to savor its taste,' Ma Hai declared, 'and your new friend is just like this coffee, you know.'

'Maybe his big wooden box is filled with coffee mugs.'

'He's a 'soma master,' someone who can fell trees with traditional saws. 'Soma' is the Japanese word for logging, and that's what everybody here calls their work.' Ma Hai threw a cypress log on the fire, and the blazing flames filled the air with a strong lemony scent. 'In fact, an axe and a traditional crosscut saw is what's in that box of his. But the saw is so enormous it scares the hell out of city people.'

'I didn't get to see what was in the box. He was hugging it even in his sleep.'

'You've seen him sleep?'

'It's not what you're thinking! When he was lying asleep under the bridge over the Mugua River, I happened to walk by. That's when I saw him clutching the wooden box.' Ku A-Hsia was not prepared to tell anybody the truth about her encounter with the stranger under the bridge, including the fact that they had shared a dirty and smelly sleeping bag for the night. Better depict it as a chance meeting.

'My goodness! What a devil-may-care thing to do, just picking someone up on the road and then bringing them up the mountain.' Somewhat daunted by Ma Hai's blunt manner of speaking, Ku A-Hsia kept her head low and didn't make a reply. He went on, 'He doesn't like to use the ropeway. He prefers to walk back up slowly, taking the little trails and paths. Hard to say how long it'll take him. He might go stop at one of the forestry sites for some logging, or spend a few days in the Wood of Cursed Prophecies. It might be days before he comes back.'

'I can wait.'

'If you want my advice, you get back down the mountain as fast as you can. This is no place for a girl like you,' Ma Hai said firmly.

Ku A-Hsia took a closer look at the old man in front of her. He was wearing a padded jacket made of rough gray cloth, with brown patches at the cuffs where long use had left it threadbare. His loose, baggy pants were clasped around the calves with gaiters. In the old days, this had been the standard outfit of Japanese loggers. He kept pulling at his saggy khakis as he spoke, which had a rather comical effect.

Ku A-Hsia was not about to listen to his advice and go back to Hualien, the place she'd only just resolved to leave for good. So she replied, 'I'll wait for Pacilo to come back. I just want to say hi to him before I leave.' The part about waiting for Pacilo was true, but she had no intention of leaving when he got back: that bit was just for Ma Hai's benefit.

