Men Don't Apologize

1.

Each time a prospective suitor swerved away from Ou Hong, her father couldn't help but remind her to warm the hues of her face a little. He would clumsily jest, "Have they borrowed your rice and repaid with chaff?" And he always got the rebuttal, "Where do you think I got my hues from?" Those words choked off the even-tempered old man, once an eloquent teacher of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. He would quietly lament the metamorphosis of his sweet little girl, while she did what she pleased.

Ou Hong's mother had died shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution. As if she could not manage the tremendous relief of waking up from a decade-long nightmare, her nerves just snapped like a string drawn too taut. Ou Hong was a freshman then, and her mother's last words were like a prophecy, that she, Ou Hong, would find a suitor among neighborhood boys, someone she was familiar with from childhood. The unsaid words: someone who wouldn't mind her aloofness and chronic sarcasm.

No one knew if the mother had a particular boy in mind, and Ou Hong took the prophecy as no more than a loving mother's kind wish. Four years passed and when graduation time came, Ou Hong was the only girl in her Mechanical Engineering class who had not been paired. On a campus of mostly male students she dated few, and never for very long. She departed university with the crown of "cold-eyed princess."

Then, in the spring, on her first day of work at the Bus Factory, she ran into a neighbor from childhood, to whom she hadn't uttered a word for 16 years, though she had seen him on TV and around home sometimes.

She was passing workers crowded around two TV cameramen inside the factory's gate, when a strangely familiar voice glued her feet to the ground. It came from a young man wearing a gray-striped western suit, freely and elegantly unbuttoned. His thin lips moved swiftly over a microphone while the overflowing light from his enthusiastic eyes swept through the audience. The mannerisms were his trademark as the host of the popular TV program, *Focal Interview*. He cast a look on Ou Hong before she could lurch away.

"Hey, look who's here." He turned off the microphone and said, "mountains don't circle but waters do." His long, girlish eyelashes

flapped, as he contemplated the white dress-shirt tucked into her red jeans.

"What a white swan," he eulogized.

"Was I an ugly duckling before?" Ou Hong said. Immediately she bit her lip.

"No, no, I was," he said, in the charming self-deprecating tone that had made him adorable to his massive female audience. His voice and smile tore open every little detail of that autumn day in her childhood. She could hear — with a sharp clarity — her own flustered and exasperated voice shrieking, "One day! One day . . ." and see him bouncing backward, turning with a sinister smile, then disappearing around a corner of the wall.

What had she tried to say that day? As they stood face to face once again, 16 years condensed into 16 seconds. She felt on the verge of recovering those words, before they slipped away like water — shapeless, with nothing to grip. *One day* what? All these years of time were like beach sand, layer over layer, with unspoken words buried beneath, till unearthing became hopeless, yet she could not give up digging.

His lilting voice encroached, "What are you doing here anyway, white swan?"

She strutted away without another word. Her heart churned with anger as she sped to the Administration Building. Didn't he remember anything? How could he speak to her with such a casual intimacy?

2.

Chen Yiping was the neighbor boy's name, and the Political Institute was their neighborhood. The last time she spoke to him was 1966. He was 10. She was 8, until then a spoiled little princess pampered

by her father's colleagues and students.

The Political Institute's function was to educate the Nationalist army's ex-generals, who surrendered, or fled unsuccessfully, when the victory of the Chinese Communists became inevitable in 1949. Ou Hong's father was the president of the Institute. He wore a four-pocket navy cadre uniform and lectured on revolutionary theory in a dignified manner, and those ex-generals were knocked out with admiration. His ability and excellent work even received recognition from Chairman Mao himself; the Great Leader received him in the People's Hall in Beijing and shook hands with him, a rare honor.

The Institute, located on the south side of the city, was housed in what was once the American Embassy, taken over by the new government after the American imperialists "ran away with their tails between their legs," as the popular song "Socialism Is Good" goes. In the garden-like Institute, Ou Hong's family had the entire second floor of a beautiful Western-style, two-story beige house, while two families of her father's subordinates shared the downstairs, one of these the Chen family.

That day in early fall of 1966 was an ordinary day; the sky was blue, the clouds were white, and the bird songs were jubilant. Ou Hong returned home from her elementary school uncertain whether she should be happy or upset about the classes stopping. Yiping slid down from a mulberry tree right in front of her, his lips purpled by the ripe berries.

"Brother," she said, "you scared me!" Girls and boys didn't talk at school, but in one's own yard the rules were relaxed.

"Who's your brother!" The boy hooted, surprising her in a big way. Yiping was nicknamed by his schoolmates as a "sissy" and had never raised his voice at her or anyone before.

"Did you eat the wrong medicine this morning?" she teased.

"Your Pa ate the wrong medicine." The boy backed up a step and announced, "*The revolutionary situation is grand, and is getting better and better*. Your Pa is a loser, my Pa is in power now!"

"What do you mean?" Ou Hong said.

Yiping backed another step and ran away.

Puzzled, she walked to her father's office building. Long and dense green vines of ivy coated the walls; in front was a goldfish pond with stone rails. Pink lotus flowers bloomed graciously in the pond. She dallied at her favorite mossy-rimmed pond from which a dragonhead spurted water, but a surge of collective shouting from inside the building washed over her like a wave. Scampering through the front gate, she climbed up the rosewood stairs to the third floor, where the President's Office was located. She stood stunned at the wide open door: the usually neat and roomy office was a total mess, white papers with black and red print scattered everywhere. Her father was nowhere to be seen.

Another sharp wave of shouts erupted from the first floor. Ou Hong ran downstairs. Standing behind rows upon rows of sitting people, she saw her father on his knees in the center of the stage, the same stage where he would give long speeches and receive loud applause from the same crowd he faced now. Uncle Chen, her father's amiable subordinate, the kind neighbor of her family, the caring father of her playmate Yiping, pressed her father's head down till it almost touched the floor, his other hand holding a tall, pointy dunce cap made of cardboard. On the paper cap's surface was a column of hand-written, black ink characters, each bigger than the one above: *Capitalist Roader Ou*.

"Put the cap on your head!" Uncle Chen ordered. Kneeling prone, her father raised unsteady hands over his head and put on

the dunce cap.

"Tell us you are a capitalist roader!"

"I am a capitalist roader," the small voice did not sound like her father's at all.

"Louder!"

"I am a capitalist roader!"

"You are a monster and demon!"

"I am a monster and demon. . . ."

As the revolutionary masses burst into loud bellowing "Bombard capitalist roaders!" and "Burn the monsters and demons!" Ou Hong sprinted through the meeting hall's passageway, blasting up to the stage, swirling white papers around her. Bending over, she butted her head into Uncle Chen's unsuspecting stomach, staggering the big man. Her shriek echoed in the meeting hall, "I won't let you bully my Papa!"

Uncle Chen caught his balance: "Little Hong, children are not allowed here. Revolution is a grownup matter."

She kicked him in the shins and screamed, "*You* are a monster and demon! My Papa is a good man!"

At that moment her father twisted his head toward her, struggling to look up from the floor with bloodshot eyes. "Get out, go home!" His husky voice was muffled, with nothing remaining of his usual dignified bearing. When she did not obey, Uncle Chen nodded to a thick-waisted woman who came up and pulled her out of the meeting hall, as Ou Hong kicked and cursed with the few dirty words she knew.

Once out the door, the woman whispered, "Go home; you'll only make things worse for your father." Her voice was surprisingly concerned, which was what made Ou Hong obey.

The upset girl ran into Yiping again. The boy kept a few feet from

her and said:

"Yay, what did I say?"

"You are wrong! Your father is wrong! My Papa is not a capitalist roader!"

"He is too!" the boy clapped his hands and sang:

"Your Pa is a loser,
My Pa is a winner!"

As he sang, he jumped up and down on a pile of coal against his kitchen wall. Ou Hong said hurriedly, "Listen to me, Yiping, one day you—" Before her next word was out, *pa*! a charcoal briquette hit her forehead. The briquette shattered into thousands of particles, blacking her cheeks and blinding her eyes.

Compared to the episodes that followed later, the pain caused by the charcoal was really nothing. However, this was her first experience with humiliation, and the anguish, confusion and frustration had hit enormously. She kept rubbing her eyes, wanting to speak, as if completing the interrupted sentence was the most important thing at that moment, as if it was a lifebuoy for her sunken body, "One day, one day—" Her words broke to sobbing, as Yiping ran away in victory.

Her father returned home that evening, weary and exhausted but in one piece, with no apparent physical wounds. His spirit had yet to be broken completely. That happened days later, in a house raid conducted by outside Red Guards who seized everything he treasured. Compared to those middle school teenagers, Uncle Chen and his people were rather merciful. The following week, the news came from Ou Hong's elementary school, that her principal had been beaten to death by Red Guards from a nearby middle school. Not until years later, when she was older, did she realize how lucky her father had been during the cruelest initial months

of the Cultural Revolution. Even when she was mature enough to admit that her father's actions were no more than strategic self-protection, perhaps mixed with confusion, and the traditional virtue of "enduring humiliation in order to discharge important duties," she could never bear to look back at that day, or look straight into her father's eyes.

Following her father's disgrace, she became a "fallen phoenix less than a chicken," being constantly bullied by the neighborhood boys. The boys also smashed the artful stone dragonhead adorning the pond, and killed all the goldfish. As she grew up, her memory of almost all of that would fade; what never went away was the picture of her father on his knees, placing the dunce cap on to his own head with unsteady hands. It was an impossible scene — worse because at that young age she could not understand what was being crushed in her image of man. It was not because of what they did to him, nor what they did to her; it was he, her father, what *he did* that day. How could a revolutionary hero, who had never yielded to the enemy's torture and death threats, become such a pitiful man when facing his own comrades and those he had liberated? The answer was beyond her. Each time the denunciation scene resurfaced, she would shudder, and shake her head rapidly to get rid of the terrible image. She never talked about this to anyone, her parents or friends. She just let the anguish mold her insides — and the hues on her face — over time.

She never again spoke to Uncle Chen, who for a while became the number one leader of the Revolutionary Rebellion in the Political Institute. Not even after she learned that he was the one who warned her father about the Red Guards' house raid, not even a decade later when both men returned to their original posts — her father again the president of the Institute and Uncle Chen his subordinate. She

did not speak to Yiping either; not when they went to the same middle school, not after she went to university and he became the city's most popular TV program host and a rising star.

3.

In the north of the city, at the Bus Factory built of gray concrete and devoid of anything green, Ou Hong's arrival puzzled many. What was a university graduate doing here? No man (not to mention a woman) with a university degree had worked at the factory in its 30 years of history. Even the Chief Engineer and the Director of the Technical Division only had a secondary specialty school diploma.

Now Ou Hong understood why the Political Advisor in her university had smiled at her handsomely. She must have helped his mission involuntarily and enormously. This January, her campus had once again been filled with the same red slogans, *Go to the Most Needy Place of Our Motherland!* As if it were still the 50s or 60s, and they, the post-Cultural Revolution students, were still taken in by those big words and wouldn't beat out each other's brains to compete for the best jobs. The same tradition from before the Ten Disastrous Years (as the Cultural Revolution was called now) continued: everyone was required to fill the Graduation Assignment Volunteer Form, and was allowed three choices. Ou Hong didn't actually care where she went, but she thought a little of her father's frost-like hoary temples, and a rare moment of softness came over her. She knew her father would like her to stay in the city, although she hadn't asked — didn't want to ask — for his advice. She scanned the list of local jobs, and the Bus Factory caught her eye. The factory name revived a latent memory, and she felt a sudden urgency to complete a personal mission: she must find Master Liu, a man from her past. She made the Bus Factory her first option, and got the

assignment nobody else wanted.

She chose to start her three-month probation in the Chassis Shop because the foreman's surname was Liu.

Liu Huagu was a typical southern man in his late 20s, of average height, with a swarthy complexion, a wide forehead, and delicate cheekbones. If there was any deficiency in his mien, it was that he looked at everybody out of the corner of his eye, making you feel denigrated.

When Ou Hong arrived, Liu Huagu was lighting a cigar on the blinding white flame of a welding torch held in the hand of his apprentice, "Mynah." Liu Huagu's bony hand flicked like a snake's forked tongue. Before Ou Hong realized what he had been doing, the cigar, flashing tiny red sparks, was already hanging between his teeth. Behind him, on the workshop's wide wall, a large sign bore down on them, "Smoking Prohibited."

"How hot is the flame of the welding torch?" she asked nonchalantly.

"Hmm?" The cigar fuzzed Liu Huagu's tongue. "Over 3000º C," he answered, somewhat taken aback, and then said, " 'Ou' is an unusual surname."

"Certainly not as common as Liu." Her gaze dwelled on his face for a second too long — it bore no resemblance to the other Master Liu. She weighed the bluntness of her next question, but asked anyway.

"Master Liu—" she felt a bit strange to call such a young man *master* — "does your father work here too? Was he once a member of the Workers Propaganda Team?"

Liu Huagu leered at her. "What, checking my eight generations?"

"Never mind then," she said.

The foreman turned to his apprentice. "Mynah, what work do we have for Miss University?"

"Master, are you kidding? In this shop even the rats are all male!" The young man at his side fleered, lifting up a 12-pound hammer and pounding at random on an open chassis with a loud *Bang*.

Liu Huagu flung open his hands at Ou Hong, "Help yourself. See what you can do."

Amidst the loud din of metal colliding, she walked in circles around the half-assembled chassis, trying to figure out her position. All the while she felt Mynah's eyes following her. At one point she stopped to survey an old worker's face, then shook her head and continued circling. In the third circle she heard Mynah say, "His mother's! Aren't men and women equal? Can I take a break too, Master?"

"Nobody'll think you're a mute if you shut up," Liu Huagu said.

Ou Hong sauntered over to Mynah, who was shooting a rocker arm with the blaze of his welding torch, and asked:

"How often do our buses have accidents?"

"Huh?" *Bang*! Mynah hammered the heated rocker arm. "How inauspicious!"

"How long have you been doing this?"

"Doing *what*?" Mynah did not stop hammering.

"Do you know that the rocker arm is made of chilled steel?"

"Em?"

"Never mind," Ou Hong said, and resumed her circling. But Mynah wasn't exactly dumb. He yelled at her back: "You have a problem with my way, Miss University? Tell you what, my master taught me this, and my master's master taught him this. Know who my master's master is? It's Manager Gao!"

"Whatever," Ou Hong said.

The next morning Ou Hong did not report to the Chassis Shop. She wandered through the adjoining Bus Body Shop and the Trial Model Shop, then to the Supply and Marketing Division, and the Personnel Division, everywhere checking on faces. No one knew what she was doing; the entire factory did not seem to know how to handle this newcomer. There were speculations: some workers whispered she might be appointed as an inspector.

At one time, in the Bus Body Shop, after Ou Hong checked an old man's face and the man ignored her, she stooped next to him, while he squatted on a large iron sheet and skillfully hammered it. For quite a while, she watched with amusement the iron sheet bouncing rhythmically under his nimble hammer, the cambered surface of a bus front unfolding. Finally she said, "So our bus is hand-made."

"Is there another way?" The old worker replied, not lifting his eyes.

The factory had a small number of women employees, who held jobs such as clerks, nurses, and typists. It was those women who started to stir the waiting air. Gossip began to circle around. Ou Hong's unwrinkled white shirt, contrasting with her scarlet red jeans, was a loud violation of the factory's all-blue "labor protection uniform" dress code, which did not help. Nor did her slender waist and long legs.

Liu Huagu overheard a conversation between two typists in the administration office.

"The foxy girl is after a boyfriend," one woman whispered.

"A worker? Why would she want one?"

"Maybe she had bad grades in college."

"Better watch your man closely."

Liu Huagu went to find the wandering girl and brought her back to the Chassis Shop.

"Don't cause me to lose face," he warned her.

"*Your* face?"

"Do whatever you want after you finish here. Right now I'm your master."

He took her to his small make-shift room, a cubbyhole with shelves for walls and a cloth door, threw her a set of blue coveralls, and said, "Make yourself look like a proper worker!" Despite his leering eye, his tone was that of a concerned elder brother: This hit her soft spot and she obeyed. After she came out, she went to find a lightweight hammer, and started to work with the men.

It did not take long for her to notice Liu Huagu's unexpected personal charm and power over the other workers, especially his apprentices. Even the glib-tongued Mynah was always ready to take his orders. Somehow he had bought them over, she figured. She noticed that every day, at exactly 12 o'clock, Liu Huagu told Mynah to stop work and go for lunch. By the time Ou Hong and other workers arrived to long lines in the dining hall, Mynah had already wolfed down half of the rice in his white-tin meal box.

Several weeks passed and Ou Hong hadn't being able to find any information about the Master Liu she was looking for. It made it that much more difficult that she didn't know his given name. During the two years when she saw him every weekday, she'd never thought to ask. How could she know? She was only a middle school student then and had always called him Master Liu.

The chassis assembly work was tedious, and she quickly became bored with it. Looking around, she couldn't figure out why the workers were so content. The tool they liked the most was the 12-pound hammer. Here didn't fit, *Bang*! There didn't fit, *Bang*! No

machines other than the overhead crane. If several *Bang*s still didn't work, they turned on a welding torch and heated the particular parts to red, softening the stubborn and unruly steel, and then hammered again. No one was concerned that the high temperature might weaken those parts made of chilled steel and cause them to fracture later. Still, you had to admire the fact that all the buses in the city and its surrounding counties — a population of over 10 million — came from their bare hands.

What was an engineer needed for in such a backward place? Soon Ou Hong started to scheme about changing her job. Although she knew that switching jobs was harder than landing on the moon, she had one dim hope: several of her schoolmates hating their job assignments had been talking about running a private placement center, the first in the city. They were trying to make it a legal activity. If that didn't work out, the last resort would be her father, though she hated to ask for his help. He had connections everywhere.

Then a series of episodes stalled her plans.

4.

Mynah the glib-tongue turned out to be very easy to please. Almost as soon as the oversized blue-canvas labor-uniform covered Ou Hong's graceful curves and made her look the same as everyone else, he started to offer her a helping hand. When he saw it didn't take her too long to manage the 12-pound hammer (though she refused to have anything to do with the welding torch), Mynah cursed fewer "his mother's" in her presence.

Ou Hong's coldness toward the popular TV guy further pleased him, as if that handed him an advantage.

Yiping came to the Bus Factory a few more times, alone and without the camera, looking for Ou Hong. Each time Mynah

spotted him, he ran back and told Ou Hong, who immediately hid in Liu Huagu's cubbyhole.

Yiping always looked in the Administration Building first, certain that he was in the right place each time. He shook hands with Manager Gao who asked for more TV promotion of the Bus Factory; he waved to his female fans, who pressed their faces flat on the window and stared at him, with no less enthusiasm than the first time. Yiping, of course, did not find Ou Hong there. When he eventually came to the Chassis Shop, Ou Hong slid to the adjoining Bus Body Shop. By the time he traced her to the Bus Body Shop, she had gone to the Public Health Office. The hide-and-seek went on for almost an hour, until Yiping ran short of patience. The last time, he left a note written with calligraphy like dragons flying and phoenixes dancing, taped on the Chassis Shop's gate. It read, "White swan, don't hide from love!" When Mynah asked Ou Hong what to do with it, she tore it off, crumpled it and dropped it on the floor. As this made her the center of the factory's gossip again, the workers in the Chassis Shop became increasingly protective of her, not much different from a family of brothers taking care of their baby sister. Even Liu Huagu didn't leer at her anymore.

One Friday, Mynah asked her a bit cryptically if she wanted to go with them on a road test Sunday.

"On a weekend?" Ou Hong wondered if this was another trick they played to make overtime bonuses.

"Well, not exactly work."

He told her, with some hemming and hawing, they were going to a far suburb for a spring outing ("To step on the greens," he said) in the name of a road test. Not exactly a cheat, he quoted his master's words, because they worked six days a week and had no vacations.