

YESTERDAY'S RAIN

昨日雨水

When the love of his life suddenly disappears, a man subjugates all self-respect in a desperate attempt to see her one more time. A story of betrayal by master of narrative voice Wang Ting-Kuo.

In a tale of betrayal that reads like *The Count of Monte Cristo* meets Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, a young paralegal finds himself suddenly deserted by the love of his life just as he has bought her an apartment. Left with not even a good explanation, the unnamed "I" is desperate to recover something of what he has lost, and at least manufacture a chance to see his ex again.

Uncompromising desire drives him to the extremes of deception. He goes to work for his ex's new husband, Councilor Liu, and begins to bribe his way deeper and deeper into the legal world. He links himself to Liu through trust, and carries out all kinds unethical directives. Eventually, he stands witness to Liu's downfall, an event that will also bring him surprising news.

Wang Ting-Kuo's second novel since his return to the literary world features a smooth, understated narrative voice that gives one the sense of a sharp knife in a velvet case, as a seemingly passive protagonist morphs under pressure into a vehicle for his own deep-seated motivations.

Wang Ting-Kuo 王定國

Born in Lukang in 1955, Wang now lives in Taichung. He started writing at the age of seventeen, and from eighteen his short stories began winning prizes all over the island, including the *China Times* and *Unitas* awards. He has worked in fields as diverse as building design, surveying and advertising. His early writings were love songs to nature and youth, but in his twenties he took a distinctly more politically conscious turn, mixing reportage and commentary with novels about the downtrodden in society. He stopped writing for many years while he built up his own company, until 2013, when he returned to widespread acclaim with a series of books including *So*



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booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

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Hot, So Cold and his most recent collection, *Who Blinked in the Dark*. Rights to his 2015 novel *My Enemy's Cherry Tree* has already been sold to six territories.

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By Wang Ting-Kuo

Translated by Om Buffalo

Chapter One

My original plan was to move into the Shen-Lai Building with Wen-Chi a couple of autumns from now.

It was a dream for our future that I had already paid for, but one which I had kept a secret from her. It was supposed to have two bedrooms and an open-plan study, with hardwood floors extending all the way to the bedrooms. The sun would beam into every corner from street-facing windows. Next to the laundry room, there was supposed to be a small, twenty-square-foot porch, which the construction company had promised to surround with a steel fence. Wen-Chi could grow her favorite herbs with enough space left over for two small chairs where we could sip tea and watch the sunset from the corner.

They had barely broken ground on the basement when Wen-Chi left me.

The world hadn't changed. Everything moved along the same as before.

Perhaps the only thing that had changed were the notices that I kept getting from the seller. Their tone went from polite to hostile, to downright hateful in the end when they sent me a letter notifying me of the foreclosure. It wasn't enough that I lost my love; I was robbed of my only dream, all there in black and white. In that cruel moment, it felt as if my entire life had vanished before my eyes.

When I received the foreclosure notice, all I could do amidst the crippling shame was start making phone calls. I talked to one employee after another until I was finally transferred to a female manager. I asked if she had ever saved money, if she thought it degrading to save ten to twenty thousand every month, to become a person that nobody likes because you never attend any of your co-worker's get-togethers and find every excuse in the book to alienate yourself from other people's worlds for fear of spending money.

I told her I had lived this kind of life for many years, until last year when I suddenly felt the intense desire to have a home of my own. That's when I naively decided to purchase the house. Do you have a home of your own, miss? Can you relate to what I mean when I say "home"? I exhausted all of my savings, and it wasn't even enough to pay for the cellar hole.

"Can you forgive me? I didn't even know I was so humble."

"Sir, don't be so hard on yourself. I'll help write a report and see what I can do."

"Just make sure to write the report clearly. The name on the contract is Ms. Wen-Chi. All of the rights and interests are in her name. At least give me some time so I can explain to her what happened."

"Huh? Are you saying she doesn't even know about the house?"

"It's nothing. I don't know why she suddenly left me either."

"How can that be?"

“Let’s talk about the house.”

“Well...if you can keep making the payments, I’ll find a way to transfer it into your name.”

“Absolutely not,” I said solemnly, “This is the only excuse I have left to talk to her.”

Wen-Chi had of course, been to my hometown, and met my mother.

My mother was a little bit nervous the first time they met. When we arrived, she was hanging up a quilt to dry. She violently rubbed her clean hands against her body. She wanted to step forward and welcome us, but she kept looking at me, unsure of herself. It seemed as if she was afraid that she might mistake her for someone else, and she didn’t want to rejoice too soon and be let down.

My mother liked Wen-Chi’s soft smile, and her sweet-talking and pleasant city-girl demeanor. Her presence brought a certain liveliness to the house that was lacking before. Her voice, clear and crisp like a bell, rang out delicately from under the tiled eaves, making the chickens perched atop the earthen jars squawk and the dogs jump. Even the neighbors, awakened from their midday naps, poked their heads out one after another. My mother insisted that she stay the night, and took her to the morning market the following day. They returned with their arms full of fruits, vegetables, and seafood. My mother even quietly bragged to me, saying she was the envy of the market that morning. People kept coming complimenting her on her future daughter-in-law, telling her how beautiful and considerate she was, nicer than their own daughter.

By the time Wen-Chi left me, those flattering qualities had mostly disappeared.

I’m not saying that she changed. In fact, she still possessed her youthful looks, but the drawstrings of reality had already begun to close in around her. She still had one really endearing habit. When I was depressed, or when we were both feeling helpless, she had the ability to change moods in the blink of an eye. One second she would be depressed, and then suddenly she would start humming a pleasant tune, and run into the bathroom to splash some water on her face, like she were watering flowers. Her charming smile would poke slightly through the gloom, still unwilling to open up fully, like a flower stubbornly refusing to bloom. It was almost as if she was afraid that she’d have nothing left if she opened up completely.

With such sweet and tender company, it seemed like there was no way we could ever be separated.

There is just one exception, namely, when two people in love suddenly feel lost.

I know this sounds a bit abstract.

Looking back, it would seem that we broke up during those final four days.

She was just about to go abroad for a vacation. When she left, her face was full of joy, her suitcase carefully placed on the doorstep. Outside on the curb, her friend’s beautiful sports car waited to take her to the airport, where she would fly on a plane for the first time in her life.

There were no signs at all. Unlike many other couples, we hadn’t been fighting, or been through many betrayals.

“How scary...we board the plane and bam, we’re in Hong Kong?” she asked.

“Yes, it’ll be quick. There will be snacks on the plane. Just imagine that you’re having afternoon tea with a friend.”

She got a free ticket to Hong Kong from her friend in direct sales, who had won the tickets as a performance bonus and invited her to come along. After she got in the car and left, her heart was still with me. "Remember to eat well when you're alone. I'll give you some peace and quiet for a few days." She left her phone on the entire car ride. Ear-splitting rock music blared continuously from the car's speakers. After half an hour, it sounded like they suddenly slowed and turned down the music. I heard her chirp, "What do we do? The fog is getting thicker. I can't see anything. Where are we?"

"You must be going uphill. The fog can be really thick where you need to turn."

Her friend gave a precautionary beep of the horn.

"Wow, that's amazing. It's like you're in the car with us," she echoed in the phone.

The flowery dress she was wearing when she left the house was clearly panicking a little, hurriedly covering her knees as she drew them back. She then leaned forward to peer through the windshield at the thick fog that filled the sky. The sports car was like a firefly soaring into the fog, vanishing without a trace.

Even though the car only fumbled through the fog for a few minutes, gradually getting further and further away from me, my heart was still right there with her. At that moment, there were no signs at all that we were growing apart.

I was actually a little bit happy. She rarely got an opportunity to go out. We were both able to relax a little bit. We didn't need to make compromises for each other's crazy schedules. And she wrestled with the decision a lot before deciding to go on the trip. She stocked the fridge with vegetables and refilled the water dispenser for me. She also hid the bamboo broom in the storage cabinet behind the house and when I opened up the cabinet, I found that she had mischievously hung up a note on the broom that said: "Don't sweep! Wait for me to come back."

The way she left only showed how she couldn't leave me. Nobody could have expected that she eventually would.

Besides, she did return from Hong Kong on the afternoon of the fourth day.

If destiny controlled time, the suffering would be almost over, I just need to endure a few more hours.

I work in a corporate legal department.

As long as you have a rudimentary knowledge of the law, it's not hard to prepare documents and run errands in a legal department. My role straddles the line between a legal assistant and a lawyer. As a clerk who has repeatedly flunked his bar exam, I'm responsible for reviewing documents sent over by different manufacturers and for drafting up various contracts, as well as sale and purchase agreements for all stages of the logistics process. And of course, all the lawsuit-related administrative work is my responsibility too, meaning I need to go to the courthouse every now and then.

I first met Wen-Chi in the outdoor corridor connecting the courtrooms behind the bailiff's office.

At first, she was just another woman wearing a face mask and passing me from behind with a pile of folders in hand. It was dusk, and a light rain fell outside. The gloom from the falling rain caused the lights on the pathway to come on early. I scurried behind her, on my way to hear the last civil case of the day. Suddenly she stopped in front of me and sneezed twice, dropping

all of the files she was holding. Some of them even opened up, scattering documents into the gutter.

I was running late, so I couldn't stop just because someone was blocking my way. I was too busy to pay much attention to her predicament. I rushed passed without giving it a second thought. To my surprise, she called out to me.

"Hey! You're not even going to help?!"

Only when I turned to look did I see what I had done. I had left a big half-footprint all across her folders.

I pulled out a tissue immediately and squatted down next to her to wipe off the folders. Yet the more I tried to rub out the footprints, the more blurred the letters on the documents became. "I am so dead!" she screeched from behind her mask, as she carelessly gathered up her scattered files. She was running late, so she hurriedly pulled out one of the files and stood up as she stared at me with a helpless look on her face.

"My boss is in court right now waiting for this file. Can you help me look after the rest of these documents? I'll come back for them after delivering this."

I suspected that the nasally twang to her voice was more likely the result of crushing anxiety than any sort of flu-like symptoms. Since she was no longer that angry, I felt compelled to help look after her documents to make up for my rudeness.

But when I came out of the courtroom after my civil case, still carrying the giant stack of folders in my hands, the woman in the mask was nowhere to be found. I ran to the main entrance and looked around, only to discover that there were lots of women wearing masks. Since I couldn't recognize her, I had no choice but to wait for someone to approach me. I never thought I'd be waiting from dusk until late into the night, when a bailiff finally came to shut the iron gate.

That night, I ended up taking her pile of folders home.

Those important documents just sat there on my desk all night, like a tragic omen that she would enter my life in such an absurd fashion.

Yet later, when I thought I really had her, she took that love back.

Right here, at this moment, the only things of hers left in the house are a hairbrush and a few solitary hairpins.

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The following day, though I still didn't know her name was Wen-Chi, I was able to find a phone number on the folders. The receptionist at the lawyer's office told me that their little scatter-brain was at the courthouse right now searching for the documents. "So you're that guy? Could I trouble you to go over there? Or could you leave a number...?"

To me, their "little scatter-brain" must be a somewhat forgiving old lady, otherwise she wouldn't have shouted in a traditional Taiwanese accent "I'm so dead" when she dropped the files. It sounded like she had forgiven me and was already blaming herself. I raced to the courthouse on my motorcycle. I was in a decent mood when I got there, but after circling around a few times and scanning the crowd, I still didn't see anyone wearing a face mask come and

greet me. I was starting to get a little fed up. I didn't like being out too long, regardless of whether I had anything to do or not. Never being able to pass the bar exam was depressing enough, how could I have gotten myself into a mess like this...?

Just when I decided to go back to work, a girl in a white jacket came running out of the service center.

"It's me!" she shouted to me, smiling.

Ironically, I couldn't recognize her eyes from the day before without the face mask.

Then, perhaps to help jog my memory, she held up two hands and covered her face. The eyes of the person I met the previous day momentarily shone through the cracks in her fingers. She blinked at my astonished face as if we were playing a game of hide-and-seek. She felt familiar, like the girl next door, or running into a childhood friend at the courthouse.

I was both amazed and a little confused, especially when she removed her hands to reveal her charming face. It made me wonder if someone had sent her there to play a trick on me. Nor did she leave, even after I put the folders in her hands. Instead she asked me if I worked in the same profession as she – then, having asked, she clicked her tongue to correct herself. "I'm not really in a place to talk about 'professions.' I just pour tea, and sometimes fetch documents or help make copies. Of course, I run things to the courthouse too."

She asked if I had a business card so she could meet me in a few days to properly thank me.

"I didn't bring any with me today. Actually, I rarely use business cards. I usually only give them out to clients."

"Oh, I understand. Could it be that you are...," a mischievous look came into her eyes, as she fired off a long list of titles, "...a bid-rigging sea cockroach, judicial scalper, representative from the mediation board, volunteer consultant, a bidding agent, or just a salesman who snuck in to wander around? Ha ha, I'm just messing with you. I don't actually think you are any of those things."

I let out a sigh of relief. She still hadn't finished talking. "I think I've actually seen you a several times. You're the one who is always sitting under the tree reading, waiting for the court to open, aren't you? Are you studying for the bar exam? My co-workers spend every spare minute they have studying for it too, but they're burning the candle at both ends. One of them even studied so hard last year he spit up blood. I know you'll pass for sure. Just look at the people inside the court. None of them are anything special, but they all sit there so cocky."

I forced a smile and told her that the test just wasn't for me. I thought about giving up for a long time.

"That's a pity. What, you don't think I can see the future?"

"I already took it a bunch of times."

"So? I'll tell you what, I'll marry you the day you pass it."

She must have just graduated from college, but her tone was so provocative that it stunned me. Who talked like that?

"I'm joking! I just felt sorry for you. You already studied hard for it. You'd be an idiot to give up."

"Since you know so much, maybe someday you really will marry a lawyer."

“Marrying a judge wouldn’t be so bad either. They look so authoritative in their robes. Every time I deliver something to the courtroom I have a hard time leaving. Sometimes I stay and listen to an unrelated court hearing. Now that I’ve heard a few, I can guess how many years the defendants will be sentenced to, and I’m always right. What do you think? After you become a judge someday you can tell me if I’m guessing correctly or not. Maybe you will even ask me how many years you should sentence someone to. Then you can marry me. I need to hurry back to the office with the files. I had already written my resignation letter this morning. Luckily you saved me.”

After she finished, she was swallowed up by the crowd as the light turned red, and quickly disappeared under the shadow of the overhang.

The world is so full of wonders, even an ordinary guy like me can run into one. Only after I saw her turn and leave did I suddenly realize that maybe I still might not recognize her if I saw her again someday, because her face wasn’t just pretty, but also a little intimidating. All I remembered were those long eyes, and that peculiar shyness. When she talked in that flirtatious tone, her fair skin suddenly turned pink from her forehead to her cheeks, as if she’d realized she had said something she shouldn’t have, but it was too late to take it back, so all she could do was purse her tiny lips and lower her head.

Although I didn’t take her flirting seriously, I figured she was so young that she either didn’t understand what she did, or she understood all too well, and she was teasing a loser like me just for fun. Honestly, I couldn’t stop thinking about it for days. I really wanted to go and ask her: did somebody put you up to this, or...did you mean what you said?

Taking the bar exam is simple. I take it every year, and every time I do the same thing after the results are announced: clear off my cluttered desk in despair, take all of my study materials, pack them into boxes, and stack them up as high as the ceiling. Then I put my head down on the desk and think about what I should do with my life next. Sometimes I really just wish that the stack of boxes would fall down and crush me to death.

If she were waiting for me to pass the bar exam to marry me, well, she would have to wait until the next life.

Half a year passed.

During those long months, I felt alone and somewhat ashamed. I developed a habit of looking out for female pedestrians wearing masks whenever I stopped my motorcycle at a red light. When girls wear masks, you can only see their eyes, and it makes their eyes more beautiful. Even if their facial expression looks hopeless, or depressed, or devoid of emotion as they wait for the light to change, covering half their face with a mask gives their eyes a melancholy, moving look as they stare directly ahead.

Since I only remembered those eyes, it’s no surprise that as I waited for the green light on the street, continuously staring at passersby, she gradually faded from my memory.

Besides, I was already over thirty-five. My ambition of having an official career had long since been destroyed, and my will to study had already suffered so many defeats. How much did I have left? She totally got to me. Her flirtatious language had me wondering if maybe she were a loose woman. If I were doomed to lead a boring life from then on, then her youth and provocative beauty had become even more threatening.

Yet, in March of the following year, I ran into her again.

My firm had sent me to a drinking party for lawyers that happens every year after the Spring Festival. I originally planned on signing in and sneaking out early, when a light voice rang out from the corner of the hall, "Little prince, little prince..." I didn't know who the "little prince" was, but the voice was directed at me. Only after hearing her voice did I catch sight of her, sidling out from amongst the throng of guests in a white blouse and bowtie and carrying a small tray of cocktails. The blissful look on her face gave the slight impression that she hadn't yet finished saying all she had wanted to say at the courthouse that day. The shape of her mouth looked as if she was quietly whispering, "Marry me. Marry me."

She handed me a cocktail with a cherry floating in it.

Her lips were like that cherry, sweetly talking to me. She told me that she had changed firms. She said she had gone to the courthouse many times and hadn't seen me. Then she pushed her way back into the crowd of guests to hand out more drinks. When she returned, there were desserts on her tray, which she offered to me before disappearing once more.

A week later – no, not quite that long, it must have been less than three days later – a rush of happiness rose up inside of me, and suddenly it made me think of her.

I didn't know it would be risky. I thought love was simple.

Given my circumstances, I was in no place to act like a playboy and get involved with a loose woman. All I had was my poverty, mediocrity, outdated style, and introversion, as well as my occasional cowardice. I can only imagine what I would say if we saw each other again. There's a good chance that she, with her straightforward, flirtatious nature, would say something really direct to me again, like asking my age, how many years it would take to pass the bar exam, or what I planned on doing if I don't pass it.

It was important for me, then, to figure out how to answer her questions without her losing interest. To put it simply, I wanted to be a respectable person, and not be alone forever, or waste my life sitting in someone else's law office.

I'm serious. Saying this might get her attention.