Tongueless

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PART I

Wai and Ling

IT WAS AS IF NOTHING had happened.

Summer vacation had passed, and Wai's cubicle remained untouched. Even the custodian hadn't asked about it. A perfectly ordinary seat, a desk full of exercise books, a pen holder packed with red pens, a partition tacked with scattered notes in Mandarin pinyin romanisation, reminiscent of a poor bird whose feathers had been plucked from its body. What stood out was that the area was extremely neat, the exercise books on the desk arranged by height from tall to short, each angle precisely ninety degrees. Similarly, the pens in the pen holder were categorised by colour: red in front, black and blue in back, resembling a national flag from a distance. Although it had been two months since anyone had sat there, there wasn't a speck of dust on the surface of the desk. Another peculiarity was that Wai's desk and bookcase were covered in mirrors – a small round convex surveillance mirror, a mosaic-studded vanity mirror, a small mirrored decorative box, and on and on, all of them connected like one mirrored sea. Even the four sides of the computer screen were besieged by mirrors, leaving only a small rectangular frame. Ling had always wondered: when Wai turned on the computer, what else could she see other than her own image?

Wai had died by suicide on the first day of summer break. News of Wai's suicide had generated a lot of buzz. Facebook

comments flew everywhere, and the foreign media scrambled to report it. It was absolutely spine-chilling, bloodier than a family massacre – surely it would be selected as one of the top ten news stories at the end of the year. There were people online using the incident to promote their own views, calling for the government to advocate for smaller class sizes and abolish the territory-wide system assessment and contract teacher system. . . The teachers' office, however, was like a sealed-off structure; no one mentioned Wai unless they absolutely had to. At the start of the new school year, as she'd done previously, the head of the department reviewed past papers of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam during her free period. Miss Wu and Miss Ip huddled together to browse the gossip pages, information on group buying and pet photos. The other Chinese-language teachers had their hands full teaching classes, issuing announcements, disciplining students, contacting parents, grading homework and planning lessons. No one had time to think about what had happened to Wai – everyone had long forgotten this person, except for her mirrors.

In the Sing Din Secondary School teachers' office, colleagues who taught the same subjects sat together, forming their own communities. None of the colleagues in the Chinese department could bring themselves to look at Wai's mirrors. The array of mirrors reminded the head of the department of the Eight-Trigram battle formation, giving off an evil aura that made her scalp tingle at the very sight. Miss Au, who sat behind Wai, was separated from her cubicle by a corridor. Whenever she sat down, she scooted her swivel chair forward, unable to feel at ease until her

body was pressed tightly against her desk. The other teachers steered clear of Wai's seat whenever possible, as though something ominous would happen if they got too close.

Ling was the one who sat closest to Wai. Their seats were divided only by a partition the height of half a person. Each afternoon, Wai's sea of mirrors reflected the piercing glare of sunlight. Whenever she passed by Wai's seat, even if she avoided looking at her mirrors, Ling nevertheless felt countless oncoming blades dismembering her entire body. Even on cloudy days, Ling deliberately kept her head down, but the light from the mirrors still flashed in her peripheral vision like the useless tail of a gecko that remained in place even after the gecko had scurried off, giving a false impression of power.

But no one ever considered clearing out Wai's cubicle, Ling included. They just wanted it to be out of sight, out of mind.

At the end of August, the principal attended lunch with the Chinese department as usual. Ling hadn't seen her all summer break; the principal's mood didn't seem to have been affected by Wai's suicide. The school was on a hill, with only a public housing-estate shopping mall nearby. There used to be many dining options, including a cart noodle stall, a cha chaan teng and a Chinese restaurant, but several years earlier the shopping mall had been acquired by Link Real Estate Investment Trust, leaving only a Western and a Japanese restaurant from which to choose. The other eateries had all been replaced by chains. However, the mall renovations had little impact on colleagues in the Chinese department. All along, they'd solely patronised the Western restaurant, because the principal preferred Western food. As

each lunch cost at least 80 HKD, students rarely ate there, so they could let their hair down and talk freely. They sat in the innermost corner of the restaurant, chatting about students, stocks and the property market, their laughter rising and falling. The principal poured a glass of red wine as she told them about a new real estate project in Huizhou.

'Rumour has it that Huizhou City will merge with Shenzhen, and the Huizhou property market will continue to rise.' The principal was in her fifties, with short hair, the flesh around her mouth sagging down to her chin, the Valentino studded sheepskin handbag placed on the seat softly slouching against her waist – just by glancing at it, it was obvious that it was the latest model.

'Congratulations, Principal! You must be raking in the dough!' The head of the department raised her glass and clinked it against the principal's.

'Just a few hundred thousand, not that much.'

While the head of the department was talking to the principal, the other teachers' perpetually smiling mouths quickly finished chewing so that they could join the conversation once the principal was done speaking. Ling rushed to interject, 'Principal, do you have any interest in land speculation? Recently, it's been more lucrative than property speculation. One piece of land can change hands for more than two million dollars. I heard that the land in Hangzhou is the fastest-rising among all the major Chinese cities.'

Ling had learned this titbit from her mother. The principal liked real estate, and it so happened that Ling's mother ran a subdivided flat business and was familiar with a number of real estate brokers, who often slipped her inside information that even people paying attention to the property

market may not have known. Ling had hoped the principal would say, 'You know so much.' Then her colleagues would chime in, surprised, 'Ling really knows everything.' But that day, everyone just bowed their heads and ate, the scraping of knives cutting back and forth on plates as clear as a scream.

After a while, the principal broke the silence. 'The lasagne is delicious.'

The head of the department said, 'It tastes so different from ordinary lasagne.'

The principal and head of the department took turns speaking, discussing the cheese in the lasagne. Everyone shared which brands of cheese they'd tried. No one paid attention to Ling. Ling smiled and nodded at each statement, replying *mm-hmm*, but her smile was like ice-encrusted meat that had been hidden at the bottom of the freezer for so long that people had forgotten it.

It was as if nothing had happened, but things kept following the trajectory of the past. Since Wai's death, Ling's life had changed drastically. She felt as though Wai's words and actions were enshrouding her like a fog. All she saw was a vast expanse of white, without a starting or ending point.

Ling wanted to forget Wai, but the sea of mirrors, the blood and the electric drill with the flashing red light would reappear in the blink of an eye, crossing over the half-person-high partition. Ever since Wai died, she rarely got a good night's sleep. Gazing at the orange light halo projected on the ceiling from outside the window, she recalled the thick ripples that spattered when Wai collapsed into the pool of blood. Even when she was sleeping, the rumble of the electric drill just before Wai died still echoed in her ears, startling her awake.

Wai clearly killed herself. She was her, I am me – what do I have to do with any of it?

Sunlight darted through the transom window, fanning across Ling's and Wai's seats, slanting to the floor. The air conditioner didn't have enough horsepower – Ling couldn't stop sweating, the test papers on her desk wrinkling with wet spots. She wanted to go to the kitchenette to pour a glass of ice water. The kitchenette was far away from her seat, requiring her to pass by Wai's cubicle. Carrying a water glass, Ling took a roundabout route, heading toward her colleagues in the maths department, then turning toward the kitchenette. She came back the same way. As soon as she sat down, she leaned into her desk, lowering her head to avoid the reflected sunlight.

She took a sip of water. It had become hot before it even reached her throat. This semester was going to be brutal. It was only September, and the principal had already announced that she wanted to do an assignment check, reviewing teachers' grading of student homework. Last time she'd checked, the principal hadn't been satisfied, criticising Ling's sloppy work. She had to do well this time. Her desk was cluttered with test papers from her Form 4 class and essays from her Form 5 grade class, her computer screen displaying the lesson plans for her upcoming course observations. Ling was a wreck – half of her two free periods had passed, and she'd only written two sentences in the teaching objectives column.

She couldn't concentrate. Her gaze shifted from the computer screen to her desk. Exercise books were strewn

everywhere, the keyboard surrounded by papers, a few red pens tossed on top, the mouse, swallowed up among all the papers, nowhere to be seen. There was too much work, too much multitasking, and her desk was an absolute mess. Ling decided to set her work aside, neatly stacking the exercise books, tucking the red pens back in the pen holder and placing the papers on the file rack. After a while, the desktop returned to its original off-white colour.

After all this physical activity, Ling was even hotter. The sun had shifted westward, and the sunlight projected from Wai's mirrors was unavoidable. Ling's head was throbbing. Suddenly, a staff member informed her that someone was calling for her. It was a call she didn't want to answer.

'Hello. May I ask, is this Miss Ng Tsz-Ling?'

A young-sounding female voice was on the other end. She assumed it was a parent calling.

'I'm a reporter for the *Mango Daily*. I'd like to ask you about Miss Yu Bat-Wai.'

At the sound of Wai's name, her whole body trembled as though an electric current coursed through her. 'I'm sorry, I'm rather busy—'

'It's only a few questions. I won't take much of your time. I just want to learn more about Miss Yu.'

'I'm sorry, I'm really very busy—'

'Rest assured, your interview will be anonymous.'

When the reporter said the two words 'rest assured', she deliberately raised her tone, so it was similar to the tone Ling used when comforting parents. Ling hesitated. The reporter continued, 'What kind of teacher was Miss Yu?'

'Hmm. . . a good teacher, very hard-working. She gave everything her best,' Ling responded coldly, hoping that the

reporter would pick up on her impatience, but before she'd even finished the reporter followed up, 'For example?'

'She graded essays on time. Look, I'm rather busy—'

'What else?'

'The students said she finished grading their test papers very promptly. . .'

The handset emitted *uh-huh* sounds, and a keyboard simultaneously clickety-clacked. Ling had a hunch that the reporter was recording her. In fact, these things she'd mentioned were simply part of a teacher's job. You had to submit graded work at regular intervals for the principal to do assignment checks – not submitting on time was unacceptable; student achievements reflected your teaching progress – not preparing for class was unacceptable.

'Was Miss Yu on good terms with her students?'

'I don't know.'

Ling had taught senior secondary, and Wai junior secondary, so they rarely worked together. But Miss Au, who also taught junior secondary, said that many students disliked Wai's class because it was boring, and she was fond of punishing students by keeping them after school to do their homework, and. . . she was *weird*. The Hong Kong students made fun of her and teased her. Only the mainland students liked her. Rumour had it that Wai was especially kind to them.

'Was Miss Yu on good terms with her colleagues?'

'I wasn't close to her.'

'Was Miss Yu. . . particularly unhappy before her suicide?'

'Can you ask someone else? I'm sorry, hold on.'

The more she spoke, the hotter Ling felt. She set down the handset, stood up and aimed the wall fan directly at

herself. She took out a tissue and dabbed the sweat from her forehead, light brown foundation staining the paper. The handset emitted *uh-huh* sounds. She was annoyed and just wanted to hang up. How was she supposed to answer the reporter's questions? Say that Wai was a serious and boring person? Say that no one liked Wai when she was alive? Why did the reporter have to ask *her*?

WAI WAS A WEIRDO. Last August, on her first day of work, the head of the department had escorted her to her cubicle, which happened to be next to Ling's. The department head was in her forties, clad in a Céline blouse and pencil skirt, the typical outfit for a Chinese-language teacher. Ling wondered whether she'd recently undergone a thread lift – it was as if her facial expressions were propped up by metal needles, like a newly opened folding fan, her smile buried among the folds, giving the impression of someone who held her cards close to her chest. A short woman trailed behind her.

'This is Miss Yu.' The department head moved out of the way, allowing Ling to size up her new colleague. A mushroom head. A wide gap between her fringe and eyebrows. Two drooping brows. Thick-rimmed glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. A black suit paired with leather shoes similar to the ones worn by schoolgirls.

'Ling's been teaching here for ten years. She's very experienced. If you have any questions, you can ask her.'

Ling waved her hand and briskly said 'Hi' in English.

'I'm Wai. It's a pleasure to meet you.' When Wai spoke, her eyebrows drooped so much that they looked like they were about to slide right off her face.

The department head said a few words and set down some folders. Wai was deferential, nodding in agreement,

as was common for newly hired faculty members. Ling already knew that this new instructor would be teaching junior secondary and there wouldn't be many opportunities to work together in the future, so, after the department head left, she didn't strike up a conversation, and instead kept her eyes glued to her computer screen. Wai sat down. Soon, the partition between Ling and Wai started shaking, and Ling heard the rustling of plastic bags. She was trying to organise her notes for her senior secondary classes and couldn't help but be distracted. Glancing over, she saw Wai holding a slip of paper in one hand, the other hand picking up a thumbtack from a small dish filled with them. At first, Ling assumed it was a school calendar or family photo. Upon closer inspection, she realised it was a slip of paper inscribed with Mandarin pinyin romanisation.

Wai firmly pinned the paper to the partition and, slightly embarrassed, said in Mandarin, 'I'm studying Mandarin.'

What a weird opening. New hires usually tried finding common ground to get to know everyone, but this teacher clearly didn't plan on saying much to her – she only told her a fact, and an awkward one at that.

When Ling didn't say anything, Wai lowered her head and softly spat out, 'Are you okay with Mandarin?'

'Huh?'

Wai's throat twitched. 'From now on. . . can we speak Mandarin?'

Ling didn't understand what was happening. Before she could respond, Wai had already continued, still speaking in Mandarin.

'You can only learn a language well by creating an immersive language environment. I often tell this to my students.'

But Wai's voice quivered. She'd used the wrong tone for 'creating' and hadn't curled her tongue.

In her ten years of work, Ling had never encountered a new colleague who asked her to speak Mandarin on the first day of employment. Wai rubbed her hands and kept on talking. 'Whether studying English or Mandarin, Hong Kong people are always in a *female*. . . no, I mean an *in* – yes, an *infer-ior po-position*. We have no opportunities to listen or speak, so we always study. . . it's not good. If possible, I'd like to create a Mandarin-speaking *en-fry* – no, *en-vi-ron-ment*. This is the only way to speak as well as those whose mother tongue is Mandarin.' Wai spoke extremely slowly, repeating the words she had difficulty pronouncing multiple times, as though she were coughing up each syllable from her throat.

Ling struggled to understand her.

'Oh. . . I'm not used to speaking Mandarin.'

'Then I'll just speak it and you can speak in Cantonese.' Wai peered at her, her eyebrows knitting together and furrowing into an upside-down V shape.

Not wanting to get involved with her, Ling said, 'You. . . really know how to crack a joke.'

'I'm not joking. I'm serious.'

'But I'm really not used to—'

'So, it can be just me who speaks it.'

Ling wanted to protest that her Mandarin wasn't good. She didn't teach in Mandarin at school – mainland students would ask her questions in Mandarin, and she'd answer in Cantonese. But as a Chinese-language teacher, how could she admit that her Mandarin wasn't good? She uttered a perfunctory noise, then turned round and resumed staring at the screen on her desk. Wai clearly assumed Ling had

agreed, and kept telling her thank you. She was such a weirdo – Ling decided it was best not to engage her.

The partition shook for a while and then stopped. Ling thought that Wai had finally settled down, but before long more noise floated over the partition. This time, it was a continuous stream of a sharp, thin voice. It was grating on Ling's nerves. She raised her head, and was taken aback: Wai had tacked up notes in pinyin throughout her cubicle, English letters and the four tone marks stretching as far as she could see. And there was a Mandarin textbook on Wai's desk. She had covered the phonetic portion with her hand and was reciting the words aloud.

'Am I bothering you?' Wai asked.

Ling wanted to say, 'Please keep it down a little,' but she thought, they'd only just met, and it wouldn't be very polite to say that, plus she had to sit beside her for the next year, and she didn't want to make their relationship awkward. When Ling didn't reply, Wai quickly said, 'Sorry, sorry. . .'

High-heeled shoes click-clacked behind them. The department head had returned, to inform Wai which classes she'd be teaching and where the reference books were located. Wai stood up. 'Okay, okay,' she said – in Mandarin, but the department head didn't seem to notice. After she'd finished speaking, the department head picked up her folders. Before leaving, she asked Wai, 'Is there anything you don't understand?'

'No. Thank you.'

Stunned, the department head squinted at her. Wai hastened to add, 'Um. . . um. . . my Mandarin isn't good, so I want to practise speaking it more often.' Looking perplexed, the department head muttered, 'Do as you like' in Mandarin, then returned to her seat.

The head of the department had graduated from the Peking University Chinese department. She spoke the most orthodox Mandarin of all the teachers, scoring a grade of Level 1-B on the Mandarin Proficiency Test (PSC), perfectly pronouncing that single phrase 'Do as you like' in a standard Beijing accent. By contrast, Wai's Hong Kong accent was jarring.

After a while, the head of the department came back. 'I thought you should know that Sing Din Secondary School doesn't use Mandarin to teach Chinese.'

'I know. . . I'll use Cantonese in class. My Mandarin isn't good, I can't use it to teach. I just want to practise. . .'

The department head left before she could finish. Wai watched her retreating figure with admiration in her eyes, waiting until the department head was far away before she took her seat. Upon seeing this, Ling was dumbfounded. Wai shyly smiled at Ling, then sat down and continued studying. Ling exchanged glances with her other colleagues. Miss Au, who taught junior secondary, sat with her mouth wide open, and Miss Wu, who taught senior secondary, covered her mouth and snickered, but Wai didn't notice.

The Chinese department planned on having a welcome lunch for Wai. Half an hour before it was time to eat, Ling asked everyone in the WhatsApp group if they were going to the 'usual place'. The principal only patronised that one Western restaurant, so she didn't need to ask, but she did so anyway to be polite and seem democratic. Ling posted the latest OpenRice food reviews in their WhatsApp group chat – recently, many diners had recommended the restaurant's escargot. Ling encouraged her colleagues to order it that day, 'So that our new colleague can try new tastes.' The

principal sent two thumbs up, and her colleagues followed suit.

Shortly before lunchtime, Ling turned off her computer and stretched. As soon as the bell rang, she picked up her handbag and walked over to Wai, illuminating the photo of the snails on her iPhone screen. 'Let's eat together. The food is really good.'

Wai didn't hear her. Her hand was still covering the pinyin romanisation in the textbook, her mouth humming as though she were chanting sutras. Ling tapped her on the shoulder and repeated, 'Let's eat together.'

Wai shrugged her shoulders and turned to face Ling, her expression frozen. After a while, still speaking in Mandarin, she said: 'I. . . want to stay at school and study.'

'You can study any time, but you have to eat.'

'No. I brought my lunch.'

No new colleague had ever brought lunch on the first day. Each person would first assess the situation, seeing whether people tended to dine out or stay at school, before making a decision. Although this didn't sit well with Ling, she didn't let her smile fall. 'On the first day, everyone gets to know each other. . . the food is really good. Even the *principal* likes it.' Ling deliberately emphasised the word 'principal'.

'No thank you.'

Before Ling had even dropped her hand that was holding the phone, Wai had turned her head away and resumed studying, not appearing the least bit sorry. Ling couldn't help but feel angry. She spun round and walked away. Up till the moment that the door closed, Wai remained hard at work, and didn't even say goodbye to her.

From that day on, Ling couldn't stand her. A know-it-all,

different for the sake of being different, stubborn to the core, a pain in the neck.

Ling got along well with everyone at school. In an office full of women, name brands were a world language. The principal was fond of Valentino, the department head liked Céline, and other colleagues had their own preferences. Ling often prattled on about famous brands, such as where to score the cheapest handbags, where to resell them for the highest price, and the like. Her mother had previously been a hawker and had specialised in selling knock-off handbags, so, since childhood, she'd soaked up knowledge about all the major brands from Europe and the United States, from vintage to the latest style – there was nothing Ling didn't know. Moreover, her mother often asked her to buy designer handbags for her, and she always had a way to find the cheapest reseller. A group of women gathered together could gab about name brands all day.

Ling had her own views on name brands. Unlike the principal and department head, she didn't stick to the same brand. Yes, a brand could represent a person. Every time she walked into a Céline store, she thought of the department head. As soon as she learned that Valentino was launching the newest style, she'd inform the principal at once. However, she'd long believed that it wasn't the clothes that wore her, but that she was the one who wore the clothes. As long as they were complementary, different brands could look good together. It was all about taste.

In her spare time, Ling studied fashion magazines. She felt herself to be the best-dressed teacher in the school. School

rules stipulated that female teachers could only wear closed-toe women's shoes, and slacks or skirts that were at least knee length, but even with these regulations Ling could still dress to the nines. She'd wear a floral dress paired with pointed-toe shoes, a khaki blouse with a vest and long skirt, a floral jumpsuit with French ballet flats. . . Students often compared her clothing combinations with those of other teachers. Whenever students she knew told her, 'You're the only one who can carry off these clothes,' she was in seventh heaven.

She was aware that there were people in the teachers' office who thought she loved dressing up too much, but clothes made the person. Who didn't like good-looking people? Besides, Ling wasn't naturally a beauty – she had to work at it. Clothing was a person's second skin; you had to package yourself well before you could sell yourself. After working for ten years, Ling had come to understand the perks of dressing up. Although she hadn't been promoted or given a raise, if she dressed smartly people would subconsciously have confidence in her.

However, the deeper reason why Ling liked dressing up was that her job was tedious. Day after day of teaching, grading assignments, attending meetings, on Monday looking forward to Friday, at the start of the semester dreaming of summer break, one batch of students after another graduating, their faces the only thing changing. The daily grind chipped away at teachers until they were reduced to only one type. Since life was so monotonous, why not add some colour? Ling's motto was, *you are what you wear*. Whether you were mature, nonconformist, dull or old-fashioned was reflected in what you wore – you could only stand out from the crowd based on how you were dressed.

Yet Ling never flaunted her fashion sense. When colleagues complimented her on how well she dressed, she gently brushed it off, pretending to be coy, and changed the subject to talk about food, wine or travel. Rather than deliberately stick out and make others feel threatened, she tried her best to build strong relationships. Cultivating good interpersonal relationships was more important than a hard day's work on the job. Instead of showing off, she preferred discussing topics that everyone liked so that her colleagues would like *her*.

Aside from name brands, in recent years beauty and skincare were all the rage. Most of the teachers in the Chinese department were over thirty. They all understood that, no matter how fashionable their clothes or how expensive their handbags, such things only looked good when matched with a young face. And so, every time a new course of treatment was launched, such as HIFU, Sculptra or hyaluronic acid injections, Ling would try it out and share her experience with everyone.

She still remembered how, just a few days after Wai had arrived at school, she'd been discussing her HIFU procedure with her colleagues. At the time, HIFU had just launched its first generation of treatments and many celebrity spokespersons raved about its lifting effects, so Ling went to the salon to try it out. Colleagues from the Chinese department gathered around to listen to her talk, as did curious female teachers from other sections.

'It hurts, it really hurts, the kind of pain that spreads from the skin to the roots of the teeth. I kept asking the aesthetician to be gentler.'

'Was it effective?' the department head asked.

‘See for yourself: The lines in my neck are much less visible.’ Ling stretched her neck. ‘However, you have to endure the pain. While it was happening, I was worried about getting burned. I heard that some people do HIFU for their cataracts.’ Although it did hurt, it wasn’t as painful as Ling made it out to be – she’d intentionally exaggerated. Everyone ‘wow’ed in awe.

Wai happened to pass by at the time, and, upon overhearing Ling’s words, she squeezed into the crowd, her eyes widening. ‘Why do you. . . *ha-hat-hurt* yourself?’

Everyone looked at Wai and then back at Ling. Wai’s reaction was over the top, and her Mandarin was so weird. Ling paused. ‘Are you worried I’m going to kill myself?’

One of her colleagues burst out laughing – she wasn’t sure who – which made everyone else double over with laughter. Wai’s face blazed so red that a rash broke out on her neck.

After everyone had been laughing for a while, Miss Chan, who taught economics, suppressed her laughter and tried to ease the awkwardness. ‘I couldn’t do it. I’m terrified of pain.’ After she said that, she returned to her seat, and everyone else followed her lead.

Ling glared at Wai. ‘I’m just doing beauty treatments.’

‘I’m sorry. . . I always feel. . . it’s not good to hurt yourself. . .’

Wai’s hair is sticky, and her black-rimmed glasses look like they’ve been smeared with a coating of fog. She’s a teacher who’s as unkempt as a student. Where does she *get off criticising* me *for doing beauty treatments?*

Wai glanced at Ling, lowering her head. ‘It seems *dung-arouse. . .*’

Wai’s mispronunciation of ‘dangerous’ made Ling even

more impatient. Forcing herself to bite her tongue, she walked away without saying a word.

At first, Ling thought Wai only spoke Mandarin when making small talk. Then, a week before the start of the semester, the Chinese department held its first meeting of academic affairs to discuss the work arrangements for the coming year. The head of the department drew a chart on the whiteboard, with the Chinese department's annual activities written on the left, the column on the right awaiting the names of the corresponding teachers in charge. 'Dear colleagues, please sign up,' she said.

As soon as the department head finished speaking, Ling's hand flew up, volunteering for the Joint School Oral Exam. Ling had been in charge of this activity for five years. It only entailed one long day, unlike the debate team, special education tutorials and school publications, which lasted more than half a year, plus the workload wasn't heavy – as long as students helped out, there wasn't much to prepare. Other colleagues signed up one after another, resuming their responsibilities from the previous year. In less than three minutes, the chart was full, except for the debate team. Everyone counted the names on the whiteboard and, discovering that Wai's was missing, they all turned to her. Wai lowered her head, avoiding their gaze.

'Wai, can you be in charge of the debate team?' the department head asked.

Wai started to wave her hand in refusal, then withdrew it. 'I'm not good at *dupe-bait*. . .'

The department head peered at Wai, whose face blushed

crimson. 'I must've misspoken. I don't know how to say *dupe-bait* in Mandarin—'

'Just speak Cantonese,' the department head interrupted. Everyone howled with laughter.

'No. . .' Wai stumbled over her words, unable to speak.

The department head cut her off. 'Wai, you're in charge of the debate team.'

Wai shook her head, but the department head ignored her and wrote down her name in the space for the debate team. The head of the department had always been in charge of the debate team. The workload was heavy, and the procedures were tedious. Naturally, the department head was eager to palm it off on someone else as soon as possible – now that someone new had arrived, wasn't this the perfect opportunity?

After going over each person's job, the department head snapped a picture of the whiteboard, then picked up her folders and left the conference room. As soon as the door opened, the hot air rushed in from outside. Seeming to regain her senses, Wai couldn't help but gaze out the door; then she turned and looked up at her other colleagues, unsure of what to do.

Wai deserved being placed in charge of the debate team – who told her to immediately refuse and then sit there tongue-tied for an eternity? Her colleagues stared at her, speechless. Ling piped up, 'Actually, during meetings, can you not speak in Mandarin? You can't express yourself, and we can't understand you clearly.'

'I want. . . I want. . . to force myself to speak Mandarin all the time, except when in class. . .'

No one knew how to react. Wai took a breath. 'It's not a

problem. I believe that, as long as I speak Mandarin every minute and every second just like a *main-man-man-lander*, I'll be able to speak it well.'

If she was going to be so insistent, it was useless to say anything. Ling shrugged, and turned round to leave. Other colleagues filed out with her, Wai's calls of 'wait, wait' fading away.

From then on, the whole Chinese department disliked her. If she wanted to practise Mandarin, that was her business – why did everyone else have to bend over backwards to accommodate her? Speaking Mandarin was fine, but she couldn't speak it well, and had to rely on sign language; she clearly had working ears and a working mouth, so why act like a deaf mute?

What irked Ling the most, however, was that she spoke Mandarin not only in meetings, but also with the principal. Once, the principal showed up in the teachers' office with several folders, looking for the head of the department. The head of the department was busy writing down key points and seemed to be dealing with an urgent matter. Wai happened to pass by and saw the principal. She patted her on the shoulder, speaking loudly in Mandarin and bowing ninety degrees. 'Hello, Principal.' The principal couldn't help but be taken aback, exchanging glances with the head of the department. She quickly pasted a formulaic smile on her face. 'Miss Yu, have you adjusted to school life?'

The head of the department impatiently thumbed through the files on the desk, explaining to the principal in Mandarin, 'Miss Yu is practising her Mandarin.' Then she turned to Wai and asked, 'Have you finished the work in hand?'

'I have. I came over to say hi to the principal.'

'To be a Chinese teacher, knowing how to speak Mandarin is certainly a must.' The principal smiled, smoothing things over.

'Yes. I'll give it my best.'

The principal no longer paid Wai any heed, and resumed her conversation with the department head, but Wai stayed put until the principal left, bidding her farewell, and focusing on her departing figure until the door of the teachers' office closed.

Teachers didn't salute the principal, only students did. And what did she hope to gain by speaking Mandarin all day long – was she angling for a promotion? Better classes next year? Ling had to keep her eye on this one.

AT 3 P.M., THE SUNLIGHT STRETCHED wider and wider, but the heat never waned. Ling sat beneath a fan, her chiffon Céline blouse drenched with sweat. She couldn't resist unbuttoning it to let the air flow in.

Sounds of *Hello? Hello?* still rang out from the office phone. Ling had nothing more to say to the reporter.

Everyone knew that what the principal cared about most was the reputation of the school. She'd explicitly said that teachers weren't allowed to discuss Wai, and that neither teachers nor students were allowed to accept interviews, let alone teachers or students giving interviews to the media. Even if the reporter claimed to keep her anonymous, if she kept on talking the reporter would link Wai's suicide to the school and make a big deal out of things, which would be of absolutely zero benefit to the school. If the principal suspected Ling had been in touch with a reporter, she'd have even more misgivings about her. She couldn't afford to lose any more of the principal's trust – she'd emerged from her office just fifteen minutes earlier. 'I'm concerned about your career. . .' Recalling the principal's expression and how she didn't say goodbye before she left, Ling shook her head, not wanting to think about it any longer.

In any case, it was better to look the other way than to stick her nose where it didn't belong. Wai hadn't committed suicide at school, nor had she left behind a note – who knew