

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE TV BOOK CLUB SELECTION
THE RAPTURE

The Uninvited

‘A masterclass in creepiness – as unsettling
as Margaret Atwood or Kazuo Ishiguro’

Independent on Sunday



LIZ JENSEN

BLOOMSBURY

Praise for *The Uninvited*

‘Expertly paced, combining moments of chilling horror with deadpan comedy, this audacious novel is utterly gripping’ *Daily Mail*

‘Genuinely unnerving’ *Times Literary Supplement*

‘A gripping read . . . [Jensen is] a great British author with a talent for brilliantly written and truly original tales’ *Daily Express*

‘Brilliantly effective . . . The mainstream is moving towards her, rather than the other way around’ *Guardian*

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‘I’ve never read anything like this. Chilling, and thought-provoking, this book offers a vision of a future where things go badly wrong . . . written by an author with precision timing and an innate talent for the genre . . . Compelling to read, difficult to put down, Liz Jensen’s new novel is both terrifying and redemptive’ Monique Roffey, author of *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle*

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‘Gripping. Imaginative. Shocking’ Matthew Quick, author of *The Silver Linings Playbook*

THE UNINVITED

LIZ JENSEN

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

For Clare Blatchford Rees

An inspiration

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting
The soul that rises with us, our life's star
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar . . .
Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither
Can in a moment travel thither
And see the children sport upon the shore
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

William Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*

There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.

Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*

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PROLOGUE

Mass hysterical outbreaks rarely have identifiable inceptions, but the date I recall most vividly is Sunday 16th September, when a young child in butterfly pyjamas slaughtered her grandmother with a nail-gun to the neck. The attack took place in a family living-room in a leafy Harrogate cul-de-sac, the kind where no one drops litter and you can still hear birdsong.

Three shots. Three half-inch bolts of steel. The jugular didn't stand a chance.

No reason, no warning.

The little girl's father was the first on the scene. Hearing a blunt vocal noise – the woman had tried to scream – he rushed in to find her haemorrhaging on the sofa, while the kid sat staring at the wall in a trance that resembled open-eyed sleep. When the others joined him and saw the blood, they all had the same thought: a terrible accident.

But it was a mistake to think that, because a few seconds later the child jolted awake and grabbed the tool again. Before anyone realised her intention, she'd put it to her father's face and fired.

Eyes are delicate, so no chance there either. He was fortunate it wasn't worse.

A lightweight pump-action Black & Decker. One murder, one blinding. Two minutes. No accident.

She can't have been the first. But I'll call her Child One.

At the time of the assault, she had just turned seven.

Is violence contagious? By what mechanism does a series of apparently random events start cohering into a narrative of cause and effect? Can there be such a thing as psychic occupation?

For me, these became pressing questions.

The day the news broke, I'd just flown in from Taiwan. In the car park of Glasgow airport I blinked at the sunshine. After the pressurised heat of downtown Taipei, the air shuddered with freshness. When my plane was touching down, the little girl was preparing her weapon. By the time I'd cleared customs, she'd executed the attack. And as I drove towards the coast and the ferry, skirting the sprawling edges of grey Scottish towns, two police officers were contemplating a crime scene which they later described as 'the most distressing and perverted' of their careers.

I lived, at the time, on the island of Arran, in a landscape that flitted unpredictably between light and dark: shafts of sunlight, charcoal clouds, sudden rainbows, the pale featherings of fog on scrub, the pewter glint of the Atlantic. I'd rented a stone cottage on the eastern coast straight after my split with Kaitlin: ideal for someone who cherishes his solitude and needs only appear at Head Office on the rare occasion. It was dark and low-ceilinged. The front door opened on to a flank of scrubland a short way from the shore: in the middle distance lay the rhomboid outline of a black granite rock and a cluster of hawthorns, side-swiped by wind. I could watch the rotating blades of the wind turbines on the horizon for hours. At the back of the cottage, by an abandoned vegetable patch, lay some rusted tractor parts.

and an enamel bathtub on brick supports which a previous tenant had turned into a crude pond. When I cleared away the chickweed, I found a pale goldfish. Once in a while I'd empty the toaster and feed it crumbs.

'Here, Mr Fish, Mr Fish, Mr Fish!' I'd say. Strange to hear a human voice, in that empty place.

There are certain fixtures in my life which constitute a kind of home. The antique optometrist's chair in Cyrillic, Hindi, Chinese and Arabic that Professor Whybray bequeathed me when he retired; my paint catalogues, foreign-language dictionaries and folk-tale compendiums; some of the mathematical diagrams and origami models I've constructed across the years, and a cardboard dinosaur Fred made at primary school. Good shelving is important. I have that too. I'm a creature of habit. After three days in Taiwan working flat out on the sabotage case, it was comforting to be surrounded by what I cherish. Fortress Hesketh, Kaitlin used to call me. Entry forbidden. If she had a point – and yet the general consensus was that she had – then my self-containment wasn't something I had a mind to fix.

I had one day to write up the Taipei investigation, and explain the anomaly of Sunny Chen. That was what was preoccupying me as I unpacked my suitcase. Five identical shirts, ditto boxer shorts, two pairs of trousers, wash-bag, Chinese dictionary, electronics. I put on a wash, then flipped on the TV to catch the midday news. *Growth figures up for the third consecutive season; the UN warns of 'catastrophe within a generation' if birth rates fail to drop; severe weather alert as Hurricane Veronica heads for the West coast.* But it was the domestic atrocity that snared me. My exhausted mind lent the report the drifting, sub-oceanic quality of a nightmare.

The little girl's grandparents were on their regular weekly visit to her home. The distraught family insisted that nobody had done anything to antagonise the child. Neither on that Sunday or any other day. When she woke that morning, she was in good spirits, according to her mother. She had even recounted a dream about 'walking around in a beautiful white desert that sparkled'. It looked like Heaven, she said.

The TV showed a semi-detached house in a Harrogate suburb. The reporter demonstrating how small hand might clasp and operate a nail-gun of this type. A psychologist struggling to hypothesise why such a young child would turn on people she loved. An elderly neighbour declaring the family to be 'perfectly ordinary' and giving the detail about the pyjamas. Her own granddaughter had a similar pair. From Marks and Spencer, she said. 'With blue butterflies on.'

Strange, what makes people cry.

I wondered what kind of blue. Celestial, Frosted Steel Aquamarine, Inky Pool, Luna? I could name you thirty-eight off the top of my head.

As a boy, I read everything I could lay my hands on, regardless of its function: dishwasher instruction manuals, TV schedules, the works of Dostoyevsky, lists of cereal ingredients, my mother's *Cosmopolitan*, fishing magazines, porn. But mostly I devoured comics featuring a panoply of onomatopoeic words deployed to render specific sounds. A blow to the jaw would be *BAM*, while an arrow loosed from a bow might be *ZOOOSHHH*. A regular gun would typically go *BANG*. But a nail-gun's sound is shallower, and features a distinctive click. I would spell it *SCHTUUKH*.

Plato suggested that the realm we inhabit after death is the same territory we lived in before birth:

fusion of time and space that encompasses both pre- and post-existence. Ever since the High Energy Research Organisation in Japan confirmed the results of CERN's experiments in which neutrinos travelled faster than light, it has struck me that Plato was closer to the mark than anyone could have imagined. Not least Einstein, whose notion of special relativity had been violated. The fact that a unified theory of physics had come within our grasp for the first time in human history was something I came to reflect on much later, in relation to Child One's attack and the others that followed. But perception is personal. In the early days, some saw the atrocity as a symptom of a spoiled generation 'pathological' craving for attention in a world in which the future of mankind, through its own mismanagement, appeared blasted. I'd seen no evidence of this myself, in my observations of Freddy and his entourage. On a point of style, I also considered the interpretation to be unduly masochistic. As an anthropologist I read the phenomenon more as a sick fairy tale, a parable of dysfunction at certain times. None of us got it right. The message was written in letters too big to read, letters that could only be deciphered from a vast distance or an unusual angle. We were as good as blind. This, by the way, is a figurative expression. Unlike many on the spectrum, I can deploy those.

The nail-gun murder struck me with particular force because Child One was Freddy's age: seven. Having made the association, I couldn't help picturing my stepson aiming his catapult at another human being and letting fly.

Who is Freddy's chosen target, in this image?

It doesn't put me in a good light, but I'll say it anyway, because it's the truth: his mother, Kaitlin.

I see Freddy, with his curly black hair and pixie face, take aim and fire at her heart – *ZOOOSHHH* – and I hear her cry of shock.

One of my chief coping mechanisms, in mental emergencies, involves origami: I carry an imaginary sheaf of delicate rice paper in my head, in a range of shades, to fold into classical shapes. When the image of Freddy shooting Kaitlin first reared up I swiftly folded eleven of the Japanese cranes known as *ozuru*, but I couldn't banish it. Kaitlin used to call me, affectionately, an 'incurable materialist'. Later, this changed to 'a robot made of meat'. This is unfair. I'm not a machine. I feel things. I just register them differently. The story of the pyjama-clad killer and the unwelcome images it inspired rocked my equilibrium.

After she confessed to her affair, and its excruciating nature, and the lies ('white lies', she insisted) that she'd told to cover it, Kaitlin and I stuck it out for a while, at her insistence. This involved a form of mental torture known as relationship counselling.

What do you most admire about Kaitlin, Hesketh?

Kaitlin, can you identify what attracted you to Hesketh when you first met?

As well as being irrelevant to the issue in hand, it was purposeless. There are certain things I am not cut out to do. Fieldwork, my mentor Professor Whybray always told me, was 'very probably' one of them. Sharing my life with a woman, I'd long suspected, was another. The fact that my first and only attempt had ended in failure confirmed it definitively. I would not be trying again. I moved away from London and the home Kaitlin still shared with Freddy. I have always been fascinated by islands, both linguistically and because of the social-Darwinian speculations they invite, so Arran suited me perfectly. That said, I saw few people: the cottage stood alone, five miles from the nearest village, in a landscape of sea and heather, boulders and sheep. Here, with the capital far behind me, I took strategic command of myself by developing a ritualised schedule of work and half-hour walks, began work on an ambitious origami mollusc project, and trained myself to think of Kaitlin in the past tense. B

nothing could fill the vacuum left by the boy.

~~‘Look at me properly. In the eye,’ Kaitlin used to say, at the climax of a fight, or sex.~~

It was a kind of taunt. She knew I couldn't. That I'd simply turn my face away or shut my eyes tighter.

When she got me, she got the things I was, including the elements of my personality she deemed defective. She got the package called Hesketh Lock and all that it contained. Where was the logic wanting me to be someone other than myself?

Freddy never did that. He'd never heard of Asperger's syndrome. And if he had, he wouldn't have cared. He accepted me from the start. To him I was Hesketh.

Just Hesketh.

Anthropology is a science which requires you to observe your fellow men and women, their traditions and their beliefs, as you would members of another species. The impulse to fabricate is a natural response to a confusing and contradictory world. Grasping this helped me to unlock the thought systems of my fellow men, and move on from the state of frustrated bafflement that dogged me in childhood and teenage years. I grew adept at sketching mental flow charts to track the repercussions of real events as well as hypothetical scenarios. Tracing narrative patterns through the overlapping circles of Venn diagrams – still my tool of choice – revealed to me the endless interconnectedness of human imagination and memory. Armed with these templates, I worked on adapting my behaviour. Under Professor Whybray's tutelage, I learned to mimic and then assimilate some of the behaviours observed. I was not the first: others had exploited their apparent disadvantage with great success, I'm told me – most notably an internationally celebrated Professor of Behavioural Psychology. But apparently I still lack some of the 'normal social graces'. Men like Ashok, my boss at Phipps Wexman, tend to take me as they find me. Women are different. They see a tall, dark, well-built man with strongly delineated features, and this classic combination triggers something at cellular level: a biological imperative. When they discover my personality is at odds with what they wishfully intuited from my 'handsomeness', their disappointment is boundless. It's often accompanied by a disturbing rage.

Ashok once said to me, 'We're all liars, bud. It's human nature.'

No, I thought. He's wrong. Through a quirk of DNA, I am not part of that 'we'. I can get obsessive about things. Or sidetracked. I can appear brutal too, I'm told.

But I know right from wrong. And I revere the truth.

So you will at least find in me an honest narrator.

In the days that followed the Harrogate attack, the little girl in blue butterfly pyjamas still refused to speak.

*GIRL WHO DREAMED OF HEAVEN –
AND MADE HELL
SICK CHERUB'S SHOTS OF HATE*

What happened next to the child whose dream about a sparkling white desert gave birth to such lurid headlines? Speculating on the possibilities and their variables, I pictured the family moving to another part of the country, or even abroad, to start a new life. The child would accompany them, if the father could still bear to be around her. If not, they'd install her in a secure home. I'll admit that I considered

the case to be as unique as it was isolated: a thing of its own and of itself. I am a natural joiner of dots and I saw no dots to join.

And then came the distressing phone call about Sunny Chen, which sent my thoughts hurtling back to Taiwan. And because of the drastic nature of what followed, Child One was relegated to the back of my mind.

The phenomenon known as the fairy ring is caused by fungal spore pods spreading outwards like water ripple around a biologically dead zone. In European legend, they represent the gateway to the fairy world, a parallel universe with its own laws and time-scales. The rings are evidence of dark forces: demons, shooting stars, lightning strikes.

Jump into one and bad luck will befall you.

From the air, Taipei is like a fairy ring: a city built in a crater encircled by mountains.

It was early morning when my plane touched down, but the day's heat was already rising. I'd spent the flight from Manchester to Taipei listening to audio lessons on headphones to brush up on my Mandarin. When the last one came to an end, I pressed play and started again from the beginning. I once attended an intensive language course in Shanghai, hoping to refine elements of my Ph.D. Linguistically, I am more of a reader than a speaker, so inevitably it was the ideograms that excited me most. I'd copy pages of Chinese characters and use the dictionary to make translations.

The effort on the plane paid off. My taxi driver understood me when I gave him directions. The air shimmered invigoratingly, reminding me of TV static.

I dislike change of any kind. But paradoxically, something in me – a kind of information-hunger – seeks and requires it. If sharks stop moving, they die. Kaitlin once said my brain was like that. We drove past suburban tower blocks stacked like grubby sugar cubes; flat-screen billboards and rotating hoardings that advertised toothpaste, nappies, kung-fu movies, mobile phones. All this alongside glimpses of an older order: street hawkers selling tofu, lychees, starfruit, sweets, caged chickens and cigarettes beneath tattered frangipanis and jacarandas. Violet bougainvillea frothed over fences, and potted orchids swayed in the breeze. Even with sunglasses on, the intense light drilled into my retina. Here and there, on street corners or in doorways and temple entrances, thin trails of incense smoke drifted up from offerings to the dead: fruit, sweets, paper money. For the Chinese, September is Ghost Month. The spirits of the dead pour out from Hell, demanding food and appeasement, and wreaking havoc.

I inhaled the foreignness.

Fraud is a business like any other. Anthropologically speaking, it involves the meeting, co-operation and communication of tribes. The space between sharp practice and corporate fraud is the delicate territory Phipps & Wexman regularly treads. As Ashok tells clients in his presentations: 'After catastrophic PR shock, our job is to ensure nothing like that ever happens again anywhere on your global team, because it won't need to. Phipps & Wexman has the best investigative brains in the business. And we have the success stories to prove it. Sanwell, the Go Corporation, Quattro, GTT, Klein and Mason: all companies whose reputations have been definitively recast by our profi-

makeovers.’ I have heard this speech eighteen and a quarter times. I even feature in it. (‘Hesketh Local, our cross-culture specialist, who has analysed sabotage patterns from Indonesia to Iceland.’) Ashcroft has that easy American way with audiences. ‘Nobody at Phipps & Wexman claims to be saving the world,’ he continues, ‘but we’re sure as hell pouring oil on its troubled waters.’ It always stimulates the clients, this notion that we’re healers. Shamans, even. It was the brainchild of Stephanie Mulligan, a behavioural psychologist with whom I have an excruciating history.

They clap and clap.

Hardwood trees are slow to grow, and prices have skyrocketed in recent years. There were logging restrictions, even before the weak anti-deforestation protocols. But where there’s a will, there’s a loophole. And a panoply of crooks. The fraudulent trading of hardwoods culled from protected forestland is a global business lucrative enough to have spawned countless millionaires. Jenwai Timber’s bosses and their suppliers and shippers among them.

The week before my visit to Taiwan, an anonymous source had sent the Taipei branch of the national Fraud Investigation Office a set of documentation relating to the purchase of hardwood for Jenwai timber factory from a Malaysian supplier. These impressively produced forgeries had served to whitewash a raft of illegal transactions concerning wood sourced in Laos and marked, for good measure, with apparently legitimate stamps. The paper chase that followed the first police raid triggered further investigations, and within a matter of days, the entire Laos–Taiwan element of an extensive international logging scandal was exposed. Detectives, environmental campaigners and the media were already busy writing up their reports. But my own assessment would be of a very different nature.

As investigators affiliated to a multi-national legal firm, we’d been hired by Ganjong Inc., the parent organisation under which Jenwai Timber traded. At Jenwai Timber, the main players consisted of corrupt NGO staff, Laotian traffickers, Thai middlemen and Chinese factory managers. And one employee with a conscience. My mission was to find him.

In most organisations, whistle-blowing is seen as a form of sabotage. But it’s impolitic to say that publicly. Phipps & Wexman’s brochures delicately classify the phenomenon as ‘a sub-story in a wider David and Goliath narrative of workplace unrest’. Officially, I was in Taiwan to identify the whistle-blower, pronounce him a hero and award him a generous financial package or ‘golden thank you’ for alerting Ganjong Inc., via the police, to the corruption it had – unwittingly, it stressed – presided over. In reality, I was there to do a situation autopsy, as a part of a wider damage-limitation exercise.

The Taipei branch of the national Fraud Investigation Office, a modest low-rise to the south of the city, had the feel of a huge walk-in fridge. Here, over the course of several hours, kept awake by coffee, I heard several theories about the whistle-blower’s identity from the police and a sharp-featured young journalist who had covered the case for his newspaper. Although they were curious about his identity, their main concern was the crime itself, and the domino effect of its exposure. They seemed puzzled that Ganjong should have called in a Western personnel specialist.

‘It’s known as the Outsider Impartiality Effect,’ I tell them. ‘My presence here is Ganjong’s message that it rewards honesty and condemns corruption. Standard strategy.’

The sharp-featured journalist made a face I interpreted as ‘wry’ and said, ‘Cover your ass, right?’ And they all laughed. He went on to speculate that the mystery man was in fact female, and the wife of a Jenwai manager who had been having an affair with a bar-girl. This prompted further theories: shop-floor grudge, a power tussle between senior managers, a rival company’s attempt to bring Jenwai

down, infiltration by eco-campaigners. I spent the rest of the day probing deeper, only to find that the actual evidence was either thin or non-existent. It's often the case, at the beginning of an investigation, that you spend eight hours in an over-air-conditioned office, learning what seems barely one level up from rumour. It's only later that you might spot a stray detail that's part of a bigger pattern, and things fall into place. Over 80 per cent of the time, that doesn't happen.

The next morning I was at the timber plant on the outskirts of Taipei by 8.25 for my meeting with Mr Yeh, the only Jenwai manager untouched by the scandal: at the time of the illegal wood-trafficking transactions, he'd been on sick leave with colon cancer. The air was humid, and pulsed with the heavy electric heat that heralds thunder. Undulating lines of *altocumulus castellanus* and *altocumulus floccus* patterned the sky.

The plant itself was a functional warehouse building in a high-fenced compound. In the office section near the front gates, the skeletal Mr Yeh welcomed me with a dry handshake and we exchanged business cards. I accepted his with both hands according to custom. The skin of his scalp, which was the distinctive yellow-grey of Dulux's 1997 River Pearl, looked alarmingly thin and desiccated.

'I am pleased to meet you Mr Lock. You are very tall,' he said. Then he laughed. In Chinese culture amusement display can mask embarrassment.

'One metre and ninety-eight centimetres,' I told him, pre-emptively. 'But I've stopped growing, promise.' This is a joke I have learned to deploy to 'break the ice', but Yeh didn't laugh, as Westerners tend to, so I inclined my head and told him in Chinese that I was honoured to meet him. This worked better: he broke into a cadaverous smile and complimented me on my facility. I told him that languages were a hobby of mine, though my Chinese was unfortunately rudimentary.

'Call me Martin.' His English was assured and American-accented.

'If you'll call me Hesketh.'

'Hesketh. Unusual name.'

'Originally Norse. It means horse-racetrack.'

'Horse-racetrack?' He laughed. 'And Lock is a Chinese name. But spelled L-O-K. In Cantonese means happiness. Joy. Good name. Lucky name. Lucky-Lok.' He paused. 'So if you should bet on horses, you win. Ha ha.' Then his face changed. 'As soon as the current orders are completed the factory will close. It is a terrible situation, Mr Lock. Hesketh. It pains me.' He touched his chest, as if to show me precisely where it hurt. In the cottage, five to the left on Shelf Three, I have a book of Leonardo Vinci's anatomical drawings. The valves, aortas and arteries of an ox heart are on page eighteen. 'Easier the way. I am sorry for the way I look. I know it is shocking.'

'No, I'm interested. I like seeing new things.'

There was quite a long pause which I did not know how to fill. Then he nodded towards the door and said, 'Well, Hesketh. You didn't come here to talk about death.'

In his office, we settled on either side of a desk littered with wood samples labelled in both Chinese and English. It took half an hour to get through my list of questions. He answered diligently, checking dates and figures on his computer. It all added up, and he appeared clean. As for the four female administrative staff, they had already been eliminated by the police: none of them had access to the relevant files.

'I'd like to see round the factory,' I told him.

'Of course. Our operations manager will be happy to show you.'

He made a call and within minutes, a slight man he introduced as Sun-kiu 'Sunny' Chen appeared.

a hard hat. I'd been curious to meet Sunny Chen, not least because one of the fraud officers had referred to him as 'an oddball', a term which always piques my interest. He hadn't gone into detail but just tapped the side of his head in the international gesture denoting madness, and said I'd see for myself. The others had grinned.

Sunny Chen's movements were jerky and puppet-like. I couldn't tell his age. Mid-forties perhaps. He was diminutive, with much darker skin than Martin Yeh (Monsoon River) and a hectic look. The two men conversed briefly: I missed most of what they said, but their body language told me there was respect between them. Sunny Chen and I shook hands. We began in Chinese, but I found myself struggling, so after two and a half sentences we switched.

'You know, my father worked here, until he retired. My grandfather too, and four uncles. Jenwai was a good company. Moral. Trustworthy.' Sunny Chen wiped his brow, which bore a sheen of sweat.

Martin Yeh sighed. 'If I had been here . . .' He didn't finish his sentence, but shrugged and began a new one. This was about needing to go home and rest. I responded that this seemed wise, given his health status. After I'd seen the factory, he said, Sunny would take me to lunch on his behalf. The two of them had a swift exchange in Chinese, about the name and location of the restaurant. Then we said goodbye and I followed Sunny Chen outside.

The courtyard faced the factory entrance, which was festooned with warning signs and surveillance cameras. In the shade of its concrete flank, Sunny Chen offered me a cigarette which I declined. He lit one for himself and inhaled deeply. His fingers were stained with nicotine. He jerked his head toward the building. You could hear the machinery inside working at full tilt.

'So what do you make of the whistle-blower?' I asked.

'He deserves to die,' said Sunny Chen. 'In fact, I would like to kill him myself.' Then he laughed. His teeth were an ivory colour – somewhere between Silver Birch and Musk Keg.

'Why?'

'He has brought us shame.' This remark indicated he was more bothered by corporate loss of face than by the company's intrinsic rottenness. Did this make him a traditionalist? I made a mental note.

'Have you any idea who he is?'

His head gave an abrupt twitch. 'The police asked me the same thing. And I said yes. But they didn't listen. Please come in. I will show you inside.'

In an antechamber near the entrance, we put on fibre face masks and overalls. Mine were far too small. Sunny Chen gave me a hard hat like his own with built-in ear mufflers. I like wearing headgear. The skull feels pleasingly cushioned.

'We will have to shout in there,' he said, waving me in.

In the vegetable world there's no real time of death. In the right conditions, flowers can last a week, irradiated strawberries a month, apples or onions a year. Technically, a tree is killed when it is chopped down. But its aroma – of bark, of sap, of dense, massed fibre – lingers for decades afterward. It is a smell that attracts me in the same way as certain colours, shades of violet and green in particular. Inside the factory, the trunks that were being processed were freshly felled, so it was overwhelming: thick and heady and mixed with machine oil. Parallel rows of conveyor belts fed huge tree trunks into mechanical saws which sliced them as effortlessly as a knife cutting through cheese, then dropped them on to another belt system which bore them to the far end of the warehouse, where they were sorted according to width and mechanically stacked. It was a cleverly constructed system that required minimal manpower. The fifteen workmen I saw ticked off checklists, swept bark and

sawdust from the floor, drove forklifts and righted skewed planks on the conveyors. The loading of the trunks and the shifting and transportation of the cut wood, Chen told me, was done outside. Like a manifestations of mechanical efficiency, the process was mesmerising to watch, despite the searing noise. And even that had its merits: it was regular, and it meant something. Everything was powdered in a layer of fine, dark wood dust. Standing there in my comfortable helmet, I felt very content. I was Lucky Lok.

‘Pencil cedar,’ shouted Sunny Chen in English over the racket, pointing. ‘From Indonesia. Over there is Malaysian kauri and teak.’

He indicated another section of the shop floor, where wide planks of a darker wood were being sliced to the narrower width typically used for decking and garden furniture. The offcuts and shavings from the closest sawing machine fell on to a conveyor belt, which transported them to the overhead funnel of the machine in front of us, which stood about four metres high. Sunny mouthed something I couldn’t hear, and directed me to the wide service ladder. By the time we reached the top rung I was sweating and high on the atmosphere. Peering over the metal rim that curved downward like a hanging lip, we gazed far down into the dark whirring hole of its innards.

‘Long way to fall!’ Sunny Chen shouted, pointing down. The pulping mechanism worked like a giant food processor, accepting whatever it was fed and chomping it into a coarse mash of woodchips. ‘Turn you into hamburger!’ His face mask hid his features. I’m not good at second-guessing people’s emotions but his eyes didn’t seem to be smiling. The flayed wood was collected in a vast skip below. ‘We use this to manufacture chipboard,’ he yelled. ‘The sawdust is re-used also, so nothing’s wasted, all recycled.’

I stared at the jostling blur. Repetitive movements snare me. As a child, I would happily watch the washing machine for an entire cycle.

‘So you said you knew who exposed the corruption?’ I yelled at him when we had climbed back down to the bottom.

He didn’t answer directly. ‘I showed the police something important here, but they didn’t take it seriously.’ His brow was beaded with sweat. He pulled off his mask and wiped it with his hand, leaving a smear of wood powder. ‘Messy place.’ Still no smile. ‘Come with me.’

I followed him round the base of the machine to the side nearest the wall, where he pointed to what appeared to be a small, blurred hand-print low down on one side of its steel flank. You had to bend down to see it properly. ‘Evidence.’

‘Of what?’ I asked. But he just shook his head and fiddled with his piece of wood. Perhaps I had misheard him. ‘Mr Chen, Mr Chen, Mr Chen! What are you saying?’ I shouted.

‘It means they come here to wreck things. They hate us! They hate everything we do!’ He seemed agitated.

‘Who do you mean?’ My throat was drying up from the wood dust.

‘The ones that made this mark. The ones you are looking for!’

‘Campaigners?’

‘No! Not campaigners. Just very desperate and naïve people.’

This was making no sense to me. ‘What did the police say?’ I yelled.

‘They say it’s nothing. Just a hand-mark. Can’t get finger-prints.’

This didn’t surprise me: I could picture the detective dismissing it, and see why he called Sunny Chen an ‘oddball’ and made the international madness gesture. What Sunny showed me was nothing more than a crude smear with a bit of wood dust on it, as if someone had slammed a dirty hand against

the machine's steel side.

'They say the CCTV doesn't show who made it.' He pointed to the overhead security camera. That didn't surprise me either. It might have been there for weeks, and those images are typically on a three-day recycling loop. 'But it is important, Mr Lock!'

Everything has an explanation. It's just a question of identifying and deploying the right analytic template. The frustration I felt was with myself.

'Is it a message?'

'Maybe. Yes. Yes, a message.'

'So what's it saying, this message?'

He shook his head and said, 'I don't know. You just need to note this down for doing your job right OK? I say the same thing to police.'

'But what do you think it means?' I persisted.

He shook his head. 'It's bad. Like a warning. Like a stop sign. I am telling you, it's evidence!'

I don't know much about unbalanced minds, but I do know the importance of meticulousness. I hadn't travelled all this way to miss something. If Sunny Chen said it was evidence then I'd treat it accordingly. I took out my camera and photographed the little smear of filth on the wall. Since it was only three feet or so from floor level, I had to crouch down to get a decent angle on it. If it was a hand mark, whoever had made it was very short, or had assumed an odd posture.

'I'll take a sample too,' I called to him, and he nodded vigorously. I scraped some of it off and folded it into some origami paper for analysis. It was crystalline and coarse. A brown close to Cinnamon Stick with a few darker grains. It looked like mud and salt, with traces of fibre. I sniffed it and noted a faint vegetable smell with a touch of iron to it.

When we'd disposed of our protective gear and come outside, the sky was darkening and grumbling with thunder. We walked to the main road where Sunny Chen flagged down a taxi. As we drove, flashes of sheet lightning began to scald the sky. The restaurant was in a square at the edge of a public park: we reached it just as the rain began to fall. Huge, swollen drops, silted with fine grit, hammered the formal flowerbeds. Picnickers, roller-bladers and children with kites rushed in all directions across the concrete prairie. I like to be in countries where everyone has black hair. The running people resembled matches being scattered by a giant hand. Sunny Chen whipped out an umbrella and beneath its shelter we sprinted towards the nearby park and up some steps into a garish, soy-smelling place with Funfair Crimson tablecloths and matching napkins. The wind coming in from the open balcony set the lanterns overhead gyrating: I had to tear my eyes away from their spin. Sunny ordered for both of us and we sat contemplating the antics of the sky outside, lavishly lit one moment, and dark the next, the deluge lending everything a neon brashness. The greens of the foliage seemed to vibrate.

As we waited for the food, Sunny Chen's mood shifted. His eyes roamed the restaurant, as though he was expecting someone to appear. At one point he reached for the salt dish, took a pinch of crystals and put it on the end of his tongue. This struck me as strange, and I speculated it was due to a residual nervousness. To reconnect to him, I asked him a few questions in Mandarin which he answered patiently, using simple phrases I could understand. I learned that he had a wife who was a teacher, and three daughters, two still at school and one at university. When he asked about my own domestic arrangement, I told him I had recently split up with Kaitlin (for simplicity's sake I called her 'my wife') and I now lived alone. I told him about Freddy, that I collected foreign-language dictionaries and paint-colour charts (here I used the translation app on my phone) and made origami. At this latter news his eyebrows shot up. People have trouble believing someone big can do something delicate.

Small dishes of spicy Szechuan food arrived: squid in black-bean sauce, chicken and chilli, wonton soup, jasmine rice, green tea. He explained them to me in both languages and I memorised the new vocabulary. Then we filled our soy dishes and began to eat. We both got lost in the food for a while. It was excellent.

‘Would you say that the mark you showed me is a hand-print?’ I asked after four minutes.

‘Yes,’ he said, putting down his chopsticks. ‘It appeared after Ghost Day. You know Ghost Day?’

‘Yes. It falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh moon of the lunar calendar.’ His eyes narrowed. I was aroused curiosity. ‘I have a good memory for anything I’ve seen written down,’ I explained. ‘Especially facts involving numbers.’

I hadn’t mentioned my PhD in the anthropology of belief systems: as far as Sunny Chen was concerned, I was just a corporate troubleshooter.

‘Well you know then, that’s the day we honour the hungry ghosts, in the month when the gates of Hell are opened.’ I nodded. The term Hungry Ghosts was also used to describe the starving victims of the famine caused by Mao’s Great Leap Forward. ‘The spirits wander the earth. They are restless. They need help. They expect us to give it. They scare us. So we do what they want.’ As he spoke, he refilled his soy bowl with sauce, the liquid shooting from the bottle in tiny dark spurts. Like the gyrating lanterns above us, the movement was mesmerising. At one point he picked the little bowl up and tipped its contents directly on to his rice. This seemed to me very un-Chinese: more something a Westerner might do. Soy is very salty, so I wondered about his blood pressure. ‘They can be family members. But they don’t have to be. They need to say something, or they need you to do something for them. Then they appear in your sleep. That’s called *tong-mong*. You know this?’

I nodded. ‘*Through dreams.*’

There is no Heaven in Chinese tradition. Just different levels of Hell. The spirits that come out around Ghost Month are from the lowest levels of the underworld. Sunny Chen was looking at me intently, as though he had said something momentous which would lead me to a specific conclusion. I didn’t. I can’t play the game where you must guess and guess. I put my chopsticks down and set my small digital recorder on the table between us. The detective at the Fraud Office was right: Sunny Chen’s theory, if I’d read between the lines correctly, certainly fitted with the description *oddball*. But the anthropologist in me was stirred, and I have learned that when people have something important to say, they often spiral their way into it. I pressed Record.

‘Please, carry on.’

He took a deep breath. ‘The spirits don’t always want the best thing for us,’ Sunny Chen began. ‘If we don’t show them enough respect they need to be . . .’ Here Sunny Chen couldn’t find the word, and he set aside his chopsticks to key it into his mobile translation app. ‘Appeased.’ I waited for more. He grabbed the salt dish and sprinkled a blizzard of coarse crystals into his bowl. ‘That’s why we visit their graves and burn Hell notes. Pay them off. Very different from the West.’

I said: ‘Beliefs are more global than most people realise. Every society has its ways of trying to calm the spirits. Or whatever you want to call them. The Catholics have favours. They’re a down payment on sins not yet committed.’

‘But do they get punished, if they do wrong? If they . . . wait. I must find the word.’ He keyed in another Chinese character, and held the little screen out for me to read.

Commit a sin/Transgress.

‘Yes. But they can confess and seek atonement. Mr Chen, did someone at Jenwai commit a sin slash *transgress*?’

He didn’t answer directly. ‘You please one and then you offend another. It’s like being torn into

small pieces, you understand?’ I didn’t. Professor Whybray always advised: *when in doubt, say nothing*. So for a while we ate in silence. Sunny Chen continued to add more salt to every mouthful I took. In between he sipped green tea. ‘I think we make a big mistake about ghosts,’ he said suddenly. ‘We think they are from the past. We think they are all dead. But they are alive. And some of them are not even born yet. They are travellers.’

‘Travellers?’

‘Yes! They move about.’ His voice caught in a strange choke. ‘They go wherever they like. They enter your body and make you do things.’

I’m not proud of my reaction, which was to register his welling tears and look away.

Through the window, forked lightning cleaved a blinding white slash across the sky’s deep green, chased by the cymbal-crash of thunder. A tourist coach drove past, headed for the National Museum: I recognised the ideograms on its destination plate. Chen’s raw emotion was very desperate. And for me, awkward to contemplate. A behavioural psychologist such as Stephanie Mulligan would have known what to do or say. I did not. So I reached in my briefcase for the lime-green praying mantis I pre-creased on Arran and started constructing at Manchester airport. While Sunny Chen recovered himself and paid the bill, I did the last twenty-eight folds and presented the paper insect to him with both hands and a small bow of the head.

‘A gift.’

It seemed to cheer him. ‘I want to take you somewhere,’ he said. ‘I will show you what I mean about the spirits.’

Outside, we caught another taxi: he had a brief conversation with the driver and we drove through dense Taipei traffic. The rain stopped and the sky cleared. Chen seemed absorbed in his own thoughts. He didn’t say where we were going. The hotels and department stores of downtown gave way to suburbs, then a netherland of factories, silos, warehouses and repair workshops. Finally, after twenty-three minutes and fifteen seconds, we took a fork to the right and began to climb upwards into the mountains that ringed the city, heading west towards the district of Yang Ming Shan. Six and a half minutes later the taxi driver asked Sunny Chen a question about the precise location of our destination and he answered distractedly, pointing. The storm had cleared completely, replaced by piercing sunshine. Rocky outcrops and feathered trees and small rubbish dumps exhaling coils of smoke dotted the roadside. Eventually, the taxi took a left turn down a narrow side road flanked with high bamboo. After three minutes and five seconds we slowed and entered a gateway into a concrete car park with weeds pushing through the cracks. The rainwater was evaporating in the sunshine: you could see the rising vapour. The driver parked under a tree with coarsely corrugated fan-shaped leaves and Sunny Chen told him to wait for us. I was pleased by how much Chinese I could understand.

The shrines hugged the earth, so it took me a while to register what we had entered. There must have been a hundred or so monuments in marble, granite and cement, scattered across the hillsides overlooking the city. Up here, we were right on the edge of the fairy ring. Distant enough from the sprawl of humanity to see the scale and enterprise of it. Around us, the sunlight danced on the puddles left by the storm.

‘Good feng shui,’ said Sunny Chen, spreading his arm wide to indicate the view. It was spectacular. Beneath a blue sky streaked with wisps of cloud squatted the great urban crater: a centrifuge of money, metal, glass and cement, of malls and sports centres and arterial roads dotted with the pinpricks of cars, emanating a faint hum. A heat-haze scrolled over the glittering ceramic rooftops of the outer suburbs. You couldn’t see any human life from here, but you could do a mental X-ray and

sense how the cityscape seethed with it. Taipei is home to four million and counting. I wondered: what has Sunny Chen chosen to take me to a place where the vivid living and the unforgotten dead converge? Far below, black birds whirled above the skyscrapers like coarse flakes of ash. After a few moments we turned and wandered among the family shrines: low, squat constructions with wide thresholds. Some lay crumbling and neglected, while others were lavishly tended ancestral showcases. The higher surrounding walls featured alcoves containing urns. Stray cats sunned themselves on the cracked slabs, or nudged at the remains of food offerings. After the air-conditioned taxi the air was sweltering. A hot breeze came from the west like the blast of a hairdryer, shaking the black-stemmed bamboos and rustling half-burned paper models attached to shrines. Small mounted black-and-white photographs of the dead glinted in the sun, dotted with rainwater. You could see the legacy of Qing Ming, the April tomb-sweeping festival in the form of soggy, charred incense sticks, plastic and silk flowers and the remains of burnt offerings. Streams of red ants transported ancient food crumbs amid faded and rain-damaged cardboard or paper replicas of coveted objects: miniature houses, yachts, cars and mobile phones, all fitting, I supposed, into the cultural category known as popular kitsch. The artistic standard was not high.

‘Is this where your ancestors are?’ I asked.

‘Over there.’ He pointed to a shrine, studded with photographs, only two of which were in colour. Most of the faces were stern, though one woman wore a half-smile. The men were jacketed, and the women wore cheongsams. None of them resembled Sunny Chen. ‘You don’t expect them to be dressed in rags, do you?’ he blurted angrily. He waved his hand at the photographs. ‘You think they will look like in the photos. Normal size. Wearing smart clothes. You don’t imagine they smell bad. You don’t expect them to eat insects.’

I waited for an explanation for this bizarre outburst, but none came. His face flickered in an agitated way. Then he reached in his inner pocket and brought out a wad of scarlet paper, ornamented with gold. Hell notes. Each leaf of the pretend currency was covered in Chinese characters. I recognised a few of the simpler ones, such as ‘heavenly’ and ‘respect’. BANK OF HELL was stamped across the bottom of each in English.

He handed me a note.

‘Can you please make me one small man?’ he asked. I couldn’t read the expression on his face. ‘Let us sit there.’ He pointed to a shrine shaded by a feathery-leafed tree with candelabras of furred buds.

On its low surrounding wall I laid the Hell note flat, folded a line and ripped it to a square. He sat next to me and watched as I folded. The wall was dry, but these were still not ideal conditions. I had no proper work top and the cheap paper dye left red stains on my fingertips. When I’d finished, I handed him the squat figure – boxy limbs, triangular head – and he accepted it with both hands and a jerky nod. The little man glinted red and gold in his palm.

I hadn’t done a very good job. It was clear he thought so too, because he reached for a plastic lighter which had the Chinese character for ‘good fortune’ engraved on it, and angled it beneath the man. I was glad he was going to burn it. It’s exactly what I do myself, to poor specimens. It’s what you might call a cathartic ritual.

But he was hesitating.

‘Who is he?’ I asked.

He laughed. ‘Who do you think?’ he said, igniting the pointed end of the man’s leg. I would have bent it to form a foot, but in these conditions it was too fiddly. A bluish flame crept up the paper limb.

‘I don’t know.’

I feared he would burn his skin but he dropped the flaming paper just in time. Together we watched

the little effigy blaze, shrivel to a crisp and waft sideways, disintegrating as it went.

~~‘But you do know, Hesketh. Because you are a clever man.’ He spoke urgently. I noted, in my brief connection with his eyes, that they were so dark that pupil and iris merged into one. When people lie to you their irises grow big. When they hate you they get small. The degree of light must be factored in but dappled shade is tricky to calibrate. I felt very distinctly that this was a test. No: more than a test. A challenge. More games. More things not said straight. But I’ve studied the tendencies and the rules.~~ ‘He’s the whistle-blower,’ I said. ‘The Jenwai saboteur. The man you want to kill.’

He didn’t say anything. His jaw was working oddly. Then I realised why. Once again he was in tears. Then it dawned on me, what he was saying, and why it was so painful to him. Of course. Stephanie Mulligan would have spotted it long ago. How do you address a man who has just symbolically set himself alight? We stood there for a long time, watching the ashes of the tiny paper Sunny Chen drift across through the coarse weeds.

Finally I cleared my throat.

‘Do you think your ancestors are angry with you?’

The laugh came again. ‘Sure, I will have to take the blame.’ I blinked and wiped my brow. An intense, laser-like heat can follow thunder in this latitude. I wished Stephanie Mulligan had not entered my head. But now here she was, judging me and finding me wanting. And behind her, somewhere, was Kaitlin. Different women, both making the same assessment. ‘But it wasn’t my choice. Something can get inside you.’ He was becoming animated. ‘Sometimes it’s asleep. But when it wakes up, it’s in charge. You can’t make the decisions any more. You are a clever man Hesketh, but I am sorry, I don’t think you are the kind of person who can understand what is going on here. How they make you do things. You are –’ he whipped out his mobile and looked up a word. ‘Too *rational*.’

He’d made a confession. He’d come to seek atonement. And I was his witness.

But capitalism employs me, via Phipps & Wexman. Not God.

I am not sure what ‘too’ rational might mean. But Sunny Chen was right; I have a respect for facts and the logic systems that connect them. Which is why what he said was immediately unsatisfactory. While whistle-blowers tend to have an inflated view of their own importance, Sunny Chen’s ego was virtually non-existent. I admired him for standing up for the rules. But he didn’t match the profile.

‘I’m going to record this,’ I say. ‘For my report.’

He shrugged. I pulled out my device, settled it on the marble slab between us and pressed the button. ‘This is very bad for me,’ he said.

‘It’s not bad at all,’ I countered quickly. I was on safe ground here: this was something I had rehearsed, though not, I’d thought, for him. ‘You’ll get a reward. A generous one. That’s why I’m here. You’ll be a hero.’

‘The last thing I want,’ he said in a flat voice.

When I computed this statement it made a kind of sense. He’d brought down his company. Inevitably he felt torn. Publicly, he’d receive a financial reward as a face-saver for Ganjong, and be hailed as an eco-warrior, a crime-fighter, a corruption-buster, a champion of honesty. But in reality, small, insecure, tormented Sun-kiu ‘Sunny’ Chen was none of these things.

‘So why did you do it?’

He looked uncomfortable and fiddled with a Hell note. ‘I didn’t want to. I can’t explain. Even myself. I was not in charge.’

‘You respect the tradition of ancestor-worship. Do you have any other beliefs?’

He shook his head absentmindedly and took a drag of his cigarette. ‘No.’

‘How does your respect for your ancestors relate to your exposing corruption at Jenwai?’

‘I can’t explain.’

‘Try.’

‘I can’t. Just ask me another question.’

‘The mark you showed me at the timber plant. Who made it and why do you think it’s relevant?’

‘I made it,’ he said. ‘That’s why I wanted the police to take fingerprints. Evidence. But they refuse.’

‘You mean those are your own fingerprints?’

‘I am not sure. I would like to know.’

‘But you just said the hand-print was yours.’

‘They make you do things. From the inside.’ He touched his chest.

‘Who?’

‘Them. They’re our blood, but they hate us. They blame us. I can’t explain.’

I decided to try another tack. ‘Do you consider yourself a moral person?’

‘Not really.’

‘Do you have views on deforestation? Or the environment?’

‘No views,’ he said, gazing into the middle distance. He took another deep drag on his cigarette and

shook his head as though to get rid of a fly. ‘I’m just an ordinary person.’

‘Ordinary people can have views.’

He blew out a stream of smoke. When smoke mixes with air it obeys mathematical rules. ‘So as a

ordinary person I don’t especially care about the environment.’

‘So why did you do it?’

‘Pressure.’

‘What kind of pressure? Who from?’

‘I told you! The spirits! Them!’

He shook his head, stubbed out his cigarette and lit another one. We sat there for a while. Two

metres away, a tabby cat with a kinked tail was nursing a litter of black, white and tortoiseshell

kittens.

‘Do you fear that there will be a reprisal of some kind?’ I asked after a moment. ‘That the Jenwai

staff who were exposed might attack you in revenge?’

He made a noise with his mouth, as if he were stifling more choking. ‘It’s not their business. It

nothing to do with them. You see, it was not me that did this thing. They come in. I don’t know how

Maybe you eat the wrong thing and they get in your blood. Like a parasite. And they make the body

disobey the mind. Do you understand?’

‘Not yet. But I’m here to try. That’s my job. So I can write my report.’

He reached for my recorder and turned it off. ‘No. Sorry Hesketh. We finish this now.’ He blew out

thin stream of smoke. ‘I can’t. I don’t understand it myself. I’m not in charge of anything, you see.

am just a . . .’ he trailed off.

‘Just a what?’

He flicked some ash off his sleeve. ‘Just a little man made of paper.’

Then he stood up. I did too, and made to follow him, but he signalled for me to stay where I was. So

I sat down again and watched as he walked stiffly back to the family shrine where he took a wad of red

Hell notes from his pocket, knelt to place it on the stone, fanned it out and set fire to it with the plastic

lighter. Then he fished in his briefcase for some incense sticks, bowed three times, then placed the

incense in a small jar and lit it. His shoulders were shaking.

The smoke drifted towards me: I smelled sandalwood. I recognised it instantly. Last Christmas when Kaitlin and I rented a cottage in Devon, Freddy insisted on lighting sandalwood joss sticks in every room. Kaitlin's moods tended to be capricious, but on this occasion the atmosphere was positive. She had drunk four glasses of wine and there was a sheen to her skin that made me want her urgently. My body has a mind of its own and I have learned that when it comes to sex one need not fight them because sex has its own rules. That night she was very receptive and for once she shut her eyes to me. But I misunderstood why. I thought she was giving me something, finding a way to join me in what she called the Fortress. But it wasn't that. The truth was, she'd already begun her affair.

I was actually present when they met. It was a Phipps & Wexman reception. They talked all evening and I saw that they stimulated each other. One minute they'd be serious. The next they'd be laughing. Ideas were bouncing around. It was the kind of exchange I struggle to participate in. It was classic courtship behaviour, but I failed to identify it as such. Later Kaitlin told me this was because I'd been 'complacent'. I had 'made assumptions', and 'failed to appreciate' her sexual appetites. I had taken her for granted. I should have been jealous and I wasn't.

I asked her: 'Are you saying I'm to blame for your having an affair?'

'Don't twist what I'm saying.'

'My intention is to understand the logic. Not just of what you did, but why you hid it from me. I need to know why.'

'Look. Not everything can be explained by some damned behavioural flow chart, OK? And not everyone shares your rule book.'

'It's not a rule book. It's just morality.'

'People change, OK? They evolve over time, they want to explore who they might be, as well as who they are!'

'They should just be who and what they say they are.'

'Well one of us failed to do that, OK? One of us committed the apparently unforgivable crime of *changing*.'

Her body language and facial configuration told me to leave it there.

A flock of green birds flew overhead, squawking, then disappeared into the smog coiling around the mountainside. Parakeets. I went and joined Sunny and we watched the glowing tips of the incense sticks.

He said, 'Thank you for making me the man. And the insect. What is its name?'

'A praying mantis. It's called that because it rocks to and fro like someone praying.'

I like to rock too. It soothes me.

'Ha. A holy insect.'

'Not really. The females devour the males after they've mated.'

He shifts a little, and glances at me sideways. 'Not my business, Hesketh. But your wife—'

'Girlfriend. Ex. Met someone else.' I might as well learn to say it aloud.

He studied his hands. 'Very sorry. I should not ask.'

'Later she regretted it and wanted us to carry on like before.'

He looked up and smiled. 'So the best man won!' he exclaimed, play-punching me on the arm in an American-buddy style. But he might as well have shot me. He meant well of course. He wasn't supposed to know the appalling nature of what happened. 'You're the best man,' he continued. 'She saw that, so she wanted you back.'

'But I couldn't trust her any more. That's why I live alone.'

‘Man of principle. Good.’ I knew he was looking at me. ‘But you miss your son.’

‘Stepson. Freddy’s hers. From before we met. He doesn’t know his real father.’

‘He still needs you. You know, Hesketh, families are with us all the time.’ He gestured at the shrines. ‘Dead and alive. The ones from the past and the present and the future too. They’re living with us. We can’t escape them even if we want to. They send us signals. This is what holds us together. Blood. DNA, Hesketh. It’s very strong.’

‘Freddy and I don’t share DNA.’

‘Then you are lucky. DNA is cruel. It makes demands.’ He leaned down and stubbed out his cigarette in a dried pomegranate shell. ‘Hesketh, I am glad it was you they sent.’

His eyes were glittering again. I looked across and met them for a second. I couldn’t manage any longer. But perhaps there was an exchange of sorts.

I said, ‘Yes.’ Then in Chinese: ‘Me too.’ I meant it.

‘We will say goodbye now. I have told you all I can. Go and do your job. I will stay here. Take the taxi back to the hotel.’ I started to object, but he stopped me. He had his mobile, he said. He would order another car when he was ready to leave. ‘I want to be here for a little longer. To work out what I must do now. But be careful, Hesketh. The spirits are becoming very active.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They are angry and starving. They live in bad conditions. You like the truth. So I will be honest with you. This is not something Phipps & Wexman or any other organisation can resolve. The spirits will do what they came to do. They won’t give up. They are fighting for their survival.’ He sighed, then held out his hand. We shook, then exchanged a small head-bow. ‘It was good to meet you, Hesketh. Have a safe journey. Please go now.’

He called out to the taxi driver, who snapped awake and started the engine. We shook hands and got in the car and Sunny waved me off. I looked back at him, but he’d already turned away to face the city. Hands in his pockets, shoulders high. On the way back to the hotel, I used my BlackBerry to let Phipps & Wexman know I had identified the whistle-blower. Ashok’s instant reply: *You’re the man.*

The best man, according to Sunny Chen.

The man who won.

He wasn’t to know.

As the taxi drove off, I looked back and saw the small figure of Sunny Chen standing like a hunched sentinel at the shrine of his forefathers, near the blown ashes of his little origami self.

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