

Shi Zhecun (1905–2003)

ONE EVENING IN THE RAINY SEASON

Translated by Gregory B. Lee

It was the rainy season, and once again the rain was pouring down. I wasn't at all bothered by the rain; what really bothered me were the passing cars whose wheels as they sped by splattered muddy water over my trousers, and sometimes even left me savoring a mouthful of the wonderful stuff.

When things weren't too busy at the office, I'd often stare out of the window at the rain falling against the pale sky, and tell my colleagues how I loathed the wheels of those cars. There's no point in trying to economize when it's pouring rain; you could take the bus, travel in comfort, they'd urge me kindly. But I didn't deign to heed their well-intentioned words, since it was nothing to do with economizing. I just liked putting up my umbrella and returning home amid the pitter-patter of the rain. My home was very close to the company's offices, so there was no need to take the trolley bus at the end of the working day. And there was another reason why I didn't like taking the bus when it rained. I've never had a raincoat and in rainy weather it's usual for everyone to wear a raincoat, and on such narrow buses with the people brushing past each other they are all covered in water, and I, despite my quality umbrella, would inevitably arrive home drenched.

Besides, especially when night was about to fall and the streetlights came on, walking along the sidewalk with a momentarily free and easy mind observing the city in the rain might be muddy and messy but could after all be taken as a personal pleasure. The precise contours of people and traffic, coming and going in the misty drizzle, would all vanish, the broad avenues would reflect

the numerous yellow lights, and now and again green and red traffic lights would glisten in the pedestrians' eyes. When it rained hard, the sound of people talking nearby, even when it was loud, seemed to hang in the air.

People often take such behavior as an illustration of how frugal my way of life is, but they don't understand that I draw a great deal of pleasure from it, even if the wheels of the passing cars do splatter mud all over me; and I certainly wouldn't give up the habit just for that. Yes, a habit, what's wrong in calling it a habit? It's already been going on for three or four years now. Every so often, I'll think that I really should buy a raincoat so that I can take the bus on rainy days, and even when walking avoid having my clothes splattered with muddy water, but so far it's simply remained one of those things I ought to get around to one day.

During the recent days of continuous heavy rain, I as usual went off to work in the morning clutching my umbrella, and in the afternoon returned home clutching it. It was the same every day.

Yesterday afternoon, lots of things really piled up at work. When four o'clock came around, I saw that it was still raining hard outside, so I stayed on alone in the office, thinking I might as well get a few more bits of work out of the way, and save having an even larger pile to do the following day, while at the same time put off going out into the rain until it had died down. In the end, I hung around until six o'clock, by which time the rain had long since stopped.

When I got outside, although the street was already all lit up, the sky itself had in the meantime brightened up. Trailing my umbrella, and avoiding the dripping eaves, I strolled along from the southern end of Jiangxi Road to Sichuan Road Bridge, which in the end took me almost half an hour. It was six twenty-five by the big post office clock. Before I'd actually started across the bridge, the sky had grown dark again, but I hadn't noticed since I knew nightfall was approaching. As soon as I stepped onto the bridge, the black clouds unleashed a sudden downpour, which resulted in a resounding pitter-patter of rain. Looking down on the confusion of the pedestrians scurrying for shelter on North Sichuan Road and both sides of Suzhou Creek, I even felt a slight anxiety in my own mind. What were they so worried about? Surely they knew this was simply rain, and presented no danger to their lives. So why were they so urgently trying to hide? Maybe they were frightened of getting their clothes wet, but I could clearly see even those clutching umbrellas and clad in raincoats quicken their pace. I felt that at the very least this was some sort of unwitting chaos. But, if I hadn't felt that I was taking a leisurely stroll in the rain, I too might have dashed madly off the bridge. That's what I was thinking as I opened up my umbrella, without even noticing I'd already crossed the Tiantong Road intersection. It was also raining torrentially down on the main road. It was quite a sight. Apart from a few cars, which, breaching the rain one after another as if boring through it, sped by as normal, there was no traffic, no trolley buses or rickshaws to be seen. I wondered where they'd all taken refuge. As for people, there were almost none moving about, but under the shopfront awnings and

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shelters you could see little groups of them both with and without umbrellas, with and without raincoats, all huddled together staring out disdainfully at the rain in the face of which they were helpless. For what kind of weather they'd bought their rainwear, I didn't know. As for me, I was already approaching Wenjianshi Road. I wasn't at all put out. I had a good umbrella, and my face couldn't possibly be wet by the rain, and although my feet felt a bit damp, it would merely mean putting on a dry pair of socks when I got home.

As I walked along, I surveyed North Sichuan Road in the rain and had a vague feeling that it was rather poetic, but this "feeling" was certainly no substantial kind of thought; apart from an "I should make a turn here," there was no conscious thought in my mind at all. Stepping off the sidewalk and looking around I saw there was no traffic about, and I had just decided to cross over and turn down Wenjianshi Road when a trolley bus I hadn't seen coming stopped right in front of me. I stopped and stepped back onto the sidewalk and stood next to a telegraph pole waiting for the bus to go. Although I could in fact have happily crossed the street while the bus was stationary, I didn't do so. I've lived in Shanghai a long time and know the traffic regulations. Why didn't I walk to the other side of the street at the moment I could have crossed? I didn't know why.

I counted the passengers descending from the first-class compartment of the bus. Why didn't I count the ones getting off in third class? It was no conscious choice on my part; the first-class seats were at the front of the bus, the passengers getting off were right in front of me, so I could see them very clearly. The first passenger was a Russian wearing a red raincoat, the next one was a middle-aged Japanese woman who hurriedly got off the bus, opened up the plain Oriental umbrella she held in her hand, and, concealing her head in mouselike fashion, rounded the front of the bus and turned into Wenjianshi Road. I recognized her; she ran a fruit shop. The third and fourth looked like merchants of our own from Ningbo. They both wore green rubber Chinese raincoats. The fifth, and in fact the last, passenger to get off was a young woman. She wasn't carrying an umbrella, nor was she wearing a raincoat. It seemed she'd boarded the trolley bus after the rain had stopped, and on arriving at her destination unfortunately found it to be raining hard like this. I surmised that she'd boarded the bus a long way away. She must have got on at least a few stops beyond Carter Road. She got off the bus. She looked trim and slender, but since she had her shoulders covered, it wasn't until she stepped awkwardly onto the sidewalk that I started to notice how beautiful she was. There are many facets to beauty. Granted, a pretty face is important, but what also count are a graceful bearing, a well-proportioned figure, and a pleasant way of expressing oneself or at least one that isn't annoying. And this woman in the rain, I felt, would meet such criteria completely.

She looked up and down the street, then went to the corner and looked down Wenjianshi Road. I knew she was urgently looking for a rickshaw to hail. But I could see, following her glance, that there was no sign of a rickshaw, and

the rain was still falling heavily. She turned around, revealing a vexed look on her face, and, knitting her delicate eyebrows, she took shelter under the awning of a furniture shop. I also retreated under the awning, even though the trolley bus had already left. The road was clear, and I could easily have crossed the street. But why didn't I cross over, and continue on my way home? Was it because I felt regretful at the thought of leaving this young woman? Certainly not. I was totally unaware of any such feeling. Yet neither was it anything to do with having a wife at home waiting for me to come home and eat with her in the lamplight. At that moment all thought that I already had a wife had slipped from my mind. Before me was standing a beautiful companion, and one in the midst of difficulty; lonely, standing and staring blankly into the incessant rain. It was quite simply for these reasons that involuntarily I edged up to her side.

Although we were standing under the awning, and although there were no large drops of water coming down from it, we were hit by the cool drizzle when the wind blew. I had an umbrella, and like a brave, medieval warrior I could have used my umbrella as a shield, warding off the attacking spears of the rain, but instead the top half of the young woman's body was periodically drenched. Her thin black silk dress was little use against the rain and merely emphasized her soft, shapely arms. She repeatedly turned and stood sideways to avoid the drizzle attacking her breasts. But, I wondered, didn't it matter then that her arms and shoulders were exposed to the rainwater, letting her dress cling to her skin?

On clear days, the main roads were clogged with rickshaws touting for business, but now that they were needed, there were none to be found. I thought about how poor the rickshaw pullers were at plying their trade. Perhaps it was because there were too many people wanting to hire a rickshaw; demand was outstripping supply, so that even on a bustling thoroughfare such as this, there was not a trace of a rickshaw to be found. Or perhaps all the rickshawmen were themselves sheltering from the rain. In rain as heavy as this, were the rickshaw pullers not entitled to seek shelter themselves? Until now the availability of rickshaws had never been of concern to me, and yet here I was suddenly pondering the question. Besides, I was even thinking what a detestable bunch the rickshawmen were. Why don't you pull your rickshaws by and accept this fare? Here's this pretty young woman, in discomfort and standing in the rain just waiting for any one of you to pass by.

But however much I reflected along these lines, it didn't produce the slightest sign of a rickshaw. Now it was truly getting dark. Across the street a few men, who had been sheltering in the shop doorways and who were only wearing shirts, had grown impatient and decided to brave the rain; risking being drenched from head to toe, they made a dash for it. I saw that the young woman's long eyebrows had knitted yet more tightly; her eyes shone bright, as though she were very anxious. The gaze of her saddened eyes met mine. From her eyes I could tell she was astonished by me. Why do you keep standing there? You have an umbrella, and a pair of leather shoes. Who are you waiting for? In rain like this, who might you be waiting for on the street? How could

eyes boring through me like that not harbor some ill intent? From the way she shifted that inquisitorial gaze from me to the darkened sky, I surmised she had certainly entertained these thoughts.

Yes, I had an umbrella. What is more, it was big enough for two. I cannot understand why this realization hadn't come to me sooner. But now that it had, what would it have me do? I could use my umbrella to protect her from this excessive rain. I could go with her a short way in order to find a rickshaw. If it wasn't far I could see her home. If it was far, well, so what? Ought I to cross this divide and make clear my good intentions? But might she not have some other sort of misgivings about my intentions? Perhaps she might misread me, like I had just guessed she had, and then turn me down. But then would she really prefer to stay here in the wind and rain, on this chilly evening street, standing on her own until who knows when? Not a bit of it! The rain would soon have stopped. It had already been raining without letting up for . . . how long? In this rain I'd completely forgotten time flowing by. I took out my watch. Seven thirty-four. Over an hour now. Surely the rain couldn't go on falling like this forever? Look at the road unable to rid itself of the flow, gutters already past containing the rainwater. How much water had already collected in them, whipping up eddies on the surface, and how long before it would inundate the sidewalk? Impossible. It certainly couldn't rain that long. In a while she could surely be on her way. Even if the rain didn't stop, it was likely a rickshaw would pass by, and she would surely take it, whatever fare was demanded. So, should I leave then? Yes, I should. So why didn't I?

Ten minutes went by like this. I still hadn't left. The rain didn't stop and there was not a hint of a rickshaw. She continued to stand there as anxious as before. With cruel curiosity, I wanted to see how she would finally extricate herself from such difficulties. Yet seeing her in such desperate straits, I was divided between impulses of compassion and indifference.

Again she was watching me with astonishment.

Suddenly, I realized why; how could I not have realized just now? She seemed to be waiting for me to present her with my umbrella, and see her home. No, not necessarily see her home, just see her to where she was going. You have an umbrella, but you just stand there. You want to share your umbrella and shelter me from the rain, so what are you waiting for? her eyes said to me. I blushed but didn't bow my head in shame, turn on my heels, or walk away.

Replying to a young woman's gaze with a blush of shyness was something that hadn't occurred often since my marriage. I immediately felt odd about it. How could I account for this? I couldn't! But immediately a sort of masculinist sentiment welled up inside me; I wanted revenge. Putting it like that makes it seem rather forceful, but at the very least I wanted to subdue the urgent press of her mind on me.

Eventually I moved closer to the young woman and sheltered her with one half of my umbrella.

"Miss, I'm afraid there won't be any rickshaws for a while. If you don't object, I could accompany you on your way. I have an umbrella."

I wanted to say "see you home," but it immediately occurred to me that she wasn't necessarily on her way home, so I resorted to this ambiguous way of phrasing it. While saying my piece, I tried to adopt as nonchalant an air as I could muster, but she could surely see that concealed behind this unconvincingly calm attitude lay a rapidly beating pulse.

For some time she stared at me with a hint of a smile on her lips. She was weighing up the motivation behind my offer. Shanghai is not a friendly place, and people are not trusting in their relations with one another! Perhaps she was putting off her decision. Would the rain really not stop in a short while? Would a rickshaw really not come by? How about accepting his offer of the umbrella just for the time being? Perhaps on turning the corner there'd be a rickshaw, perhaps I should just let him see me to where I'm going. Was there any harm in that? . . . There wasn't. But if I bump into anyone I know, won't they be suspicious? . . . Then again, it's really getting late, and the rain doesn't seem to be letting up.

Then she nodded; a very slight nod.

"Thank you." A soft Suzhou lilt wafted from between her crimson lips.

Turning into the western end of Wenjianshi Road, as the rain pitter-pattered onto the umbrella, with a young woman at my side, I began to wonder at this chance encounter. How could things have come to this? Who was she, this woman walking beside me, letting me shelter her with my umbrella? Aside from with my wife, over the past few years I hadn't done anything like this. I turned my head and glanced over my shoulder. In a shop there were people taking a break from work who were staring at me, or rather at us. Through the mist of the rain, I could see the suspicious expressions on their faces. I started with fright. What if there was someone who knew me? Or could there be someone who knew her? . . . I glanced back at her. She was just lowering her head and carefully picking out her steps as she went. My nose had just brushed her hair, and it smelled so good. No matter which of us was recognized, if they saw us walking together like this, what would they think? . . . I lowered the umbrella slightly so as to hide the upper part of our faces. Unless people intentionally bent down, they wouldn't be able to see our faces. She seemed to approve of this move.

At first I walked on her left side, with my right hand holding up the umbrella. To give her extra shelter from the rain, my arm was stuck right up in the air. I started to feel my arm aching, yet didn't consider it a hardship. I looked at her sideways, detesting the umbrella handle that obstructed my line of view. In profile, she didn't look as pretty as she did from the front. However, I made a new discovery from this perspective: she reminded me very much of someone I knew. But who? I searched and searched my memory, she seemed very reminiscent . . . someone who almost every day came to mind, a girl I knew, with a physique similar to this person I was walking next to right now, with the same kind of face, but now why for the life of me could I not remember? . . . Ah, yes! Now I had it! How was it possible that I couldn't recall her! My very first

girlfriend, my schoolmate, and neighbor. Judging from her profile, wasn't she just like her? We hadn't seen one another for years. The last time we were together she was still only fourteen. It must be one, two, . . . oh, seven years ago now. I'd married. I hadn't seen her again. She must have grown even prettier. . . . But it wasn't as if I hadn't seen her grow up; when I pictured her in my mind, she didn't keep the posture and appearance of a fourteen-year-old. Frequently in dreams, when asleep or in daydreams, I'd see her grow up. I myself had constructed her as a beautiful twenty-year-old poised young woman with an attractive voice and carriage. Often when I happened to be feeling sad, in my imagination she'd be a married woman, or even a young mother.

But what was it about her that resembled her so? Her looks still had a lingering air of a fourteen-year-old. Could it really be her? Why should she come to Shanghai? It was her! Was it possible for there to be two people on earth who looked so alike? Had she recognized me or not . . . I should ask her.

"Would I be right in thinking you're from Suzhou?"

"Yes."

It was definitely her. What an unheard-of chance! When did she come to Shanghai? Had her family moved to Shanghai? Or was it, as I feared, that she'd married someone in Shanghai? Surely she'd already forgotten me, otherwise she couldn't allow me to be with her like this. . . . Perhaps I'd changed so much that she couldn't recognize me; a good few years had gone by. . . . But did she know I was married? If she didn't know, and now she recognized me, what could I do? Ought I to tell her? And if it was necessary to tell her, how would I go about it?

I happened to glance to the side of the street where there was a woman leaning on a shop counter. She looked at me with melancholy eyes, or perhaps she was looking at her. Suddenly it seemed that I'd stumbled across my wife. What was she doing here? I was confused.

Where were we walking? I looked about assiduously. A small food market. She was probably getting close to where she was going. I shouldn't lose this chance. I wanted to know a little more about her, but should we resume an already interrupted friendship? Yes, as long as it was just friendship. Or would it not be better to let her go on thinking that I was merely a well-intentioned stranger wanting to help out a young woman? I started to hesitate. What should I do for the best?

I still needed to know where she was headed. She wasn't necessarily on her way home. Home. If it was her parents' home she was headed for there'd be no problem; I could go in, just like when we were kids. But if it were her own home? Why didn't I just ask her if she was married. . . . Perhaps it wasn't even her home, but rather her lover's home. I imagined a cultured young gentleman. I began to have regrets. Why was I feeling so happy today, when I had a wife at home anxiously waiting for me, while here I was minding other people's business? At last there were rickshaws plying North Sichuan Road. If I hadn't been accompanying her like this with my umbrella, surely she would have long

since hired one. If I hadn't felt it inappropriate to speak out, I would long since have turned around and walked away, leaving her standing in the rain.

So why not ask one more question?

"Might I ask your name?"

"Liu."

Liu? It must be false. She'd already recognized me, she surely knew everything about me, she was kidding me. She didn't want to know me anymore, and she wasn't interested in renewing our friendship. Women! . . . Why had she changed her name? . . . Perhaps it was her husband's name. Liu . . . but what was her first name?

This little monologue of thoughts didn't take up much time at all. They just quickly danced across my mind in the few moments it took to cross the street with this bewitching young woman. I'd seldom taken my eyes off her, so I hadn't realized that the rain had now let up. There were more people coming and going in front of us now, and it seemed there were a few rickshaws to be seen about. Why didn't she hail one? Perhaps she was getting close to her destination. Could it be that she really had recognized me, but not daring to say, had deliberately extended our walk together? The gust of a breeze caught the hem of her skirt and lifted it behind her. She turned her face to avoid the wind and closed her eyes in a coy yet sweet manner. It was a very poetic pose that recalled a Japanese painting by Harunobu Suzuki entitled "Visiting a Beautiful Lady at the Palace in Evening Rain." She carries a lantern, sheltered from the wind and drizzle by a torn umbrella. Passing at night before the earth god's shrine, clothes and lantern swept up by the wind, she turns aside to avoid the force of wind and rain; it had a rather unconventional feel. Now I noticed that she too had that sort of style. As for me, perhaps I passed for her husband or boyfriend in the eyes of passersby. I was quite proud that people might make such an assumption. Yes, when I considered that she had indeed been my first love, my childhood girlfriend, I was as happy as if their assumption really were the case. And I could tell that the scent wafted from her temples by the wind was the same as the perfume my wife used. . . . And then I thought of that old line of poetry, "Holding up a bamboo umbrella I accompany an elegant beauty," and found it fitted today's chance encounter quite nicely. Suzuki's famous painting once more came to mind. But the beautiful woman depicted by Suzuki didn't resemble her at all, rather it was my wife's lips that resembled the lips of the woman in the painting. Taking another look at her, it was odd, but I now felt that this definitely was not the childhood girlfriend that just now I'd mistaken her for. This was a totally unrelated young woman. The eyebrows and forehead, the nose and cheekbones, even taking into account the intervening years, bore not the slightest likeness. And I particularly disliked her lips, which seen in profile seemed a little too thick.

I suddenly felt quite at ease; even my breathing was more relaxed. Half consciously, half unconsciously holding the umbrella for her, apart from gradually sensing my arm ache more and more, I felt nothing. It was as if the form of the young woman beside me had already been released from the confines

of my mind. Only now did I realize night had fallen completely, and the sound of rain was no longer to be heard on the umbrella.

"Thank you, I can make my own way now. The rain's stopped." She chirped into my ear, suddenly startling me, and I closed up the umbrella. A beam of light from a streetlamp shone onto her face, which seemed an orange color. Was she almost there, yet unwilling for me to see her all the way, and so now was taking advantage of the rain's having stopped to get rid of me? Couldn't I think of a way to see where she was eventually going?

"It's no trouble; if you've no objection, I'll see you all the way there."

"There's really no need, I can manage by myself, don't bother coming any farther. It's already very late. So sorry to have kept you."

Evidently she didn't want me to see her all the way there. But what if the rain started up again? . . . I resented the unsympathetic weather. Why couldn't it continue raining for half an hour? Yes, just another half an hour would have done it. For a moment, I could see in her gaze—while waiting for my response—a particular sort of correctness, and I felt an icy chill, as though the wind had blown through the rain into my shoulders. I was about to respond, but she was no longer waiting for a response.

"Thank you. Please go back. Good-bye. . . ." she said faintly and walked away without turning around again. I stood in the middle of the road watching her back, and soon after she disappeared into the night. I kept standing there, right until a rickshaw puller touted for my custom.

In the rickshaw it was as though I were flying in a dream one would forget immediately upon waking. It was as though something remained unfinished, as though there were a burden on my mind, but I was only vaguely aware of it. Several times I thought about putting up the umbrella but immediately laughed off this unconscious thought. Moreover, it wasn't raining, it had cleared completely, and in the sky one could make out a few scattered stars.

I got out of the rickshaw and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?"

It was the voice of the young woman I'd accompanied under the umbrella! I was bemused, how did she come to be in my house? . . . The door opened. The hall was brightly lit, and the person who stood out against the light beside the half-opened front door was not that young woman at all. Rather, in the opaque light I recognized the woman who had been leaning on the shop counter and eyeing enviously both me and the young woman I'd been walking with. I entered feeling lost and confused. Under the lamplight, I found it very strange that now I could no longer find anything in my wife's features resembling the unreal image of that woman.

My wife asked me what had made me so late. I said I'd run into a friend and stopped off for tea and cakes at Sullivan's. Since we'd waited for the rain to stop, we'd sat there a long time. In an effort to lend credence to this lie, I ate very little for supper.

Zhang Tianyi (1906-1985)

MIDAUTUMN FESTIVAL

Translated by Ronald Miao

The wine and dishes were already neatly arranged on the table.

Kui Daniang¹ shifted a chair slightly. In an earnest voice she called to the guest: "Third Uncle, please sit over here!"

Third Uncle crinkled his thin, jaundiced face into a smile. His tongue flickered over parched lips, but his body betrayed not the slightest movement. He merely cast a wistful glance at Kui Daye.²

Kui Daye had no intention of sitting down to the feast. He was strenuously lecturing on ingratitude:

"I don't get it . . . I really don't! The human mind these days is really odd! It used to be that tenant farmers acted like tenant farmers. They showed respect for the landlord . . . didn't dare fart! At New Year's they'd send over chicken and meats . . . at least there they showed proper manners! But look at how they treat us now! Here we're celebrating our festival and they don't give a damn! Very few send gifts, and only a few come to pay their respects. None of them stop to think where their food comes from!"

"Yes . . . yes . . ." Third Uncle stared foolishly at his host and gave a faint nod. Kui sighed and stood up, his short, dwarfish body like an upright jar. Third

1. Title for the wife in the household.

2. Literally "Great Master," the head of the household. Here used as a proper noun.