

Set in an alternative, modern China, Te-Ping Chen's riveting and idiosyncratic story, "Hotline Girl," centers on a young woman working at the government's "Satisfaction Office" fielding calls from distressed customers.

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"Hotline Girl"

The highways were adorned with thousands of roses each spring. They came in bright pinks and butter yellows, perfect potted visions in the center meridian. The annual choreography of thorns and petals usually came in April, after the winter gloom lifted. During those dark and choking months, the authorities painted the roads a luminous yellow: *For better cheer and energy during the gray!* The bulletins came like that, dozens of them a day:

Attention, they said. This afternoon, shorthair kittens (and they would appear onscreen, big-pawed and blinking, and commuters would look up and smile).

Attention: how maple syrup is made (a man in a stark forest drilling into a tree, gray vats of boiling liquid).

Attention: the ginkgo leaves are turning gold around Nanshan Park—come see!

And so on.

When Bayi stepped out that morning, like every morning, she slipped a red lanyard with her identification card around her neck. The lanyard's color confirmed her status as a resident of the city, hard-won after years of jobs at its margins. The card had her picture and name and work unit on it. Anyone entering the city had to wear one. Each card synced with the city's sensors and recorded the bearer's activity. At the end of the day, you could log on and see the number of miles you'd walked; it was one of the system's more popular features.

“I’m going on a highway, I’m going on a lightning bolt,” she sang as she walked to the subway. For years she’d wanted to be a singer, tried to make her voice the strong, slender vessel she wanted it to be, tried to write a breakout hit. They were short melodies, just a few refrains repeated on a loop; she couldn’t seem to figure out how to write a full one, chorus, verse, bridge.

The trains were packed that morning. All the stations piped in classical music at rush hour; it was supposed to soothe tempers, but everyone pushed and elbowed one another anyway. Bayi distrusted it instinctively, anyway; all those long, meandering phrases—it felt like cheating. She wanted her music precise, to have a point.

When she’d pushed her way through the crowds, up the elevator seven floors, and into the office, she could see the oily bristles of Qiaoying’s hair over his screen. “I had a plumber come this morning,” she said, shrugging, as he stood and frowned at her. “They’re always running late.”

She didn’t apologize. She’d realized early on apologies were the surest way for Qiaoying to decide that you were ruan shizi, soft fruit, easily picked on. The other girls didn’t get that. They kept their eyes lowered, almost visibly leaning away as he passed their stations. One girl would spring up and hide in the bathroom anytime he approached their corridor, the one that bore a sign saying hotline girls.

“We’ve already had twenty-seven calls,” her friend Suqi whispered to her. They both looked automatically at the girl sitting at the row’s end and sighed. The girl, Juanmei, had been picked as this year’s office Model Worker. It wasn’t clear why, except that she had pleasing features and long hair that fell in a silky black rain about her face. For months her glowing image had blanketed the subway and billboards across town: *Warm, gentle, capable. Government workers can help you resolve any question, any concern. Call the satisfaction office today: 12579.*

When the switchboard pinged, no one looked to Juanmei anymore. Ever since her award she’d been slack, creating more work for the other girls. All calls had to be answered within forty-five seconds. All chats had to be replied to within twenty seconds. It meant that while Juanmei was sitting idly there with her headset on, Bayi and the others were scrambling, picking up, pressing hold, picking up, muttering, pressing return on their keyboards, typing fast. When she first came to the city, Bayi had worked for a time in fast food. It was that same complicated kind of dance, keeping ten orders in your head simultaneously, twirl, turn about, begin again.

The switchboard pinged again as Bayi opened up her chat screen and faced a barrage of popups. The easiest thing was to send a smiley face. She started all her conversations that way. There were set programmed keys for smiley faces, and another key that spat out: Hello, Satisfaction Office, what can I help you with?

The switchboard kept pinging, the big timer with its red numerals counting down. If no one picked up by the time the number hit zero, a buzzer sounded and everyone's rating was docked. Still, the other girls didn't budge; they were waiting for her to take the call. Everyone knew she'd just arrived. She jerked on her headset guiltily. "Hello, Satisfaction Office, what can I help you with?"

A swarm of words enveloped her ear, a raspy connection. It sounded like the person was dialing from a rooftop on a windy day.

"Excuse me, I didn't catch that...You want a housing—I'm sorry, please restate the matter. You've been evicted?" She was guessing now, half the time you could fill in the blanks yourself. There were complaints about corrupt officials, questions about social subsidies. There were all the lonely people who dialed the government day after day, wanting to talk, the elderly or mentally infirm, many with complaints that would never be resolved. One mother called regularly to inquire about a daughter who had gone missing ten years before: kidnapped, she was sure. One agitated man called their office for months, complaining there were termites in the tree opposite his building; he was convinced they'd get into the wires and electrocute the neighborhood. They'd sent an inspector, who'd found nothing. They'd sent someone who'd pretended to spray, to set his heart at rest, but it didn't satisfy him. At last they'd sent someone to chop the whole thing down, and he stopped calling.

"Excuse me, not a housing—you want to report someone?...An unregistered kitchen knife? Let me take that down."

She began typing, simultaneously pressing the button for "Tell me more" on four different windows that popped up. One woman was complaining about a court verdict, saying the judge was related to the defendant. Another man claimed authorities were illegally taxing his restaurant. A senior said he hadn't been getting the rise in pension payments he was owed.

Her shoulders were starting to ache and she rubbed her eyes, staring out at the sea of computers around her. It always surprised her how quickly time passed, taking down notes, sending links, marking case urgency by color. A few times Bayi routed red compassion packets to callers, just to smooth things over;

there was a common budget for that, for the particularly obstreperous cases who refused to hang up. “I’m going to report you to your supervising agency—oh, I just received a notification—thank you for your good intentions. No, I know you are only trying to help.” It was astonishing how many residents just needed to feel they’d extracted something, anything, from the other end of the line, even if it was only 10 or 20 yuan.

At noon the deliveryman arrived outside and unloaded two hundred boxed lunches, white containers of rice or noodles with vegetables and shredded pork. The options were nearly identical but everyone crammed the narrow hall in a frantic rush anyway, the grease turning the cardboard orange and translucent.

As they waited, Suqi stretched out her leg and showed off one boot, and she and Bayi squealed. “You got them!”

“I did,” Suqi said proudly. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

“A little,” Bayi said. The boots were knitted from soft brown leather, studded with the whorls of tiny seashells, and cost a month’s salary. Suqi had the office’s highest bonuses; her satisfaction rate was extraordinary, and she almost never got repeat callbacks. It wasn’t because she used the red packets, either; there was just something so reasonable and capable in Suqi’s manner—she never argued and had an encyclopedic knowledge of the government’s workings, knew just what resources she could offer, was genuinely good at helping people. She was a hard worker, too: in the evening she picked up extra shifts working in transport.

The call came around 2 p.m., when they’d settled back into their stations, into that midday stretch when calls ebbed and it was hard to keep your eyes open. One of the girls on the line kept a spray bottle nearby, periodically misting her face to stay alert. Bayi was feeling lazy, dealing with some chats by simply sending a nodding face, which bought another minute before you had to reply again.

The switchboard pinged, and Bayi waited until the timer showed ten seconds left, then punched firmly and straightened up. “Hello, Satisfaction Office, what can I help you with?”

There was a silence. She spoke again, impatiently. “Hello?” and “Hello?”

Bayi frowned into the receiver. Occasionally, very rarely, you'd get a heavy breather. Sometimes they might say inappropriate things: ask what you were wearing, if you were married, had a boyfriend.

She was about to hang up when she heard a voice: "Wow, at last."

"I'm sorry?"

"Bayi. It's me."

She sat back, pulled her headset away for a moment and cupped the earpiece, eyes closed. Then, when she'd composed herself, she put it back again. "Yes, sir. Why are you—I mean, please state the matter," she said.

"I called probably 60 times already today," he said. "I wasn't sure I'd ever get you."

She looked around to the other girls on the line and spoke neutrally. "Is there something I can help you with?"

There was a silence. "Is that it?" he said.

"This is a government line," she said coldly. "Is there a matter that requires assistance?"

"Yes," he said. "I wish you would see me. I'm here, I'm standing outside."

Bayi hung up automatically, the way one might drop a shoe at the sight of a cockroach scuttling inside. She breathed in, went back to her screen and picked up two more calls in a hurry: an abused wife, a man complaining about trash in his neighborhood. At 5 p.m., she slipped the lanyard about her neck again and exited through the service elevator around the back, moving fast, trying not to be seen.

She went home shakily, fixed herself a meal. She felt agitated, and finally went to pace outside for a while before sitting on the bench opposite the trash cans. After twenty minutes, one of the alley cats came up and snaked itself into her lap, and she petted it automatically. She stared into the bushes accusingly, as though they might conceal someone watching her.

The next day he called again.

“It was too much,” he said. “I shouldn’t have come over. I was just so excited to have found you.”

She cleared her throat. “I wasn’t lost.”

“No, of course not,” he said.

They were both silent. He had never been good at making conversation, she remembered. Sometimes they’d eat their meals together in almost complete silence, which, oddly, never seemed to bother him. She relaxed a little. There had always been an art to being around Keju. It meant turning off your mind, like lifting weights or falling asleep. It didn’t feel as bad as it sounded. It was important to be strong, it was important to sleep; you needed both to stay alive.

“You’re here?” she said. “I mean, I know you were yesterday. Are you visiting, or—?”

The city was 32 million people, none of whom were Keju; he should have been six hundred miles away.

“Just visiting,” Keju said hastily, as though to reassure her.

They were silent again, and she watched her screen light up and flash. “I really can’t talk now,” she said.

“Don’t hang up,” he said. “It took me two hours to reach you today. Isn’t there a direct line I can call, to know that you’ll pick up?”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“You’re the Satisfaction Office, aren’t you?” he said, trying to make a joke of it. “I’m not going to be satisfied until I get to talk to you.”

She silently clicked over to another call and transferred it to the government’s legal division. A few minutes later, he was still there.

“I do have complaints, you know,” he said. “I could tell you about them.”

“Fine.” She opened a form.

“They tore down the old schoolhouse,” he said. “They brought in a wrecking ball.”

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She knew the building, could picture it. He'd brought her there shortly after they'd started dating, on their first trip together to his old village. It was a small abandoned schoolhouse, just two rooms, something out of a historical photograph. They'd wandered it hand in hand, their voices strange in the empty rooms. For months afterward they used it as their private meeting spot. No one attended school in places like that anymore; actually, no one really lived in places like that anymore, with their bad roads and tiny dried-out plots of cultivated land. By the time he was growing up, Keju's family was one of the last holdouts, poor and very proud.

"I don't remember it," she lied.

"Are you sure?" he said, and his voice was teasing. "I know I do."

She felt the heat rise in her cheeks. "Not a real complaint," she said. "Next."

"I just want to see you, Bayi."

She made a noncommittal noise.

"I have another," he said.

"Okay." She sent a smiley face to a new chat. She copied the instructions on how to file a whistleblower report into another window that was flashing repeatedly, and hit send.

"My parents aren't doing well," he said. "My father's spirits have been bad ever since we were relocated. I think the government should do something about it."

"Like a doctor."

"Not like a doctor. He's seen doctors."

"Like what, then?"

"I was thinking compensation." She raised her eyebrows. This was new. Keju's family had been relocated from the countryside a decade ago, when he was fourteen, to a city twenty miles west of their old home. It wasn't far, but it

might as well have been another nation. It was a million people living in closely set blocks, with bus lines and supermarkets; it was parks with water features that lit up and sprayed arcs on the hour. It was where the two of them had met, back when they were in high school.

“I’m sorry to hear he’s not doing well,” she said, and she was. She had always liked Keju’s father. He was obsessed with collecting gourds. He’d started the habit back in their village, and in the city, where he struggled to find work, it had become a fixation. Their apartment had two black bookshelves filled almost wholly with gourds, big ones like water bottles, small ones like toy tops, a few painted, others carved. Some he’d carved himself.

“There’s a two-year statute of limitations for petitions on relocation compensation,” she said, frowning a little. “You might try one of the spirit management committees; they often have subsidies he could apply for. You should call his local satisfaction office,” she said. “They’ll help you.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“I’m sorry I can’t do more,” she said, and meant it. She had liked his family. She liked the way his mother made their kitchen fragrant, dicing red and green bell peppers into pixels, mixing them with ground pork and bits of chopped vermicelli for lunch. She liked the way his father knew the seasons, how squash grew and how to pick the kinds of melons that were sweetest—she’d had no idea they came in male and female specimens (the female ones, with their slight dimple up top, were sweeter).

“That’s okay,” Keju said. He sounded sad. Toward the end, even when he’d struck her (never so hard, nothing requiring a doctor; there were girls who’d had it worse), he’d been so terminally sad and sorry afterward that she found herself patting his hand, making shushing noises, promising they’d get through it, which of course she knew was a lie, because even then she knew that Keju was a toxic piece of sea kelp that was going to cling and cling to her, that she needed to escape, even if it meant cutting off the limb he clung to. Still, she missed his family.

Her screen was flashing with unanswered messages, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Qiaoying starting to rise. “I really have to go,” she said desperately. “Please stop calling. It hurts my rating whenever someone calls back so quickly. Call your local satisfaction office, okay?”

“Bayi, would you just hold on a moment?” His voice was getting exasperated now, bladed.

“I hope you enjoy your time here,” she added hurriedly. “There’s a movie tonight on the screens. You can watch it in the Central Square. Check your phone for the bulletins.”

“Bayi—”

“Thanks so much. Goodbye!”

After work, she rode her scooter with some of the other girls to the mall downtown. There was a military parade scheduled for the next day, which meant the government had cleared the roads in advance and all the streets were long, glorious stretches of empty asphalt that they could ride their scooters down and feel like queens, could do zigzags all over if they pleased. A warm sunset light caught the steel and glass of the buildings and encased them in gold.

At the mall, they ate Korean food and stopped into one of the dozens of photo parlors that rented rooms by the hour. They were full of different props and costumes, giant foam dumplings and purple ruched gowns, cartoon cat masks and colorful parasols, a little dingy but cheap, and you could swap in and out different backgrounds, a green lagoon, a floodlit stage, a ballroom, whatever you wanted. The girls squeezed into one room and took repeated shots of one another, Bayi dressed as a feudal princess, Suqi as a tiger.

She hadn’t told anyone about Keju, or about the animals. There was the time, six months after they’d started dating, that she’d come across a dead mouse in a box in his room. It was soft and slumped and gray, stiff-limbed, front crusted with blood: someone had partially severed one of its legs.

When she’d confronted Keju, he’d said it was just a mouse, it was going to be killed as part of a school science experiment. He’d given it a few days of freedom but he couldn’t keep it, and so he’d had to kill it; it was only humane. The explanation was disturbing but possibly logical, and so she’d tried to put the thought aside.

Then there was the neighbor’s dog. It was a shaggy golden creature with no neck, like a shark, and eyes usually half-closed in slumber, a somnolent thing. Once, they’d been sitting in the courtyard downstairs and she’d been nickered at it, scratching its ears. “You like that dog better than me, don’t you?” Keju

had said, and when she hadn't responded fast enough, he'd planted one boot on its neck and pushed, laughing. The dog squeaked. It made a raspy noise in its throat, guttural, whining. Bayi had pleaded for him to stop, and at last, he did. "Relax," he'd said. "I wasn't going to hurt him." After that, every time he saw the dog he kicked at it, casually, as though aiming at a stray soccer ball, just to tease her.

A few months later, one of the semi-feral cats that lurked outside of their high school had been lying on the asphalt, Keju stroking it, until it had startled and bitten him, drawing blood. Keju had talked jokingly of getting revenge on the cat for days, and everyone had rolled their eyes (he liked the attention), until one afternoon he'd pulled Bayi aside and showed her a steak knife. "I'm going to get that cat," he'd said, eyes glinting.

"You're crazy," she said.

"It attacked me first," he said.

"It's a cat," she said.

It didn't matter. He'd chased the cat around, knife in hand, alternately wagging his fingers, trying to get it to come near, and lunging at it. Bayi had watched him, near tears. She'd finally walked away. The next day she saw the cat, unhurt, but a week later it disappeared. Keju didn't volunteer any information, and she didn't ask. It was easy to imagine what he would say: "We're all animals," something stupid like that.

Then there was that time at the movies when he thought she was flirting with another boy and he'd turned mean and shaken her, savagely. That was how it began. From that day on, something changed between them. One day at lunch in front of his friends, he'd flipped up his own shirt and said, "Look, she's as flat as I am," and laughed. A week later, she'd teased him about the way he often ran his fingers through his hair, a nervous tic of his, and he'd struck her across the cheek. Each time, he'd get flustered, apologize, occasionally weep. "I didn't mean it, you just upset me," he'd say. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

She wasn't brave enough to break it off with him. Instead, after she left home to pursue her ambitions as a singer, she gradually stopped answering his calls, or returning his messages. Eventually she'd heard that he'd dropped out of school.

The phone rang again at the office, two days later.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” Keju said. “I wanted to let you know.”

“Okay,” she said, idly composing a pattern of flowers and smiley faces on her screen, which she planned to send to the next recipient who messaged her. Sometimes she made impossibly elaborate bouquets of different flowers: tulips, sunflowers, roses, peonies. She liked to send those to elderly recipients in particular, liked to imagine their wrinkled faces softening and smiling to see them; it broke up the monotony of the day.

“I don’t have anything else to do this afternoon,” he said. “I’ll wait outside your office.”

And then, when she didn’t reply: “Don’t be like that, Bayi. I came a long way.”

She let one of her chat windows sit idle for more than a minute, considering, and her screen flashed red angrily. She swore softly under her breath.

“Bayi?”

“What?”

“Please. Just let me buy you a coffee. I won’t call you again.”

“You promise?” she said.

“I promise.”

They met that evening after work, in the plaza of the mall across the way. The water fountain was activated, and kids were skipping in and out of it, screaming. “I never understood what was so fun about that,” Bayi said, just to have something to say. Now that Keju was there, he stood silently, eyeing her. He was shorter than she remembered, and stockier. He wore cheap sunglasses and a sky-blue shirt, boxy and too short.

It struck her that something seemed wrong with him, and as he turned to face her she saw he was missing his right arm. “Oh,” she said, surprised, then stopped herself. The sleeve that would have held his right arm was folded over and fastened with a safety pin, like a doll’s blanket.

He caught her gaze and looked away. “An accident,” he said.

“I see. It’s been so long,” she said, trying to cover her shock.

“Thanks for coming,” he said.

“That’s okay,” she said uneasily, keeping her distance. “Did you want to get something to drink?”

They stopped at a stall and drank a lemonade in the fading light. She paid. Standing there, he felt familiar in the way of a distant cousin, or an old school acquaintance: full-fledged in her memory, but a stranger. She tried not to look at the blank space beside his body.

“So why are you here?” she asked.

“I’d never been before,” he said, and she nodded as though it were an answer.

She fidgeted, scanning the scene around them, half wondering if any of her coworkers were nearby, watching. “Do you still keep up with anyone from school?” she said inanely. “I keep meaning to go back to visit.” For a while she’d thought of visiting the music teacher who’d encouraged her talents, though enough time had passed that she wondered if he’d remember her.

Keju didn’t reply: his eyes kept crisscrossing her, absorbing her. It made her feel acutely conscious of the shape of her clothes, the way her belt held her about her waist, the exposed parts of her feet in their sandals.

“You look different,” he said. “You look nice.”

She thanked him. “Keju, what happened to you?”

He was watching her steadily. Up close she could see the stubble on his chin, the bags under his eyes. There were lines around his mouth and on his neck that hadn’t used to be there. The sight of them made her feel suddenly sorrowful, aware of the miles and years that had passed.

“It was a factory explosion,” he said. “A fire.”

“I’m so sorry.” She could picture it: the orange fireball going up into the sky, shaky footage shot by residents; there were accidents like that every few weeks, places that had been neglected, factory inspectors paid off, planning studies that had never been done. Always the same reasons.

“The place hadn’t been inspected in four years,” he said. “We were locked in during our shift. It was a fire trap.”

She shook her head sympathetically. Out of habit, she found herself wanting to tell him it was something that was being addressed, that there were government programs and new laws being drafted, but the words died on her lips.

“Might have been worse,” he said. “I almost didn’t make it. Hid in the crawlspace for hours.”

Fire isn’t something to hide from, she thought, but couldn’t bring herself to speak. She didn’t know what she could say around him anymore. After they’d parted ways it surprised her how quickly he’d faded from her life, as did the absence of news of him from mutual friends. It occurred to her later that she had been one of very few who’d been close to him, perhaps the only one.

“I panicked,” he said. “Didn’t even notice how much time had gone by. It felt like I’d never be able to move again.”

He was standing with his back to the screen above the square, which was lit with a swirling orange spiral, as though the sun were rising out of his head. *Doesn’t it matter that you are one of a billion plus?* an announcer was saying, an advertisement of some kind. *It doesn’t matter—you are one of us.*

“After you cut me off, I went a little crazy. Dropped out of school,” he said. “You never told me what I did wrong.”

Bayi opened her mouth to speak, then paused. “It was so long ago,” she said. There was a steady drift of the crowd moving toward the screen. In another twenty minutes, the dance party would start. The districts held them every evening; they were free and principally attended by retirees, everyone shimmying together in a choreographed group. This week, the bulletins had said, the theme was Caribbean.

“We were good together,” he said. He drained his lemonade through the straw, and the sound of it made her wince. Behind him in the distance, kids chased one another, shrieking. She wondered if he was able to tie his shoes, drive a car, cut a piece of meat.

“Do you ever think about those days?” he said, and reached out and cupped her face with his hand, rough to the touch. She tried not to recoil or move and instead stared straight ahead, holding her breath.

“Please don’t,” she said, voice cracking.

He didn’t seem to hear: his hand was in her hair now, fingering her scalp. He leaned in as though for a kiss, tenderly murmuring her name, until she recalled herself and jerked away.

“No,” she said, more forcefully than she meant to.

His face was that of a child who’d been struck, and for a moment she regretted her reaction. But then Keju moved away and drank from his lemonade again, and she saw his face smooth and rearrange itself, as though nothing had happened. He was proud. It was something she’d always liked about him.

They watched the crowd silently: a distant sound of drumbeats was starting up. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him looking at her, but she stared determinedly ahead.

“Anyway, I’m glad I got to see you,” he said finally, as though the city had a set number of attractions and she was on the list.

“It’s nice here, isn’t it?” she said, relenting.

He looked beyond her: it was a pleasant scene, the kids running around, the crowds of retirees in their bright skirts and sequined tops, getting ready to dance. On the perimeter were the black-uniformed security officers, a couple of them casually talking with tourists crossing the plaza, a few speaking into walkie-talkies.

“To be honest, it gives me the creeps,” Keju said.

“I guess it takes getting used to,” she said stiffly. She looked at the lanyard strung around his neck, its green cord and green badge the size of a soap dish clearly identifying him as a non-resident. The photo of him was scarcely recognizable, his face sallow, too broad, its proportions badly rendered to fit the badge; it made him look like a much older man.

“You should really call your local satisfaction office,” she said. “I hope your dad will be okay.”

Keju was silent for a few minutes, staring at the fountain. “You always thought you were too good for everything,” he said. “You were going to be this great singer, remember?”

She shut her eyes, briefly. “I remember.”

“Now look at you, taking calls all day in a cubicle,” he said, his voice harsh. “All alone in this big city. Really, Bayi, I’m sorry for you.”

Strains of Caribbean music were starting to drift to them, some of the black-uniformed police were handing out maracas. They finished their lemonade and lapsed into a strained silence, which finally she broke. “I’ve got to go, Keju.” There wasn’t anything else to say. “Good luck with everything,” she said.

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After they parted, Bayi couldn’t bring herself to go underground, not quite yet. She’d walk awhile, she decided. Her parents, she thought, would have liked her to marry him. There was something quietly dependable about him: once when he was away on a holiday and the networks were down he’d walked two miles to find a place to call and say good night to her. “You’ll never find anyone who loves you so much,” she remembered her mother saying. If they’d married, too, it would have meant that Bayi would’ve stayed at home, wouldn’t have been a single girl in the capital, taking calls from who only knew—of course it was a good job, a government job, but still.

There was a bulletin on her phone that had popped up moments after they’d finished their lemonade. *Attention*, it ran: *learn the five things to do before bedtime to wake up refreshed*. She turned her attention to the screen and watched as a beautiful woman cut the stems off a quartet of ruby-red strawberries and rinsed them at a sink.

A few blocks later, someone shouted and she looked up. It was Suqi, sitting at the driver’s wheel of a large van, window rolled down, grinning.

It was an unmarked government van. Anyone could tell it was intended for the discontented, the protesters who tried to stir up trouble, usually from out of town. It had all the subtle signs: the missing license plate, the large man staring stolidly ahead in the front passenger’s seat, the metal grill separating Suqi from her human cargo, bound for a nearby detention center. The backseat windows were tinted, but through the windshield she could see the seats were mostly filled.

“You want a ride?” Suqi said, gesturing to the backseat.

Bayi forced a laugh. “Shut up,” she said, and kept walking.

“Have it your way,” Suqi said, and stuck out her tongue, a little fillip of pink. Bayi smiled back and watched her drive off. She’d go home, she thought, put her feet in some hot water, maybe watch something. She was glad to be off work, glad it was spring. It was good, she thought, to be young, to have a weekend, to be free.

TE-PING CHEN

Te-Ping Chen is the author of *Land of Big Numbers*, a short-story collection published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; her fiction has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Guernica*, *Tin House*, and *The Atlantic*. A reporter with the *Wall Street Journal*, she was previously a correspondent for the paper in Beijing and Hong Kong. Prior to joining the *Journal* in 2012, she spent a year in China as a Fulbright fellow. She lives in Philadelphia.