

蓬草：翅膀

Wings

By Peng Cao

Translated by Hannah Cheung with D.E. Pollard

THEY MOCKED AH MU behind his back: Ah Mu was mad, they said.

First of all, who was “Ah Mu”? And who were “they”?

Ah Mu was a man; his features were perfectly regular, but he was slightly bigger built than most people. When he was born, Ah Mu’s parents probably foresaw that he would grow up to be bigger than others, like a tree, so, on the third day after his birth, they named him “Ah Mu”—“timber”.

Back to Ah Mu. As a matter of fact, he was just a very ordinary person. He had the proper “human” qualities—modesty, kindness, gentleness. And in his conversation he was very discreet, he never let his tongue run away with itself. Usually such an ordinary man is not worth writing about. However, the aforementioned “human” qualities have for some time ceased to be valued and respected by the average person. Ah Mu was unfortunate because he had to live among these average people. These people were “they”. They could not bear Ah Mu’s being “a cut above the rest”, so they mocked him behind his back and called him mad.

Every morning when Ah Mu woke up, he always softly kissed his wife, who was lying beside him, on the cheek. He did this out of immense respect and gratitude. He felt it inconceivable that such a beautiful and caring woman could actually be sleeping by his side. The two of them had been together for a long long time. Ah Mu said that feelings, especially love, should grow richer and deeper with every

Peng Cao is the pen name of Feng Shuyan 馮淑燕. Born and educated in Hong Kong, she left for Paris in 1975, and studied first in the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle III and then in the Ecole Supérieure d’Interprètes et de Traducteurs. Her creative work includes fiction, essays and film scripts. She now lives in Paris.

passing day. Of course, many people did not think like Ah Mu. Most of them had very complicated feelings, and loving a person would often turn out to be something painful. They felt that Ah Mu was too simple-minded, and they looked with pity on his innocence.

And the whole thing, that is, the fact that Ah Mu was happier than ordinary people, made them very resentful. Why was it that Ah Mu wore a smile on his face from morning till night? Once, some youngsters who enjoyed mischief-making saw Ah Mu approaching slowly from the other end of the long corridor. They deliberately rushed towards him at full speed, and bumped right into him. Big as he was, Ah Mu was knocked staggering for a few steps. However, not only did he not lose his temper, he even asked with an alarmed look, "Where are you off to in such a hurry? I hope nothing untoward has happened?" This reaction made the youngsters very angry. They thought Ah Mu was being deliberately sarcastic, so they viciously stamped on his toes before running away.

Ah Mu never let such things bother him. When he reached home, his wife saw his dirty shoes and asked him where he had been. Ah Mu had forgotten about being bumped into and stamped upon, he rolled his big bright eyes, thought for a while, and smiled at his wife apologetically, "Don't know!"

His wife was by now used to his "strange" character. She believed she was the only person in the world who could understand Ah Mu, and took upon herself the responsibility of protecting him. When Ah Mu sat cross-legged and bared to the waist on the sitting room floor, cast his eyes down, and "meditated" (this was Ah Mu's way of maintaining bodily and mental health), and did not move or speak for an hour, his wife would drape a garment round his shoulders. It was a good thing she did, otherwise Ah Mu was likely to catch a chill and fall sick.

But Ah Mu did not realize that even such seemingly uncontroversial matters as meditation would arouse resentment in others. He worked in a publishing company designing book covers and drawing illustrations, and even did some layout work when the editor was too busy. And if the old man who delivered articles got sick and failed to come, Ah Mu would chase off in his stead to the typesetter some four streets away. This seemed the most natural thing in the world, because Ah Mu never refused any work that others placed on him, and never expected gratitude afterwards, so nobody felt it necessary to express gratitude towards him. All along, his colleagues might indeed have overlooked his presence—that is to say, apart from asking Ah Mu to do this and that for them, they would not have noticed Ah Mu's behaviour particularly. Except one day, when they began talking about eating out. A thought that the "Spicy Chicken" at Tianxianglou Restaurant was simply the tops, while B scoffed at the idea, and at A for being no gourmet. Firstly, the "Spicy Chicken" dish used such strong seasonings that it was impossible to detect the taste of chicken. Besides, the "Spicy Chicken" at Tianxianglou had nothing special whatsoever about it, there must be something wrong with A's taste buds. When A heard that, he flew into a rage, and went on the attack. He told B he looked like a down-and-out: nobody would believe that a shabby character like him would be let into the Tianxianglou in the first place, so he could never have tried the "Spicy Chicken" there. The personal slanging match ranged back

and forth. Only too pleased to stir up trouble, the other colleagues divided themselves up into two factions and egged on the contestants. Feelings ran high: It seemed that a fight would break out at any moment. Ah Mu really could not imagine how "Spicy Chicken" could become a subject for argument. When he heard the various insulting, even disgusting, words flying about the office, he gradually turned pale and put down the pen in his hand. The colleagues cursing at each other then saw a "strange sight"—Ah Mu sat down on the floor in the office, crossed his legs, put his hands on his knees, closed his eyes and began to meditate, as if to elevate himself to a higher plane. For a moment they were stupefied, then they looked at each other in consternation. Everyone returned to his own seat. A feeling of shame came upon them, followed by loathing towards Ah Mu—it was Ah Mu who made them ashamed of their own behaviour! This Ah Mu was really detestable! Besides, he was mad!

Ah Mu did not know that he had become a detestable figure among his colleagues. But if he had known, would he have minded? Ah Mu still did the extra work the others dumped on him with great enthusiasm, he still did not expect a word of thanks. He only wished to see an occasional friendly smile. That, more than the sunshine outside the window, would have made Ah Mu happy.

His colleagues finally thought of a way to play a trick on him. One day, when Ah Mu had gone to the washroom, they put three sleeping pills in his tea. Ah Mu came back, raised his glass and gulped down the tea together with the drug. His colleagues smiled to each other secretly, casting sideways glances at Ah Mu. Very soon, Ah Mu's big body shifted slightly in his seat, the pen in his hand slipped onto the floor. Finally Ah Mu slumped over his desk and fell into a deep sound sleep. His cheek rested on a half-finished picture. In the picture, there was a bird about to take flight, but it was still missing one wing. His colleagues roared with laughter, and waited eagerly for the editor to come out of his office.

This trick had a consequence which may not have been what they intended. As they pointed out in their mutual justification and explanations afterwards, they bore Ah Mu no ill will, they just wanted to have a game with him. But when the editor walked past Ah Mu and yelled at him several times, and Ah Mu did not wake up, he flew into a furious rage. In fact, the editor's ill temper was mainly due to his family affairs. The editor did not get along well with his wife, and often had quarrels at home. That morning they had just had a row, and naturally he was not in a good mood. He glared at Ah Mu sleeping soundly on the desk and cursed him up hill and down dale. He absolutely refused to stop and find out the reason why, and was determined not to take into consideration Ah Mu's customary diligence and hard work. He wrote a notice of dismissal on the spot, threw it in Ah Mu's face, and ordered one of the others to call Ah Mu's wife to take him home. His tone of voice left no room for argument. "He must go at once!" There was dead silence. Among those who had played the nasty trick, there might have been some who felt regret and even wanted to explain the whole thing to the chief editor. But they did nothing. They reasoned that under the circumstances, there was nothing they could do.

Ah Mu's wife walked into the office. She was a beautiful and quiet woman.

She looked at Ah Mu who was dozy with sleep, and then at the people sitting around with guilty looks. She understood everything at once. She did not need to ask anything. They were just a lot of cowards, and were not worthy of her hate. She called in the taxi driver, and together they helped Ah Mu into the taxi.

Afterwards, not one of Ah Mu's colleagues mentioned his name again. It was after all an awkward topic. But they heard by chance that Ah Mu and his wife had left the city. A streetsweeper who knew Ah Mu (because every morning when Ah Mu left his home, he would always smile and bid him good morning) insisted that he had seen Ah Mu and his wife: it was a bright and lovely spring day, and they each had a big knapsack on their back, and Ah Mu was pushing a wooden cart as well. There were books and pictures piled like a little hill on the cart. The streetsweeper said they walked away in this way. They were smiling "as if they were going to a distant and beautiful place!" When he said this, he couldn't help sighing softly, but that may not have had any special meaning.

About Ah Mu, there was one other minor detail. According to Sanjie, the cleaning woman at the publishing company, Ah Mu had been back to the office the morning after he was sacked. It was very quiet at that time, nobody was in the office as it was not yet time for work. Sanjie, who was outside the office, saw Ah Mu walk up to his desk, sit down and add something to a picture. In fact, when Ah Mu had woken up, he had remembered the unfinished bird. So he came back and added its other wing, so that it could fly high in the sky. That was all he had come for.

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