

Submission title: Souvenirs

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Every morning I spread out the coins, guide books, plastic swords, and brightly stitched cotton scarves. Most days, the sun cuts through the icy air like an axe, shedding particles of dust. I squint to make sure everything's there. Lift, polish, position. Take stock. Call me pathetic, call me a fraud, but unless you've tried peddling for twelve hours straight, I'm not taking any of it.

I don't have a lot. Waiting for me, a half-hour ride away, is a half-suitcase-worth of bedsheets and clothing I pulled from the village.

I have a daughter. I had a daughter.

What difference does it make?

*

I'm looking for a gift - what do you have?

I've got flower perfume in bottles, keychains, and more. I've got the terracotta warriors right here. Look around and see if there's anything you like. I've got it all.

*

When I moved to the city, I landed a job scrubbing floors in one of the hot-pot chain stores around town. Then, I met Guang, who introduced himself as an electrician. He said he liked it when I smiled, and I smiled a lot around him.

The next thing I knew I was pregnant, fat and fragile like a cake. I stopped smiling as much. I left the restaurant and started sitting in the cramped apartment that we shared, slanted sideways on the bed under layers of thick towels. Every now and then I looked at the half-moon of my belly and wondered what it all meant.

First, I was *Mo li*. Then, *Migrant*.

And then?

Mama.

She came out a red and wrinkled, her head as fleshy as a knee. Beautiful. We named her Mu Dan, for the peony flower.

She calls herself Amanda now.

What did I expect? As she grew older, she lengthened and hardened into a real person. Watching her change was like trying to track the scenery from the window of a moving bus.

I like to say that children can be a bridge across old age. They can provide a source of continuity. Yet because of that, they bring you utterly outside of yourself. Your love turns you inside out, all blood and organs. For better or for worse.

*

Yes, real, woven silk – feel it on your fingertips. Fine, Tibetan material. From up North, you know. Look at how it matches the colour of your eyes.

The price -

Oh, trust me, it's worth it. You won't regret this one. I can't say it enough

*

Guang's arrival is always announced by the dull, heavy lock of the door. In the other room, the faucet runs.

Got around four hundred today, I would mention while steaming rice.

He would grunt, running a hand along the edge of his jaw. Across from him, I can count the deep lines on his forehead finely woven into his face.

We eat, and when the clock hits eight, he looks up. I would know what he wants to ask. I try to keep my voice bright.

She wasn't here when I came home. Probably at one of those web cafés right now.

He would then heave a sigh that is more pained than relieved, like being hit hard in the stomach. Slowly, he swallows a gulp of tea. *No word from the police, either.*

The silence assumes physical proportions. It expands in the space between us for the rest of the night.

*

Fifty yuan, sir.

What?

*That's an antique coin. Look at that rim of rust, that pattern. That colour. I've nothing more to say.
Yours, for fifty.*

*

As a girl I had heard about ungrateful men, but I only really learned what 'ungrateful' was after I had Mu. I stumbled to her side whenever she called. I poured hours into preparing her meals, and tried my best, however unsuccessfully, to clean her room. Yet to her, this was just what the world was: something that miraculously made room for her wants and needs.

As a girl I heard about romance, and I heard about marriage, but I only understood 'love' with Mu. It wasn't just a sense of duty, as I had thought. The love was painful. It was not receiving anything in return. It was seeing the young incomprehension in her eyes and knowing she would have to be hurt, even if I was the one doing the hurting.

*

How much for that statue?

Eighty.

Eighty yuan?

Really, I need to do my job.

No deal.

Alright, alright – how about sixty?

Forty, or I leave.

You're killing me, sir.

Yes or no?

Please, sir, I have a family.

*

The night I last saw my daughter, I was cleaning out her bag.

What are these? I demanded. I threw down half-empty boxes of chocolates, squashed tissue-paper roses, fist after fist of small envelopes. Inside one was a two-page long verse of tacky love poetry, with lines copied from old pop songs like 'my love is as forever as the moon'. I twisted my face in disgust.

Mu Dan – Amanda – stared at the snow-like pile of tattered paper on the ground. She watched it as if it was going to burst into flames.

You told me that you were going to spend more time studying. You've lied to me, and on something like this. How could you?

She looked at me with a muted tone of defiance. *I thought it was the best course of action. What's so wrong with it?*

Because you're so young. There are so many better things that you need to do with your time. I pause to wipe the spit from my chin.

You haven't been out there in the world. You have no idea what you're getting into.

No, I think I do.

What?

With her head tilted upwards somewhat, she was much taller than I remembered. In the light, she was far prettier than I was when I was her age. I could see the fine line of each individual eyelash, fluttering indignantly.

I slapped her.

How dare - I shouted. Then another slap. Then a mess of flailing limbs: kick, bend, scratch. She was pushing me away, screaming. Maybe she was crying. It was all just a mess of sound, a high-pitched whistle pouring from her mouth as she bent over, cupping her hands over her face. I struck again and again, this time with words.

YOU WERE A MISTAKE, A MISTAKE. A TERRIBLE, TERRIBLE MISTAKE.

Guang has caught me with surprising force, his arms jacketing me.

After that, nothing. Just a whole lot of nothing.

*

Souvenirs! Scarves! Look around and see if there's anything you like - I've got it all.

*

The day comes and goes, dragging its feet. When I return, the sun has faded from the windows, and I set the rhythms of the early evening in motion: steam rising, rice cooking, oil bouncing on the pan. I hear the door click open. Without turning around I keep stir-frying the eggs.

Hey, I say. Earned four hundred today.

I am just about to tell him to sit down when I realize that a girl stands in the door. She looks tired, breathless, with cheeks slapped by the cold. Under the pale light I can see the thick, tousled hair, the thin nose, and the slightly crooked edge of her lips. She looks at me, as if wanting to take a step forward.