

## Shanghai Murmur

A short story

By Te-Ping Chen

The MAN WHO LIVED UPSTAIRS had died, and it had taken the other tenants days to notice, days in which the sweetly putrid scent thickened and residents tried to avoid his part of the hall, palms tenting their noses as they came and left. At last someone sent for the building manager, who summoned his unemployed cousin to break the lock and paid him 100 yuan to carry the body down the three flights of stairs.

There was a squabble as the residents who inhabited the adjoining rooms argued that they should have their rent lowered; the death was bad luck. Xiaolei stood listening as the building manager shouted them down. She felt sorry for the man who had died, whom she recalled as middle-aged, with tired, deep-set eyes, a chain-smoker who'd worked at the local post office. She supposed that if she ever asphyxiated or was stabbed overnight, the same thing would happen to her.

That evening, she brought back a white chrysanthemum and went upstairs in the dark, intending to leave it outside his room. As she carefully mounted the steps, though, she saw that the door stood open. The room was windowless, with a blackness even denser than that of the hall. She didn't wait for her eyes to adjust. She pitched the flower into the void, barely breathing, and ran back down the stairs.

If she came to the store more often, Yongjie would have noticed in a flash that the flower was gone; she had the sharp female eyes of a southerner. But most days she wasn't around; in addition to the flower shop, she ran her uncle's poultry slaughterhouse, which occupied most of her time. Since she'd been at the job, Xiaolei probably could have gotten away with taking whole sheaves of flowers: high-waisted, frilly-leaved stems of alstroemeria, clusters of lilac batons. She thought they looked better in isolation, though, and kept her windowsill lined with individually pilfered stems, each housed in its own soda bottle: a tousle-headed rose, a single agapanthus in electric blue.

It had been three years since she'd said goodbye to her parents, telling them that she'd gotten a job at a microchip factory down south in Shanghai. Plenty of girls had already left their village; no one expected them to farm anymore. As it happened, she didn't know what a microchip was, but she'd heard a segment about them on the radio. She was 16 and took a teenager's cruel pride in telling her parents about the microchips—a Japanese company, she'd said authoritatively, that made exports for Europe—and they'd been impressed enough to let her go. All the way up until she boarded the train, she'd been expecting them to catch her in the lie. When they hadn't, she felt disappointed and unexpectedly sad, boarding a train to a city 14 hours south where she knew no one and had only a phony job waiting.

THE NEXT MORNING, when she got to the flower shop, she was in a foul temper. She had not brushed her hair, and her reflection in the mirror behind the counter made her wince. It seemed that days of fighting to board buses, hustling for space on the sidewalk—elbows always out, eyes half-squinted to see if someone was cheating her, lips pursed and ready to answer back—had left an indelible mark. She was not yet 20 but felt the years deep beneath her skin, as though Shanghai had grafted steel plates in her cheeks. Already she'd lost a teenager's mobility of features, sensed the exhausted cast of her eyes. Everyone she met had a story about someone from back home who'd made it big in Shanghai. Funny how she'd never actually met any of those people firsthand.

Still, she thought the flower shop had helped. In her first job, working at the bottling plant, she'd felt herself turning into something nearly savage, fingers stiff, mind numb, chest a cage. There had been cats in her village who'd hiss and spit at anyone who came near them, and Xiaolei thought she could understand why. Sometimes if she wanted to leave her room, she first found herself listening for any hall noises and waiting until they subsided before exiting; the sound of another door rasping open would prompt her to pause. If she spotted people her age clustered in the courtyard—a few girls had made friendly overtures—she would turn and make a hasty retreat, as if suddenly remembering something. It wasn't surprising, she told herself: All wild animals fear human contact.

But for six months now, she'd stripped rose thorns and sold bouquets, and there was a civility to it. She'd found an aperture onto a part of Shanghai

that she'd almost stopped hoping she'd ever see, which soothed some of the growling in her chest. She sold flowers to office secretaries and grieving widows who arrived in sleek black cars and men who dispatched identical bouquets to separate addresses, their wives and their mistresses. She learned to flatten her tones and inflect her voice with a certain inquisitive softness that wasn't native to any one place, certainly not Shanghai, and customers seemed to appreciate it.

Her moods were all over the place these days, low currents that eddied peaceably before surging up into the sand, erasing everything in their path. Maybe someday she would open her own flower shop. Skyscrapers were rising everywhere across the city, a neon tangle of signs and burnished steel, men in suits and women in high heels, *click click clack*. She could sell potted plants for their hallways, build up her own business, maybe meet someone in the elevator, get an office job. It wasn't impossible.

By lunch she had stopped thinking about the dead man and her spirits began to lift. Outside, the sunlight reflected off the white strips of the crosswalk, and the street almost glowed. She'd sold six bunches of daisies that morning and taken an order for a funeral spray of chrysanthemums. Yongjie would be pleased.

It was Wednesday, so she'd been saving the best flowers all day for her favorite customer, first selling the ones with edges threatening to turn brown, the petals starting to swoon and go loose at the tips—another two days and they'd come undone.

By 5 o'clock he still hadn't arrived, though, and she felt a creeping sadness clot her limbs. As she helped other customers, she kept one eye out the door for his silhouette. The light outside was turning that pallid gray of late afternoon, stealing across the sidewalk, muting even the garish red sign across the way that blared HEALTH PRODUCTS, ADULT PRODUCTS; the jumble of computer cords and pipe fittings in the store next door; and beyond that, the dirty, slovenly floors of a small restaurant named for its chief menu item, Duck Blood Noodle Soup. He wasn't in sight. She stared at the remaining flowers, fought the urge to tip them from their buckets onto the sidewalk.

The day after next was Friday, meaning that she'd have to wake up at 3 a.m. to try to beat all the other flower vendors to the wholesale market across town, then spend the next few hours slopping heavy, wet bundles back to the store. It also meant that she now had to go wash out the buckets, already rancid with rotting stems, before leaving for the night. The scent of dying stock flowers, their stems soft and mushy in the water, she thought, compared almost unfavorably to the smell of her neighbor's corpse.

And then, suddenly, the man was outside the store and smiling at her with his crinkled-up eyes. He ducked through the door as if dodging inclement weather, though it wasn't raining, and he rolled his shoulders backwards, relaxing them. He'd cut his hair, she noticed, and was wearing the same white collared shirt as always; she envisioned his closet lined with whole glowing rows of them.

At the sight of him, she felt the room come into focus again; her face unfroze. "Seven red roses and three lilies?" she asked, not quite able to meet his eyes, and he nodded. "The nice wrapping, please." She felt a warm thrum in her chest. The ease he carried with him worked on her like a balm, though he rarely said much—indeed, now that she'd memorized his order, there was scarcely any need to speak at all. She stepped toward the buckets with their floral charges, grateful now for their perked-up appearance, and tucked her hair behind her ears.

Gently, she pulled each flower from its bucket and started splaying them out in her left hand, a galaxy of rose heads, then carefully threaded the lilies in among them. Finished, she slid out a sheet of pink paper and one of purple tissue and laid them tenderly atop each other on the worktable. She thought she could feel his gaze on her and moved more slowly, just for the pleasure of drawing out the moment.

Then, with one unsteady hand, she raised the cleaver and brought it down on the flowers' stems. She placed them at the trembling center of the paper and brought its edges together, carefully tying an orange ribbon around the bouquet's middle. It wasn't very nicely assembled, far more ragged than she would have liked, and she hoped he couldn't tell. Yongjie made

bouquets perfectly, so even across their tops that you could drape a cloth over them and mistake them for pedestals.

When she turned to look at him, he was standing at the counter, back to her, but as though sensing her movement, he turned to look at her expectantly. Little trickles of thought bubbled up that she wanted to share with him, but she tamped them down as she handed him the flowers, feeling a jolt as he took them, as though they were an extension of her fingertips. It was foolish, she knew: The flowers were likely for a wife, or a mistress.

“What do you do, anyway?” she asked hastily, trying to cover her embarrassment as she assumed her position again behind the counter. “I see so much of you, I’ve always wondered.” That was an understatement; in her mind she’d already constructed an elaborate life for him. He was a doctor specializing in the brain; he played the violin; he liked stinky tofu and walks in the park; he had been to Japan.

He looked at her and smiled, and the clean lines of his shirt, the dark thatch of his hair, the contrast of it, made her ache. She wanted to lean over the counter and stare at each strand of hair, count the hair follicles on his chin. “I do sales,” he said. Then, examining her, as though rethinking his statement: “Well, I’m in sales,” he corrected himself, and there was that smile again. He laid the flowers carefully crosswise on the counter and began fishing for his wallet. “Here, I’ll give you my card.”

Xiaolei looked down and studied it—it was matte and thick to the touch. The company wasn’t one she’d ever heard of; she wouldn’t insult him by asking what it did.

Outside you could tell the time by the ranks of red taillights forming on the street; dusk was pressing in. Farther down the road was an expensive residential compound sealed with fat shrubs and a tall iron fence around its perimeter. The building, which bore the name Triumph Mansion, was six years old but still had the bewildered air of a fresh transplant; the neighborhood had not yet developed to match the pocketbooks or aspirations of its new residents. Xiaolei looked toward it now, as if for clues. Was she being rude by not speaking? Should she speak?

His gaze was no longer on her as he fumbled, emptying his pockets, looking for his wallet. The silence had gone on too long. "It's a nice neighborhood," she said hesitatingly at last. "Do you live at Triumph Mansion?"

He looked at her again, longer this time, his brow furrowed slightly. "I do," he nodded, handing her some bills. "Do you?" This, of course, was sheer politesse; she was wearing a smock and could see this embarrassed realization cross his face as she shook her head and tried to think of what else to say. "A little farther out," she said. He nodded absently, checked his watch.

Desperation surged inside her; she'd already demanded more of him in two minutes than she had in two months. In another moment he would disappear, gone for another week. She counted out his change more deliberately than usual, willing him to ask her a question, any question. He didn't. She paused. "Well, take care," she said, unable to keep the regret from her voice.

He smiled and picked up the bundle of flowers and inhaled. "Thank you," he said. "See you."

AFTER HE LEFT, she started sweeping the green scraps off the table with a wedge of newspaper, flushed in the cheeks, angry with herself. He'd thought her odd, surely, to be asking such questions. Maybe he wouldn't even come back. Asking about Triumph Mansion must have sounded to him so aggressive and strange; she'd been greedy, should have left that question for another week, spaced out all the details she wanted to know. But then that would take months, years, and she didn't want to be at this job that long.

Later on, while helping another customer, she noticed a pen that had been left on the counter. It was black and thick-waisted with a narrow band of silver around its middle and a matching silver clip, a jagged white line on it depicting a mountain. She uncapped it and drew a long stroke against the back of a receipt—its ink was black and dense, and flowed under her touch like a thin, controlled river. *It must have been his*, she thought to herself, and dropped it into her pocket, where it landed with surprising weight.

For an hour between the final two customers (no purchases), she filled out bouquets with the last salvageable flowers; they might sell more quickly that way the next day. As the cars thinned outside, she mixed bleach and water and was on her knees scrubbing out buckets on the sidewalk when she saw a woman stride past her into the store. After a moment Xiaolei followed her, patting her hands dry on her smock.

Her first impression: big sunglasses with crystal-studded hinges resting on her head, and below that a makeup-free face, so flawless that Xiaolei couldn't stop trying to seek out imperfections. She had on a pair of snug sweatpants and a pink purse that swung from a strap of golden chains. A soon-to-be bride, she thought, though surprising that she'd come alone and so late. A wife asking where else flowers had been sent, perhaps; it had happened once before.

"My husband left his pen here," the woman said. "Have you seen it?"

A confusion of emotions drifted across Xiaolei's face like clouds. She didn't know what she'd expected the man's wife to look like—not like this—but mentally she paid the woman tribute; she was beautiful, what he deserved, though frankly there was something off-putting about her face. She looked like the sort of woman who would feed a pet dog expensive food and dock her servants' pay.

An interval passed before Xiaolei realized that the silence had gone on too long. "We have some pens," she said slowly, feeling heavy and shapeless in her smock. She went to the cash drawer and brought out a handful of ballpoint pens and laid them on the counter with ceremony.

The woman shook her head, frustrated. "No, I'm talking about a nice pen," she said. "Black, thick," she said, and then she named the brand, which Xiaolei had never heard of. "You must have seen it."

She raised her eyes to Xiaolei's and held them. It was like being trapped in a cobra's gaze. After a minute, just to put an end to it, Xiaolei drew the pen unwillingly from her pocket.

The woman's face struggled between relief and annoyance that it had taken her so long. Relief won out. "Yes, that's the one," she said, and reached out to take the pen. "Thank you. It's worth a lot."

Panic rose in Xiaolei, irrational and strong, and she pulled the pen back, just as quickly. She put on her best functionary's voice, a mixture of boredom and witlessness. "I'm sorry. I can't let you take it. I can only give it back to the pen's owner."

"I'm his wife," the woman said, her face now suspicious.

"Do you have ID?" Xiaolei said.

"Does that pen have ID?" the woman said. "What kind of question is that?"

Xiaolei shrugged.

"Look, it was an expensive pen, a gift from his boss. You wouldn't want to get him into trouble, would you?" the woman said. "If I come back without it, he'll be unhappy, and I'll be unhappy."

Inside, Xiaolei stiffened. Then the woman smiled again, such a confident look, and that sealed it. She would not give the woman this pen, no indeed. There was no protocol for expensive lost pens, but if there were, Xiaolei was certain she would be in the right; surely one should return the lost item only to its owner. She sat down deliberately at her stool behind the counter, as though to cement her position.

The woman stared at her. "Are you deaf? Give me the pen!"

A couple was passing by outside, an elderly pair of retirees walking in that slow, stooped way of older people. She knew them by sight; the man used to walk a songbird in a cage by the shop in the mornings until one day he'd been alone, and she wondered what had become of the bird. On hearing the woman's raised voice, they stopped and looked inquiringly at the scene.



The woman made as though to go behind the counter. "Give it to me!"

"No, and you need to stay in front of the counter!" Xiaolei's reflexes were honed after years of living in the city; her right leg shot out and quickly blocked her.

"Thief! Thief!" the woman shouted. "I'll report you to the police!"

Xiaolei was full of indignant fire now; she had what she needed to keep fighting all day. "Go ahead! I'm not going to violate protocol! We have rules," she said proudly.

Seeing the retirees hesitating at the doorway, Xiaolei quickly recruited them. "She wants me to just give it to her, but I can't—there are policies." The elderly woman seemed confused, but after hearing Xiaolei's explanation, the man turned to the woman inside and spoke gently. "These policies are for your own protection," he said. "Who would want their lost things to be given away so casually? Tell your husband, tell your husband to come back to the store and get it himself."

At this the woman turned tail and spit on the floor. "You'll be sorry," she said to Xiaolei, and walked out.

Years later, lying awake in bed at night, Xiaolei sometimes thought of all the things she could have done differently. She could have handed back the pen, submitted to the woman, seen her husband the following week and pretended nothing had happened, continued to sell him flowers for weeks and months, an avalanche of roses, an eternity of lilies. She could have held on to the pen and returned it to the husband the next week, or the next day; probably he would have come back in person if it had been truly necessary. She could have kept it in her pocket and never returned to the store, perhaps pawned the pen. Used the money to start her own business.

Instead, after the woman left, Xiaolei closed up the shop in a hurry; she didn't want to risk her returning with the police. She took the pen back with her that evening, tucked inside her purse, and rode two buses to a night

market, where she sat on a stool amid other workers finished with their shifts and ate a bowl of especially good noodle soup with pickled vegetables, then walked back in the direction of her rented room.

That night she slept poorly, dreaming of the man who had died above her. In her dream, they were riding the same bus in the dark, the brightly lit buildings of Shanghai flashing by in a blur. He was seated a row behind her and leaning forward, his voice a steady, urgent murmur in her ear, the sound of it not unpleasant. He held a bundle of daisies, with petals that tickled her neck. Then the scene shifted, and they were whirling together on a dance floor lit up in an enormous, multicolored grid.

THE NEXT DAY was Xiaolei's day off. Usually she would lie in bed reading dime novels, or occasionally she'd go to the Bund, an hour's bus ride away and one of the few destinations she knew. She liked to gaze across the water at the gleaming pink orbs of the Pearl Tower and the colored jets of light that illuminated the skyline. Sometimes she sat there for hours, long enough to see the skyscraper lights wink off, just before midnight. Her first year in Shanghai she went frequently, until she overheard a beautifully clad woman telling a friend it was where all the "country bumpkins went to stare." After that, she didn't go so often.

Xiaolei remained in bed awhile, trying to go back to sleep, until at last she rose, feeling restless. She put on a white hooded sweatshirt—adorned with the word SUPERSTAR, edged in gold trim—which she seldom wore for fear of getting it dirty. She donned a matching baseball hat, and her nicest pair of jeans. Under her bed she located a tube of bright-red lipstick, which she'd bought shortly after moving to the city. She'd worn it only once before wiping it off, ashamed and startled at the change in her appearance. Today she carefully applied it to her lips. She shouldered her purse and walked toward the bus, humming softly.

When she'd first arrived in Shanghai, the girls at the bottling plant said there were two ways to make it: get rich or get married. But here she was, still working for a pittance, and the only man to make a pass at her had been her boss at the plant, who was married and three times her age. One day after she'd been there two years, he'd called her in to give her that week's pay. As she bent over his desk to sign the receipt, he leaned

against her and squeezed her chest, as though testing the firmness of a fruit at the market. “Do you like this?” he’d said, breath hot against her ear. Xiaolei had wrenched herself away and quit not long after, but occasionally she found herself wondering whether life would have been better if she hadn’t refused him.

She got off the bus not far from Triumph Mansion. As she approached its thick shrubs, she walked more slowly, heart jumping. Its tall black gate was locked, but she loitered until she saw another resident leaving, and quickly slipped inside. It was easier than she’d imagined.

Inside was an oasis, with shrubs clipped into spheres and a marble lobby that contained a golden statue of a trident-bearing angel. The air was perfumed, and from somewhere overhead, a melody was playing, pianissimo. A somnolent guard sat at the front desk, but his head snapped up on seeing Xiaolei.

“Sign in,” he grunted.

“I’m just waiting for a friend,” Xiaolei said, and ran one hand carelessly through her hair, a gesture borrowed from the man’s wife. The guard looked at her hard but didn’t say anything.

There was a large mirror on one side of the lobby, and a white-leather bench opposite, which Xiaolei sank onto gratefully. She took out the pen and gazed at it briefly before slipping it self-consciously back in her bag. The man would thank her for returning the precious item. He would offer her cookies made from paper-thin crepes baked in tight scrolls, and tea served in fragile glassware. Back in the village, when she was not yet a teenager, she had watched a popular television show that depicted the lives of two women in a big-city apartment upholstered entirely in white—white-leather couch, white tufted rug, white lilies—and she pictured his apartment like that too. They would sit beside each other on the couch. He would press against her like her boss from the bottling plant, only this time, she would not resist.

Hours passed. The air was cool and conditioned, and carried its own kind of quiet hush. A few men in suits and nannies with their beautifully dressed charges came and went. The security guard left and another took his place. Every now and then, Xiaolei pretended to be on the phone, but mostly she just sat and watched the scene. She felt perfectly content there, a thousand miles from the dusty village where she'd been raised, as comfortable as if she belonged. She liked observing the residents' faces, so intelligent and refined, no doubt full of more clever things to say than just *going to rain; guess so; have you eaten yet; yes, hot out today*.

She thought back to her grandfather's 80th-birthday celebration, the year before he'd died. A crowd of villagers had assembled for roast fowl, and after a long string of toasts, he'd told them how glad he was that he'd lived all his life among them. He meant it with pride, the fact that he'd never left, but the thought had filled Xiaolei with horror, and she'd vowed to get away.

A ding from the elevator interrupted her reverie. When she looked up, her favorite customer was disappearing into it, briefcase tucked neatly under one arm. She rose to follow, trying to look casual, but the elevator doors had already slid shut. The gold numbered panel overhead showed him getting off at the fourth floor. Up front, the guard was busy chatting with another resident. She hurried up the stairs in pursuit.

She arrived just as he'd reached an apartment at the end of the hall and shut the door behind him. The floors here were carpeted in dark blue, with faux-crystal lamps above. She hung back, suddenly shy. It was very quiet. In a mirror by the elevator, she inspected her face carefully. She removed the baseball cap and wet her lips and smoothed her hair. *You've come this far*, she told herself. *Don't be afraid*.

A few minutes later she was knocking at his door, but there was no answer. After a long while she knocked again, more loudly this time, and heard footsteps. When the door opened, he was standing there in an undershirt and shorts, having just changed. "Yes?" he said impatiently. "Who are you?"

Xiaolei tried to find her voice amid her surprise. "I'm—"

“What do you want?” he said. No flicker of recognition registered in his eyes.

Xiaolei heard a woman’s voice from somewhere deeper in the apartment. “I don’t know,” he called over his shoulder. He looked at Xiaolei again, more quizzically this time. “We’re not interested.”

Inside, she could see a mahogany coffee table and a miniature fountain built into one wall that bubbled over a polished black orb. At the sight of Xiaolei, a white poodle curled on the couch stood and barked. The man still didn’t appear to recognize her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, disappointment crashing over her in heavy waves. She began backing away.

The man eyed her strangely. “That’s okay,” he said, and shut the door with a click.

Somehow, Xiaolei found her way out of the apartment building, cheeks burning, looking neither left nor right as she hurried down the stairs. Outside, the cool air was a relief. She was sweating profusely and remembered just in time to strip off her white sweatshirt to keep it from getting stained. It was foolish of her to have gone. It was foolish of her to expect anything of him, to think someone like her might have made an impression on him. She pinched herself hard as punishment, leaving ugly red marks on her arm. She rode the bus and walked home in a daze; once back, she crawled immediately under the covers and lay there, a pit in her stomach and shame in her chest, until she fell asleep.

It was only the next day—after four hours of trundling through the wholesale market in streets slicked with water and dawn half-light, after arriving back at the store to find Yongjie waiting there with an ominous expression—that she’d looked inside her purse and found the pen gone. She didn’t know if it had been stolen or perhaps slipped out. Anyway, it didn’t matter. The wife had found her boss early the previous morning. By the time Xiaolei returned to the shop the following day, arms sopping with

bundles of flowers, Yongjie had made up her mind; she was fired. Plenty of other young girls could do the job, and probably better, besides.

When Xiaolei heard the amount of money the woman claimed the pen was worth, it astounded her; it was nearly 20 times her monthly salary.

“She must be lying,” she said desperately. “What pen costs that much?”

Yongjie hadn’t heard of such a pen before either, Xiaolei was nearly sure of it, but she affected an instant sense of knowingness that came down like a shield. It was a famous European brand, she said.

“Well, then it was probably fake,” Xiaolei said, feeling only briefly disloyal. “Who carries a pen like that around?”

Yongjie didn’t disagree, but she also refused to pay any of the two weeks’ back wages Xiaolei was owed. “You’ve caused me that much trouble—count yourself lucky it isn’t worse,” she said. “Word will get around. Triumph Mansion is our key clientele, and now no one will want to come here.”

Xiaolei didn’t bother to argue; Yongjie probably had a point. At the very least, she’d lost them one of their steadiest weekly customers. “I really did lose it,” she said, meaning the pen, but her boss wasn’t moved.

“You know it doesn’t make a difference,” Yongjie said. She was poking white chrysanthemums into a stand of green foam, as if Xiaolei had already disappeared.

IN THE MONTHS that followed, as she looked for another job, Xiaolei found herself stopping into the city’s small stationery stores seeking out its likeness, wondering if such an expensive pen could possibly exist, and if so, where to find it. She saw thin-stemmed ballpoints and some with outlandish pink or green ink; all kinds of imports were coming in now from South Korea, transparent ones and gel tips and retractables. She’d hold them in her hands, evaluating them, weighing their worth.

Her only regrets were that she hadn't spent more time with the man's pen, cradling it, uncapping it, testing it out for herself, and that she hadn't been able to keep it. She'd retraced her steps, of course, even interrogated some vendors at the wholesale market, and gone back to check the perimeter of Triumph Mansion, but found nothing.

Even when she got another job, this time selling shampoo and conditioner door-to-door, the pen still haunted her. She'd bought a bicycle by then and would ride it up and down Shanghai's streets, leaping off occasionally at stationery stores to check their racks in different seasons. It was a benign quest that gave her some control over a city that otherwise threatened to wear her down.

Once, at a pharmacist's, she saw a woman filling out a receipt with a fat black pen. Its shape was familiar, and her heart stopped. "May I try?"

The clerk knitted her brows, but Xiaolei was sheepish and insistent, and at last the woman shrugged and gave her the pen and a piece of thin gray cardboard, the inside of a pillbox, to try it on. It was lighter than Xiaolei had remembered, and had no silver clip, no alpine etching. But it sat in her hand the same way, and it, too, had that glossy sheen. "How much?" she asked.

The clerk frowned. "Not for sale," she said.

"Please," Xiaolei said. She started writing with it. It wasn't a fountain pen, she discovered; inside was a raspy ballpoint that skidded over the cardboard's surface, leaving only a wisp of an imprint behind.

"It works better on the pad," the clerk said, and that was true. Xiaolei could see the receipt she'd just written out in a clear black hand. The clerk looked at her curiously, and then pushed the pad forward kindly. "You can try."

But Xiaolei had already disappeared out the door, shaking her head. "Thanks," she called out behind her. "It's not what I'm looking for."

---

*This story is an excerpt from Te-Ping Chen's upcoming collection, Land of Big Numbers.*