

The Missing Bangle

(1)

Whenever my parents talk about my upbringing, they say - with pride - that I grew up in Little Fat's house. Little Fat lived upstairs, was a year older than me, and had a face like the fox spirit girls in a TV series called Ghost Spirit. She was extremely feminine, unlike me, who was festooned in a bowl hair cut above the ears, a testimony to my parents' unspeakable wish for a son. In my chest of drawers were boy cotton boxer shorts and tank tops. So too were a wooden pistol, a plastic water rifle, and a rubber dagger with whose sharpness I was never satisfied. Little Fat wore dresses and I had pants. Her thin lips—glib and smooth—were in sharp contrast to my stuttering mouth.

When I was seven and she was eight, Little Fat and I competed in almost every way we could, starting with grades in school. Hers were always higher than mine. *She was older than me*, I reasoned, so it's *No Big Deal*. But at home I secretly practiced high jumps. To rescue my beaten ego from lower exam scores, I became a fierce competitor in Chinese Jump Rope.

My eager-to-win legs always cleared the rubber bands, whereas Little Fat frequently fell short. After I had gone to the trouble of attaching the rubber band to our main building's door handle and expertly stretching it for her to jump, she exacted revenge by simply quitting the game after her turn, denying me a victory.

Little Fat was never ready to yield a single event or point. After rejecting my request to join me in Hopscotch, she stepped onto my solo Hopscotch territory, invading each of my marked squares, jumping like a spoiled lunatic Queen. Her nonchalant moves suggested, "Been here. Been there. Been to all those places *you* wanted to go!" Obnoxious!

No matter how fiercely we competed against each other, Little Fat and I reached détente every day. We were magically bonded through our mutual love of playing games. Like two addicts getting our fix, we would always resume our games and renew our rivalries.

Whenever it was raining after school, we played inside, most of the time at her home, which was a free play zone after her parents returned to work in the afternoon. I called her father Wang Daye and her mother Wang Daniang. Since they were older than my parents, I showed more respect to them. Just before leaving for work, Wang Daye would remind his daughter, "Little Fat, take good care of Big Happiness. Share your candies and be a good girl." Wang Daniang had prepared a plate of candies and nuts, placing it on Little Fat's *kang*, a brick bed with a stove inside. She whispered to us, "Don't open the door to strangers. You two hear me?" She said it as though someone at that very moment was on his way to knock on the door and kidnap us.

Little Fat was less aggressive towards me in her own home. The superior position of the hostess was well established, as I had been taught to behave as a submissive guest and listen to the hostess. As a result, Little Fat actually invited me to light the stove with her. Fire - so my favorite!

The kindling was skin from a birch tree, which burned the quickest. Before lighting it, Little Fat removed the lunch ashes inside and under the stove. She did it with great care, as though she were petting a favorite cat, so that the ash would not fly all over the place. She built a wooden tent out of the thin cut firewood and left an entrance for the fire source. Several big pieces of coal that waited on the nearby shovel, were cued up to burn next.

The sound of a match being lit always frightened me but not Little Fat. She did it as if she were casting a spell on the match, which would either break from her strength or burst into flame. She held the matchbox in her left hand and a match in her right, keeping them at bay in the same way that she might set off a firecracker. She stroked the match head firmly, ready to toss it away if the fire darted towards us. The first match broke, and she threw it onto the coal pile on the floor with a quick and vigorous “*Cao!*” (“Fuck!”) under her breath. It wasn’t the only occasion for her to curse, but when she did, an instant coolness arose around her, which triggered goose bumps on me, as if we were the masters of the universe.

The birch skins burned fast. As soon as they were lit, the flaming end curled, making a crackling sound, its smoke instantly permeating the room. Holding the unlit end of the skin, Little Fat pointed it down and as the flame grew larger. She hurriedly inserted it into the wooden tent inside the stove. While she extended her arm as far as she could, I walked a few steps behind, shouting “Be careful!” again and again. Then peering over her shoulder, I saw the flame glowing bigger and brighter. Little Fat latched the stove door, stood up and watched it from the top, assessing the life of the fire. It survived. The air coming from the chimney increasingly blew under the fire, agitating it to stand.

After the fire was secured, Little Fat picked up pieces of coal and placed them on the burning wood. Then she held a metal bar with an L-shape at the end to hook into and lift metal rings of different sizes placing them on top of the stove. The bigger rings went to the outer side, the smaller ones to the middle of the burner. The mission was complete except for Little Fat sitting a full kettle of

water on the stove as a final statement in her stove lighting performance. We heard the wind suck the smoke up to the chimney and out into the open air.

Her *kang* was reheated. Resting on her bed, we found black marks on our bodies, especially Little Fat's nose, cheeks, and back of her wrists. My hands were also black, although I didn't recall ever being close to the stove.

After playing in Little Fat's room and becoming bored, we explored her parents' bedroom. Everything in that room was bigger. Their bed was a real bed with a mattress covered by sheets patterned with huge purple flowers, and pillows packed in cases with a pillow towel on each. When we lay down on it, we felt like queens watching the fancy chandelier-like ceiling lights, not wanting to return to her small and hard bed made up of layers of bricks and concrete.

Best of all, Little Fat knew where the balloons were. She took out two each time for us to blow up. Some substance on the balloons' surfaces greased our hands and mouths, but that didn't bother us. My fear of a balloon exploding and rubber whipping my face prevented me from inflating it all the way; thus, mine was always smaller than hers. Little Fat grabbed mine and blew more air into it till the size met her standards. As the rubber expanded from her blowing, I turned my back, covered my ears, squeezed my eyes shut and peered sideways through the slits in order to minimize any potential damage from the bulging object.

We had no idea why these balloons were not round, but long and slender, like winter melons with tiny stems. Keeping the inflated melons in the air and hitting them to each other gave us great joy. Their ungainly shapes were difficult to maneuver, so their flight paths were erratic. However, playing an

unpredictable game was the perfect use of our limited time and unsupervised space.

After ravishing her parents' room, we restored the apartment to normal "to build credits for our future trips," as Little Fat ordered when she pointed to places that I should go fix. I obeyed without protest. Who could refuse the chance to experience more secret joy?

Going home was a drag.

My inability to light a stove was a real safety hazard, although I badly wanted to be of service. Thank goodness for two things: 1) my parents let me try and 2) they cautiously supervised me. They stood behind me with curious smiles, wanting to see for themselves what I had learned from next door. Since they were opposed to me lighting the fire, they won the battle when my first fire failed to stay lit. I also made a mess inside and outside the stove, scattering wood and coal in the kitchen, and making myself black. When Mom saw my wooden tent in the stove, she said, "Oh my god, if everyone lit a stove this way, people would starve to death! Have you finished your homework? Go study!" And then Mother uttered her daily mantra "*Go study!*" again.

I can remember the day I discovered balloons in my house; balloons seemed to be wherever there were adults. I blew one up. As this balloon began to form its shape, it caught the attention of my dad who was sitting on the arm handle of the sofa his feet resting on the sofa, his favorite spot. Dad frowned and hollered, "Don't do that!"

His reaction confused me. How could he not be happy to see me enjoying myself? So, I didn't listen. Then he looked away. Hearing my dad's voice, my mom ran over, shyly trying to take the balloon from me. I ran and she chased. She won,

confiscating my toy and saying playfully, “Oh my god, *Er Zi*.” She liked to call me her “son” in opera style, “This can’t be blown. I’ll buy you balloons. Throw it away and go clean your mouth.”

“But this *is* a balloon,” I protested, but stating *that* never worked.

It didn’t take us long to figure out what *that* had been all about. My mom released the secret when I found a colony of those balloons in her drawer at work. She was the Dean at the Birth Control office at the time. “They are to be worn on men’s penises.” This was my first biology lesson. Penises were so delicate that they needed to be protected. I said “Oh!” and then bounced away, never wanting to touch them again for blowing up.

I couldn’t wait to tell Little Fat what I had found out about those “Safety Gloves.” But how do you put it on?” She asked, holding a loose unfolded condom at the open end between her thumb and index fingers. We were both staring at it, figuring out how to apply that soft and greasy thing to a penis, when we became mystified by another question. Where would an equipped male organ go? Our imagination had never reached this point before.

We grew nauseated thinking about how we had put those things in our mouths. Yuck! We both felt like vomiting.

It wasn’t because I hadn’t seen penises before. I was with a team of boys and girls my age who visited a boy’s apartment across from my home. We were there to Play Doctor. What couldn’t be seen excited us. The boys went first while we girls shyly waited and watched. The enthusiasm in the room was high. I had to fight through the audience traffic, peering through the crack between bodies to see a boy reclining on a single bed, leaning against the wall behind him while his legs were open towards us. He was so nervous that as soon as he unbuttoned

his pants showing a small flesh colored lump, he screamed, "Done!" Zipping himself up, he ran away. The nano-second peep shows went on. The boys after him followed his lead, doing it faster than my eyes could see. We all desired to see others but none of us wanted to show our own. I felt tightness between my legs and was eager to see more, but then it was my turn.

It's so embarrassing, I thought, but to be fair, I should do it. I climbed up to the bed, filling the empty spot on the examination bed. I looked at myself, pelvis tilted. Like bookish medical interns, the onlookers curiously and expectantly stared at the place I would soon uncover.

The three press buttons in front of my pants gave me an idea. Like the boys ahead of me, I just needed to unbutton them and display what was under. I did, and they saw the pubic bone area sans hair under my belly. "Done!" I shouted like the boys but I wasn't let go. When the unsatisfied crowd insisted that I take my pants off, I heard my mom calling me to come home for dinner. This was the only time that her piercing call was helpful.

I wasn't sure if it was Little Fat who told my mom about our 'project' in the boy's home. When I got home, my mom's thundering voice continued, growing more bombastic. "WHAT WERE YOU DOING IN THERE?" she meant where the boy lived. "WHY DIDN'T YOU RESPOND TO ME WHEN I FIRST CALLED YOU? DO NOT GO TO HIS HOME ANYMORE. YOU UNDERSTAND?" Despite a few initial shudders, that was her best effort to scare me from further interactions with boys in private spaces.

But even so, with the condom listlessly hanging in front of Little Fat, I had no idea about the compatibility of its size and the ones I had seen while Playing Doctor. "We should see some adults," Little Fat announced. And so we added a

new project on our To Do list. I remember the list clearly because we never got to complete that task together.

Though Little Fat had many things that I didn't have, we had a few things in common. We both had mothers who occasionally wore color-changing rainbows on their faces and arms, as though it was expected that every woman should.

When I visited her on her mom's bruise day, Little Fat refused to have me in her home. From the other side of her door, she told me that she didn't want to play. When I returned home sooner than usual, I had to report why. My mom was concerned and asked how bad her bruise was and how Little Fat was doing. I knew nothing because I didn't get to go in at all.

"I'll go check on her later," my mom said. She went over to my dad, asking him to talk to Little Fat's father next time he saw him, "Tell him not to be so violent. Barbaric! What if he hits the wrong place and she (Little Fat's mother) does not recover?" My dad nodded and said nothing. My grandmother, who was living with us at that time, was sitting on the sofa. She looked outside and began talking into the air. "When a couple fights, the one who suffers most is the child." She sighed, "Bitter life for poor Little Fat." She knew we were listening.

Listening to my grandmother's speech was always rewarding. Not until she added that last thought did I realize that Little Fat was in a terrible situation, a front line witness to her father's ugly face and her mother's fate. At that moment, my grudge against her for better grades in school and bullying in games instantly dissolved. I wished I could have invited Little Fat to live with us, even though we would not have as much fun as we had enjoyed in her house. One

could not have fish and the bear palm at the same time. Could people truly experience freedom if they were not secure?

When the rainbow colors turned from red to purple to black to green to yellow, the bruise had completed one healing cycle, and Little Fat allowed me to visit. That was when I learned she was going to move away.

On her last day in Dongbaowei coalmine, I went to visit her. The door opened by itself. The air was tense but unusually light. Little Fat was sobbing in her room and her father was packing in another. Her mother had already left. They had divorced.

“Wang Daye, I have come to see Little Fat.”

“Oh, Big Happiness, she’s in her room. Go ahead.” He was perspiring from moving things around. A cigarette was stuck behind his ear. I saw, in his kindness to me, no trace of violence at all, which added more nerve-racking creeps in me. I had phantoms of how he had painted on Little Fat’s mother with his fists.

Passing the kitchen where dirty bowls and plates had piled up in the sink, I entered her room and quietly closed the door behind me.

On her kang, Little Fat sat with legs folded closely up to her chest, her face buried between her knees. I crawled over and sat next to her, taking hold of one of her arms. I wanted to ask ‘*What happened?*’ but answered myself immediately knowing that was a stupid question. She jerked her arm away from me, and clung more tightly to her knees in a hopeless way. Her reaction was unlike any response I had received from her before: unlike when she abandoned me at the jumping games; unlike how she lit the match against the side of box; unlike how she grabbed my intimidated balloons. I rejoined by closing the space between us so we sat shoulder-to-shoulder.

“I heard what happened. Is that why you didn’t show up in class this morning?” Of course, it was. But I could find no better things to say. I was panicked and sad. “Do you know where you are moving to?”

“My Nainai’s home, in Yilan.” She was moving to her grandmother’s home. Her face was red, and so was her neck, where a few hairs were free from her ponytail.

“Where is that?” I could not recall seeing this place on any map.

“I don’t know.” She looked up and leaned her head against the closet behind her. She looked tired, and her face was pleading to know why.

The most cliché of all the dramas we used to watch on TV had now jumped out from the screen and become part of our lives.

“When can I see you again?”

“I don’t know.” Then, determinedly, she said. “Maybe I’ll come back.”

Smelling the warmth in her, I wondered if she was as sad as I was, about us separating without a definite place and date to meet again.

I took off one of my silver bangles and opened a hand that was still clinging to her knees. I pressed the bangle into her palm and covered it with her fingers. “Here, I want you to have it. When you see it, you will remember me. When I see my other bare wrist, I will remember you.” I clutched her arm and rested my head on her shoulder. Through the window, we could see the big, round and red sun, which was setting faster than we had hoped.

I used to classify my friends in layers, like the clothes on my body. Some were far from me like winter coats or spring jackets, and some were close like underwear. Little Fat was like my tank top that I was uncomfortable without, something that I never grew tired of.

Not long after she moved away, a neighbor said that she had seen Little Fat in a nearby town. Why was she there? No one knew. Some said she had become a Karaoke girl. They said it with such sour pity.

Whatever I later heard about her was pure fiction. The Little Fat image in my mind's eye was eternal: she was forever the bully in our Chinese Jump Rope, the stove-lighting artist, the fake balloon provider, and a great teammate for childhood projects.

When more coalmine families moved to the nearest small city for better education and greater conveniences, some of my friends disappeared as well. Back then, none of our homes had any computers, much less access to the Internet. No calls were made because we didn't know the new numbers. No letters were mailed because we didn't know the new addresses. Our neighbors moved out one after another and, after awhile, our building looked like a base camp. Residents came to rest for a while and then took off to their next destination. New faces moved in, and over time, visits between familiar faces became rare.

Ten years later, when I finally had my own private address, the hope to have Little Fat in my life again was close to zero. I buried our private joys in my diary, locked it and hid it at the bottom of my closet.

When I left *Dongbaowei* coalmine for the university in the capital city of Harbin, most fire stoves and *kangs* had been removed, replaced with electric stoves and modern beds with mattresses. The four chimneys on top of each apartment gradually ceased their smoke emissions, adding to the increasingly lonely landscape of the mine. Each member of my family gave me tips on how to live alone in the city.

“Silence is golden. Watch, listen and learn.” My Dad said, as if he wanted me to become his clone.

“Don’t listen to your father. Speak out when you need to. But what’s more important, keep an eye out for quality boys and bring us one someday.”

Dad attacked immediately. “Enough!” he said, turning to Mom, “Don’t you know *yan duo bi shi?*” - He who talks much errs. Mom rolled her eyes at him with no words.

“Remember this, Big Happiness, one’s mouth turns soft after eating food from others, and hands become shorter after using things that belong to others,” Grandma added, looking out the window. She knew we were listening, “If you are short of things, you must let us know so we can help you get them.” She paused. “Don’t depend on others.”

“Open a bank account, and start saving money,” my accountant Grandfather advised like a professor. He told me to save a Certificate of Deposit for three months, and that way I could earn the most during each four-month semester. I didn’t understand why, but I didn’t say no.

After receiving such attention from everyone, I was reluctant to leave home. No matter how many restrictions they placed on me, I was willing to bear more. However, when I sensed my lack of privacy and my inability to do things as I wanted, I was ready for the farewell.

(2)

When Xiao Di rushed through the door, I had been comfortably snuggling under a blanket in our dorm room. She asked me to get up and go out with her. The wind was blowing sand from Inner Mongolia and, although it was only three

in the afternoon, the sky was brown. White lights in buildings were ghostly blue. The best thing one could do, I thought, was to read in a warm bed. So I whined.

“I can’t lift the heavy tables on my own. Come on!” Xiao Di was taking off her working jacket, a dark blue velvet top. She bought it in the Song Lei shopping mall on the day she was offered the job of campus salesperson for the Little Bully dictionary company. Song Lei was for the rich and she had spent all her savings plus an advance of her next month allowance on that jacket. Now she was asking me to get up again as she headed directly towards me. I winced.

I wanted more than to keep warm under the blanket. Da Long had been meeting with her every week to talk business. Bullshit. How serious could a campus sales job be? And why would it require them to talk privately so often? I’d told him if he really needed to see another girl *that* frequently, then we should break up. I was eighteen and in my dictionary a relationship should either be on or off. No mezzanine.

Since the start of our sophomore semester, Xiao Di had been having *everything* that we girls wanted - multiple dates and, now, a job. Turning her latest request down was the only way I could think of to feel superior and make her suffer.

Xiao Di didn’t insist. She left the room immediately to rescue her electronic dictionary display outside, banging the door closed. My heart began beating faster.

My eyes were moving over the lines in the book, but my mind was somewhere else.

I got out of bed, and went to Xiao Di’s purple new stockings lying in her open closet. I took them out and tucked them under my bed, thinking she would

have nothing to wear for Da Long's birthday party. They were kept under my bed for two days before I tore them up and tossed them in a landfill outside the campus.

When students came to our dorm room, asking about Xiao Di's Little Bully electronic dictionary, I whispered into their ears with the confidence of an insider: "I wouldn't try something like that if I were you." They knew I must have first-hand information about her business. "It's all about making money, you know?" Then, with my nose up and hands deep in my pockets, I drifted away.

With Da Long I had used a slightly different approach. He had come over to me after our common lecture on Politics, and whispered into my ear, his glasses so close to me that I jerked back. "Our dinner has to be canceled. I've got a meeting to go to. Dictionary ..." Xiao Di was going too, I knew it! Before he finished his sentence and before I had a sensible, verbal response, my hand had already slapped his right cheek and my whole body was shaking as fast as my pulse. I inserted my eye sword into him, an infidel of our two-member tribe. "You go to the meeting. That'll be *it* for us!" My voice surprised even me. Keeping the relationship with Da Long was much more complicated than experimenting on the condom utilization.

I distanced myself from both of Xiao Di and Da Long when what I really wanted was their acceptance. It was a paradox, one of many in that period of my life. But I had the guts to sustain it and live with it.

The tug of war with Da Long went on for two years. Before we all departed upon graduation, Xiao Di asked me out for a drink.

I was ready for a one-on-one challenge.

We went to an ice cream bar called Ice Peak on the snack street between the Uyghur lamb restaurant and a youth hostel. Ice Peak was a hot dating spot among the students especially with its delicious homemade strawberry ice cream. This time, though, Xiao Di ordered a bottle of red wine instead.

Surrounding us were lovers murmuring at each other. The room smelled high on hormones, leaving us ignored and alone. Xiao Di took a sip of her wine and I sucked on the spoonful of ice cream. I felt a piece of canned strawberry linger on my tongue, and I carefully massaged it with the support of my upper gum.

“We're graduating next year. What's your plan?” Xiao Di asked.

She didn't sound that she had known I stolen her stockings. Check!

“My mom wants to live with me after I finish school,” she said.

That didn't seem that she had known I destroyed her business on purpose. Double check!

Then she lowered her glass and began sobbing into her elbow. “My mom and dad are getting a divorce.”

Bingo! She must have thought I was still a friend.

I filled my glass with wine and pushed the empty ice cream cup away. I touched my hand to her shoulder. As I felt her tremble, I was at a loss for words.

The oversized winter coat made her look extra skinny and fragile. Her hair was loose and thin, sticking to her wet, red face. She straightened. Her eyes were locked on her wine glass. At the moment she lifted her head, the usual glorious side of her had melted like a cup of uneaten ice cream. I took a sip of the wine and smelled the alcohol, instantly coming into full consciousness. In front of me was a roommate with whom I had lived for nearly four years, a dilettante

with whom I had shared “pillow talks” in the wee hours. Now she was helpless, torn apart by the separation of her parents; her future was unsure, especially with a mother who had only her daughter to cling to. And, I had been trying my best to make her miserable? Why?

I wept, as well.

The couple sitting nearby looked sympathetic, as if they were sending condolences. I searched for words, but too many of them crammed into my mind at once and I panicked. I couldn’t make a choice. Should I admit my evil deeds to her to balance our confession bank, or should I continue to play the good and nice roommate and try to comfort her as much as I could?

Finally, I blurted out, “If a couple do not get along, it’ll be a good thing for them to divorce. The sooner they do it, the better it is for everyone in the family.” Crap. What did *I* know about marriage and relationships? But then, my silent tears decided to shoot out from my eyes like high pressure sprays to wash me clean.

Xiao Di nodded, sobbing even harder.

I looked at my wrist with the silver bangle. A dragon paired with a phoenix. My other one was still bare. Little Fat was gone, but Xiao Di was right here with me.

(3)

Da Long stayed beside me till the last day of our university. I didn’t recall who initiated the break-up, but I told all my friends that *I* was the one. “What’s the point in keeping the relationship if he’s not around all the time?” I argued, knowingly, each time. Condom was the only thing that I remembered about him. I ticked on to-do list Little Fat and I had made.

“I never thought Da Long was a match for you.” Xiao Di said on the phone.
While I was in Harbin, she moved to Beijing for a Sales position and stayed there.

“How come you didn’t tell me that?”

“Like the many things that you did not share with me, perhaps?”

Xiao Di and I have remained regular correspondents since then, and we’ve never talked about her missing stockings.

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