

# WELCOME TO THE DOLLHOUSE 海邊的房間

*Welcome to the Dollhouse* draws together thirteen stories written between 2002 and 2012. Some of them have already won prizes. Reading them is like returning home to a familiar old lane, somewhere deep in the heart of the city. Sabrina Huang's eyes are focused on the detail, the people who populate her fictional world, the doctor who makes his step-daughter sick and moves her to the sea so that she won't leave him; the fortune teller and the young child with cancer; and the person who waits by the traffic lights to see if the green man will fall down...

Huang's prose is clean, cold almost, with a sharp satirical edge. Her work often addresses the theme of alienation and focuses on those in the lower classes of society. She may not be a prolific writer, but her output never fails to impress, earning her a much-devoted fan base.

## Sabrina Huang 黃麗群

Sabrina Huang was born in Taipei in 1979, and holds a degree in Philosophy from National Chengchi University. Huang has received many literary awards for her short stories, including jury prizes from both *China Times* and *Unitas* and the top prize from Lin Rung-San Literary Award. Her works have also been selected in two *Chiu Ko* short story yearly anthologies. Among her publications are a short story collection, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, and two works of prose. In 2012, she was named by *Unitas* as one of the 20 best Sinophone writers under 40.



- Category: Literary Fiction, Short Stories

- Publisher: Unitas

- Date: 1/2012

- Rights contact:

Victor Huang (Unitas)

[victor.huang@udngroup.com](mailto:victor.huang@udngroup.com)

- Pages: 264pp

- Length: 69,000 characters (approx. 45,000 words in English)

# WELCOME TO THE DOLLHOUSE

By Sabrina Huang. Translated by Jeremy Tiang.

## Cat Sickness

Her cat was sick? No, she knew that couldn't be. Her cat, her May Mee, had always been considerate, never given her any trouble, never required a trip to the vet. Of course, she'd noticed the nearby animal hospital she walked past every day, its illuminated sign decorated with cartoon animals, its glass doors and full-length windows revealing a spotless, gleaming space. One time, she watched as a young couple passed her on their motorbike. Only when they stopped did she realise the girl, riding pillion, was hugging a plastic carrier. The pair, all aiyah-don't-be-like-that-did-you-lock-it-hahaha pushed open the vet's door and jostled in. 'Animal Hospital.' The addition of that first word made it much less frightening. She'd often reminded herself to take down the phone number, just in case—but getting home she'd climb into bed, turn on the television, and forget about it.

But her May Mee was so sensible. She wasn't ill, just growing up. These few weeks, she'd watched the cat twitching her tail and groaning. Even when on heat she was never any trouble, never howling or calling out, only emitting little angry grunts, the tip of her tail flicking across her face and the backs of her ears, everything it touched seeming to bloom. She was a little worried—the stingy landlord had used wooden boards to divide up the rooms so this flat could be rented to six people, leaving just enough space for a bathroom, a balcony, and a cooking area (it wasn't even big enough to qualify as a kitchen). The other tenants were impossible to avoid, and as pets were forbidden, she was anxious it was only a matter of time before May Mee's presence was detected.

But in any case, she needed to seek out a vet. 'May Mee, May Mee,' she called softly, and the animal came over obediently, walking so sweetly, so heartbreakingly, to be by her side.

With one hand, he lifted May Mee's chin to examine her eyes, the other soothing her tail, telling her not to be afraid, he just wanted to look. May Mee lay down, her posture amicable, looking suddenly flirtatious. Her eyes never left his hands.

'Your—' he took the form she'd just filled in. 'My Mee—'

'May Mee,' she corrected him.

'May Mee. How old is she now?'

She still couldn't stop looking at his hands. The skin peeping out around the edges of his latex gloves was pale, just the colour you'd imagine a doctor's skin would be. 'I don't know. She was a foundling.'

(Oh, let me tell you, it was raining heavily that day, really heavily. I saw her creeping along the driveway, by the concrete wall, completely sodden and pitiful, water dripping from her fur into her eyes until she couldn't even open them. I can't leave my cashier's desk during business hours because customers might turn up wanting to park or drive away at any moment, so I tapped my pen against the aluminium door frame, calling her—'Mee Mee, come here, Mee Mee, come here, you'll be hit by a car if you stay over there.' And she understood! I'm not bluffing, she really understood. And just like that, she walked over to me.)

He prised open the cat's jaw and examined her teeth with his fingers, then weighed her. May Mee turned back to look at her, but she was helpless too. She reached out to pet May Mee at the exact moment the vet lifted her off the scales, and the tips of her fingers passed lightly over the backs of his hands, which were neither young nor old. Just a gentle brush. She wore white gloves in her own work too, receiving receipt after receipt through that little window, evidence of departure. Everyone leaving, every day. Her cotton gloves actually hindered her work, the change and tickets she handled frequently slipping through her fingers. But she persisted; at least this way her hands looked more or less like those of someone with a good life. Wearing a facemask was beneficial too. Sometimes she caught a glimpse of herself in the window glass, and thought her reflection held a tiny hint of beauty.

'I'd say about a year and a half, two years old. And she hasn't been to the vet since you found her? Has anything similar happened before?'

'No, she hasn't, and it hasn't.'

(So she walked over, just like that, and sat there staring at me, not meowing. Water dripping down one side of her nose and she twitched and twitched, but didn't make a sound. And I thought how obedient this little cat was. She even knew to jump into my cashier's booth when she heard a car coming, avoiding its wheels. They say cats are afraid of people, but she was never afraid of me. After some thought, I decided to wrap her in my cardigan and carry her in my bag, the zipper open a bit so she could breathe. Actually, it wouldn't matter if my manager or colleagues saw her—they'd ask about it, sure, but they wouldn't do anything. They're all good people. For instance, there was this one time...)

'Miss? Are you listening?'

'Oh! Oh, yes, yes I am.'

'I was saying, she's on heat now. I can prescribe some medicine for her.' He was running his fingers through May Mee's short fur as he spoke, examining every inch of her. 'But that's only to relieve her symptoms. If she doesn't undergo tubal ligation, as she grows older there's a likelihood of pus accumulating in the uterus. I normally advise pet owners to spay early.'

'If she has pus in—her uterus—what will happen?'

'The same thing, we'll have to cut her open, but it'll be more troublesome, and that operation is more dangerous. Do you want her to have kittens?'

'Kittens, her have kittens? I hadn't thought about it. Probably not.'

'Then tie her tubes. If a female cat isn't going to breed—' May Mee, finally released, began flicking her long tail at his waist, completely lacking the fear a small creature ought to possess instinctively. He seemed to enjoy this, his thumb idly twirling the tuft of white fur that sprouted jauntily between her brows, the other four fingers kneading her neck until she relaxed into a limp heap. 'If a female cat isn't going to breed, her uterus and ovaries, the whole reproductive system, is superfluous. Useless. Nothing but trouble.'

'Can I give her the medicine for a few days while I think about it?'

'Of course. And feel free to get a second opinion from another vet.'

When she left, the street outside was relaxing into the evening. Clutching the bag of pills in one hand and May Mee's carrier in the other, she walked a couple of steps down the pavement before looking back, just in time to catch his illuminated signboard going dark. There was some cartoon animal on it—impossible to tell if it was meant to be a dog or cat or mouse. It blinked its large eyes, and the light went out in them.

May Mee's loving heart was steadfast. She followed the vet's instructions—'Mix the powder with half a can of cat food, once a day,'—but after three days of May Mee obediently gobbling

up what she was given, there was no change. The cat's body, lusty and broody, seemed to take up the entire three square metres of their room. She sat on the single bed hugging her knees, her back against the wooden partition, watching the cat twist and turn. Thinking about that pair of hands, probing and pressing all over her body.

He was of medium height, his wrist bones comparatively wide and his palms thick, but who knew what his hands really looked like underneath those gloves? Probably like a scholar's hands. Or perhaps there'd be scars. Yes, surely there would be. Little animals are always clawing and biting.

Because her raised position angled her gaze down, the first she saw of her customers was always their extended hands. Fingers and nails, palms and backs, skin and tendons and veins. Even with the barrier of gloves, she was making contact with hands all day, and had learnt to make instinctive judgements about them—clues to the drivers' personalities, even before the rest of their bodies emerged from the darkness of the car, whether a rude man about to lash out at her ('How much? A hundred and twenty? Fuck! A hundred and twenty dollars for one hour? That's fucking robbery! Fuck you!') or a generous one ('Keep the change, don't bother giving me a receipt, I'm in a hurry.') Of course, most of the time her job wasn't so dramatic. She just sat there quietly as exhaust fumes blew past her. There were constant rumours that the mall owners were planning to fully automate the car park. Still she sat, allowing the rumours to blow past her too.

Who knew what his hands looked like under those latex gloves? If only she could see them, she might learn a little more about him. She really wanted to see those hands.

She reached down and hugged May Mee to her, running her fingers over the cat, retracing the path his hands had taken. The chin, between the eyes, top of the head, neck, spine, tail, paws. Then he lifted her by her four little paws to examine her underside. ('Good, good cat. That's it, put your claws away. Such a good cat.') Of course, she knew he was just coaxing his patient, and hadn't meant it as a compliment on how well May Mee had been brought up by her owner. She pressed her nose into May Mee's short fur and breathed deeply, but there was nothing out of the ordinary—still, she knew May Mee's body was seductive in a way she'd never experience. He'd said, 'When female cats are on heat, toms from several kilometres around will detect their scent, so you also have to consider whether you're prepared for hordes of males to descend on you, fighting and howling outside your home. And she'll want to go outside, day and night. You should think about all this.'

May Mee turned over on her knees. She lowered her head and touched her face to the spot he'd indicated on the cat's belly. May Mee wasn't concerned. How sweet she smelled. Like a carefree child, the cat tangled all four limbs in her hair, licking her mother's neck with a sandy tongue. You could hear the blood flowing through her veins, vividly gushing with desire. Recalling that day, the rumble of the animal's lust sounding beneath his hands, she opened her eyes wide, unable to stop tremor after tremor passing through her body.

As a young woman, she'd wondered whether she'd end up like this, watching the flames of possibility in her life wink out one after another, all the while slowly drying up as she approached the end. What she hadn't expected was the reality being even more depressing than her worst imaginings.

So, for instance, she'd reckoned she would, before getting too old, hurriedly marry someone or other, not someone rich or powerful, nor even someone who particularly loved or was loved by her, but at least this would be an existence she could explain to herself and others.

The space left in her life, after youth had flowed away, would need to be filled by marriage or something else. Otherwise she'd only be able to face the world sorrowfully, apologetically. Yet it seemed even such a haphazard solution would not be open to her.

And she'd always thought she was good at planning—though not calculating. She'd been a bus conductor, and for a long time had worked as the general manager of a small trading company, not to mention her many years as an accountant. Surely that indicated an ability to plan clearly? And shouldn't someone skilled at this have nothing to worry about?

But she hadn't known the world doesn't normally allow us to hold onto our little comforts. One year, after finally saving enough, she bought a place on the fringes of the city – a thirty-five-year-old apartment of twenty-odd square metres. This was about all that could be accomplished by a woman on the wrong side of youth, looks, education, wealth and marriage. But soon after this, one parent got cancer and the other dementia. You could say these things happen sooner or later, and what does it matter—but what else could an only daughter do, especially one mature in years? She sold the flat. Of course, her father and mother died in quick succession soon enough. After that she lived in shared accommodation, rooming with college girls who never stayed more than two or three years. She looked at them with the gaze of a caged beast eyeing birds, and as a result none of them could stand her.

Another example: She'd once thought she could go on like this, stunted but not incapable, having long ago signed a surrender treaty with fate. No, she'd no longer imagine she had the right to strive for a slightly better existence, she wouldn't even think of going against her place in the world, as long as the world left her alone. When her periods finally stopped at the age of fifty-one, she calmly submitted herself to being fifty-one and having nothing. It wasn't all bad, at least possessing nothing means having nothing to lose. And now those female students couldn't complain she'd made a mess, dripping all over the bathroom. (But of course, no one knew about her menopause, and so she continued to get the blame for any unsightly stains.)

Still, she'd never thought she'd find May Mee, as unwanted as she was. That day, when she stuffed the cat into her backpack and watched the warm, wet, dirty animal curl up and go to sleep, not stirring even as she finished her shift and, mind and body clumsy with drowsiness, carried her on the two bus rides home, stopping at the convenience store at the alleyway entrance to buy some dry cat food before finally climbing the stairs to the flat. Only then did she wake up, and instead of clawing or biting, leapt decisively onto the pillow. She bundled May Mee into the bathroom, scrubbing her with shampoo and Savlon antiseptic liquid, finally blow-drying her fur into a loose, fragrant puffball. Now you could discern her snowy tail and belly, her round face, the patches of colour on her back—a pale calico. (She only learnt this term later, hearing him explain it to another pet-owner: 'A cat with white, black and orange in its coat is called a calico, or pale calico if it's white, grey and pale orange. Calicos are almost all female.')

She didn't know that these days, owning a pet is a fraught business. Relying on common sense, she got some cat litter and filled a tray in the corner, a bowl of water and a dish of food next to it. She didn't suddenly become broody and start sighing with regret, she wasn't that sentimental. Still, her life was no longer the same. There were even times when she experienced happiness, offering her fingers or some paper or a piece of string for May Mee to play with, the TV volume turned up loud to cover the sound of her laughing and talking with the cat. When she opened her room door each day, without exception May Mee would be sitting just inside, looking up and, with the utmost self-control, uttering a single meow. More than once she'd seen May Mee glaring at the mosquitoes on the ceiling, and contemplated moving to a bigger place. Just a little larger, nothing too extravagant, ideally with a window facing the

outside. May Mee would be able to crouch on the sill, trying to snare passing birds.

But she hadn't counted on May Mee's reaching maturity, her cat's ripening youth bringing her into contact with him.

That month of bringing May Mee back and forth for treatment was a complicated period of time for her. This jealousy she couldn't dispel was like being in a boiling pot with no way to turn the flame down—if only she could be reborn as a cat. How hopeless humanity is.

She brought May Mee back. 'Doctor, the medicine isn't helping, but I still don't want to have her tubes tied.'

He nodded, and without a word lowered his head and raised May Mee's chin to study her eyes. What followed was the vet's usual routine of folding back ears and tugging at limbs, but all done so calmly, his thin lips gently curving, opening. 'I remember, she's called May Mee, right? Good May Mee. Are you feeling better?'

He turned to rummage for her chart in his files, his voice winding round behind him. 'Of course, you're free to leave her tubes untied. But I think I explained to you last time, there'll be after-effects. Medicine can only do so much.'

'That's fine, I—She seems fine now, I don't think we need the medicine.'

He shrugged. 'Sure, it's best not to take medicine. Your cat is actually in excellent condition, and at her age, one check-up a year is all she needs, unless she seems unwell.'

'A year?'

'I'd suggest increasing it to every six months when she's five or six.'

Less than two weeks later, May Mee, who should have been in very good health, was back at the vet's. It was all due to her lack of confidence. Every morning and evening, her route to and from work took her past his door. It was all above-board—surely anyone was allowed to walk down a public street? Yet in her intense agitation, she didn't dare even glance in that direction. Actually, she could have stared openly, and no one would have said anything, or even noticed. But she didn't have the nerve. When a woman is old, she becomes a man—no, that's wrong, not even that. She becomes a nobody. She has no right to express anything.

So her only choice was to take a small fruit knife and slice it into May Mee's left front paw.

Afraid the wound wouldn't be deep enough, but also worried May Mee would escape her grasp, she put a little pressure on the knife, and immediately blood droplets dribbled onto the fur. May Mee was stunned, terrified. Clutching the cat and holding the little paw, she dashed to his clinic, the bell jangling as she pushed open the glass door, entering the cool air-conditioning and light as clear as glass. He was here.

'I don't know what she stepped on, she's hurt...' Her pained expression wasn't entirely put on. He said nothing, not even looking directly at her. 'May Mee, be a good cat, Uncle's going to make your foot better. It'll just take a short while.' May Mee suddenly lifted her eyes to his and, with infinite sorrow, meowed piteously. His face twitched and he held her leg tight, reaching for his equipment to clean the wound. With infinite tenderness, he applied some medicine and bandaged it. Finally, he pulled off his gloves and flung them into the rubbish bin, rinsing his hands in the sink to indicate his job was done, and the work-experience boy would soon come in to deal with the aftermath.

She could now see clearly that his hands were indeed scarred, but not seriously. Clean and very pale, his fingernails broad and flat, his wrists strong. She spent a while staring at that pair of hands.

'Your cat is very obedient, very sensible. I've never encountered such a good little cat.'

He turned back, staring at her expressionlessly for what felt like too long, revealing the power a man in his early forties can summon at will. 'I don't believe your cat cut herself. You should take better care of her.'

'I know, I know, I should pay more attention. Thank you, doctor. Thank you.'

The wound wasn't deep, and within a week, May Mee was able to walk about as normal, seeming to make up her mind that this was a pure accident, not blaming anyone for it. Just as before, May Mee slept beside her pillow at night, and climbed onto her knees as she daydreamed.

The next time, she smashed some empty glass bottles into shards, mixing them into the cat litter and waiting for May Mee to step in. She'd done this as an experiment, not expecting the results to be so thoroughly realistic. They didn't look at all like the work of a human hand. 'Doctor, she was playing with a drinking glass and knocked it over. So clumsy! Then she managed to step onto the broken pieces.'

A couple of weeks later, it was two of the claws on her right front paw. 'Doctor, I was so careless.' She thought it would be a good start to admit her guilt. 'I was trimming her claws, and accidentally went too deep. I'm afraid I've hurt her.'

He lifted the paw. This was more than an accident. A cat's claws, like human fingernails, divide into two sections, and you can only cut the first part, the cuticle. After that you're hacking into flesh. The soft pad of May Mee's claws had been cleanly cut in two. Imagine snapping someone's fingernail, right in the middle! How could you make a mistake like that? Looking up to see her hands clutching each other, eyes glued to him, he became filled with a rage that he was later unable to explain to himself. He flung a pair of pliers violently onto the table.

'What kind of pet owner are you? Three leg injuries in one month! If your cat has any more of these strange accidents, kindly don't come looking for me. Take her somewhere else! It makes me angry just to look at you.'

May Mee shrunk into a corner, her eyes wide, staring at her owner. In the waiting room, a middle-aged man in a tracksuit, holding a large dog's leash, stared at her. The work-experience boy stared at her. Every pair of eyes in the building was fixed upon her, every pair except his. He had his back turned, busily medicating and bandaging May Mee. When he turned back, she knew, his eyes would show how little he thought of her. The sort of gaze she'd had to deal with all her life.

She snatched up May Mee and hurried out. It was evening rush hour, and the city was about to dissolve into light and pour onto the streets. Everywhere was confusion. A few seconds later, the work-experience boy followed her out. 'Miss, Miss! Doctor says be sure to wash your cat's paw carefully— He ran a few steps after her but couldn't catch up. 'Ah, forget it.'

On his way back into the clinic, he pressed a switch on the pillar outside, and the signboard flickered on. The cartoon animal that might have been dog or cat or mouse sprang to life, its enormous eyes filling with light.

Friday evening. She wasn't required at work this shift, and everyone in the flat had gone out, leaving her alone on the bit of the balcony that stood in for a kitchen, lighting the stove and boiling water in preparation for another solitary meal. As she was carrying the pot back to her room, the two girls living opposite arrived back at the same time.

'Hi, Auntie Chen, you're here.'

'Back so early? Aren't you going out to have fun?'

'Just wanted to have a quick shower. We'll go out in a while.'

Strangely, May Mee had trusted her completely, from beginning to end. And so she believed without hesitation that May Mee had been sent on a mission to help her. Otherwise why would she have been so placid, not even struggling at the moment of sacrifice? She'd closed her hands tight around May Mee's throat without being clawed once.

Now she sat in front of the TV, one eye on the screen as she measured out the right proportions of pickled vegetable, ginger strips and congealed blood. When she was a little girl, her mother had often made this dish. At that time, animals still got slaughtered in the marketplace. Whenever there was a little money to spare, her mother would go along to collect some pig or duck blood, bringing back a tiny packet to be processed, tipped into boiling water to harden into brown cubes. 'An ounce of live blood is stronger than a pound of dead flesh,' her mother would say, watching her eat.

The first girl, finishing her shower, ran to knock on the door of the second girl. The two huddled together, keeping their voices down, grumbling.

'It must be Auntie Chen. I went to the bathroom, the one with better water pressure, and she'd dripped red everywhere. It washed away when I showered, so at least it's clean for you.'

'Who asked you? You always want to grab the good bathroom, always want to shower first...'

Normally, she wouldn't be able to hear their hushed voices, but now her eyes were bright, her chest puffed up, and she felt full of untiring, undying secret energy, bubbling inside her. May Mee's soft touch. May Mee's delicate meow. May Mee's lovely expression. She spooned into her mouth the hormones that young female cats disperse over several kilometres. Her nether parts felt suddenly hot. Reaching down, she found her hand bright with blood. Doctor, can you see what's wrong with me? My periods stopped years ago, and now I'm bleeding again. Doctor, can you tell whether this is a cat sickness or human sickness? Doctor, you like May Mee, don't you? Then you'll definitely like me too. May Mee, May Mee, let's go and see the doctor together.