

Hungry Ghosts

A play
by Tim Luscombe

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1.

Zhi-hui's Shanghai apartment

SATURDAY

The apartment is smart, with a door to the outside world, and an exit to the kitchen

Zhi-hui holds the phone with his shoulder as he continues to type

Zhi-hui: *(Into phone)* Long Chan's? I need a table. Two. Xia. Xia Zhi-hui. *(Apparently flattered)* Aha, thank you very much. Look, it's going to be sometime this afternoon. I don't know exactly. Do me a favour and hold it, would you? *(Writes in diary)* Great. Thanks a lot. *(Hangs up)*

Doorbell

Irritated, Zhi-hui gets up

He opens the door to Pin-de (played by the same actress who played the woman in the prologue, but as different as is possible in the time given. A completely new character)

Shocked, they stare at each other

What the...?

Pin-de: *(Educated provincial)* Zhi-hui.

Zhi-hui: *(Stunned)* Why...? What – How the hell did you find this address?

Pin-de: Went to your newspaper. Explained to some woman we were getting together for Hungry Ghosts –

Zhi-hui: They wouldn't have given out –

Pin-de: Played the family card. Charmed her. And the five-hundred yuan note helped.

Zhi-hui: How dare you?

Pin-de enters the apartment. We might notice she has some slight mobility issues, e.g. painful arm, stiff leg

Pin-de: Funny Monkey.

Zhi-hui: *(In a daze, picking up laptop bag)* I'm on my way to work.

Pin-de: We read your stuff and watch you on the telly. My boy loves what you –

Zhi-hui: We're not chatting, Pin-de.

Pin-de: Lao-Chao. My son.

Zhi-hui: Tell me what you want.

Pin-de: This is lovely. Great view. You should see where I live.

Which blocks are yours? Can you see them from here? We read you'd 'diversified'. Property developer. Who'd have thought –?

Zhi-hui: Is there a point to this? Because –

Pin-de: *(Reading from the laptop)* 'Yet one more triumphant step for the People's Republic...'

Zhi-hui: *(Shutting the door)* What do you expect?

Pin-de: From a journalist? You've got a point.

Zhi-hui: If you're not going to tell me –

Pin-de: I've missed you.

Zhi-hui: You're dead to me.

Pin-de: You're in shock. You need time.

Zhi-hui shakes his head

Your face hasn't changed. Not really. Let me look at you.

Zhi-hui shuts laptop, bags it

I've come all the way from Guiyang – wouldn't you like to know a bit about –?

Zhi-hui: No.

Pin-de: In '82 I got the chance to study abroad. But I'd met my husband and we were in love.

Zhi-hui: I'm not the least –

Pin-de: I was allocated a job in Nanjing. But Wentian couldn't get work outside Guiyang, so I stayed to be with him and raise Lao Chao –

Zhi-hui: You turned down a job in Nanjing.

Pin-de: Go to Nanjing because a party official tells me to? ... Let's make some tea.

He doesn't move. She smiles, for the first time. Her warmth melts him, slightly

Zhi-hui: Then you'll go?

Pin-de: Then I'll tell you why I'm here. Then we'll both go. I can make the –

Zhi-hui: No! You stay there.

He exits to the kitchen

She waits for him to be gone. Then, hastily, she scans his desk, finds his diary

Pin-de: (*Reading*) Long Chan's.

Alert to every noise, she takes his phone and phones herself to obtain his number.

She rifles through a folder of papers. Among the white sheets, two orange documents catch her eye. She skims through both, realises she's hit bull's-eye...

She decides to take one – pockets it – and replaces the other...

Zhi-hui returns with tea

Has she got away with it?

I work alongside Feng.

Zhi-hui: (*Pouring tea*) Feng?

Pin-de: And Li-Tong, her husband, and others –

Zhi-hui: Feng got married?

Pin-de: We hold meetings, mostly in the evenings after work. We're like witnesses. We collect stories. Rural corruption, abuse. Women mostly. One-child brutality. I take the most likely cases. Pursue them through the courts.

Zhi-hui: The courts.

Pin-de: Wentian is a wonder. He took care of Lao-Chao while I went to evening classes. First improved my English then trained for the bar exams.

Zhi-hui: A lawyer? You?

Pin-de: Got my practising certificate. Occasionally we even manage to find someone brave enough to seek redress for old crimes – even abuses from the '60s and '70s –

Zhi-hui: (*Warning*) Pin-de...

They regard each other

He gives her tea

Pin-de: They arrested her.

Zhi-hui: Who?

Pin-de: Feng. Six days ago.

Zhi-hui: What's the charge?

Pin-de: Treason.

Zhi-hui: What did she do?

Pin-de: Nothing.

Zhi-hui: For fuck's sake.

Pin-de: I tried to mount an appeal but they stopped me on the way to court.

Zhi-hui: Who?

Pin-de: Thugs the party sent. Rolled the car into a ditch. Thing was, I was still in it. I didn't know who else to... We need you.

Zhi-hui: We?

Pin-de: The family.

Zhi-hui: My family is here. (*Lights cigarette*) Tell me what she did.

Pin-de: She brought some documents home from the Ministry where she works.

Zhi-hui: She stole them.

Pin-de: Evidence against local officials. Stuff I needed to prosecute a case I was preparing. Yes, party documents, but freely available inside the Ministry. She posted them on our website. It was shut down within hours.

Zhi-hui leaves his tea untouched, pours himself an alcoholic drink

She's going to die. They're going to shoot her in the head.

Zhi-hui: Well, I suppose it was only a matter of time –

Pin-de: You dog. You piece of shit. What's wrong with you?

Zhi-hui: What's wrong with *me*?

Pin-de: They lock our sister up and –

Zhi-hui: You want weeping and wailing?

Pin-de: Don't you care, you monster?

Zhi-hui drinks

Zhi-hui: Why are you telling me? Why have you come here? What the hell do you think I can do?

Pin-de: The word of a party boss trumps any judge, any law, and so I...

Zhi-hui: You think I –?

Pin-de: You don't get to be a land-developer, uproot thousands of people – erect shopping malls on the rubble of their houses – without a hell of a lot of help from the party. Twenty-eight days to demolish two thousand houses. You boasted about it –

Zhi-hui: Shouldn't believe everything you read in the papers.

Pin-de: – how you silenced the protest. Congratulations.

Pin-de takes from her pocket and holds out, challengingly, a USB memory drive. A bright red chip. It looks innocuous enough, only a few cms long

Go to your editor. Eight gigs of facts, figures, pictures. The cases Feng's supported.

She continues to hold the memory drive out to Zhi-hui

The party's laws that defend our right to do what we do.

Ignoring the memory drive, Zhi-hui is searching through the folder of papers

Pin-de's hand clenches nervously around the stolen document in her pocket

I'm writing a piece about some motor sports guy. Where the hell is it? It was here. *(He finds the orange sheet of paper Pin-de replaced, and doesn't notice that the other is missing).*

Pin-de relaxes

These are instructions – from the party. What I must write. A hatchet job. And you think I can pitch an article about some obscure rural protester –?

Pin-de: She's your sister. You don't want to save her life?

Zhi-hui: Are you out of your mind?

Pin-de: Then get this (*i.e. the memory drive*) to the international media. You have contacts. ... Enough shovels of earth, a mountain. Remember, Monkey? Enough pails of water, a river. Otherwise... We let her die? ... We've got less than three days. Tuesday morning. That's when they've scheduled the... 7 a.m.

Zhi-hui squashes his cigarette, gulps the remains of his drink

Zhi-hui: Finish your tea.

Collects things together, including the file of papers

Pin-de: You and I can grow old hating each other if we must, Zhi-hui. But Feng...

Zhi-hui: *(Hastily putting on a rather racy pair of shoes)* I've got to go.

Pin-de: Mother's on her way to see her.

Zhi-hui freezes

Course, Feng's not allowed visitors, so it's doubtful she'll even –

Zhi-hui: Mother?

Zhi-hui is still for a moment, then makes to go

Pin-de: Talk to me!

Zhi-hui: We have nothing more to –

Pin-de: Monkey, can't we? Together, can't we?

Zhi-hui: It's all gone, little one. Our old lives – vanished like mist and smoke. That's how it had to be. I can't help. *Mei you fa tze*. Nothing can be done.

She walks to him to embrace him. For a moment it looks as if he's about to allow it, but he manages to evade her arms

The sound of a high-speed racing car passing from one side of the stage to the other, the engine popping and grinding, breaks tearing and screaming

Lights

To read the entire play, please contact Tim directly on
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