Why Our House Has No Electric Lights

Su Tong


Each night all the houses on Mahogany Tree Street but one were warmed by the soft glow of newly installed electric lights. The dark home was called a "nail house" because its inhabitants refused to move, refused the official order to relocate to a rural area. Their refusal meant their home would remain dark indefinitely. Su Tong explores the conflict between forces set in motion by an indifferent bureaucracy and the lives of the neighbors who receive and must carry out such orders. Here under the soft glow of a neighborhood lit for the first time, in a single dark house, Su Tong explores the broad effects of modern Chinese history on the most intimate human scale.
That winter, a revolution of light swept through tattered North Town, electric lights displac-
ing ancient oil lamps and candles all along Mahogany Tree Street. Overnight, utility poles mushroomed on the outskirts of town, and a small electrical substation popped up on the hill below the tannery, all awaiting the light. Impatient children who patrolled the outskirts of town eventually convened on the hill outside the tannery, surrounded the substation, and peered through the delicate windows and doors of that small building. Occasional scuffles did not settle the question of whether or not a worker would be hired to run the transformer room.

Workers at the brand-new North Side Power Supply Bureau had already gotten used to a slow, leisurely day spent mostly around the water cooler resolving local social and political issues, so the heavy work ahead rested uncomfortably on them. The view out their window was slowly obliterated by the growing stockpile of utility poles. What began as a small pile grew into a cement mountain weighing on everyone’s nerves.

The installation team resented their work even more because they must carry out the work, climbing up and down each and every pole. Every time they burst into the office, they let loose their anger and frustration, grumbling about how they were understaffed, underequipped, and forced to live at the mercy of the sticky-fingered residents of Mahogany Tree Street. “One worker left his safety helmet on the ground, and it was gone in the blink of an eye!” But that irritation was small compared to what was bugging Captain Li, who felt the need to air his grievances to Old Kuang, head of the bureau. “Who on earth is building these houses on Mahogany Tree Street? They’ve slapped them up just anywhere along the street in any damn order! It’s exhausting, having to run wire right through several houses just to get to the one we want. What piles of shit! Are these people working-class? Looks to me like landlords and rich peasants have more awareness than you guys!”

This time, he had gone too far. The locals in the office were furious. Their bickering soon escalated to threats, each side accusing the other of outrageous offenses. The mood of the office mirrored the dry, bleak November day. Old Kuang had been coating the pimple at the corner of his mouth with yellow ointment for several days now. The infected area had improved, but now it seemed all the inflammation had worked its way into his eyes, which flared beet-red with anger as he yelled at the installation crew. With his naturally curly hair, he looked like a lion, roaring, ”If the electricity isn’t flowing by New Year’s Eve, then all of us will be called counter-revolutionaries! We’ll be executed by firing squad, right here—right here on this spot!”

That scared them. “This is our job, not yours! You don’t have to jump all over us like you’re gonna eat us alive! Besides, if you have all of us executed right here, then who’s gonna light up Mahogany Tree Street?”

After this confrontation, the installation team rarely made a scene again. But when Captain Li and his men pushed their long-bed cart full of utility poles down the alley each morning, the cart banged loudly against the wall of each house, sending echoes ricocheting throughout the neighborhood. Old Kuang could read the workers’ lips from his office window, but since he couldn’t hear their cursing, he went on assuming they were cussing each other out. Nevertheless, the work progressed and the mountain of utility poles melted away. Sunshine returned to the office along with the view of the river and the arc of its bridge. Little Ling, the accountant, finally finished her knitting, and Old Kuang once again laid out his paper chessboard at noon for a three-game match against Little Qian. Things were getting back to normal.

Sometime later, a young boy began showing up in the yard every day, and while at first he may have seemed harmless, in time he became a real nuisance. Every day that boy would run all over the place with his iron hoop chiming and clanging along by his side. He would come up to the yard, climb atop the pile of utility poles, and stare wide-eyed into the busy office. The moment any staff member happened to glance out the window, the boy would fly into action, rolling his hoop along the length of the pole. He sometimes stumbled, but he always stayed focused, determined to put on a good show. The workers knew he was trying to draw their attention, but who had the time to enjoy this performance? Nobody appreciated the racket his hoop made, either, so they would simply turn away and shut their windows.

“Whose kid is that outside, anyway?” Old Kuang asked Little Qian. “Every day he comes here, making so much noise. It’s driving me crazy! I can’t concentrate on playing chess. No wonder I keep losing.”

“If you can’t shit, don’t blame the outhouse,” Little Qian retorted. “You are bound to lose even when no one is making any noise.”

Frustrated, Old Kuang turned to Little Ling and commanded her, “Go out and drive him away!”

Little Ling, a local, was well aware that the boy was the younger son of Liu Mei Xian, and that he was even more lubricious than his mother. Little Ling set her abacus aside, stood up, and with a small laugh explained to Old Kuang, “I did try to drive him away before, but he refused to leave, and he informed me that the yard is a public area, not my own private property, and that by extension, I cannot kick him out. That kid is a little devil!
He comes up with all sorts of shrewd arguments that he must have learned from his mother."

Old Kuang was not convinced. "You’re an articulate, quick-minded woman; how can a kid overpower you? Just go scare him off by telling him that we are going to drag him to the police station if he stays."

Little Ling went out, but quickly returned quite upset. She cried, "I could just die! The little devil spits! See?" She held her coat out to them. "My coat is covered in his spit! I can’t make him leave. You guys are on your own."

Old Kuang and Little Qian stepped out of the office, but the boy was nowhere to be seen. His iron hoop, still quivering, came quietly to a stop against a cement pole and then fell flat. They knew he was hiding. Old Kuang yelled out, "Come here, you little bastard—I’m gonna drag you to the police station!"

No response. Old Kuang insisted on searching for the boy on the other side of the stacked utility poles, but Little Qian grabbed his arm and whispered in his ear, "Hey, maybe we shouldn’t mess with that kid. You know about that Liu Mei Xian woman, right? Mess with her kid, and you mess with her. Mess with her, and you are in big trouble. We don’t have to do this."

Old Kuang hesitated for a second as an image of the middle-aged woman arose before him, her gaunt, yellow face with those piercing, skeptical eyes. She had once made a really nasty scene in the town hall and been beaten for refusing to be sent down from the city to a village in Northern Jiangsu for re-education like everyone else. That day, when Old Kuang was about to go home from work, he saw Liu with his own eyes being escorted back from the district government offices in a courthouse Jeep. She stepped out, her body bent and stooped like that of a very old woman, her face traced by tears, and her right arm wrapped in gauze and fixed to a wooden board. Her eyes burned with anger, humiliation, and a painful loss of spirit.

Neighbors soon learned that the district had used a Jeep to escort her home because she had been held by the proletarian dictatorship itself. Some of the townspeople spoke out from the crowd, saying, "Though Liu is indeed a troublemaker and it is wrong to act as a stubborn nail against the government’s order that demotes her to another location, no matter how ferocious or wrong she is in what she does, the government should not beat her. You can see she has been beaten to the point that one of her arms is broken." Old Kuang remembered her tear-stained face, which her lowered head had kept hidden from view as she walked to her house, dismissing all inquiries and concerns from her neighbors.

A district cadre jumped out of the Jeep, one of his eyes completely covered in layers of gauze and bandages. With fury and indignation, he leapt in front of the crowd, pointed at his eye, and shouted, "Don’t be fooled by what you just saw! Who is hitting who? The government didn’t hit her—she invited this trouble by attacking government workers first! She almost put out my eye! Don’t you guys know that Liu has been a stubborn nail for a year? Now she thinks she’s more righteous than ever. Almost everybody in the district government has had a taste of her fists!"

As the two men returned to the office, Old Kuang saw Little Ling leaning against the windowsill. "How come you two are back?" she asked them. "That kid is hiding behind the large cargo container."

“If you won’t relocate like the others then there can be no light. This is the policy coming from above,” Little Ling, interrupting Old Kuang, went on, “We have no choice. No one wants to bully your family. Though you guys still live in Mulberry Garden, your paperwork has been transferred to some village in Northern Jiangsu. If you want to have electric lights installed, then you need to move there first.”
Old Kuang dropped the iron hoop in a corner and asked Little Ling, “Why does that kid come here every day? What exactly does he want?”

She replied, “Are you playing dumb or something? Whether it’s an adult or a child, why do they always come to us? He wants to know about the electricity!”

Old Kuang said, “Electricity has not been installed in their house—it’s a nail house! Other houses can receive electricity, but not a nail house. Besides, Liu doesn’t want it anyway. She doesn’t want to pay for an electricity meter, right? She made that point very clear, that electric lights cost more than candles. Too much more.”

“That’s what Liu—the adult—says. That’s not what her kids are saying. The neighbors next door all have electric lights now, but their house has been skipped, and they’re pissed!” said Little Ling.

As they talked, a sharp noise ricocheted off the window glass and startled everybody in the room. Looking outside, they briefly glimpsed the figure of the boy, then a louder bang shattered the glass. This time, Little Qian was the first to jump up, swearing, “That little son of a bitch! You wanna piece of us?” Little Qian was a young man after all. He thinks and acts quickly, and so he rushed out like a gust of wind. Before long he was back, dragging his captive in by the ear.

The boy was wearing an oversized army uniform with a belt around his waist. The uniform was homesewn and home-dyed a mottled and uneven army green. Little Qian pulled up on the boy’s ear, forcing his head to tilt to the side in grievance and chagrin. The boy’s dirty face was bright red with anger, and snot dripped from his nose despite his incessant sniffling. “Give me back my hoop! Give it to me!” Clamoring with his head aslant, he jumped and lurched to break free from Little Qian’s hold.

Little Qian didn’t let go, and said to the boy, “I was gonna give this hoop back to you, but now that you’ve broken our window I can’t give it back to you anymore. You’ll have to leave the hoop here and go home for some money to pay for the damage. It will cost eighty cents to replace that piece of glass. Now you bring me eighty cents, and I’ll give you back your hoop.”

Old Kuang was the father of a three-year-old, and Little Ling, although still bitter over the boy having spit on her coat, was a woman, after all. Both were overwhelmed with sympathy at the bruises appearing on the boy’s ear, and pushed Little Qian away from the boy. Little Ling checked out the boy’s ear, gently rubbing it. Suddenly her grudge was revived; she could not help sneering. Poking a finger at the boy’s nose, she said, “Hey, kid. Well, I don’t want to say this, but it seems you only have the guts to bully the weak.”

Old Kuang took it upon himself to throw the boy out, making one last attempt to scare him. “This time we’ll let you go, but if you come back again, you’ll be sabotaging the Light and Bright Project. That’s the same as declaring war against the Party, and that will cost you your life, not just your ears. You’ll be shot—shot right on the spot!”

The boy’s eyes lit up when he heard this talk about the Party and execution. He suddenly turned around and shouted playfully, “Let me go! Guerrillas are on their way!”

But Old Kuang, not trusting his ears, asked his colleagues, “What did he just say? Something about guerrillas?”

Little Ling replied, “Nobody knows what he’s talking about. It’s just kid’s gibberish he learned from the movies.”

From behind them, Little Qian began to crack up laughing. “This little fucker is saying he has a gang of guerrilla fighters and he’s going to let them wipe us out!”

The boy was in his own world. Excitement and hatred flashed in his eyes. Pointing up at the ceiling light in the middle of the office he said, “You guys really are counter-revolutionaries! Why do all of you have electric lights, but only my house doesn’t? If you don’t run the electric wire over to my house and light it up, then you guys really are counter-revolutionary!” His small face ablaze with anger, he began to howl, “You will be shot—shot dead if you don’t get the power to my house! The guerrillas are coming! They’ll get you all!”

It was almost dusk when the speakers on the office wall burst out into a joyous melody. The broadcast for the rural area was starting, and the staff began readying to go home. They all stood up at almost the same time. Little Ling was locking her drawer, and Old Kuang was winding the clock on his desk. Little Qian took his daily cup of tea to the door and tossed out the spent leaves, nearly hitting someone.

It was Liu Mei Xian’s elder son, Chunsheng, at the door. He was a robust, exceedingly strong young man, not tall, but with such broad shoulders and hefty legs that he appeared as formidable as a stone slab blocking the office door. His aura made it clear he was looking for trouble. Little Qian stood frozen in a standoff with Chunsheng. Glaring into each other’s eyes, neither wanted to speak first. Chunsheng was wearing a yellow army cap and had a cigarette tucked behind his ear. On the front of his unbuttoned blue uniform, an arched line of characters read, “Stressing Revolution and Promoting Production.” No one knows where he got the shirt, but everybody knows Chunsheng—a notorious street fighter in the Mahogany Tree neighborhood, he had not yet killed anyone, but he was bound to do so sooner or later. Looking at
Chunsheng’s stony face, Little Ling was the first to react. “Little Qian,” she said, “you have errands to run, right? You can leave first.”

Little Qian understood her meaning and took a step back. But he didn’t want to look like a chicken either, so he took a short step forward as well and asked point-blank, “What are you doing?”

Old Kuang echoed the question from the back of the office, saying, “What are you doing? The office is closed, so come back tomorrow.”

Chunsheng pushed Little Qian back a step and asked, “You’re the one who bullied my brother, right? So you’re such a man that you bully children and feel no shame?”

Little Qian refused to be outdone and was about to shove back when Old Kuang stepped up between the two and pushed Little Qian aside. “Who bullied your brother? You believe the words of a little kid?” Pointing at the broken window, Old Kuang asked Chunsheng, “Do you see that glass? Your brother did that. You know it’s eighty cents per piece, right? Don’t cop an attitude with me. Let me ask you a question. If a little kid does something wrong, shouldn’t we teach him a lesson?”

Chunsheng glimpsed the damaged windowpane out of the corner of his eye. “Teach your own ass a lesson!” he sneered. “It’s just a piece of glass, so what’s the big deal? Eighty cents per pane, right? I can pick up two tomorrow, repair yours with one, and sell the other for eighty cents. That’s my offer, take it or leave it.”

Old Kuang didn’t know how to respond. “What are you talking about? You think we are blackmailing your brother because of that glass? We don’t want your money. We just want to meet your parents and tell them your brother needs some discipline.”

“Discipline your own ass,” Chunsheng said again, spotting the iron hoop in a far corner of the room. He easily swept Old Kuang aside and went directly to the hoop. Holding it in his hands, his face suddenly turned cold. “Discipline? Let me teach you something for a change. Don’t be so cocky.” Staring at Old Kuang with a growing hatred, he continued to lay into him, “You dumb bastard! Who gave Director Zheng a big fluorescent lamp for free? Who gave every fucking house in Mulberry Garden electric lights but ours?!”

“Why doesn’t your house have electric lights?” Old Kuang shot back. “Don’t come here and ask me, go ask your mom. Seven households on Mahogany Tree Street have been relocated to rural villages. Why is your family determined to be a nail house?” Old Kuang was losing his temper. “I have regulations and codes to follow! You guys are nails, and a nail house receives no electricity. It’s the policy for the whole city. If you have a problem with it, go to city hall. The real culprit is the policy, not me—not Old Kuang!”

The mention of the word “nail” had deflated Chunsheng a little. It seemed as if the word itself stabbed at his heart. Ashamed to expose his weakness, he rolled his brother’s iron hoop back and forth and stared at the cement floor of the office. “Nail house is it? Nail, your grandma! Our legs are our own. We get to decide whether we leave or stay.”

“If you won’t relocate like the others then there can be no light. This is the policy coming from above,” Little Ling, interrupting Old Kuang, went on, “We have no choice. No one wants to bully your family. Though you guys still live in Mulberry Garden, your paperwork has been transferred to some village in Northern Jiangsu. If you want to have electric lights installed, then you need to move there first.”

“Northern Jiangsu has electric lights? The village has electric lights?” Chunsheng suddenly blew up, screaming at Little Ling. “You stupid shit! You think I’m a fool? Even fools know that villages in Northern Jiangsu barely have candles, so how would we have electric lights there, huh? Are we gonna use our heads as bulbs?”

Chunsheng’s outburst toward Little Ling put both men on edge. Old Kuang said to her, “Lock your drawer tight and go home. Trying to argue with this little punk is like whitewashing a white wall—it’s completely useless.”

Little Qian, who had been standing to the side, finally lost his patience. He rushed at Chunsheng and pushed him out the door, yelling, “Get out! We don’t have time to waste on garbage like you. Do you really think you’re our boss?”

By then all three workers were enraged. Little Ling poked Chunsheng in the shoulder with a mop handle in an attempt to push him out the door. At first, Chunsheng had taken advantage of his strength to block the door, but a jab from the mop handle forced him to let go of the doorframe. As he let go, however, he swung the iron hoop and caught Old Kuang off guard. Then, waving the hoop around outside, he began shouting, “You stuck-up shitheads! I’m ordering you to install electric lights in my house! And if they aren’t installed in three days, your heads are mine!”

Before the three workers had a chance to respond to Chunsheng’s threat, Little Ling spotted a bloody mark on Old Kuang’s neck where Chunsheng had caught him with the hoop. With panic in her voice, she began to scream, “Blood! He’s bleeding! Somebody’s gonna die for this! Hurry, call the cops!”

Layer upon layer of twilight descended and settled upon the gravel road. Street lamps began to glow, one after another all the way down Mahogany Tree
Street. Workers returning home soon filled the street’s
now-noisy intersections. The air, resonant with the cheer-
ful sounds of the city’s evening hustle and bustle, began
to fill with the smells of dinner cooking in kitchens all
along the street. Houses on the north bank of the river sat
in the shadows, so their lights were the first to turn on,
the soft glow easing through greasy windows to merge
with the light of the street lamps into a luminous mélange
of light and cooking smoke drifting down the street. He
can almost taste the fresh lard bubbling on the stove in a
nearby kitchen. Everything illuminated—every light in
North Town brought to life by Old Kuang’s hard work.
On most nights, when he walks through this light, it fills
his heart with pride. But that night, he avoided the light,
afraid to let anyone see the trail of blood winding down
his neck. Workers in the clinic had carefully spread Mer-
curochrome on it, and the dirty red color smeared along
his neck made it look all the more frightening.

When he arrived at Yadan Bridge, Old Kuang hesi-
tated, and his bike began to wobble. He thought about
the mark on his neck, and did not know whether to con-
tinue on—should he go to Mulberry Garden to show Liu
Mei Xian his neck? He didn’t want to blame or harm her,
and he was not the kind of man to knock on somebody’s
door just to voice his complaints. He thought to himself
that only women and children would do that. Still, he
could not let go of his resentment. After all, how could
he, an honorable man, exist alongside a family like Liu’s
after what her children had done? He simply felt that
since Liu didn’t discipline her kids, it was his obligation
to educate her.

After locking his bike underneath the bridge, Old
Kuang walked slowly across, peering down at the jumble
of houses in Mulberry Garden, and recognized Liu’s at
once. Every house but one was lit. The newly installed
incandescent lights threw off warm blushing halos.
Only one house’s windows remained dark, the structure
crouching in the shadows of a paulownia tree like an
aloof and deserted island. He knew Liu and her outcast
family lived there.

Standing at Liu Mei Xian’s gate, Old Kuang realized
that the door was ajar. Criss-crossing the living room
were rows of rope hung with bizarrely shaped objects
that dripped, dampening the whole room with a thin,
glittering glare. Old Kuang tentatively stepped forward,
cautiously placing one foot on a brick. Able to see more
clearly now, he noticed that the objects hanging on the
ropes were newly washed gloves.

“Hello,” Old Kuang called out. The rope gave a
slight shiver, but no response followed. Only the sound
of water, the splash of drops from clothes being wrung
out, a lone answer of plip, plip, plop. “Hello,” once again
Old Kuang called out, and this time a girl emerged from
the jungle of gloves.

“Hello, what?” she says, “There is no Mr. or Mrs.
‘Hello’ here. Why don’t you just use the word ‘comrade’?
Comrade, who are you looking for?”

It was a girl fourteen or fifteen years old with pig-
tails. Wearing a plastic apron around her waist and two
blue oversleeves, she looked like a diligent laborer stand-
ing in front of Old Kuang, her eyes bright against the
dim room. “I know you!” she exclaimed, “You’re the guy
in charge of the electric lights.” Excitement flared in her
voice. “Is my house about to get electricity?”

“Is your mom at home?” Old Kuang asked. “I want
to have a few words with her.”

The girl took off an oversleeve and moved to the
courtyard at the back. As she began to remove the other
oversleeve, she looked like a diligent laborer stand-
ing in front of Old Kuang, her eyes bright against the
mid-motion. “Oh no, no. You’re not here to install electric
lights for us, are you? Things would never be so simple,”
she murmured to herself, regaining her sense of suspi-
cion. “Why do you want to see my mom? You can just

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the boy out, making one last attempt
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talk to me. There’s no difference. My mom was beaten up and now she’s bedridden.” The girl turned toward him, determined to block Old Kuang’s way. Looking him up and down with a deepening suspicion, she asked, “Comrade, what’s really your business here? Why don’t you just talk to me?”

“It’s useless to talk to you,” protested Old Kuang. “I need to talk your mom.”

“My mother is not home!” the girl cried so loudly that her shrill voice frightened even herself. She then stuck her tongue out briefly, turned around, and gazed out into the courtyard. In a low voice she warned him, “I have told you that you cannot talk to her, so that’s the way it is.” With arms akimbo, she forcefully blocked Old Kuang’s path while continuing to question him. “What’s going on, really? Why don’t you just tell me? Cat got your tongue Comrade? You’re a grown man aren’t you?”

“I have no business with you!” Old Kuang declared, his agitation increasing. “Are you capable of disciplining your older brother and the young one as well? Your younger brother broke my office’s window and the older one is a reprobate. Look—look at my neck. Your older brother used an iron hoop to do this to my neck!” As he shouted at her, Old Kuang saw a tiny black shadow rush out from the courtyard and just as swiftly retreat from view. Old Kuang pointed into the courtyard and demanded, “Go call your younger brother, ask him about the damage he did today!”

Her eyes widening, she took a close look at Old Kuang’s neck. Clearly disturbed, she asked him, “My older brother did this? How could he have picked on an old man like you? This is not possible. You accuse him, but with what evidence?”

“Why would I, a person of my age, lie to a little chit of a girl like you? This ugly scar on my neck is the proof! What other evidence do you need?” Old Kuang, his fury having reached the boiling point, finally pushed the girl aside and made his way into the courtyard, saying, “I don’t get it. Isn’t your household governed by the Communist Party? This is the Party’s land, and your house cannot be an exception!” He felt someone grab the hem of his coat and swung around to break free from the girl, but halted when she suddenly grabbed onto his legs.

Half-kneeling, the girl looked up at him with pleading eyes, “I beg you. Don’t see my mom. She cannot take this anymore.” Her voice was choked with tears. “I thought you were here to install electric lights for us but you are here to complain and accuse her. Please don’t do this to my mom. Anyone who comes to complain makes her even more upset. She will collapse!”

Old Kuang now felt embarrassed and increasingly uncertain. Having broken free of the girl once more, he halted again in the doorway but had lost his desire to go through it. Standing there, he glanced back and forth between the courtyard and the street, but finally decided not to throw his efforts away. Still breathing hard after disentangling himself from the girl’s grasp, he continued, “You’re a good daughter, so I have decided not to talk to your mom. But I can’t let your older brother get away with this. He doesn’t respect the law. If I let him get away now, he will cause a lot of trouble later and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat will not spare him.”

Now leaning against the wall, the girl slowly pulled off the second oversleeve. “Dictatorship or whatever—the trouble my older brother made is a conflict with the people, not a struggle between ourselves and the enemy,” she skillfully retorted, flashing a cunning grin. “You can wait as long as you like, but he isn’t coming home. He’s on the other side of the river and won’t return until he sees smoke coming from our chimney.”

Old Kuang’s mind began to wander. Taking a closer look at the house, he began to realize just how much it did resemble a nail stubbornly clinging to the place. This family should have been relocated already, but had managed to stay. The Honor Roll of Relocation had been posted over and over on their front door, only to be torn off each time, just small scraps of red paper remaining. He could barely make out three words—“Cold Water County”—the place the Lius were supposed to relocate to. Old Kuang, as old as he was, had never left the city even once, and he had never endured the hardship of rural life. How far away was Cold Water County? What did it look like? Were houses there made of mud and
thatch or brick and mortar? He imagined what types of houses this family would find there. What would they do when they got there? Would they farm the land or work in factories, or just keep washing gloves? Old Kuang cleared his throat and was about to ask the girl some questions, but not knowing where to start, he ended up asking a rather irrelevant one: “How many pairs of gloves do you wash in a day?”

The girl’s demeanor suddenly turned standoffish. She reluctantly admitted, “I don’t waste time counting them when I can use it to wash a few pairs more.”

The darkness began to fill the room along with increasingly colder air. Under the light from their neighbors’ houses, Old Kuang suddenly noticed the photo of the late He Dalin hung on the wall. He had been a worker, killed in a violent fight among different political factions. Now Mr. He had nothing but this wall. It wasn’t that his death was worth millions, but it wasn’t worthless altogether. Old Kuang recalled playing chess with Mr. He before under the Yadan Bridge, and this memory makes him steal a few more looks at the photo. Mr. He’s stare is blank yet anxious, even preoccupied, as if he had foreseen the ambiguity surrounding his death and the trouble it would bring to this house—to his own wife and children. Mr. He and Old Kuang looked at each other, and it seemed the former wanted to ask the latter for a favor. It was at this moment that Old Kuang felt sorry and lowered his head without knowing why. Then the strong odor of bleach caught his attention as a cold draft wafted it across the room from the gloves hung on the ropes, water still dripping quietly. Old Kuang retreated, tiptoeing back across the bricks. “Your house needs some ventilation,” he managed to say before stepping outside. Then, turning back to speak to the girl once more, “You use so much bleach that it will damage your hands. You should wear a pair of rubber gloves.”

The girl, however, didn’t hear his kind advice. As Old Kuang, now out of the house, turned to leave, he heard the girl’s voice from behind him. “My older brother did something wrong, but it was because of you guys. Why didn’t you install electric lights in my house? Take a look with your own eyes: every house here in Mulberry Gardens now has light. Only my house is left in darkness. Why does my house have to stay in darkness? You think we are an easy target? You are just bullying us!”

Hearing the girl’s words, Old Kuang glanced around outside. Well, she is right. Lights glowing from neighbors’ windows encircle this dark house, illuminate the outer wall, and shine on the green onions and coxcombs in her flowerbed. Beyond the dim living room, however, this household is immersed in darkness. The only glint of light Old Kuang can see is the glare of the girl’s plastic apron—faintly blue, mystical and chilling.

In no way could the workers at the North Town office have foreseen receiving gifts from the family of Liu Mei Xian, but a few days later when Old Kuang got to work, he saw Little Qian holding a fine cigarette between his lips, looking at him with a sly smile. On Old Kuang’s desk there also sat a new pack of Chienmen Grande cigarettes. Little Ling carried a thermos back from the communal stove and exclaimed, “The sun now rises from the west! Liu Mei Xian has begun to give people gifts. Cigarettes for you male comrades, and I am treated nicely as well. She pushed into my arms a big bag of preserved plum in cream.”

“Well, maybe they are gifts, or maybe not. She is paying us back for her son’s transgressions,” Little Qian laughed. “Old Kuang gets hurt, and his injury goes beyond what a pack of cigarette can undo, while we just get these gifts for nothing.”

“Why is she doing this?” Frowning at the pack of cigarettes, Old Kuang cast the blame on his coworkers. “Don’t you know where these gifts come from? They’re from her! How dare you accept gifts from her?”

“We told her what happened to the window glass, but did not mention your neck. I am afraid she does not know this even now,” Little Ling said. “I was about to tell her but then I saw the splint on her hand. She seemed pretty injured, so I thought it would be inappropriate to mention it.”

“Why would you need to mention that? It’s already healed and a turtleneck covers it completely.” Old Kuang went on, “So now she is willing to spend money on gifts, is she? She must be after something. What is it, really?”

Her gifts had a purpose, something about installing the electric lights in her house. Little Ling hesitated for quite a while, but in the end, did not spell it out for Old Kuang. Then with a sudden flash of understanding, Old Kuang turned to Little Ling, “Has this nail finally been pulled out? Are they going to relocate?”

“Yes, they’re pulling out and leaving town,” she said. “The district visited her family every day to persuade her, and she finally nodded her head in consent. This woman, Liu Mei Xian, is a smart one—she is letting her kids maintain the urban household registration in her name. The district put up a good fight, and she has finally conceded, saying that she will relocate to Cold Water County before the New Year.”

Old Kuang froze for a moment, then breathed out a sigh without knowing why. He sensed a vague heaviness creeping over him. He carefully tore open the tinfoil
around the pack of cigarettes, and sniffed it to see whether there was any odor of bleach. No. The pack exuded only its own unique fresh fragrance of finely cut tobacco leaves. His eyes fixed on the profile of the Chienmen Gate printed on the pack. Rising before him was the image of that low, dark house in Mulberry Garden, and also that rural house from his imagination, one with a thatched roof and mud walls, standing by itself in the middle of farmland. That’s the house in Cold Water County he imagines the Lius are going to stay in. Old Kuang can almost see the girl who washes gloves standing at the gate. The farmland is filled with clotheslines hung with wet gloves. Old Kuang recalled that girl’s plastic apron, the tiny flare of blue in the dark. Then he thought of the photo of the late He Dalin on the wall. He asked Little Qian, “Do you still remember He Dalin? The guy I played chess with?”

Little Qian replied, “How can I forget him? He’s the only person you could beat!”

Little Ling couldn’t remember him playing chess, but she said, “As a matter of fact, that man was quite shrewd. He once worked as a loader to move dry sweet potatoes. He tore a hole in his sack and asked his kid to follow him so the kid could pick up the ones that fell along the way, wrap them in his clothes, and bring the bounty home.”

Old Kuang stopped her story and said, “You do know he’s dead, don’t you? Why do you still care about things like that?”

The Light and Bright Project was now in its final stages, and the installation team had begun to pay more frequent visits to the office again. Now that the office workers and the laborers had finally become friends, they encouraged each other to share their frustrations and complaints. More than one worker came to visit Old Kuang and vent their grievances about a strange little boy—“There’s a little boy that keeps annoying us. He hovers around like a fly and refuses to be driven away. The second we aren’t looking, he steals a stirrup or takes away a piece of electric porcelain.” Old Kuang, realizing this must be the younger son of Liu Mei Xian, kept silent.

One afternoon the boy followed two workers transporting some electric wire from the far outskirts of town back to the office grounds. After the earlier incident with the hoop, he dared not enter the office but decided instead to visit the public restroom nearby. When Old Kuang arrived at the restroom, he found the boy holding a light bulb and cowering in a stall. Old Kuang stepped outside and asked the workers, “Why did you let this kid have a bulb?”

They replied, “Oh, that is just a bad bulb, but he insists on playing with it. What a difficult kid. He says every house on Mahogany Tree Street now has electric lights except his.”

Old Kuang turned away, saying, “Right. Every house now has lights but his. Who is responsible for this? Well, it’s sure not me.” He continued muttering to himself as he returned to the restroom, where the boy suddenly popped out of the stall he had hidden in and waved the light bulb at Old Kuang, saying “Look, I have an electric light!”

Old Kuang was about to laugh but could not. He stood in front of the urinal for a long time. His prostate worked fine but he just could not seem to pee at that moment. The boy just stood there, with the light bulb pointing at him, black eyes staring at him. Old Kuang tried hard but still couldn’t pee. He waved his arms about to scare off the boy, “Go away! Beat it!” But the boy stayed on, turning the bulb around, aiming it right at Old Kuang like a searchlight. Inexplicably, Old Kuang saw a beam of blinding light shining into his eyes and felt a sudden burst of pain. He still couldn’t pee. “Alright, fine, you win, you little punk!” Old Kuang stomped toward the boy shouting, “Go home! Go home now, and we’ll install lights in your house!”

That afternoon when he returned from the restroom, Old Kuang looked somehow heavy-hearted. He rummaged about the entire office looking for a used electricity meter that had once been in the office. His two colleagues, suddenly understanding his intentions, nodded in approval of his kindness, but, wary of the political signal such an unsanctioned move might send out, chose to stand against him. Little Qian made his argument by blaming the laziness of the installation team. “If we create a new project for them out of nowhere, who knows how hard it will be to talk them into completing the work.”

Little Ling attacked the idea by calling attention to the pointlessness of the plan. “Old Kuang, they are about to be
relocated in a few days to Cold Water Village, where this family will spend their New Year’s Eve. You will spend so much effort to install the electric wires and lights in that house, but they can barely even use it before they move."

But Old Kuang had already made up his mind. He said, “Even a single day of electricity will be great in their eyes.”

Little Qian tried to remind him, “Old Kuang, your kindness must follow protocol. Let’s just report this to the district and see.”

Old Kuang lost his patience and retorted, “Report, your ass!” Suddenly feeling angry and impulsive, he surprised his coworkers by shouting out the exact words Liu Mei Xian’s children had once hurled at them: “Don’t bully them! Every house on Mahogany Tree Street has electric lights, so how come their house doesn’t have any?”

Thirty-some years later, no one living in Mulberry Gardens had any memory of Liu Mei Xian’s family, nor any knowledge of the story of her house and the light. That light was only there for one night. Other than the family members upon whom the light shone, Old Kuang was probably the only other person who still held dear that night.

On that night, Old Kuang paused on the bridge and paid close attention to the lights shimmering through Mulberry Gardens. Now every house was bathed in a yellowish glow, the distribution of light finally balanced and fair. Not just the lights, but the whole winter night enjoyed an aura of balance and fairness. This brought peace and a little jolt of triumph to Old Kuang’s soul. He was the one who made this happen, this light in Liu’s house, without the family even buying an electric meter. Old Kuang certainly had no idea that the light could only stay there for one night. He walked down the bridge with pride after seeing the light in Liu’s house, oblivious that this first bright night would be their last.

The next morning when Old Kuang passed over Yadan Bridge, he caught sight of a big red and green truck parked under the bridge. A group of gong and drum players—all usually merely housewives—was there as well. The gongs and drums had fallen out of rhythm, producing a unique clamor. Chunsheng and his younger sister were already in the truck. Loungeing in the bed of the truck with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, Chunsheng chatted with a few guys standing in the street. The girl, wearing a red flower pinned to her chest, sat on top of two big wooden suitcases and anxiously gazed toward the far end of the bridge. Under the bridge a growing crowd watched expectantly. Their eyes followed the direction of the girl’s gaze, fixated on the far end of that bridge. Some people shouted out loudly as they tried to stir up the crowd, “Hit the gongs and drums harder! Make them louder! They’re not gonna come down if we don’t make it loud enough!” Soon the gongs and drums were singing with all their strength as the scene grew ever more volatile. Liu Mei Xian and her young son finally showed up, one looking very skinny and frail, and the other even more so. Catching sight of them, the people under the bridge start to applaud, saying, “They’re here. They’re finally here.”

The mother and son both went down together. Liu Mei Xian’s eyes were red and swollen. Other than that, she behaved well. Though she was not willing to put any hint of a smile on her sullen face, she did not cry or weep or do anything to dampen this farewell gathering. She was a smart woman after all, and in the end she always knew which way the wind blows. The splint had been removed, but her arm was still in recovery, so she held it close to her body. The other arm carried a basket of pickles. They looked quite fresh and delicious. Yet what truly made the crowd curious was the small paper box the little boy held in his arms. As the boy carefully followed his mother down the bridge, all eyes were on that little paper box. Somebody under the bridge asked the girl in the truck, “What is it in your younger brother’s box? A sparrow, or a little mouse?” The girl shook her head and refused to speak. Somebody else then asked, “Are they baby silkworms? Your younger brother once picked mulberry leaves in my courtyard. Is it still possible to keep a silkworm alive in this season of the year?”

The girl could not keep silent any longer. Opening her eyes wide in exasperation, she shouted to the chatterbox, “He’s dumb and you are too! What’s this crap about baby silkworms, sparrows, and mice? It’s a light bulb! We tell him there’s no electricity there, so bringing a light bulb with us is useless. He doesn’t want to listen and just clings to that stupid bulb!”

Jammed in with the rest of the crowd, Old Kuang watched the mother and son go under the bridge. In the midst of the chaos, a teenager reached out and forced open the boy’s box. First a glove flew out to the shrill sound of the boy’s screaming, and then many faces crowded the scene to get a look into the box, including the face of Old Kuang. He did see a light bulb there, nestled in the palms and fingers of several pairs of gloves, all in a paper box, looking very warm and very safe.

Translated by Yongan Wu with Ashley Harris

Note
1 A nail household is a family that refuses to be relocated by the government, and instead clings to their house and land like a nail in a wall, hard to pull out and thorny to deal with.