Where Clouds Rain Pearls

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ON THURSDAY, BEFORE UNCLE WEN from the United States was supposed to arrive, I took the bus to downtown Yuncheng to rent a Cadillac. My uncle's train from Beijing, where he had flown for business, was arriving around noon, so I had to wake up at seven-thirty, four hours earlier than usual. On the bus, I sat next to a peasant woman with her two boys. The woman carried a dirty straw bag and wore tattered pants that didn't extend beyond her ankles. The bus wasn't heated, and her boys, both around ten, had the same oversized scarf wrapped around their shoulders. The three of them stank like rotten leek. I didn't notice the smell until it was gone, half an hour later, when they got off at Xinchun, a local village where my Uncle Jin still lived with my grandma.

A man named Fa owned the car dealership. My family had rented cars from him in the past, for big occasions like my aunt's wedding or my grandfather's funeral. Still, the old split-lipped man tried to pass one over on me. I asked him for their newest Cadillac, and he tried to add a depreciation fee.

"What do you think you're doing?" I said. I opened the car door and smelled the leather. "This doesn't even smell new. It smells like wax."

"People who don't drive quality cars don't know what real leather smells like. The price per day is five hundred, plus one hundred for the fee."

"My parents only gave me three hundred."

He ran his thumb down the slit of his lip several times before answering. "Because I know your parents well, I'll rent you the car. Just know I'm doing this to save them face."

The car was called a Cadillac Sedan and it was better than anything I'd ever driven. It was black, with four doors, power windows, and a sunroof. I had gotten my license a while ago, after convincing my dad to bribe an automotive clerk in Yuncheng. Since then I'd only driven my friend's moped. My parents had promised to borrow some money and buy me a car after I'd graduated from Shanxi University, but since I'd never graduated, they never had to. I'd been out of college for close to six months now. A part of my father had probably been glad that I'd never graduated, though he'd never been the type to ever keep a promise.

On my way back from the city, I drove past the same bus I came on. Seeing those poor peasants on the bus watching me, I lowered the sunroof and blasted the pop song playing on the radio. It was freezing out, being mid-November, but I sped past the bus, almost hitting a three-wheeled taxi in front of me. Giddy, I breathed in the cold and smelled smoke from the local coal refinery, the aroma like roast duck. I thought of my uncle coming from America and keeping my parents busy so they'd lay off my case for the next few days, and I thought of the two hundred *yuan* left over in my pocket, and life started to taste as sweet as a dozen date cakes during the Lunar Festival.

I drove directly to the train station. All my family was there, waiting for Uncle Wen to arrive. Uncle Jin was buying a lamb kabob from a street vendor for his daughter—my cousin, Lan—and my mother was combing Lan's hair with a brush so big that it looked like it was made for horses. My dad sat next to them on a green bench, not hearing me pull up.

Uncle Jin was the loser of my grandma's three children. He still lived with my grandma in the village, in the same house he had grown up in, planting government-subsidized wheat and sorghum and bringing the leftovers to sell in Yuncheng City. Uncle Wen had graduated from Beijing University and left for New York to get a PhD in microbiology. In terms of success, my father was somewhere in between. He had left the village when he was twenty-five to fight in the Vietnam War. When he returned, he borrowed money from his brother in America and started a supermarket on the outskirts of Yuncheng, in a once prosperous part of the city that was now slowly becoming a landfill. We lived upstairs of the supermarket, in clear view of watermelon peels, plastic bags, spoiled rice, and dog feces.

My cousin Lan saw me get out of the car and ran over to give me a hug. She was six years my junior, turning seventeen this December, and we'd become close ever since I'd left college and started borrowing my friend's moped to take her out to sing karaoke. Sick of the countryside, she was determined to marry a man from the city, preferably one graduating from Shanxi University. Skinny and short, she looked best in rural clothes, in dotted blouses and clay-striped pants. I introduced her to a few of my friends, and when we went out to bars or pool halls, I made sure none of them took advantage of her.

"Older brother," she said. "When are you taking me to meet more of your friends?" Today she was wearing a short, checkered skirt and her hair, straight and full, ran down her back as if it were all one, wide strand. She jumped up and down to keep warm, nibbling on the kabob.

"You must be freezing." I took off my leather jacket—imitation leather—and wrapped it around her shoulders. "How did you convince Grandma to let you wear that in this temperature?"

"Grandma didn't object," Lan said. "She wanted me to look good for Uncle Wen."

"You look like a prostitute," I said. "Only poor uneducated farmers find prostitutes attractive. Grandma doesn't know anything."

"I know," she said, pulling a chunk of lamb from the skewer. Her lips were becoming blackened from the meat. "That's why you need to take me shopping. You need to tell me what college girls wear."

I took out a cigarette and lit it between closed palms. I'd smoke whenever I'd see something pathetic in my family, and sometimes, despite my best efforts, I found it hard to separate Lan from all the other peasant girls in my grandma's village.

"Let me have one," she said.

"Are you stupid?" I swatted her hand away. "Uncle Jin and Grandma are right there."

She gave me a nagging cry, the type she'd give her parents or grandma whenever she didn't get what she wanted. It was a sound I often heard made by the girls I knew, an extended and high-pitched *na* that slowly faded away. They made these noises because they were used to getting what they wanted: the only child, in a country where girls were few.

The girl I'd been engaged to in college, Qian, made a similar noise whenever

she ate something she didn't like. We fought constantly because I was also used to getting what I wanted. We were together for a year and I wanted out of the relationship, but her parents were the ones who paid for my tuition, all forty thousand *yuan* of it. Her parents were Party members, her father the assistant mayor of Yuncheng, and they saw me as an investment in their daughter's future.

"You want to see the inside of a Cadillac?" I opened the door and motioned for Lan to get in. She handed me the skewer, smoothed her skirt as she sat down, and turned the steering wheel with greasy fingers, bouncing in the seat.

I took another drag of my cigarette, exhaled above the car's hood, and saw my dad making his way over. The wind blew up his comb-over. He re-parted it and held it down with two fingers. I knew what he was going to ask.

"How much you pay for the rental?"

"Fa's a stingy old egg," I said. "Charged us extra. Added a depreciation fee." I spat on the ground for emphasis. I was so good at lying to my father that he thought I was a moron when it came to bargaining.

"You didn't even try," he said. "Your generation doesn't think about money." He looked at Lan inside the car and then back at me, and gave me a disgusted wave as he walked off and rejoined my mom and Uncle Jin.

I didn't protest when my dad had first mentioned the idea of getting the Cadillac. But I wasn't sure what he was trying to prove. Uncle Wen would know the car didn't belong to us once he saw our house and the piles of garbage a few meters in front of our door. Five hundred *yuan* to save a half hour's worth of face didn't seem like a good deal.

The train came in fast, like it wasn't going to stop. I took a step back from the rail and felt the air blowing against my face. After a couple of compartments had passed, the brakes squeaked and the train stopped. When Uncle Wen stepped off, the first thing I noticed about him was how young he looked. My father was the oldest of my grandfather's three children, and Uncle Jin was the youngest, about eight years younger than Uncle Wen, but already Jin's skin was dry and wrinkled from working in the fields and his front teeth were chipped from chewing on coarse rice. Uncle Wen, by contrast, had a full head of black hair and hands like a calligrapher's. He carried a small suitcase that had large wheels and an extendable handle.

I drove the car. In the back, Uncle Wen sat between my father and Uncle Jin, and up front Lan sat between me and my mom. My mom was telling Lan how pretty she'd gotten, asking her if she was ready to get married. I tried to drown out their chatter, glancing back at Wen and my father. Wen was saying they really shouldn't have spent the money renting such an expensive car, that he didn't even drive a car this good in the United States. "Don't be silly," my father said. "Didn't you tell us you own four cars in America?" "Yes," Wen said, "but they're used. Their total value doesn't add up to this one." They got to the topic of my future, and Wen told my father that he'd be able to get me into an American college if I did well on my TOEFL entrance exam. "What do you think about your uncle's offer, Yu?" my father called to me. I glanced at him in the rearview mirror but didn't say anything. "The boy will never amount to much," he finally said to my uncle. "He's lazy. Doesn't get up until noon." Bastard, I thought. I knew he was still bitter about the cost of the Cadillac. Uncle Jin kept his mouth shut the entire trip, embarrassed, I suspected, sitting next to his two successful brothers.

By the time we reached the house I wanted to get the hell out of there and start drinking at the karaoke bar. Uncle Wen told me to study hard for the exam and he'd see what he could do about getting me into America. What else could I do but lie and smile and nod as if I believed I had any potential at all?

Wen didn't say anything about the garbage in front of our house, but as we made our way into the living room he lifted his shiny black shoes and peeled off a sticky piece of cardboard. He inspected our supermarket aisle by aisle, picking up jars of tofu, dried shrimp skin, and pickled cabbage. He gave my father a nondescript nod, leaving for us to determine whether it was one of approval or disdain. "You've done well," he said when we reached the parlor. "I'm glad my investments were put to good use." My father smiled, his face reddening.

I was ashamed for my father. I had seen this man only once in my life before, when I was very young, before grade school, and though I respected him for his achievements, I didn't like the way my father cowered in front of him, didn't like the way this man was judging us. I took a packet of dried dates from the supermarket and began eating while they talked, spitting the seeds not far from where Uncle Wen sat.

"All of you to the kitchen!" my father said. He motioned for me, my mom, and Lan to leave. "The men are discussing serious matters!" Uncle Jin started getting up too but sat back down when he heard the word "men."

I tapped Lan on the shoulder. She was fidgeting with her nails, trying to get the dirt out of them. Then I realized something was wrong with her. I figured she was sad because Uncle Wen never bothered talking to her about taking the TOEFL entrance exam. "You want to go somewhere?" I whispered.

"Sure." She looked up, beaming.

We slipped out from the back and I took out the Cadillac keys, feeling the two hundred *yuan* bills sweaty in my pocket. Lan followed, standing on her tiptoes to avoid contact with the garbage. "Older brother," she asked, "where're we going?"

"Anywhere you'd like, Lan. Your older brother has money tonight."

We got into the Cadillac, and instantly—just like that—the world changed. There was an air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror and the car smelled like pine trees. I hadn't even realized how filthy the air by our house was. Being around garbage so much, you tend to get used to everything foul.

I'd known Qian, the girl I thought I'd marry, since before college. We'd gone to the same high school together, a private school in downtown Yuncheng my father could afford only after receiving money from Uncle Wen. I failed most of my classes and graduated only because by twelfth grade Qian and I were a couple and the principal knew that Qian's father was a big-shot Party member.

Qian had been a shy girl when I'd first known her, a good student who sat up front and copied her lessons and understood math. I sat in the back and watched her. One day the teacher had us recite a lesson on the Three Warring States and when I couldn't she paired us up for Qian to tutor me. In the middle of our first lesson, I got up and lit a cigarette. She asked if I was afraid of getting cancer, and I asked why she cared. It was a line I had often used with other girls before, but Qian fell for it. Eventually I got her to have dinner with me, and on our first date—at a KFC's in Yuncheng's red light district, where we heard men picking up prostitutes outside—I took her hair into my hand and told her that one strand of it was worth more than my life.

A month later, by the city limits, atop one of the remaining sections of Yuncheng's city walls, built during the Ming Dynasty, we had sex for the first time. I didn't admit that it was my first time too, virginity at odds with the cynical persona I tried to create. We were lying together in the dark and we heard

an old knife-sharpener yelling in the streets to get your knife or scissors sharpened. Qian sneezed because of the dust near our noses and the knife sharpener's cart suddenly stopped. He yelled, Who's there, afraid that he'd be the victim of thieves. I hooted like I was the ghost of his ancestor and we heard him pushing his cart in a frightened half-trot down the street. Qian and I laughed for a long time. Later that night, thinking that it was my responsibility, I asked her to marry me.

By the time our relationship was over, Qian wasn't shy anymore. In college, she was like a caterpillar turning into a moth, and I was her cocoon. Leaving her home and meeting new people, she became acutely aware of her family's status, of what she was able to get out of life that others couldn't. She planned out our future: I was studying economics because she wanted me to be a businessman. After graduation, we were to move to Beijing or Shanghai and start a family. "You're so good with people, Yu," she told me. "And with my father's connections, you'll be very successful." I wasn't sure what I was thinking at the time, because from as far back as I could remember I had never minded a handout, but right then I saw the rest of my life being controlled by this spoiled girl and her family, unsatisfied with myself because everything I'd have would be because of someone else.

I didn't have the heart or courage to call off the wedding, but I didn't care much about the relationship anymore. One day I wanted to go out drinking but Qian wanted to stay in and study for an exam. I told her we could study for it tomorrow, that I did my best work cramming the night before. She laughed. "The only reason," she told me, "that you got into college was because of my father. The only reason you're still here is because of him." Before that moment I'd always tried to shrug off those remarks. But on hindsight they were like droplets of water filling up a dinghy, and at that moment I was filled to the brim, ready to sink. I never forgot the look of indignation on her face after I hit her: her hand on her cheek; her eyes thin and narrow, staring at me like two black pebbles.

She called her parents; the wedding was off. When I failed my next class at Shanxi University, I bought a ticket home to Yuncheng. On the train ride back, I passed sorghum and leek fields like the one my father had grown up on. It was winter, the windows foggy from the number of passengers on the train. I wiped off the steam with my palm. I remembered a time in my childhood when

the supermarket hadn't been making too much money, and my father told my mother that if times got even worse, they could always move back to the village, to my grandfather's land, where they'd always have a place to fall back on. His words, instead of comforting my mother, made her cry. I remembered thinking then that I'd rather commit suicide than live with Uncle Jin and Grandma.

The owners of the new karaoke bar—Man-ha-ton's—bragged that it used bricks shipped over from New York for its construction. There was a white bartender, maybe American but most likely Russian, who had a translator whispering customers' orders into his ear.

When we got there, my friend Jiang and his friend were sitting by the entrance, waiting for a room to open up. He told me that he saw Qian the other day, singing with this guy he didn't know. I looked into each room as we passed, examining faces under disco balls, but she wasn't there. We ended up renting a room with Jiang and his friend Liu, next to rooms that hosted a double date and a bachelor party. I sat between Lan and my friends because I thought her skirt exposed too much thigh.

"What are we drinking?" Jiang asked. Then before I could answer he looked over my shoulder and asked Lan. "What do you want to drink, little girl?"

"Drinks are on me." I stood up to make a toast. "My successful Uncle has returned from America. He has returned from where streets are paved with platinum, where soda flows from faucets, and where clouds rain pearls. He has given me a taste of the bounty." I took out the two hundred *yuan* and held them up to the light. Then with a broad sweep of my arm I slapped them down onto the table. "So tonight, for his honor, we drink Budweiser."

Jiang and Liu laughed, raising invisible shot glasses to make me an invisible toast. Lan looked at them and raised her arm as well, timidly, her hand in a fist.

After the first beer, to get the mood going, Jiang, Liu, and I took turns singing songs like *Xing Qiu Ra Ke*, "Alien Planet Rock," *Bu Da Bu Xiao*, "Not Big Not Small," and *Wo De Huang He Niu Zi*, "My Yellow River Girl." For the first few songs, despite Jiang and Liu's best efforts to get Lan to sing, she just sat there and sipped on her beer, holding the neck of the bottle with both her hands. But after two or three beers, Jiang got Lan to sing "A Whole New

World" with him. He lifted and dipped his arm during the carpet ride sequence, and pressed his hand against his chest, cocking his head sideways, during the line "Don't you dare close your eyes." Lan had never seen the movie, and she couldn't read very well, so she filled in the words she didn't know with what she thought they should be. We were all getting tipsy, and I heard Jiang's friend Liu laughing each time Lan made a mistake. By her fifth Budweiser, she was the only one up there singing. She was drunk, and she flipped through the selection binder to find the songs she wanted to sing. I lit a cigarette and tried to ignore Jiang and Liu laughing next to me.

"Who knew?" Jiang said. He nodded his head towards Lan, who was singing in front of the TV, oblivious of the world, jumping up and down.

"What?" I said.

"Who knew your cousin could sing well?" There was a drunken haze in his eyes.

"Who knew," I repeated. I gave him a look that told him if he went any further I'd give him something serious to feel for the rest of the night.

He didn't seem to notice. "Hey country princess," he yelled. "Why don't you sing the swallow song for us?"

We all knew the swallow song, knew it since we were kids: *Little swallow, wearing a white coat, every year, you come here. I ask you, Why do you come? And you say, The springs here are the most beautiful.* We all sang it as kids, and it was a country song, and I didn't think it was appropriate for Lan to sing in a karaoke bar.

She was flipping through the binder, though, looking for the song, taking sips of her Budweiser, when I got up and said we had to go.

"So soon? I just found it in the book."

I lifted her up by the arm and told her she was drunk.

"So soon?" Jiang mimicked Lan's voice, sending Liu into an uproar.

I swung my coat around her shoulders and pulled her out of the room as she was trying to wave the two men goodbye.

We were silent in the car. I had the feeling Lan was waiting for an explanation, but I didn't feel like saying anything. I was protecting her, and I didn't owe her an apology.

"What's wrong with you?" she finally said. "I was having a good time."

"You don't want to be with those guys." I kept my eyes on the road.

"I thought they were nice enough."

"They were making fun of you."

"So what?" she said. "I'm used to it. It's not like I'm going to find a guy from the city who *isn't* going to make fun of me."

"Then stop trying to find a guy from the city," I said, turning up the radio. "Marry someone from the village. Stop humiliating yourself."

"You're one to talk about humiliation," she said. "You were going to marry that girl—what's her name—because her father was wealthy. You were like her dog, doing whatever she told you to."

I forgave her words because I knew she was drunk, and also because I was a little drunk, but at any other time I might have hit her. "Well," I said, "we didn't end up marrying, did we? I stuck up for myself, found whatever little pride I still had left, something that you should've done with those guys at the bar back there."

Lan was resting her head against the window, fogging it up with her breath. She wrote one word on the glass: *fuqi*—arrogance. "Why didn't you marry her?" she said, and then, when I didn't say anything, she added, "You should've married her."

"And why's that?"

"Because then we'd be related."

I laughed, but I knew what she meant. "Don't be silly. We're already related."

"No," she said. She looked at me then, believing that I had really misunderstood her. "I meant me and *her* would be related."

When I pulled up next to the garbage lining my street, it was close to midnight and Lan had already fallen asleep. Being a farmer, she was used to going to bed early and getting up before sunrise, something I'd always admired about her.

Parked in front of me was a strange vehicle, a car that was even better than the one I was in. A black BMW, it reflected moonlight from its roof and door handle, and it took me a second to realize that it belonged to Qian's family. I looked around and saw the driver standing in front of my house, eating a steamed bun with Uncle Jin, who waved when he saw me staring at him. He ran over and I rolled down the window.

"She's been inside for almost an hour waiting for you," Jin said. He peered over the steering wheel at Lan, who was passed out with her head on my shoulder. He smiled. "Fun night?" he asked. "Lan always loved going to the city. Too bad she doesn't like going to the city with me anymore. She says I embarrass her. When she was eight or nine years old, when I went to Yuncheng in the summertime to sell dried apricots, I couldn't shake her off."

I shook Lan on the shoulder, trying to wake her.

"Don't bother," Jin said. "I like seeing her this way. You go in there and take care of your business. I'll see to it that she gets to bed."

When I opened the door to my family's yard, I saw Qian sitting under the dim yellow light. Our family's bench was next to the kitchen and it didn't have a backrest, but Qian was sitting up straight. She wore a pair of glasses I'd never seen before and a coat with two sets of buttons and she carried a small purse that dangled down to her knees. She got up and looked through the open door, past me, to where Uncle Jin was helping Lan out of the Cadillac. She looked at me, then at Lan, and then back at me again.

"I'm not here to see you," she said. "My parents heard about your uncle coming and I'm here to see him. You should know that this was none of my idea. My parents made me come. I'm doing this for them."

My uncle was carrying Lan around his shoulder. He pushed the front door as wide as possible and smiled apologetically as he passed us. "Quickly!" Lan said. "Can we go a little faster? It's freezing out here."

After they left, I tried to explain. "We're not what you think we are," I said. "It's funny that you would even think that."

"There's no need to explain," Qian interrupted. "As I said before, I'm not here for you; I'm here for your uncle. But it *is* good to see you again, Yu. It's good to see that you still take yourself seriously. And I'm happy you found someone just like you to be with."

She turned around and started walking to the living room. She opened the door and shook Uncle Wen's hand. Before closing the door, Uncle Wen looked at me curiously, as if waiting for me to explain the situation. I saw my mother and father sitting behind him. They probably had known as soon as Qian was at the door what this was going to be about, and I wasn't surprised that they still hadn't told him.

Standing outside, I could hear what Qian was saying to my uncle: "Fact

of the matter is your family owns my family forty thousand *yuan*, and at least in my family debts are settled whenever it becomes possible to settle them." I peered into the glass window on the door and saw my father glaring back at me. Uncle Wen was sitting still with his legs crossed. Every once in a while he raised a jar of tea and sipped from it. Qian was sitting on the arm of a couch. I was seeing her side profile and she was sitting very straight, both her hands over her purse on her lap.

Uncle Jin returned from the bedroom a few minutes later with a bun in his mouth and several stuffed buns wrapped in toilet paper in his hands. I shook my head, breathed in through my nose to make him think the water in my eyes were because of the cold.

"They're pork and leek," he said. "Take it. You grandma was up all night making them. We only eat food this good twice, maybe three-times a year."

I took a bun and started taking big heavy bites. When I was nine or ten, every year I looked forward to the Spring Festival to eat shrimp peel dumplings and rice noodles and steamed leek buns. Feeling the texture of the bun against my cheeks and the leek and pork spilling onto my tongue, I tried putting myself back in that time again, when food had been the most important thing for me and my family.

"Things seem to be serious in there," Jin said. He took a bun and began eating it slowly, closing his eyes as if he were trying to picture the taste.

I nodded.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Uncle Wen won't let anybody take advantage of the family."

I nodded again and rubbed my greasy hands on my fake leather jacket.

"He's got a trump card, you know. He's the last tile on the mahjong table, as powerful as Chairman Mao himself. That girl in there: she's never been to the places your Uncle has been. Her father's connections pale to Uncle Wen's. Uncle Wen—he is family. Your interests are his interests. Him, me, your father, we're brothers." He hit his chest twice with a closed fist. "It only takes one of us for the three to succeed."

I offered him a cigarette and took one for myself. We turned around and looked into the window on the door. Uncle Wen was now the one talking. We watched my uncle talk, watched him speak to Qian in a dismissive manner. He was standing up now and telling the girl that assumptions made about other

people's income was never a good idea, that America was not what she thought it was and that her coming here tonight wasn't going to change the fact that he didn't have the money and that her parents had made a poor investment.

I stood there with Jin and could tell that Qian, like the rest of us, didn't believe a word my uncle was saying. I knew she didn't care either way. This wasn't what she wanted; this was what her parents had told her to do, one of her many duties separating her from where she wanted to be and what she wanted to do. I could tell that the way my uncle was talking to her now bothered her. She'd probably never had anyone talk to her in this manner her entire life. My uncle didn't even bother putting down his tea. He held the jar with both hands, one on the handle and the other on the bottom, talking to Qian in the way he had talked to my dad. He had the same expression on his face as when we had first picked him up in the Cadillac: unimpressed. He didn't care if the girl drove a BMW or that her family was powerful in Yuncheng. For Lan, my parents, and me, Qian's life was something to aspire to: we were country folk looking up at city folk as if they were bright unreachable stars. But to Uncle Wen, we were all the same. The very reason she was there talking to him, asking him for money, put her in the same category as the rest of us. To Uncle Wen, Qian and my father were both under the same umbrella of pathetic-ness that he was here to deal with.

After Qian came out, I didn't even bother telling her that Lan was my cousin. She left our yard, her purse dangling from her hand, tiptoeing around the garbage to where her driver stood with the car door open.

I walked back inside. Uncle Wen was reading a book under a lamp as if nothing had happened. My mom and Uncle Jin were wiping off the table, storing the buns in a cool dry basket to save for the morning.

My dad was standing by my bedroom door, waiting for me. He didn't say anything about Qian. He asked me if I knew what I had to do in the morning. He didn't care anymore whether or not Uncle Wen heard. "Don't want to get charged for another day," he said. "Make sure you wake up early." I put my hand in my pocket, touched the keys, and told him that I'd try.