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Written by A Yi

Translated by Anna Holmwood

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A PERFECT CRIME

A YI

Translated by
Anna Holmwood



ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

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A Beginning

I went to buy glasses today. I reached for a pair of sunglasses first, but the more you try to disguise yourself, the more you stick out, so I chose a pair of normal ones instead. Much better for diverting people's attention. They'd think I was short-sighted, and short-sighted people seem trustworthy.

I also bought some duct tape, which I wrapped around my hand. It was sticky stuff. It took ages for me to tear it off and get my hand clean again.

The day's plans didn't originally include buying clothes, but somehow I found myself entering a shop, having taken pity on the owner. She was in her thirties, short, with a face grey like dried orange peel. She'd just been humiliated by a handsome customer. Everyone likes beautiful things, why shouldn't she want her own boutique? Well, that's what I thought, anyway. But I regretted it as soon as she looked up. Her eyes were submissive, unbearably so, and they trailed after me wherever I went. Just as I was about to leave she addressed me in a funny voice: 'Uncle, I do a good price. Elsewhere it might cost over a thousand. I sell it for a few hundred. Exactly the same stuff. I've got everything

you could want.' She pulled out a T-shirt and continued. 'Try this on. If you don't, how'll you know what it looks like? Try it first, we can talk money afterwards.'

There was an edge to her voice. I headed for the mirror and held it up, but I couldn't see any noticeable difference to how I normally looked.

'It really suits you,' she said as I tossed it aside. 'What are you after, then?'

'You don't have what I'm after.'

I made for the door.

'Try me.'

'I can't explain.'

I walked out and she followed like a disappointed dog. Just at that moment, a suit walked past decked out in the latest fashions from the West, a pair of shiny leather shoes and a briefcase under his arm.

'Do you have something like that?' I said.

'Yes, yes,' she breathed.

'Including the shoes and the briefcase?'

'The whole outfit.'

I figured if I looked professional I'd be trusted. I wouldn't get caught.

She went in and riffled around in a cardboard box, watching me all the while, scared that I might leave again. It was all there. She wasn't lying. Only the briefcase was brown. I carried the items into the changing

room, tried them on and emerged to check how I looked in the mirror. I spotted some gel on the table.

'Can I borrow a bit?'

'Of course. Go ahead.'

I squeezed a blob into my hand and spread it through my hair so that it shone.

'How old do I look now?'

'Twenty.'

'Tell me the truth.'

'Twenty-six, twenty-seven.'

She couldn't decide if I was satisfied with her answer and looked on anxiously as I headed back to the changing room. The truth was I was still in school. I'd be lucky to be taken for twenty-six.

I came out again and dumped the clothes to one side. I stared at her for about five seconds and then asked, 'How much?'

She jumped up as if I'd just thrown her a life jacket and started tapping on her calculator.

'I'll give you the best discount. Usually it'd be six hundred for the lot, but for you I'll do five eighty.'

'Too much.'

'The best I can do is knock off another twenty, otherwise I won't make any profit.'

'Still too much. I can't afford that.'

'Then you name a price.'

I remembered Ma's instructions: always cut the price in half. But I was even tougher.

'Two hundred.'

'Too little.'

'Two hundred.'

'Uncle, be reasonable. They're yours for four hundred.'

'I've only got two hundred.'

'If I sold all of that for two hundred I wouldn't have a business left. If you only want to buy one item, we can talk.'

I started to leave. Behind me, nothing but silence. It was a strange feeling, like a nasty break-up after which no one is happy. The further I walked the more I believed her, but by then I was too embarrassed to look back. Just as I was about to turn the corner, just as I was certain I'd lost my chance, I heard her call: 'Wait, wait! OK, for you two hundred.'

I saw her waving at me. I waved back at her, smiled sardonically and then walked away.

I got what I wanted. I only had ten *yuan* on me anyway.

At 6.30 that evening, I returned to the military academy compound where I was living with my aunt and uncle. Mr He, our idiot neighbour, was just coming back. Thanks to the state's military benefits, he lived a

miserable life. The whole base was an empty tomb. Me and old Mr He were seemingly the only ones living there and yet the gate was guarded 24/7. The academy sent the latest recruits here as part of their military training and they executed their duties well, keeping their backs and limbs ironed stiff. I had been worried that the guards or Mr He might catch me, but they were all robotic fools anyway.

I followed old Mr He upstairs, waited until he shut his door and eased my aunt's open. The shady spirits inside pounced, though I knew the apartment was filled only with nothingness.

I sat staring into space, not sure what to do next to execute my plan. I imagined how in three or five or fifty days I might be in prison. Apparently prisoners are taught a vocation. They spend their time inside working so that when they get out they've got a trade – as cobblers or carpenters, tailors or carvers. All I'd ever learned to do was to masturbate. I went to my room and pulled across the curtains. It was over pretty quickly.

I drifted off, but before long I was awake and couldn't get back to sleep again. I had to find something to do. Deciding to take my chances, I turned on the light, pushed aside an empty cardboard box, moved some flowerpots, magazines and a vase with fake flowers and finally pulled away the tablecloth to reveal my aunt's

safe. I stuck the key in and tried to unlock it. After a while I switched off the light and kept trying: darkness sharpens my focus.

Auntie would go mad when she found out the safe had been emptied, of course, but I was going to need money if I was to have any hope of carrying it off. Maybe she'd cry. Mind you, my aunt deserved it. Me and my family didn't owe her or my uncle a cent. The day it had been decided that I was to come to the city to live with them marked one of the most important business deals to have ever been struck in the history of our family. When they were young, Pa did better at school than my uncle, but only one of them could attend university and Pa let his brother go. While he ended up down a mine, getting lung cancer and dying. Someone had to shoulder the guilt, but my aunt was only ever a bus conductor. It's not like she could really take care of me. She always thought of herself as better than us just because she was born in the capital of our province. Ma sent me to live with her with bags full of presents from our home town, but Auntie gave them back, all proud, saying, 'Keep them, keep them. Things are difficult for you lot.' I wanted to shout at her, 'My ma's got more money than you!' After I moved in, I used to spend my days curled up on the balcony. The whole thing was so humiliating, I wished I was dead.

She would turn off the gas when I showered. Sometimes she would promenade up and down in her high heels while I was watching television. She didn't say I couldn't sit on the sofa exactly, but as soon as I got up she would be there, wiping it down. She was like a farmer looking for cow pats to fertilise her fields, and that's exactly what I was to her: a pile of shit.

Her attention had been diverted away from me recently, though. She and my uncle were building a new house and Auntie had to oversee it. Uncle, meanwhile, had been posted to another base, so I was often left on my own, which I'd thought was going to be great. It would be a relief not to have my aunt breathing down my neck. But I quickly realised it doesn't matter where or how you live, the house always wins over you in the end.

I was still jiggling the key. It was stuck and time was slipping away. Suddenly, I heard footsteps outside. They stopped at the door. Then the jangle of keys. Something was being inserted into the lock. The outer metal door clanged. I continued jigging until I realised with a pulse of frustration, pulling at it wildly, that I couldn't get it out. It broke. Auntie was now opening the inner door and I just managed to flip the cloth back over the safe in time, pulling the corner straight. She closed the doors as I put the old magazines and vase back on top. They

weren't in the right position, so I shuffled them around before lifting the flowerpot up off the floor. My hands were shaking so violently I nearly dropped it. The curtain was pulled across the doorway, thank God.

A second later, Auntie switched the light on and made for my room. I was lying on the floor, breathing heavily, counting out loud: 'Forty-four, forty-five.' She scooped the curtain up in her hand and poked her head through, not seeing my foot pushing the cardboard box back into place.

'Why have you got the light off?'

She pulled the curtain back, letting the yellow glow flood in.

'I'm doing my push-ups.'

'Wasting your time instead of studying, in other words.'

She forced me to my feet and appeared to be looking for something. Then she casually pushed aside the cardboard box and grabbed the vase. She was probably about to move the flowerpot and magazines, pull off the cloth and check inside the safe. I needed to say something urgently, anything.

But at that moment she turned and said, 'What's the matter? Didn't I tell you to go and study?'

At once my face turned red, but I didn't move.

'Go.'

The order had been issued and I left, wet with sweat. I sat on the edge of the sofa like a prisoner with his head laid out on the guillotine, waiting for her to storm back out and let me have it.

I imagined choking her to death. I wasn't yet sure who I was going to kill, but if anyone, why not her? It would be too easy, though, too expected. I hated her. But she wasn't worth the energy.

When she emerged she was merely stuffing some old clothes into a bag.

'I'm going to visit your uncle and mother tomorrow. Do you need me to bring back some money?' she asked.

'No,' I said.

I collapsed and she left. For a long time afterwards it felt as if she was still there. I went to my room, but it didn't look as if the cloth had been touched.

Prelude

The next morning I checked again on the key broken off in the lock. It looked like a little dick caught in the jaws of a vagina. It struck me that I needed a pair of pliers. I'd buy some on the way back from school.

Today we were having our graduation pictures taken.

The light was soft and dappled, which made the campus look cleaner than usual, cheerful even. The pictures were being done under a row of trees. Everyone was gathered together, chatting. I stood by myself. First we were to have our individual shots, then the group photo. I watched my classmate Kong Jie. She was wearing one of her stage outfits, made from white silk, a pink skirt and a blue necktie. She kept running her hands through her sweaty hair. The sun was beating down on us, making her look even whiter, as if she was being photographed in a winter wonderland.

When Kong Jie wasn't in school, her mother followed her everywhere like a pathetic mutt. At least, that's what she told me. After her father died, she became her mother's sole property, locked up indoors, made to repeat scales on the piano like on a production line. Her

mother installed herself in the front row of Kong Jie's every performance, examining the audience's reaction at the end before leading her daughter away. Until one time when the entire audience gave Kong Jie a standing ovation and her mother finally pulled her into her arms and wept with happiness.

The only secret Kong Jie ever kept from her mother was the purchase of a little puppy. Or at least it was while she tried to find a way to broach the subject with her. But by the next morning she realised she was never going to be allowed to keep it. Every day she gave it to a different friend to look after, until she came to me. My aunt was away so much she'd barely notice. It was perfect. That is, until I ended up killing it. I got so mad I kicked it, and it died in Kong Jie's arms. She dug it a grave using a spoon, the tears dribbling down her cheeks. I told her someone else did it.

Just then she caught me looking at her and came over, thinking I wanted to speak to her. There was a sweet empathy in her eyes, like a mute gazing on another mute, a deaf person gazing on another deaf person. We'd both lost our fathers. Maybe that was it.

'You look unhappy,' she said.

'It's my aunt.'

I imagined her laid out in the snow, legs open, me hovering over her. My heart thumped. I couldn't bear

to look straight into her charcoal eyes, but I tried to stay casual.

'I can't take it any more,' I said, then I walked off.

They'd tacked up some white cloth where the photos were being taken and put a chair in front of it. Someone would sit down and everyone saluted them with their eyes. Then it was my turn. I was already feeling pretty awkward when the photographer looked up over the camera and said, 'You need to brush your hair. It's a mess.'

Laughter erupted around me. My lip quivered, my cheeks flushed, but I straightened up and pointed my chin fuzz right at the lens, clenched my cheeks and stared it down, cold and mean. I wanted this to look like a mugshot. I wasn't trying to look good, this was going to be the image everyone would remember me by. The picture that would be plastered all over the papers. For my aunt and my mother.

When they were done I walked away. I was never going to see this place again.

I had a hundred *yuan* left after buying the pliers. Might as well buy the rope and knife while I was at it. You had to get a certificate to buy a combat weapon, so at first I thought of purchasing a fruit knife, but the shopkeeper gave me a conspiratorial smile and I realised I needn't

be so careful. He led me into the back room and took out a box of army switchblades. I chose the cheapest one. I was going to strangle my victim with the rope, but if they fought back I might need a knife. Plus, a switchblade would lend the whole event a ceremonial feel.

I hid it in my bag and threaded my way through the crowds. As I walked I couldn't resist the temptation to slip my hand back into my bag and push the button. Click, it flipped out; click, back in. It made me feel dizzy. I'm the Angel of Death. I could kill any one of these people. The way I saw it, those who get killed are the ones who are worth the effort. These people weren't right. The spindly man walking towards me, combing his hair? No, he wasn't right. None of them were right.

Back at home I used the pliers to pinch hold of the broken-off key, but no matter how hard I tugged and yanked, it just wouldn't budge. After an hour, I was furious and began attacking the safe with the pliers instead, until the bit between my thumb and forefinger started throbbing and tears started rolling down my cheeks. I had to keep at it. I couldn't go through with it without money.

At 1.30 the neighbour's door banged shut. It was Old He, heading out. Things may not have been going well, but my plan wasn't ruined yet. I grabbed my bag and opened the door. I was going to follow him.

Mr He had a worn-out hunting dog who walked by lifting his legs in a languid, funny way, like a dignified mare. Every once in a while they stopped, Mr He to scratch his arm while the animal smeared his flea-infested back all over his master's leg. He lay down periodically, refusing to continue, to which the old man responded with a gob full of phlegm and a kick to his stomach: 'Useless dog, hurry up and die.' He snorted a response and Mr He whipped the sorry mutt with his leather belt before he pulled himself up onto his unsteady feet. Mr He had to keep throwing biscuit crumbs onto the road ahead just to get him to walk on.

I understood the guy's particular kind of loneliness. He was used to being someone important in the military academy, looking down on people. It wasn't death that scared him, more like the way time seemed to stretch out endlessly. He hardly slept. He was up early every morning walking the dog, coming back as the sun rose, when he would make a big fuss over breakfast. Then he would walk to the sentry box to collect the newspaper, which he read fastidiously all morning, taking in each and every word before launching into the operation that was lunch. Then came the hour-long nap and another walk with the old dog. Mr He wasn't a nice guy, no nicer than my aunt, but he wasn't the right victim either.

I couldn't be bothered to follow him any more so I went home, shoved some soapy water in the lock and had another go with the pliers. I stood there, anger rising up in me like steam building in a bottle, slowly expanding and pressing against me until I exploded under the pressure. Gripping the pliers, I attacked the lock, but it fought back.

I lay down on the bed and tried to calm myself, but panic gripped me. I got up and lay back down again, repeating the cycle, each time thinking I'd come up with a solution, only to descend deeper into my anxiety. The last time I got up I felt so impotent, all I could think of was how much I wanted to punish it. So I pissed into the lock. Then I grabbed the base, hunched one shoulder up like a bull, roared three times and turned it upside down. It crashed to the floor. It was too much to hope that the force might've popped it open, but I did notice that the underside had a plastic bag glued tightly across it. I ripped away the bag and found some bubble wrap and old newspapers, inside which was a round, flat piece of jade carved with the image of a Buddha. It was shiny like a mirror. The room was dark, so I went to find some light and watched as the Buddha danced under the rays. He laughed with his mouth, eyes and eyebrows. Even the red birthmark on his temple was laughing – laughing so that the rolls of fat and robes

covering them were billowing like waves.

I too laughed, laughed so that tears gathered in my eyes. I wanted to pick up the phone and tell someone, anyone, about how I'd managed at least to unlock the strange mind of my petty aunt and her secret hiding place. She'd been almost stupidly clever. She didn't trust anyone, not even herself. She believed the most dangerous place to be the safest. She'd stuck her most precious possession on the *bottom* of the safe.

Just then Old He returned and I checked the time on my mobile: 6.30 – dinnertime exactly. That's right, fucking army guy.