

## *A Room of One's Own*

Translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang

### *I. Qiu Luo*

**T**he morning before she left, Qiu Luo woke especially early. To make things seem normal, she lay still in bed as long as she could, until around the usual time. Wrapped in her dressing gown, she put on some music in the living room and then pressed the button that made the drapes jerk apart, start-stop, an inch at a time. She squinted at the impossibly red sun. Then a shower, the hair dryer, a pot of coffee on the stove and two slices in the toaster, a dash downstairs for the day's papers.

With all this done, she glanced at the clock—time to wake Jing Yu. But when she went back into the bedroom, he was already up, slumped on the bed and staring blearily at her. He was sluggish that morning, lingering over his newspaper with a half-drunk cup of coffee. The day before, the office had formally announced news of his promotion. It was as if he had suddenly stopped after working so hard and for so long—his clockwork running down just as he crossed the finish line.

Qiu Luo had also been waiting for this day, it seemed for ages. She nagged him to get going and not be late for work. At the door, he said his colleagues would be throwing him a celebratory dinner that evening. He wanted her to join them, but she made an excuse and then immediately regretted it. Not seeing his happy, confident face would be a kind of sadness.

As soon as he was gone, Qiu Luo locked the door and started packing. Even restricting herself to the clothes she wore most frequently, there was far too much, and she began returning things to the wardrobe, all the while reminding herself that she was starting a brand new life; she didn't need these old things. She dithered over each item, wondering what she would need on the road ahead: curlers, a hair dryer, make-up, CDs, books—then, abruptly, all of it seemed worthless, and she tipped the whole lot out. The cat, watching from the sidelines, picked this moment to leap into the case and refuse to get out. She didn't know if he was trying to stop her from leaving, or if he was asking to be taken along.

It took quite a lot of effort to get the cat out and locked in the study. By the time she got back, she was out of patience. She tumbled armloads of stuff higgledy-piggledy into the suitcase and closed it without a second glance. She had never been good at packing, perhaps because she hated going anywhere—life away from home was too restrictive. But now she was changing her mind. Her life on the road would be full of structure, not limitations. She dragged the suitcase out onto the balcony and stacked dusty shoeboxes on top of it. No one would know, except the yowling cat in the study, that this case now contained the start of her “life full of structure.”

There was still half an hour before the supermarket opened. She sat on the sofa and flicked through the rest of a half-finished novel. Another indifferent ending. It was as if the writer had realized the futility of the enterprise and, losing faith, cut her losses and finished up as best she could. Qiu Luo hadn't seen a satisfying ending for a long time. Many novels started out promisingly, with a few good—even moving—chapters, but inevitably lost their way. She knew she was being harsh, but then she had asked as much of herself, before. That is why she had never become a novelist, why her young-girl dreams of writing were smothered early on. She asked too much of herself.

She got to the supermarket a little after ten. Trash bags, men's refreshing oil-control shower foam, anti-dandruff shampoo, herb-scented soap, stain remover, hand lotion refill sachets, three boxes of Kleenex, vitamin supplements for men, sixty-watt lightbulbs, A4 paper, hazelnut biscuits. At the checkout, she tossed four packs of AA batteries into the cart.

At twelve o'clock, she picked up a suit and three shirts from the dry cleaner.

At half past twelve, she ate alone—a bowl of spare rib noodles—and then dashed to the pet store to get a five-kilogram bag of dry cat food, as well as ten sachets of wet food. She asked the store owner for a business card, making sure it had the address and delivery number. Then she got some cash out of the bank to pay the gas and phone bills.

At one, she got to the café. Even after a cup of strong coffee, she felt sleepy and had a little nap, resting her head on the table.

Yuan Yuan didn't arrive until almost two o'clock, her child clinging to her like always. They moved to an outside table, in the sun, but didn't talk for long; the kid kept interrupting. As Yuan Yuan picked up her daughter, cradling the tiny face against her large forehead,

softly cooing to her, Qiu Luo had a strange thought: Does this little girl know that her mother's double eyelids are a plastic surgeon's work? Of course not; she's probably too young even to know where her eyelids are. So this world lies to you, right from the beginning. Even your mother's eyes, smiling ferociously down at you, might turn out to be fake.

At three thirty, they left the café. On the way back, Qiu Luo had the car washed and topped up the oil. She hoped the life she was leaving behind for Jing Yu would not be too hollow. By the time she got home, Chrysanthemum, the cleaning lady, had arrived and was scrubbing the floorboards.

"Spring cleaning today," announced Qiu Luo as soon as she stepped in the door.

"Are you having guests?"

"So we can only do a spring clean when we have guests?" snapped Qiu Luo. Chrysanthemum kept her mouth shut.

This was her first time working alongside Chrysanthemum. Together, they washed the curtains and changed the sheets. Some of the food in the fridge had expired and needed to be thrown away, along with four dresses and three pairs of boots that, realistically, she would never wear again. They trimmed the cat's long fur where it had tangled itself into knots.

As she worked, she noticed for the first time how disordered the apartment had become. Chrysanthemum came in for two hours every afternoon, but it looked like her efforts had been decidedly superficial. Qiu Luo suddenly felt regret at not heeding her mother's warning: don't be too nice to your cleaner; you'll spoil her, and she'll get lazy.

It was almost seven by the time they finished. Chrysanthemum was sulking at being forced to stay late, and Qiu Luo had to remind herself to be nice—it was her last day, after all. Knowing that Chrysanthemum liked dressing up, she gave her some of the old clothes and boots. Sure enough, she brightened up, rushing over to help Qiu Luo with the spaghetti she was cooking. As she brushed past, Qiu Luo remembered the countrified smell Chrysanthemum had given off the first time they met, the smell of bad food and poverty. City life had now reduced this smell to a mere whiff, quickly disappearing into the buttery aroma of the spaghetti.

Chrysanthemum had watched Qiu Luo enough times to know to put a drop of peanut oil into the pot, to stop the noodles from sticking together. She also knew how to make pizza, cheesecake, and cookies. She could make a pot of coffee and open a bottle of wine. Qiu Luo

sometimes wondered whether Chrysanthemum would find any of these skills useful in later life.

She asked Chrysanthemum to eat with her, but the girl had another household to rush to. Qiu Luo had tried to use up a jar of meat sauce, but now the spaghetti was too salty and thick for her to eat more than half of it.

As she sat, blankly, she realized she had forgotten to tell Yuan Yuan that she had finally seen *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* a couple of days ago. Yuan Yuan used to talk about the film constantly, wondering what the significance of the title was. Qiu Luo had looked on the Internet, finally discovering that it was a pun on the children's rhyme "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf," the English words for "wolf" and "Woolf" sounding similar.

The film had prompted her to get hold of Woolf's essays. She had spent some time staring at the author's photograph. That long face—which, frankly, couldn't be called beautiful—and searching eyes made her heart sink, as if those eyes could see how worthless her superficial life was. She wanted to ask Yuan Yuan if she felt the same way and even thought of giving her a call, but Yuan Yuan would be stacking blocks with her daughter, or yelling at the latest nanny (her fourth?), or perhaps continuing the ongoing argument with her mother-in-law about whether to send the child to a private or public kindergarten. Even if she had remembered to bring this up earlier on, she realized, they wouldn't have discussed any of this. Never again. These days, Yuan Yuan thought only of the big bad wolf in children's stories, not of Woolf.

The cat jumped onto the table, sniffed at the spaghetti, and then retreated a few steps to regard her suspiciously from a distance, as if to say: what will happen to me after you've gone? It was Qiu Luo who had insisted on getting a cat. Jing Yu was perpetually annoyed at having to spend five minutes every morning brushing cat hair off his suit. Now that Qiu Luo was going, naturally the cat was worried about his fate. But let's be optimistic: perhaps while looking for a new home for the cat, Jing Yu would fall in love with one of the neighbors, who'd insist on keeping the cat around even though he still smelled like his first mistress. That way, the cat could be a part of Jing Yu's new life.

And so she fell to wondering about Jing Yu's new life. How long would he spend looking for her? How long would he spend being sad for her and healing that sadness before finding a better woman? How much time would he spend on dates until he got the new woman into bed, and how long in bed before getting married? Of course, many

of these steps could be carried out concurrently or even eliminated. That would be in keeping with Jing Yu's general air of efficiency. It was hard to deny there was a streak of ruthlessness in his character. She felt sad, as if he had already hurt her, and her leaving was a form of retaliation.

Her heart was a frustrated jumble. Hearing the clock strike ten, she couldn't resist giving Jing Yu a quick call. There was a wall of laughter behind his voice, which was more energetic than usual—he was drunk. They had gone back to Mr. Huo's house after dinner.

"I'll come and get you," said Qiu Luo. Afraid he would tell her not to, she hung up immediately.

Mr. Huo was Jing Yu's boss. He lived out in the countryside. Even though she had been there a few times, she felt lost as soon as she had stepped from her taxi outside the garden gate. Fortunately, the sentry came along on his bicycle, and she followed him up to the house.

Every time she visited here, she loved it—but who wouldn't love such a vast European-style house, such a big flower garden? She remembered her first visit—that night, it was as if they had left the human world behind. The house was full of antiques from different centuries: a dark, floral carpet older than her grandmother that she was afraid to stand on; a bowl of fruit more beautiful than if Vermeer had painted it. Everything sparkled. She had never tasted such exquisite wine. Mrs. Huo had lobster and steak flown in specially, and after dinner she had insisted on showing them her special collection of jade. Mrs. Huo was as dignified as the antique furniture, as if she had been constructed to go with the house. Light from the floor lamps knew how to flatter her, lapping around her like a faithful dog and giving her a Virgin-Mary glow. Subsequently, running into her in a coffee shop, Qiu Luo was relieved to notice that by daylight her make-up looked uneven and couldn't quite conceal the liver spots on her face.

Qiu Luo had been on her best behavior during that first dinner, trying to look like she fit in. She knew Jing Yu felt as self-conscious as she did, or worse—he hadn't grown up in town, and no matter how many grand events he attended in his adult life, he always felt the sorrow of the outsider, of having been a village boy. The first time they went to Mr. Huo's house, she had asked Jing Yu: when you've risen to his position, will we live in a house like this? She didn't know why she needed to know this so urgently. Perhaps it was a way of bringing the house closer to themselves—as soon as the question left her mouth, she sensed a deep well of longing within herself. Jing Yu answered yes. He wasn't worried about his future but about how insubstantial such

a house seemed to him. Even so—as a goal, something to struggle toward—it had a solid weight of its own.

After that, Qiu Luo was frightened to come to Mr. Huo's house. Once, when they had spent a whole evening talking about the Ming vase on the table, she was gripped by the urge to jump up and smash it on the floor, with the bravado of a child exposing the emperor's nakedness. She was unable to dispel such evil thoughts, which made her shift uncomfortably in her seat—it took a great effort to stay in her place. Each time, she would shoot Jing Yu an anguished look, but he never once met her gaze.

She loathed this life even as she longed to possess it for herself. Worse, it wasn't even jealousy she felt—that would at least be understandable. She quickly gave up the idea of trying to explain any of this to Jing Yu. He needed to focus on this goal to sustain him through the awfulness of his job. Removing it would be like taking a bone from a dog. And so she kept silent, but from very early on she knew that her ideals and his had separated and were hurtling in different directions. Unlike the processes of divorce, moving out, and splitting the assets, a separation of ideals required no more energy than drawing breath.

Now, standing at Mr. Huo's front door, her heart shrank at the clouds of laughter coming from inside. She didn't want to walk in on them and become the center of attention. Perhaps she could stand here for a while and enjoy the quiet. She noticed three black cars parked nearby, so similar she couldn't tell which was Jing Yu's until she looked at the license plates.

A girl walked into view, holding a tennis racket—young Miss Huo, only fourteen and already full-figured. Qiu Luo hesitated over whether to call to her, but in the end she lowered her head and pretended to be busy with her cell phone. Miss Huo walked right up to her, glaring. "Why don't you go in?" Her voice had a hard edge to it, as if this were a challenge. Qiu Luo, angered, almost retorted: why should I? But she resisted, held her tongue, and didn't look up from her phone.

The girl stomped inside and slammed the door behind her. Qiu Luo knew she should follow, but just as she was reaching for the doorbell, the door opened again and the guests started coming out. Mrs. Huo, showing them out, tapped Qiu Luo on the shoulder. "You're here. Would you like to come in for a while?"

Qiu Luo smiled and shook her head. The guests greeted her as they walked past. Jing Yu was still in the doorway, putting on his shoes. He came over and handed her the car keys. Mrs. Huo followed them

to the car. As they got in, she pinched Qiu Luo's thin blouse. "Aren't you cold in this little thing?"

"I feel cold just looking at you," Qiu Luo replied, still smiling, gesturing at the mink stole draped around Mrs. Huo's shoulders.

Jing Yu slept all the way back. Qiu Luo turned on the sound system: a sad-voiced man was singing. She had never heard him before; this wasn't one of her CDs. Jing Yu woke just as the car stopped. Walking behind him as he stumbled toward the car park lift with his suit jacket over one arm, Qiu Luo felt as if he had already entered into a life without her.

She didn't want to prolong this night, so they fell asleep without making love. She would feel a thread of regret for this the next day while dragging her suitcase out of the front door, as if she had forgotten a vital piece of luggage.

Qiu Luo had imagined she would be sleepless on her last night, but this wasn't the case. Just before dropping off to sleep, she turned to look at Jing Yu's face. Her last look at him, but it wasn't especially sad. She had stared at his sleeping face like this on many other nights before slipping into her thoughts of leaving, mentally rehearsing for that moment until repetition diminished the sadness into impatience. Who knew why it was so important for her to go? But she had spent so much time thinking about her departure. It had to become reality, or her whole life would be false.

## *II. Chrysanthemum*

Chrysanthemum wanted to leave early to go to the post office, so she arrived a little before her usual time. As she walked into the condominium lobby, she bumped into Qiu Luo as she came out, pulling a suitcase behind her. Qiu Luo seemed startled to see her.

"Are you going somewhere?" she asked.

"Mm." Qiu Luo paused for a second to grunt agreement, and then kept going.

Chrysanthemum had expected some instructions. Instead, Qiu Luo seemed to be hurrying, her steps growing faster as she reached the road. She grabbed a cab that had just dropped off a passenger, and in that second Chrysanthemum had a strange realization: Qiu Luo might not be coming back.

In the apartment, Chrysanthemum took off her shoes and started work. As she cleaned the coffee mugs stacked in the sink, her mind kept revolving around Qiu Luo's departure. Abandoning the wash-

ing up, she wiped her hands and checked each room. There was no note, no letter of explanation—but of course, who would leave something like that out where they knew the cleaning lady might see it? And after all, perhaps Mr. Jing knew she was going—but somehow Chrysanthemum didn't think he did. The wardrobe and dressing table looked the same as always, as if she hadn't taken many things with her. Nothing was missing from her jewelry box. Chrysanthemum felt tired from all that thinking. Perhaps it was as simple as a business trip after all.

After she was done, Chrysanthemum took a bus to the post office. De Ming phoned her three times on the way, and each time she rejected the call. She didn't want to have a big argument on the bus. The phone rang again as she reached her stop, and this time she answered it. "Stop bothering me. I'm at the post office." And with that, she hung up, jabbing the keys in frustration. The phone didn't ring again.

Of all the lines in the post office, the longest one, as always, was for wire transfers. The girl in front of her combed away at her rattail hair, clutching a cloth sack that barely resembled a purse. One look at her and you knew she was another cleaner. Looking down the line, there were at least two others, unmistakable. She wondered why it was always women sending money home. Perhaps their men were all like hers.

De Ming hadn't worked since last autumn. At first, it was because their new house wasn't ready yet, but even after the house was done, he didn't seem interested in finding a job. Chrysanthemum didn't want him to come to Beijing. Their child would be starting school soon, and it would be better if one of them stayed with her. De Ming didn't like Beijing. He'd lasted just six months the last time, leaving as soon as the construction job was over. Chrysanthemum wished he would go back to Jinyang; it was only an hour away, and he could commute. He'd worked there for a couple of weeks after the New Year, but work stopped for a few days because of heavy rain, and for some reason he never went back after that. He now spent all his time playing cards. And they had to play for money, he said, otherwise it wouldn't be interesting. Whenever Chrysanthemum called to ask if he had found work, he always said, "I woke up this morning and the sky was so dark, I was sure it would rain."

"Have all the rain clouds in China followed you to Sichuan?" she huffed at him.

He always had some kind of reply, some theory of abnormal weather patterns, a typhoon or mudslide on the way. She answered back: you

should have been a meteorologist. When they started one of their fights, both sides would threaten divorce, and it would take a week for Chrysanthemum to cool down. Then she would call, hear more about the bad weather, and it would start again. Even with all this going on, Chrysanthemum still sent money home every month, although recently she had started keeping back a little for herself. This time it hadn't even been a month before De Ming started asking her for cash. She'd had to ask a lot of questions before he admitted he was lending it to his cousin to build a house with. They argued again, and she said some savage things into the phone, but here she was, once again, in the post office line.

Chrysanthemum felt aggrieved just thinking about it—but actually, her life wasn't bad. She didn't mind the work; she wasn't one of those women who yearned for home all the time, tears filling their eyes as they thought of their children. She had adapted quickly to life in Beijing, buying a secondhand TV set for her Korean soap operas, even occasionally allowing herself some shrimp from the market. She didn't miss her child; a phone call every now and then was enough for her. Perhaps she was one of those people who feels at home anywhere, or perhaps she realized she was better off living apart from such a useless man.

That afternoon, clutching her purse, Chrysanthemum felt a strong jab of sadness as she stood in the line, waiting to send money home, shuffling forward with all the other servants, like a chain gang. She wanted to break out. She wanted liberty. And just then, the image of Qiu Luo came back to her, walking away with her suitcase, and she knew that receding figure was moving toward freedom.

The flat was empty again the next day and strangely clean, as if no one had been home in the last twenty-four hours. Nothing had been moved. The cat's bowl was completely empty, and when she put food in it, he fell on it like a wolf. Even though the flat was spotless, she didn't feel good about doing nothing and gave the bookshelves a wipe. As she worked, she tried to piece together what had happened. Two possibilities suggested themselves: either they were both on vacation, or Qiu Luo had really vanished, and Mr. Jing had gone to look for her. She rejected the first one—they wouldn't have gone away without giving her instructions, or at least leaving her a note. But the second one seemed unlikely too. Even if he had come back to find Qiu Luo gone, Mr. Jing would still have stopped to eat or drink something before going after her, but nothing had been used, not even a water glass. As

she left, Chrysanthemum jammed the junk mail she had picked up on her way in back between the door and gate.

It was all still there the next day, and the flat was just as clean. The cat leaped over as soon as she walked in, circling her legs and loudly reproaching her. So no one had been home. She swept the floor quickly, barely touching it—a dragonfly landing on water. Then there was nothing to do, so she sat on the sofa and leafed through a fashion magazine. By afternoon, the room had filled with sunlight. She couldn't keep her eyes open and had a little nap. When she woke up, the cat was curled up by her legs, radiating heat. She put on her jacket and shoes. As her key turned in the door, she realized she was starting to feel sentimental toward the apartment.

It took five days for her to decide to call Qiu Luo. Her phone was turned off. She called several times that day, all the way to nightfall, but there was no response. She worried that Mr. Jing had been in some kind of accident. Just before she fell asleep that night, she remembered that it was Mr. Jing who had initially called the cleaning agency, so they would have his number. Getting it would be complicated, because she'd had a falling-out with the agency, for the usual reason: after accumulating enough satisfied customers, she'd decided to cut out the middleman and ask them to pay her directly in cash. This way, her clients could pay a little less, and she almost doubled her earnings. Many domestic workers did this, but there were just as many for whom it didn't work out, who had to crawl back after a few months asking the agency to take them back. Chrysanthemum had decided at the time she would never do that.

Her only choice was to ask her friend Xia for help. She'd tried to get Xia to leave the agency along with her, but Xia was too scared, afraid they would bear a grudge. Chrysanthemum didn't force her, and they were still friends, often meeting at night for a chat. Still, she didn't feel she could tell the truth, so she made up a story about an argument. She said Mr. Jing had stormed out and not been home for days, and now Qiu Luo was ill in bed, not eating or drinking. Xia laughed at her for being a busybody. But she also said she wasn't sure if she could help; the clients' directory was locked in a drawer these days. Chrysanthemum begged until she said fine, she would wait for an opportunity.

The next day, when Chrysanthemum was in the spare room combing the cat's hair, a delivery man came to the door. "I've tried a few times, but there's never anyone in," he said peevishly. Chrysanthemum took the envelope and carefully forged Qiu Luo's signature on the receipt.

Without stopping to think about it, she tore open the envelope. It was a common brand; she could always buy another one and re-seal it. There was a thin piece of paper inside: a letter, with Mr. Jing's name at the end. She started reading it as she walked to the sofa and sat down. When she got to the end, she read it again.

*Luo Luo—*

*When I received the news of my promotion, it was like I'd been hollowed out. I sat in my office, not doing anything. I didn't want to come home. I felt like a spinning top, whirling and whirling, then suddenly stopping. I can't even stand up now.*

*I know I have no right to be dissatisfied with my life. It's a safe, stable life, and it's only going to get better. But I don't want to know what's so good about this "better." As soon as I started thinking about it, it began to lose all meaning.*

*When we first met, we weren't very practical. You were still trying to write at that time. I remember you talking about wanting to write a novel. But that seems like a long time ago. You know I've always said it doesn't matter whether or not you work. You should do whatever you want, as long as you're happy. Maybe I was unrealistic, but what I wanted from you was a bit of passion, a bit of idealism. I was most afraid of becoming like my colleagues—dull, common. Please understand—I'm not blaming you for anything.*

*Sometimes I wake up in the early morning and think about the half of my life still to come, only to realize it lacks suspense. I find this frightening. I know how much I'm giving up by leaving now, but I can't talk myself into staying, into accepting this suspense-free life.*

*I still remember how at the New Year, your parents kept asking us to get married soon. We've been together six years now, and now this wedding will never happen for us, which I regret. But I'm not leaving to avoid marriage. The thing I'm trying to escape is bigger than that.*

*I'm writing this from my office, which may be why I sound formal, unable to examine my feelings. We can leave emotional issues for another time, when we may be clearer in our minds about them.*

*You can keep the apartment and the car. I'll come back at some point to help put everything in your name.*

*Jing Yu*

Chrysanthemum put down the letter, stunned. So they had both run away on the same day. So they had never been married. She had never suspected. She calculated that she was only a year younger than Qiu Luo, but she already had a six-year-old child. Women in the cities seemed to stay girls for a much longer time.

That night, there was a blackout in her boarding house. Chrysanthemum sat in the dark, thinking about a lot of things. She thought about how strong-willed city people were, so ready to take action as soon as something wasn't right. Someone like her, from the country, would never have the courage to change her life. She lived in a fog, day after day, unable to see life's problems. But that wasn't it; she perfectly understood what her life's problem was: De Ming. He was the source of every frustration. So she knew what the problem was but didn't dare to do anything about it—had never even thought if there might be a solution.

Chrysanthemum had never seriously thought about divorce. If she did that, she'd never be able to go back to Sichuan. She'd never see her child again. She imagined living in Beijing all alone—there was nothing too scary about that. She'd surely be able to find another man. And if not, that was fine, too. Chrysanthemum was a typical Virgo—Qiu Luo had once told her this and then explained what it meant: she had high standards and would rather have nothing than something imperfect. She liked this description; it suited her.

Feeling penned in, Chrysanthemum decided to go for a walk. There were small roadside stalls all along the street, crowds hunched around tables under brightly-lit signs, gobbling spicy food and swilling frothy beer, laughing hot and loud. As she walked, she felt energy grow within her. Getting out her cell phone, she shot De Ming a text message: "When I said I would divorce you, those weren't just angry words. I really think our marriage will never be happy." She read it through and changed "happy" to "meaningful."

She felt calmer after sending the message. Looking up, she realized she had unthinkingly walked all the way to Qiu Luo's building. She hesitated, and then she decided that since she was here, she might as well have a hot shower.

As she opened the door, she heard a thumping sound from inside. Had they come back? Curiosity overcame fear, and she stepped into the pitch black. It felt uninhabited still. Turning on the light, she saw the cat flailing by the shoe rack. He liked playing with the laces, batting them about like living things, but somehow had got himself entangled. The shoes were wedged firmly under the shelf, unyielding, and he was unable to free himself.

Chrysanthemum unraveled the knots. The cat was clearly at the end of his tether. He limped to the water bowl, gulping huge mouthfuls. Chrysanthemum didn't usually care much for the cat, but now her heart felt a twinge. What if she hadn't come by? By the time she

arrived as usual the next afternoon, the cat would have been struggling all night, perhaps giving up all hope.

And so Chrysanthemum had a good excuse to come back every night. She had a shower, watched some television, sometimes even put on one of Qiu Luo's many DVDs. The shower alone made her life significantly happier. Such a strong stream of water, an inexhaustible supply of hot, even a tub to soak her tired legs in.

Qiu Luo's home was full of books. Chrysanthemum loved reading and often gratefully received Qiu Luo's old magazines. But the books—they were too difficult, too much for her to understand. Qiu Luo had left some out on the desk, probably the ones she was reading just before her absence. A few of them were by a foreign woman called Woolf. Chrysanthemum flipped through these, but they were just a fog of words, nothing she could grab hold of. One of them, *A Room of One's Own*, seemed to say that a woman needed her own home to accomplish anything. Chrysanthemum was touched by this. Here, in this apartment that could accommodate her for a while, she felt her life transforming.

Apart from a couple of times, when she was too scared to walk home after watching a horror film, she rarely stayed the night. She didn't like other people sleeping in her bed and thought Qiu Luo would feel the same. As for De Ming, he took a day to send her a reply: "Do what you like." And that was exactly what she would do. She decided to find a time to go home and have a thorough talk with De Ming about their divorce.

After half a month of this, a practical problem presented itself. There was still no sign of Qiu Luo and Mr. Jing, and now her salary was due. Losing their six hundred yuan left a big hole in her income. Her other households only wanted her once a week or called when they needed her to come in. She had no choice but to phone them all, asking if they had any friends who needed a cleaning lady. She felt conflicted—on one hand wishing for the couple to come back and pay her wages, on the other hoping they'd stay away so she could keep using the apartment. This space meant freedom to her. In the past, she'd always thought that having money meant having freedom. Now, she was faced with an absurd alternative—to get money, she would have to give up this new freedom.

But then, it wasn't really a choice; it was out of her control. All Chrysanthemum could do was see what fate had in store.

Of course, what fate has planned for us often falls outside anything we could anticipate. In a way, De Ming's excuses finally came true, and the full force of the planet descended on Sichuan.

The afternoon of the earthquake, Chrysanthemum was in the middle of cleaning another house when Xia phoned to tell her. She called De Ming immediately but couldn't get through to him. It was only that night, watching the news, that she realized the extent of the damage. None of her relatives were answering their phones. She comforted herself by thinking that the areas mentioned on the news were all quite far from her family.

So she sat on Qiu Luo's sofa, fixated on the television, dialing again and again. Xia phoned again to see how she was, to comfort her. Just before hanging up, she said, "What a thing to happen. You're doing well, holding up like this."

"What else can I do?" asked Chrysanthemum.

She understood how powerless we all are before nature. Her mother was killed by a falling power line in the floods of '98. She remembered hugging her younger brother in the hospital corridor, crying as if the whole world had collapsed. Her present strength had grown from the tears of that summer's day. Chrysanthemum sat grimly by the television, waiting for more news from Sichuan. Hungry, she unearthed some wrinkly apples from Qiu Luo's fridge and then, in a burst of bravado, opened a bottle of red wine. She drank a glass quickly. As she was starting on her second glass, the phone finally rang. De Ming's voice startled her, calling, "Hello? Hello?" It took her a long time to realize it really was him and not the alcohol talking. De Ming and the child were fine, and so were all their relatives. The new house had collapsed. They were in a temporary shelter.

The next week's news was dominated by the rescue effort. Apart from when she was cleaning, Chrysanthemum spent every waking moment by the television. The village next to them had suffered many deaths. Each time De Ming phoned, he would have more news: so-and-so that we knew, his uncle died.

Sometimes she turned off the cell phone and television, feeling dazed to be back in Qiu Luo's flat instead of Sichuan. The cat lay asleep on the armchair; wind plucked at the thin curtains; the gardenias on the windowsill had opened. The wall clock had no second hand; every time she looked at it, she was convinced it had stopped. She couldn't have said if she felt peaceful or frozen.

Xia asked her why she wasn't going back to Sichuan. Chrysanthemum said, "The house has collapsed. We'll need money to rebuild it. I have

to keep working.” Xia seemed satisfied with this explanation, but Chrysanthemum herself felt lost. She had almost forgotten she’d come to Beijing to earn money. And now they really needed it—the cousin’s house had collapsed too, and it looked like De Ming’s loan to him would never be repaid. Thinking about this made her angry.

A few days later, De Ming’s parents went to live with his sister in Jinyang. Now it was just De Ming and their daughter. He phoned to ask her what to do; he couldn’t take care of the little girl on his own.

“You should go to Jinyang too,” she answered coldly.

“There are already too many people,” he answered. “My sister’s house is full. And there’s no work in Jinyang.”

“What do you want?”

“I’ll leave Lan Lan in Jinyang—none of the schools are open now, anyway—and my parents can take care of her.”

“And you?”

“I thought I might come to Beijing.” He said this weakly, and the next sentence was even more feeble. “There’s nothing left here.”

Chrysanthemum was silent for a long time. Then she said, “Let me think about it.” She hung up and suddenly realized no other plan of action was possible. There was nothing to think about. She even felt a faint glimmer of happiness, as if De Ming might somehow have changed for the better.

The day De Ming was due to get the train to Beijing, Mr. Jing sent another letter. Seeing Qiu Luo’s name on the envelope, Chrysanthemum realized that she missed her.

*Luo Luo—*

*I am writing this letter from Jinyang. I wandered for a long time after leaving home, as if I couldn’t find a place to settle. I had intended to become a village schoolteacher in the Northwest, but when I heard about the earthquake, I decided to go to Sichuan to help. I’ve been in one of the most hard-hit towns. Every day, the phrase I hear most is “signs of life.” These words make me happy, as if they have some deeper meaning. Really—you might find this funny—I’m not doing any good here. I run around, ready to help at any time, and that makes me feel full of strength. Yesterday, I set a pigeon free from its cage—that’s the only creature I’ve rescued so far.*

*You’re probably laughing at the thought of me being a village schoolteacher or a volunteer. We’ve never been those kinds of people—hot-blooded bleeding hearts. At first I didn’t understand what was happening to me. Later, I remembered reading about the psychology of fanatics, how they throw themselves completely into charity and good works, because their own lives are full of utter*

defeat. They're trying to escape their constant sense of being on the losing side. Helping people gives them satisfaction and is the only thing they can do without recrimination or resistance. Kindness is like a shield for them. There are so many volunteers here, like a swarm of locusts. I don't know if they're all like me—if they're really here to save themselves.

*I can't write any more; I'm moving on to another town very soon. One more thing: I've just remembered that Chrysanthemum, the one who cleans for us, comes from Sichuan. I hope her family is all right. Please ask after them for me.*

*Jing Yu*

As she read the last sentence, Chrysanthemum began to weep. She still had no idea what Mr. Jing was doing in Sichuan. She turned on the television, looking closely at the news footage, hoping to see him somewhere in the thickly flowing crowds.

After a long time, there was no sign of him, but suddenly she noticed a voluntary ambulance crew member who looked a lot like Qiu Luo. She must be imagining things. Perhaps she had forgotten what Mr. Jing looked like, and so her subconscious had started looking for Qiu Luo instead. But as the woman walked away, she looked exactly like Chrysanthemum's last image of Qiu Luo, trailing a suitcase behind her. The more she thought about it, the more convinced Chrysanthemum became that the woman was Qiu Luo. After all, she said to herself, they left on the same day; why shouldn't they also both have decided to volunteer in Sichuan?

At that very moment, De Ming would be doing as she said, tossing all the valuables they owned into a plastic bag and hurrying to the train station. The television had never shown their small village, but still she thought she could see him, emerging from behind a pile of rubble, walking away, looking back wistfully at her.

A few days before De Ming's arrival, Chrysanthemum had hesitated over whether to tell him about the empty apartment. But now, waiting for him, she found herself changing the sheets on Qiu Luo's bed. The clean linen, smelling of lemons, spread crisply over the mattress like a new life. Chrysanthemum realized she was longing for De Ming to arrive—but it was an uneasy, timorous longing, as if she were about to do something dangerous. She was lost in joy. Although she was in someone else's house, waiting for her husband to arrive, she felt instead like she was in her own home, waiting for a stranger to knock on the door.