

Wang Ping

THE SNAIL CATCHER

I love snails. The best time to eat them is at dusk, with a bottle of rice wine warmed to the right temperature, the sound of my wife cooking her last dish, my boy doing his homework in front of TV. Snails from the Western Lake are the cleanest of all. You're laughing. You think this water is dirty? You should see other rivers and lakes, all stinky from factory waste. No, I don't make a living catching snails. I'm a chauffeur for a businessman from Wenzhou, the city where everyone gets rich trading or making things. I make a thousand yuan a month, just enough to pay for food and rent. That's why I'm driving you around today for pocket money.

A man needs some pleasures after a day's work, like a glass of wine, like bringing home fresh fruit for his child, or a bag of pearl powder for his woman. What makes a man happy, I mean, truly happy? It's not being rich or famous. It is the moment when you come home and see your beloveds all there, healthy and content, doing whatever they're supposed to be doing. My boss is rich, business in his home town, in Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, and I believe he has a concubine everywhere. Is he happy? I'm not sure. He's always worried about being robbed, always on the road, always making up stories to cover his ass. His wife spends his money shopping during the day and playing majahn all night long. Their only son is left to the maids, chauffeurs, and teachers. I feel bad for the boy. He has everything one can imagine in this world, everything but love. He hates his family, hates school, hates people. What for? he asks me when I advise him to put some time into studies. My dad has no friend, didn't even

graduate elementary school, and he's a billionaire. I'm his son, entitled to everything he makes. Do I need a college degree to spend money? No!

I'm glad my son wasn't born into that family. He has no brand name clothes, rides a clanky old bike to school, gets only fifty yuan a month for pocket money, but he's happy. He's the best in math and physics in his school. His teachers think he can get into Beida or Qinghua. But I'm happy if he can get into Zheda or Fudan. Why so greedy? Why put so much pressure on the boy? He's only sixteen, but already taller and bigger than me, very handsome, a captain in the soccer team. Girls go nuts about him, drowning him with gifts. Last year on Valentine's Day, a girl took him to the most expensive store and picked a love-watch set, one for him, one for herself. My boy came home with that shiny thing, and when I found out where it came from, I told him it was like an engagement ring. You should see how pale he turned. The next morning, he returned the watch to the girl, right in front of the class, told her he couldn't accept the watch because his dad said it was an engagement ring. My stinky boy, he exposed my ass just like that. The girl flung the watches out of the window, almost flung herself out of the building because she lost her face big. My boy, he may be taller than me, but he's still innocent, his groin still hairless. Good! He won't be distracted from his school work. Hold it as long as you can till you get into college, I told him, then you can have as many girls as you can handle. And he laughs. I just want one, Dad, he said, a girl like Mom.

You're smiling. I know, a man is not supposed to praise his own wife. Well, I'm not. But if you meet her, you'd know what I mean. She's a real beauty, snow-white skin, smooth like the snail shell, tender like its meat. She's forty-one, but looks like a twenty-year-old. It's all because of the pearl powder I buy her once a month. Real good stuff.

Makes you look younger ten years. I can take you to the store next time. I love going out with her. Men and women stare at her, at us, can't figure out our relationship. Once, a guy asked her if I was her father. You should see how she turned red and swore at the rascal. I just laughed. What more can a man want? A beautiful wife who makes good money and loves her husband and our son? She makes four times as much as I do, selling beauty products and life insurance. Well, her face is the best advertisement for the company, so youthful, vital, and wise. She draws customers like a magnet. Am I worried that she'll run away with other men? No. Not at her age, even though she looks young and pretty. When a man has money, his eyes will wander to fresh flowers, the younger the better. Not a woman, though. Besides, where is she going to find a man as devoted, tender, funny, and relaxed? She's saving to buy an apartment. Next time you visit, you can stay in our new place. It'll be in the suburb. No one can afford a place in the city any more, except for millionaires and officials, of course. It's my idea: she saves to buy our nest; I save for my son's college tuitions. It's not a small sum, about 60,000. That's why I picked you up outside the store when my boss is not in town. All chauffeurs do that. My boss, he kind of knows. But what can he say? Pay is so low; things are so expensive. As long as I punch in mornings and lunch times, as long as I pick up his son at 5:00, he will keep his eyes half-open, half-closed.

My son and I are pals. We watch sports together, share our midnight snacks before bed. There's nothing he won't tell me. When I start making money, Dad, he'd say, I want you to quit your job and go fishing and catch snails everyday. He dreams of going to college, get a Ph.D. in USA, and come back to work for a big company. The first thing he'll get is cars, a Mercedes for himself, a Jetta for me. You're laughing. You think my

boy should get me a Mercedes, too, right? What do I want a car like that for? It invites troubles only. How can I concentrate on fishing or catching snails when I constantly worry about my car being robbed or stolen? A Jetta is good enough for me. I know my place; I know myself. People think I have no ambition, but I think it's a virtue. I have no envy for my boss. He has so much money, so many women, but doesn't know where his home is.

Happy are those content with their lots.

Enough snails. I only need half a bowl for my wine. Too much will be a waste. And waste equals crime. Why? Because it leads to greed. We should get going. I'll take you to the train station, then pick up my boss' son at school. I really don't want to be late for him. I'm the only person he trusts. That's what he said. Please don't argue with me. I will not take forty yuan from you. It's too much. Greed poisons the heart. Just give me ten. Five for wine and fruit; the rest will go to my son's college fund. Very nice to meet you. Please call when you visit again. I'll make ginger and scallion snails for you, the best you'll ever have.

I'm a simple man, and I'm not ashamed of it.

*Western Lake is the scenic lake in the city of Hangzhou. Many poems are attributed to the lake for its beauty and history.

**Beida stands for Beijing University, Qinghua for Qing Hua University, Zheda for Zhejiang University. All are top schools in China.

***Mr. Wang finally accepted twenty yuan for a whole-day service.