

## The skies will be clear

The zoo is open on Christmas day. Lu has checked, double-checked, verified the exact translation of ‘including’. For the art gallery, the museum and the chocolate factory, it says *excluding Christmas Day*. But the zoo is open and it is a glorious 27 degrees, a temperature to surely take the chill off her heart.

The zoo sounds like no other place she knows. Strange animal cries beckon her. She is surprised to see so many people, couples and families, wandering through the lush green spaces. So newly arrived in the country, she had expected to find herself alone.

Above her, a bird shrieking almost causes her to trip. Looking up, she can just make out a species she doesn’t recognise, a kind of dusky grey pigeon up in the branches, entrapped by a larger grey bird. And not very happy about it.

‘Check these birds out!’ A stranger, too big and too loud, almost collides into Lu, yelling at his wife, or partner or whoever it is, to come over and share the hilarity. Lu is thrown off balance; he had almost trod on her toe and his noisy jeering blasts her eardrums. Why is this couple here at lunch time on Christmas day? Then, suddenly embarrassed by the mating squeals and the flood of memories, she moves away. Perhaps she’ll instead go back to her little apartment. There’s no contentment to be witnessed anywhere, not even in nature.

Lu turns back to the zoo entrance, hastening past the sea bird display. A bird called a pelican catches her attention. He is scratching under his wing and she pauses in her step to watch. She’s never seen a pelican before in her life. The giant bird can’t seem to reach the spot with its ridiculous long beak. Lu smiles, curious. Almost in complete synchronicity, and as if it had become aware of her, the bird stops scratching and eyes her beadily. Another stranger, observing not far from where Lu is standing, bursts out laughing at the same time as she does.

‘Incredible how animals can be so self-conscious, isn’t it,’ the stranger says, and Lu reddens. ‘They really do have a sense of humour.’ He, for it is a man, seems to be addressing her. *Self-conscious* She hears the sound of the word and mentally pictures the letters, in English, in her head. Does she know it? It’s one of those hyphenated words. She almost wants to pull out her phone to consult her dictionary. It would be funny if it was exactly the same word as the Chinese equivalent that had just popped into her head, just this moment as she had observed the giant bird.

She looks down but says ‘yes’ politely, knowing he will pick her accent in a flash.

She doesn’t want to talk to anyone, really.

‘You’re not from here, I’m guessing,’ the man continues. Predictably.

He’s just an average looking guy, a bit older than her, nicely dressed, no fat stomach or singlet like the guy who nearly crashed into her a moment ago. Pleasant enough. But she doesn’t want to talk to anyone. What is he doing here on Christmas Day, anyway?

‘I’m from China,’ she answers.

‘Oh, have you seen the pandas then?’

*Pandas. When her father left her mother, he went to Chengdu, where the pandas are from.*

So no, she hasn’t seen them, she’s only just arrived, and how predictable that he would assume she would want to see them. Like if he went to a zoo in China he would want to see a kangaroo.

But then, she checks herself, that’s a bit mean, and it *is* Christmas day and she hasn’t met many Australians yet. He seems friendly enough, but is this what they call *flirting?*

‘No,’ she answers. ‘Where are they?’

At least he hasn’t asked her what she is doing here. She has learnt in her very short time since arriving that when she tells people she is doing a PhD in chemical engineering, the conversation stops right there.

‘I’ll show you if you like. They are often asleep, though.’

If she hadn’t been about to leave, Lu had actually planned on seeing the polar bears. About as far away from the flora and fauna of her home country as possible. She doesn’t want to feel any familiar humidity or see bamboo or hear any recognisable cries. She doesn’t even live near a forest, but now as she passes the Chinese tallow tree, its species and genus etched on a small bronze plaque in Chinese characters, and comes face to face with a wall of rustling bamboo, a storm-swell rises within her. She has to sit down, suddenly, as if a wave, both longing and rejection, has hit her hard in the stomach.

‘Are you all right?’ her new companion stops in his step.

‘I’m fine. You go on, please. I will see the pandas another time.’

But he turns to join her on the bench. Lu shifts down it a little, away from him, although he takes a spot at the other end. A tag from his shirt is sticking up and she has to resist an urge to tuck it back in under his collar. He might still be flirting, yet he doesn’t have the air of a man who might. Not that she has anything much to compare with.

‘Maybe this is hot for you? I’ve never been to China. I’d have no idea.’

Lu fans herself with the zoo guide, not knowing how to answer. She takes a swig of her water bottle.

‘What is your name?’ he says.

‘Oh...it’s Lu.’

‘Lu,’ he says. ‘I like that name. My mother was Louisa. Everyone called her Lou.’

‘Why are you here?’ Lu blurts. There. She always says just exactly what she is thinking. It’s always been her problem.

‘Why am I here?’ The man looks genuinely surprised. ‘You mean, on Christmas Day?’

‘Yes, on Christmas day.’

‘If it’s not too personal a question,’ he starts.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says hastily. ‘I didn’t mean to ask a personal question.’

‘Why are *you* here?’ he says.

‘To see the animals.’ She knows it is not what he means.

‘So same here.’ He smiles at her.

Despite herself, Lu smiles too. She won’t tell him why she is really here.

‘Um...sorry, what is your name, also, please?’

‘Harry.’

*I like that name too.*

‘Do you still want to see the pandas?’ Harry asks. ‘They are often just there with their backs to you, not doing much. The government has spent huge amounts of money in an effort to get them to breed, but they can’t seem to get it together.’

‘So not every couple is happy.’ Lu says. *Not even in nature.*

Harry mumbles something. ‘We are all supposed to be, on Christmas day.’

It’s true. Lu remembers the very first Christmas she had been unhappy, the year she had finished school.

*They had been close friends at school, she and Xiao, and in their last year Lu had wanted them to become lovers. Xiao had said no. He was accepted into the prestigious Tsinghua University while she, with no family money and no scholarship, had gone to the university in her home town. She had written to Xiao, many times in the first year, somewhat less in the second year, and only a few times in the third year. He had never once replied.*

‘So why are you here, really?’ Lu tries again.

‘I’m here killing time.’

He laughs, perhaps at her puzzled expression. ‘It means spending time, waiting for what you really want to be doing.’

‘*Killing time*, hmm.’ Lu repeats. She likes the phrase. ‘So what is that? What you really want to be doing?’

‘I pick up my daughter from her mother’s after Christmas lunch. It’s the first Christmas day I have had apart from her – them.’

‘Oh, dear,’ Lu says. She is not sure it is the right expression for the circumstances, or spoken with the right amount of delicacy. ‘So you were not with her on Christmas morning?’

‘No – she lives in the country now. I can pick her up at 4 o’clock.’

Lu looks down at the ground, notices a small sculpture near the bench with an inscription on a bronze tablet:

*When there is harmony the skies will be clear and the earth will be at peace. All creatures will flourish, endlessly renewing themselves.*

Her throat feels tight with a clot of something. It’s seeing the Chinese characters again, probably.

‘Lao Tzu was a Chinese philosopher,’ Lu says, indicating the plaque with a nod of her head. ‘From the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.’

Harry glances over, then stands up and walks over to take a closer look.

‘I’ve never heard of him – sorry! That’s kind of beautiful, though, isn’t it?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Lu rushes. ‘About your daughter – your – family.’

‘Yes, well...’ he says. ‘Thank you. I’m guessing you are here studying?’

‘Yes. I am a student.’

‘So...can I ask what you are studying?’

Lu sighs. ‘I am studying chemical engineering.’

‘That’s wonderful!’ he says quickly. ‘That’s very hard to get into.’

Lu can feel herself blushing.

‘I was half way through a Masters in Environmental Science,’ Harry says. ‘But I had to stop, when she, my wife – oh, when we separated.’

‘Why?’ Lu blurts. There, again. It is so rude of her.

But Harry doesn’t seem to mind. ‘Well, I couldn’t afford it.’

‘Of course. Oh, dear,’ Lu says again. She won’t tell him, how hard she had worked, so hard, in her undergraduate years to be accepted into the Tsinghua University, where she had eventually travelled, to do her Masters. *She had messaged Xiao the news, how she had won a scholarship, had been accepted into the course, that she was moving to Beijing. She knew he was still there, working now, she had looked him up, but still he did not reply.*

She clears her throat. ‘So what do you do now, um, Harry?’

‘I sell second hand cars.’

Lu nods and considers what to say next. ‘Is that a good job?’

‘It’s about the lowest of the low,’ Harry replies. ‘It’s a job.’

*It took Lu 18 months to complete her Masters, breaking her studies to earn money. On the night before her graduation Lu sent what she had decided would be her final message to Xiao. She wanted to see him, to celebrate. To her complete surprise, Xiao replied. He agreed to have dinner with her, on her graduation night.*

‘I need a car,’ Lu says. ‘I would like to drive out to the other zoo, you know, the one with the African animals...’

‘Oh yes,’ Harry replies, ‘it’s great, I took my daughter and...’ he stops. ‘Shall we see if those pandas are getting it together today?’

She will cope with seeing the pandas from Chengdu. Wang Wang and Funi, she likes the names, and ‘*Look*,’ she reads aloud from the information screen. ‘Funi’s mother was named Lu Lu!’

Funi is sitting there in traditional panda pose, legs akimbo, shovelling in leaves of bamboo, furry white tummy rolling down and wobbling in folds. Lu laughs. Harry laughs. The panda couldn’t be more clichéd if she tried.

‘Doesn’t she look so perfectly happy on her own?’ Lu says. ‘She doesn’t need Wang Wang at all!’

Harry leans against the rails, absorbed in obvious enjoyment of the panda’s enthusiastic gorging. ‘I’ve never seen her so animated!’

*On the evening of her graduation, Lu had booked a restaurant in the city centre. She also booked a hotel. Her mother would come to the ceremony, but couldn’t afford to stay overnight. At the ceremony Lu couldn’t see Xiao’s face in the crowd, but there he was, after the event, amongst all the hugging and smiling and photography and flowers. She felt her chest heavy with longing, even despite his silence. His face was the same serious, funny face she remembered from their last year of school together. During the dinner she felt his seriousness settle meaningfully onto her laughter. He still loved her, she knew, nothing had changed. So that when she proposed the hotel, it felt like the right, natural, perfect thing to propose. Xiao accepted.*

‘What sort of car are you looking for?’ says Harry.

‘Um...just a small one. I am not a very experienced driver.’ Lu thinks of her attempts to drive, stalling her car regularly at the stoplights in the streets of Beijing.

‘I could bring one around for you to have a look at.’

Lu stiffens. ‘Well...’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean to scare you,’ Harry says hastily. ‘Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. It’s just how we work.’

*After they made love Lu didn’t ask questions. Xiao had been tender and passionate by equal measures, and quiet and reflective afterwards. They slept in each other’s arms and Lu had dared to begin planning a new life.*

‘How did you get into chemical engineering?’ Harry asks. ‘I confess I don’t know a lot about it.’

*In the morning, Lu told Xiao she had always loved him. He said nothing. He held her hands and told her he was engaged to be married to another woman. He had chosen his future wife on the basis of her beauty, intelligence and qualifications. Lu was beautiful, she had shown herself to be intelligent, but she was from a broken home. Her parents were separated, and not of high standing. He kissed her, and then he left without another word.*

‘Ah, oh...sorry. I was always good at chemistry. And I wanted to travel, to see the world.’

Only the bit about chemistry was true. She didn’t want to travel and she didn’t want to see the world.

‘Why did you break up with your wife?’ There, too personal again, but she really wants to know the answer. She has tried to understand it in her own family, but failed.

‘She left me. For someone else. A woman.’

‘Oh,’ Lu says, thinking *oh dear* can’t be right. Harry has stopped smiling at the panda. She struggles to find a response. ‘Are you angry?’

Harry is silent for a good moment. ‘There is no emotion for it. I would rather be angry, actually.’

Funi has had enough of her bamboo and lumbers off to sit in another spot.

‘Shall we go and see the polar bears?’ Lu asks, a little shyly.

Harry looks at his watch. ‘I had better be going. It’s half past two. It takes over an hour to get there.’

‘Oh, yes,’ Lu says quickly. ‘Of course. Your little girl will be so excited to see you.’

Harry shrugs, the sort of universal shrug that tells her everything about the disappointment of his life, his complicated love, his loss, his broken dreams.

‘Wait,’ she says. ‘I will come to the exit with you.’

‘Don’t you want to see more?’

‘I want to buy her a panda.’

‘Oh no – you mustn’t. You are a student...’

‘I want to.’

Harry laughs. ‘That’s very kind.’

They walk in silence to the exit. Harry has his hands in his pockets. For the first time she notices his build, which is quite lean, and his light cotton shirt, with the tag still sticking up, and his quite nicely cut casual pants. He is not too tall, not too short. He doesn’t look like a second hand car salesman.

At the zoo shop Lu’s hand hovers over a toy panda, then she notices a pelican. Harry is watching her, a half-smile curling around his mouth.

She finds a panda of just the right size. Harry makes one more half-hearted protest, then lets her buy it.

At the exit he pauses a moment, as if he is going to shake her hand or something.

‘Thank you,’ he says.

‘Thank you for showing me the pandas.’ She knows it’s silly, that she could quite capably have seen the pandas all by herself.

Harry lifts his shoulders.

‘Enjoy the polar bears. I wish you luck in your studies.’

‘Happy Christmas, Harry.’

‘Happy Christmas, Lu.’

And then he has turned to go, one hand back in his pocket, as the day brims still warm and inviting, still hours left of Christmas. There is the river and the parklands, the botanic gardens might even be open. *Opening your heart you become accepted, accepting the world you embrace the way:* the inscription on another plaque she had seen but not mentioned as they had left the panda exhibit. Lao-Tzu again.

She watches him walk away, his eyes to the ground, slightly stooped, twirling the little panda by the tag with one finger. He must be thinking about what is to come in his day, the pain and the muted joy of it all. *That’s wonderful*, he had said, about her degree, but it isn’t really wonderful at all. It is like selling second hand cars.

She watches him walk away for one long minute and then he stops. He turns around. She waits. Her heart quickens a little. She recalls Xiao for a fraction of a second, how he had been so silent, how obvious it all was and how she couldn’t - wouldn’t - see it.

She can’t tell if he is smiling as he observes her still standing there waiting; as if he had known she would wait. As if he had read the story in her head. So she smiles, because she knows, right now, just at this moment, that she is beautiful. That she is smart, and that it doesn’t matter about her family.

He raises his hand to wave farewell. It is the sign she needs.

One day soon she will bump into him again. At the botanic gardens or the museum. At the art gallery. He’ll give her his card, and he’ll have a good recommendation for the type of car she will need to get around the city and to drive out to the big zoo.

She’ll wait, and the skies will clear.

END

