

謹容：一個不正常的女人

Not Your Average Girl

By Shen Rong

Translated by Geremie Barmé

“FORGET about those papers for the time being, Xiao Wu, and join me in a beer. No need to get uptight, after all the meeting’s still got a few days to run.

“What? You don’t drink? Not even beer? Next you’ll be telling me you don’t smoke either? Oh, so that’s how it is. You’re a rare bird. There’s hardly any young people these days who don’t smoke or drink. I’m always on at the youngsters in our bureau to emulate the good traits of us old cadres, not just pick up our faults—all this smoking, drinking and such. What good is any of that to them? None of them take a whit of notice, of course, and they take to smoking and drinking like fish to water.

“A glass of Qingdao beer in the hot weather sure hits the spot. Ah, that’s more like it, a fine drop. This damn heat, it’s not normal for the north to be hotter than the south! We might as well be living in one of those southern hothouses for all its worth.

“No, don’t bother, just leave the fan where it is. I don’t trust the breeze from it. You’re sure to get arthritis if you sit in front of a fan. That’s the shot, just leave it be, let the wind blow into the corner. See, we still get a breeze over here.

“I want to tell you something, Xiao Wu. Now it’s not as though I want to embarrass you or anything, but to be quite honest, you impress me as being the most steady, mature and reliable of all the university graduates they’ve assigned to the ministry in recent years. I like your attitude to older cadres, too. I’m always telling the head of your bureau, Zhao, that he’s lucky to have got you. You’re a

Shen Rong is the author of many plays, short stories and novelettes, including At Middle Age 人到中年. “Not Your Average Girl” is collected in Shen Rong: Humorous Fiction 謹容幽默小說集 (Hong Kong: Xiang-gang chubanshe, 1987).

very useful young man. You can see for yourself that during a technical conference like this you're quite capable of representing the bureau all by yourself. Zhao didn't even have to put in an appearance. That's certainly not so in the case of my people. There was no choice but to have an old dodderer like me come along. But I'm really a bit past it, can't take the pace anymore, you know.

"Now I'm aware of the fact that people are always slinging off at me behind my back. They say I'm in the way and can't deliver the goods anymore. Well, there's nothing so great about this job anyway. I've been wanting to retire for ages. The thing is, we need successors, got to put the third echelon* in place first, you know. Problem is, where do you find the right kind of people?"

"You're right, of course, there's lots of young people around nowadays, all with degrees, but a university degree doesn't automatically confer talent on you. Research graduates and university types are great talkers all right, but when it comes to getting things done they skip over the details, and as for coping with larger issues they're a dead loss. The things they write can be a real dog's dinner, and they don't have a clue about doing research or how to compile an in-depth study. It all boils down to the simple fact that they lack a sense of responsibility. Don't ask me what goes on in their heads, all that time-wasting and horsing around. How can we ever expect to modernize the country while there's such rampant inefficiency in government? The schools have to take their share of the responsibility for turning out people like this, too; nor, for that matter, is our personnel department entirely blameless. They shove people our way whether we want them or not.

"Take this new girl we got last summer, Zhang Qianqian, as an example. You know who I'm talking about—tall girl, always in high-heels no matter what the season; shoulder-length hair. Yes, that's the one, a southerner. You know her then? . . . I thought you might. Well, as I've often said, though our old minister is so much at one with the rank and file, there's still a good tenth of our people who wouldn't know him from Adam. And Vice-minister Li's had a good three years with us and at least a third of staff don't know who he is. But this girl Zhang Qianqian's been here just on a year and absolutely *everyone* knows her. Even the casual workers who man the hot-water furnace have a nodding acquaintance with the girl. Quite an operator, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not one for talking behind people's backs, mind you, especially when a woman's involved, most of all a young woman. It's a bad habit, counter-productive. Say too much and you land yourself in the shit—people start accusing you of things. But this Zhang girl is just too much; she's really beyond the pale. She's just asking to be gossiped about. Look at the way she preens herself, the way she smiles, and the way she speaks!?!—utterly unbearable.

"I recall saying on her very first day, 'This Miss is going to make us famous, mark my word.' Was I right or was I right? She comes along and before you know

*The third echelon refers to the cadre of bureaucrats selected from the younger members of the communist hierarchy, often the offspring of the crusty first generation of Party leaders. As this policy smacks of the "feudal" concept of political primogeniture, the expression, although not the practice, has gone out of vogue in recent years.

it. . . . Well, within six months she's having it off with Fatty Wang. You know him: section head, late forties, got a wife and kids. It's . . . well . . . indecent.

"You don't believe it? To tell you the honest truth nor did I at first. A pretty university graduate in her twenties, clever enough in her own way, carrying on with old Fatty Wang. Fatty, of all people—there's simply nothing to the man: he has neither looks nor talent, only sheer bulk. How could she? It's absurd!

"But seeing is believing. And if it wasn't that I bumped into them together a few times I would never have dared think such a thing. Do you remember that time when our ministry reserved the whole Dahua Cinema for a movie late last year? Well, as everyone there was from the same work unit, you'd think she would have just gone straight in and sat down with friends. But no, not her. She hung around the entrance looking this way and that, obviously waiting for someone.

"I might look like a rough old crock, but let me tell you, I'm as sharp as a tack. It was all as plain as the nose on my face. I even asked her: 'How come you're standing out here, Xiao Zhang?' 'I'm waiting for someone,' she said. Now I know a girl of her age has every right in the world to go to the movies with a boyfriend, but for heaven's sake, you've got to be reasonable about these things! And guess who she was waiting for? Go on, just guess.

"Fatty Wang, that's who! A few minutes later old Fatty came schlepping along all out of breath. And still they didn't go in, they just stood there in the entrance. Talk all you want, that's what I say, but why the lowered voices, eh, answer me that? If everything you're doing is open and above board, why so scared of being overheard? Shame, that's why!

"Things got even worse once they were inside. She stood leaning against a pillar in the foyer with Fatty Wang facing her. There was something about the way they were standing, and, my word, that giggle of hers! Now I've got nothing against laughing as long as it's hearty, honest laughter. But if you'd seen her twisting around, stomping her feet and taking out her handkerchief to hide her simpering mouth. All this flirting and wriggling around . . . Shameless hussy, that's what I say.

"But the most disgusting thing of all was that she couldn't keep her hands off the man. No, I kid you not. I saw with my very own eyes how she pummelled him playfully with her fist. *Tsk-tsk-tsk*. You can't tell me that's normal behaviour. Right there in front of everyone, too, this young woman carrying on with this middle-aged man with no regard at all for appearances. Sheer exhibitionism, eh?

"What do you think's behind all those divorces? I'll tell you: adultery. It's a major social problem nowadays. This Zhang Qianqian's out of her mind. The Wangs have been married for ages; what's she up to coming between them like that? But to be fair, I must say that Fatty Wang is a right bastard. Takes two to tango, after all; and you can't tell me she'd have tried anything if he'd behaved himself and acted more his age.

"What's that? Fatty was only a go-between? We-ell, then, how come I never heard anything about it? Come on, I wasn't born yesterday. A modern miss like her could have her pick of boys, she doesn't need a Fatty Wang to play cupid. Come again? You say he was giving someone else a build up? Don't bet on it, a girl like Zhang, young, lots of friends—she and Fatty were up to some funny business if

you ask me. And just between us, Xiao Wu, according to what I know, Fatty's not the only one she's been stringing along.

"What do you think of that then? A bolt from the blue, I bet. No, I heard it with my very own ears. That afternoon I was at a meeting over in their office when a fellow rang up asking for her. I just happened to be sitting next to the phone so I took the call and told him she'd stepped out. He rang back a short while later and so I asked him the usual things, 'Who are you? What's your name? And what exactly do you want with her?' And guess what he said? Go on, just guess. Well, he didn't reply to any of my questions and fobbed me off by saying it was the police. He rung off after telling me to get her to call him the moment she came back. What a nerve, trying to scare me with that stuff about the police. You call that normal?

"She got back just as the meeting was breaking up. I told her that a man had rung twice asking for her. She made a face and, without even as much as asking who it was, picked up the phone. Pretty obvious, isn't it? She'd been waiting for his call, odds are they'd even fixed a time for it and everything. She'd missed it 'cause she'd had to deal with a visitor to the office. Then bang, the moment she comes in she rushes to the phone and rings him back. All that guff about the police. Who knows what kind of slime she's running around with? Now you can't tell me your average girl gets up to such shenanigans.

"Of course I heard everything, after all, I was still standing right there. What mush! It made me come all out in goose bumps it did. Sounded like they were fixing a date. All I heard her say was, 'No, I'm not going. Well, it's not right,' and then 'Later, we'll discuss it later.' If you had only seen the act she put on, Xiao Wu: receiver in one hand, phone cord in the other, wriggling around like a pretzel. Now you can dance around as much as you want when you're on the phone, but there's no way the person on the other end is going to see you.

"Finally she said, 'Okay, same place as usual!' Now did you hear that? Same place as usual! This was no one-off casual acquaintance. Nothing surprises me about young people today.

"What? It was *you* on the other end of the line? You, Xiao Wu? How's that possible? The person on the phone said quite definitely he was from the Public Security Bureau. Oh, so that's it, scared I'd find out about you, so you arranged this little ruse beforehand. Looks like you're not quite as reliable as I'd thought Then again, what's all the fuss about? It's quite normal to have a girlfriend. I'm nothing but a deputy bureau director, after all, no reason for me to go throwing my weight around interfering in other people's lives. I had a girlfriend, I mean girls, when I was a young man too, you know. Heh, heh.

"So what was Fatty Wang doing getting into the act? Oh, I see, he was acting as your go-between. If you'd only come to me in the first place, there'd have been no need to involve him at all.

"But enough of all that. Though I'd like you to be quite honest with me. How serious are you about Zhang Qianqian? Just friends? Not going steady yet? The truth now Right, if that's the case then I've got a bit of advice for you, my boy. I suggest you think things over very carefully. I've run into this Zhang girl with other men more than once. A couple of days before we left Peking I

saw her walking hand in hand with another man late at night. And I'll wager theirs is no average friendship. Blasted darkness, though, meant I couldn't get a good look at the fellow she was with. What's that? What are you telling me now? That was you again? You two are getting married as soon as you get back to Peking?

"Ah, well, that's fine, I mean, wonderful news! Damned hot weather we're having, though. It's not your average summer's day, I tell you . . ."