

陳惠英：命定相隨的聯繫

**Tied Together by Fate**

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Translated by Howard Goldblatt

It is a chair.

A chair with a back and four legs, made of wood, with a velvet seat cushion.

The chair exists stolidly on the rooftop not far from the adjoining building.

When the fog lifts and the sky is clear, there is an unbroken vista of trees: greens and emeralds and browns and reds, and some naked branches. The chair faces the woods.

As the housepainter paints the wall, he turns his head to look out the framed window, where he sees a chair on the rooftop.

Who was it who moved the chair up there? A woman, ideally. For some reason, the way the chair is so wispy and delicately crafted, a woman comes to mind. Why has a woman moved a chair up onto the rooftop?

So she can sit out there under a clear sky? A woman exhausted from her household chores. Back in the village, A-xiu is like that, isn't she? After she's done the dinner dishes, she moves a rattan chair into the doorway to sit and cool herself with a palm-leaf fan. In the fall and winter, of course, she's forced to stay inside.

Does she come alone? Or does she play with a baby in her lap as she leans back in the chair? Could the woman be young and pretty? Ideally she's in her late twenties or, if she's taken good care of herself, her early thirties, no more than thirty-two.

A-xiu is twenty-two, I'm thirty. She's my second wife. The first one? She died. I attribute her death to vanity. Obsessed with getting to Hong Kong, she passed herself off as an entertainer, a singer. Damn! I ate too much. Why do they want this place painted pastel orange? It'll put you to sleep. One room using three different tones of orange. Lucky for them they hired me, since I have such a good eye for colour.

The chair is up on the rooftop. At lunchtime I went up and sat there awhile. A new house is going up nearby. Happily, I can still see the green mountains. It's springtime. There are new blossoms on the kapok trees, even buds on the wampee trees. It's springtime.

The door to the rooftop opens. Apparently the builders are back on the job. Should I go and move the chair downstairs? I feel like going out for a walk today, and that's not like me. I throw open the windows.

It's not such a big deal to climb up to the rooftop from the street, is it? A mere three storeys. Of course it's even easier walking the three flights down. The builders might just come up that way to harass me—a worrying thought. The woman—that's what we'll call her for the time being—puts a piece in the puzzle, and smiles. A corner of the sky is still missing.

If they put a tall ladder against the building, they could climb up and easily reach in through the window to pick up the Walkman, the alarm clock, and the wristwatch lying on the headboard. This piece doesn't work, so I'll keep looking. What about this one? Would I buy another Walkman? I should get one that plays CDs rather than cassettes. The alarm clock? This one isn't all that good. If I'm going to buy another one, it ought to be a radio-alarm, so I won't have to wake up to a monotonous buzzing. I won't buy another wristwatch, since I already have several in my jewelry box.

I vaguely recall that I've seen the woman. Not tall, actually on the short, pudgy side, with long hair, if I'm not mistaken. Men always fall for women with long hair. A-xiu has long hair; as they say, there are no ugly girls at twenty-two, except she has a strange body odour, not one you could call ill-smelling, but I take ten or twenty bars of good soap along with me every time I return. Scented soaps: orchid, jasmine, sandalwood. She turns around and gives them to her sisters as gifts. Face-saving means more to her than the man who shares her pillow. A vague recollection: short and pudgy, sort of languid.

How does she like to sit when she's up there? Letting the sun beat down on her? She probably doesn't go up there often; if she did, she'd likely have bought a canvas deck chair or one made of rattan, something on that order. That kind of wooden chair obviously comes from the dining table.

Some paint has dripped onto my paper hat, there's even a drop of it on my

eyebrow. Slightly cool. This pastel orange makes me sleepy. Soft and gently.

A-xiu has fallen asleep in the crook of my arm.

The woman: The builders are still at it. Not yet 3:15, the time for afternoon tea.

I think I'll go up and move the chair. Climbing up to the rooftop from the street and then walking down the stairs is a piece of cake. What if it really happened? I'd say to him, Hi, how are you? But . . . but, how could that be? Me, I'd scream . . . what's the big attraction? Ha, I'm bored silly, let's sing a song, what do you say?

The key's inside the room. It's not easy to get at it just like that. If I close the door, they won't be able to open it. I'll walk barefoot in the mud out there screaming for help. Could I hurt myself that way?

My window was broken the last time, and my cassette recorder went missing.

But it isn't time for afternoon tea yet. I'll wait till tea time to go up and move the chair.

Sometimes I can't help wondering how A-xiu passes the time when I'm not around. Does she move a rattan chair out into the doorway when she has nothing to do, hoping there'll be someone she can talk to?

Mother has always been hard of hearing, so she probably can't hear what A-xiu is saying.

That chair, if the woman I vaguely recall, sort of short and pudgy, sits in it and stretches out her legs, her belly forming a little hillock, her arms probably hang straight down, plump and meaty, languid and oh so comfortable, sort of like a cat.

Meow, meow.

A cat is supposed to stretch lazily.

When she stretches lazily, her breasts and shoulders swell, giving her a woman's figure.

Three-fifteen. Tea time.

Not me, there's still a corner I haven't painted. You guys go ahead.

The woman fits in another piece. She stands up, looking quite relaxed, stretches lazily, her breasts and shoulders swell and give her a woman's figure.

It's tea time. I think I'll go move the chair.

Yes, I've seen that woman, and she's nothing at all like A-xiu. Too short, too fat, too old, too worn-looking. The painter sizes her up ruthlessly.

As the woman moves the chair, she looks over at the new house and sees the painter staring at her through the window. At that moment she realizes that 3:15 isn't tea time for all workmen. \*