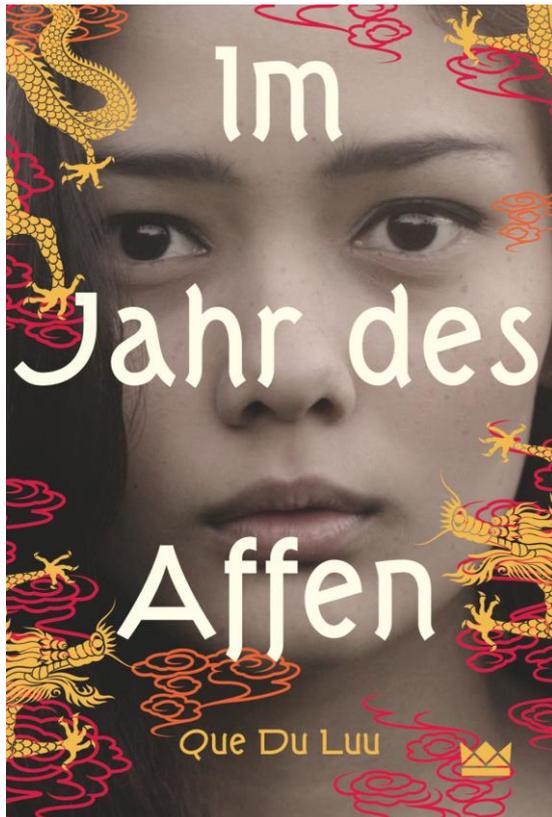


Que Du Luu

In the Year of the Monkey

[Im Jahr des Affen]



Sample translation by Debbie Lim

© 2016 Königskinder Verlag, Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg
© Translation Debbie Lim

Please contact: daniela.steiner@carlsen.de / sylvia.schuster@carlsen.de

p. 158 – 176

[...]

It was tiring, crawling on the floor. My black pants had become grubby. I flicked off the crumbs then brushed at the fabric, but it only made the marks grow bigger.

There was Bela, less than ten metres away, and I couldn't even see him. If only the restaurant had one of those special mirrors like in a police interrogation room. Then he wouldn't be able to see me but I could see him. Then I'd watch, watch the whole time and never take my eyes off him!

I heard Bao bang down the rice bowl in the service hatch then hit the bell.

'*How fun loi loh* – rice is ready!'

Ling headed off and even remembered to take the warming plate. I breathed out. Now it was just for the main courses and the biggest task would be over.

No new customers had come in. Ling re-positioned himself in front of the counter. Everything was actually going well, until the telephone rang.

Ling looked at me.

'Answer the phone,' I hissed.

Now even the music had stopped.

Ling picked up. '*Wei?*

How dumb could you get! He was working in a restaurant, not sitting at home by himself. He knew we were supposed to answer the phone with: 'Good evening. China Restaurant Hong Kong!'

'Ling,' he said, straining into the earpiece. Then loudly, 'Mini? Mini what?'

In Chinese, my name was completely different: Mei Yue.

I flipped the tape over, stuck my hand up from behind the counter and waved it at Ling. The music started again.

Ling passed the phone down to me.

'Yes?' I asked. I had to talk more quietly because now I was speaking German.

'Hi, Mini,' said a familiar voice. It was Micha. 'Sarah told me you're always at the restaurant these days.' Micha sounded like she always did. Of all moments, why did she have to ring now?

'I called you three times. I thought your phone must be out of order.'

'Now is a really bad time,' I said.

‘There’s something I have to tell you,’ she said. ‘I just spoke to Sarah. After she called you, she happened to be in the supermarket in Elverdissen. And guess who she saw there?’

I knew of course who she was talking about.

‘She said to him, “You asked after my friend. She’s always working in the Chinese restaurant. The one on Schiller Street.”’

‘What?’ I shrieked.

‘I just wanted you to be prepared.’

‘He’s already here,’ I whispered. ‘I’ll call you back sometime.’

I reached up and carefully set the phone on the hook. Ling came behind the counter and started rinsing the glasses.

I crawled on all fours back into the kitchen. Bao was standing at the stove and had just finished making new batter for the spring rolls. He glanced at me, shook his head.

I stood up and watched him working. He poured an exact amount of batter into the hot pan, tilted it until the pale mixture spread out and became firm, then in one quick movement scraped it up and flipped it onto the towering stack. The finished wraps looked just like crêpes.

The kitchen door swung open. ‘*Mutt yeh* – what is it?’ I started to say to Ling, then saw it was Uncle Wu.

‘Shouldn’t you check on the diners?’ he asked. ‘I think they’ve finished eating.’

‘Can’t you tell Ling to do it? I’m teaching him how to waiter.’

‘Go watch and make sure he’s doing it properly.’

I stuck out my bottom lip but Uncle Wu paid no attention.

‘I taught Uncle Bat how to carve meat. Unlike you, I didn’t do it by standing about in another room.’

Did he ever stop this preaching?

‘If you want respect,’ continued Uncle Wu (or at least I thought he used the Chinese word for ‘respect’), ‘you have to act as a role model for those working for you.’

Bao let out a loud snort.

I said obstinately, ‘I’m not going out there.’

‘Why not?’ asked Uncle Wu.

You just didn’t discuss such topics with an uncle, and especially not an uncle like Uncle Wu.

‘A friend of mine is sitting out there and I don’t want him to see me,’ I said, vaguely.

‘Why don’t you go and say hello?’ he asked.

That was a stupid idea in my opinion. And anyway, hadn’t I just said that I didn’t want to be seen? I squatted down, pushed open the kitchen door and duck-waddled out.

Ling was still standing behind the counter. I tugged on his pants leg. He bent down.

‘Clear the table!’ I whispered. ‘They must have finished eating by now.’

Ling left as Uncle Wu came out of the kitchen.

‘What are you doing down there?’

The tape had stopped again and the restaurant was dead silent. For all Bela knew, Uncle Wu was crazy and talking to himself. Just like Ling was crazy and also talking to himself.

I crawled past Uncle Wu’s legs back towards the kitchen. Uncle Wu followed, though mercifully held the door open for me.

‘If one of them is your friend, ask him to go to the Chinese take-away and bring back some food.’

There was a clatter as Ling slid the dirty plates into the service hatch.

‘They want to pay!’ he called.

Uncle Wu went out. He wasn’t familiar with the German currency but better him keeping an eye on things than nobody at all.

I went to the far end of the kitchen and waited by the open flyscreen window. From Bao’s direction, the klack-klack-klack of chopping started up again. Time seemed to slow then stand still. Finally, Uncle Wu came back. ‘They’ve left,’ he said.

I breathed a sigh of relief and went with him out into the dining room.

At the sight of the empty table with its used glasses and crushed serviettes, I suddenly felt flat.

I sat down next to the service hatch. Out of the corner of my eye, the glass door opened and somebody came in.

‘Is there a cigarette machine here?’

It was Bela. But he hadn’t seen me. He was looking at Ling, who still stood in front of the counter.

Ling pointed to another door. ‘Down stair,’ he said.

Bela went through the door that led down to the toilets.

Shortly after he came up again and called out, ‘Good night!’

After he had opened the glass front door and was leaving, I got up and moved to the counter. Suddenly, he swivelled around.

'Have you got matches too?' He looked straight at me, as though I'd been there the whole time.

I hoped that Ling would answer but he didn't say anything.

'Over there,' I said, and gestured to a bamboo dish. Why hadn't I just stayed in the kitchen?

'Do you work here?' he asked.

I cringed. 'Yeah.'

Bela looked exactly like he did two weeks ago at the *Glasshouse*. No doubt he also smelled just as good and felt just as warm. He tore the cellophane off the cigarette pack, glanced about him, and took an ashtray from a nearby table. Settling himself at the counter, he asked: 'May I?'

I nodded.

He offered me a cigarette, took one for himself and gave us both a light.

The cigarette tasted harsh. But at least I didn't have to cough. I didn't dare look at Bela. I hoped he wasn't looking at me either.

I dragged on the cigarette again.

Uncle Wu came out of the kitchen. After eyeing our cigarettes warily, he said brightly in English, 'Hello, I'm her uncle!'

His pronunciation sounded funny. It was probably because of his Chinese accent.

He shook Bela's hand and Bela held the pack out to him.

Uncle Wu actually took a cigarette. Then Bela offered one to Ling too.

We all stood together smoking in silence. We could have passed for a group of old friends. Yet I didn't really know Uncle Wu or Ling or Bela.

I remembered my will. How I had planned to tell everyone what I honestly thought of them. No, I couldn't keep my promise. I couldn't confess to Bela that I loved him.

'And what is your name?' asked Uncle Wu, running a finger over his overgrown mole-hair. My cheeks flushed. The hair was revolting enough but now Uncle Wu was drawing even more attention to it, stroking it the way some men stroke a long beard.

'Bela.'

'Oh, that is a very nice name!' exclaimed Uncle Wu.

Bela likely had no idea what to make of this whole scenario. He simply went on smoking.

'Are you just a friend or are you her boyfriend?' queried Uncle Wu.

Bela looked at me.

Strictly speaking, he fell into neither category. I waited to hear my death sentence.

Bela stubbed out his cigarette and pulled a fresh one from the pack. Uncle Wu was still gazing expectantly at him. And now even Ling was looking agitatedly from me to Bela.

‘Are you her boyfriend?’

I glared at Uncle Wu. Then I realised he hadn’t said anything. It was Ling who had asked the question. Of all people, Ling! Why did he have to stick his nose in something that had nothing to do with him? ‘Fuck you!’ I wanted to say.

Bela laid down his cigarette in the ashtray, mumbled that he’d come again soon, then left. As if he would ever come again!

As soon as he was out the door, I pounced on Uncle Wu. ‘Why did you have to ask him that?’ I shouted. Without waiting for a response, I spun around to Ling.

‘Fuck you!’

Ling stood open-mouthed and Uncle Wu cried out, ‘*Ai yah!*’

I should have said it in German so Uncle Wu wouldn’t have understood.

My gaze fell on Bela’s cigarette, smoking away. I decided to keep it as a memento. After all, his lips had touched that cigarette.

Then Bela came in again!

I instructed Uncle Wu: ‘Put the key back down where we clean off our shoes. And don’t forget to take the money with you.’

I walked over to Bela, not caring anymore that he could clearly see my grubby, too-big pants. He looked at me, completely astonished.

I grabbed his hand and dragged him out of the restaurant.

* * *

Ling and Uncle Wu were still watching us from the door. I pulled Bela along the street, over the bridge, and down the path that led to the embankment. They wouldn’t be able to see us there. Then I remembered that Uncle Wu would be going home soon. I took Bela’s hand again and we went on further, crossing over the little footbridges until we were finally standing in front of the music school.

I knew that now was the moment I should make good my promise and say: Bela, I missed you and I’m in love with you.

But I couldn't tell him that. He knew that I'd hidden the whole time behind the counter and had an uncle with a mole on his cheek with a long black hair growing out of it. Not to mention that my own hair needed washing and my pants were grubby.

My gaze travelled down Bela's black jeans and settled on his crisp white sneakers.

The sneakers shifted around until they were pointing at me. Now they were right up close against the toes of my shoes. Bela's body was so near that our cheeks were almost touching.

'What. Just. Happened?' he asked quietly in my ear. He smelled just like he did in the *Glasshouse*. I looked at his T-shirt, since I couldn't see his shoes anymore.

'Do I stink?' I asked.

He inhaled deeply at my cheek then sniffed down along the side of my neck. His face moved back.

'You smell like my meal.'

I looked up at him and wondered if everyone felt like this when they were in love. Like the most beautiful person in the world was standing in front of them. Like no face could be more beautiful, no body, no voice, no way of being. I couldn't imagine a time when I would no longer find Bela beautiful.

I wanted to know that I wasn't dreaming. But without having to get pinched for it. I ran my index finger down the front of his T-shirt. Surely that felt too nice to be merely a dream?

'Write something,' suggested Bela.

B-E-L-A, I wrote.

'That's me,' he said.

H-E-L-L-O, I wrote.

'Hello,' said Bela.

G-O-O-D, I wrote, then traced a circle around the word a couple of times before letting my hand drop. He was silent.

'Say something,' I said.

'What?'

'Whatever you feel like.'

'Want to go the river bank?' he asked.

We walked in silence over the grass, past the massive old tree and down the slope, where the ground levelled out. Along the river's edge grew a narrow stretch of grass. It smelt like the grass at the outdoor swimming pool. But here it also carried the scent

of wild flowers and the waters of the Aa. No chlorine stink or screech of small children.

I stretched out on my back and observed the sky. The moon was almost full. Bela lay next to me, completely still. Down at our feet, the waters of the Aa rushed past. I turned on my side. Bela had taken his glasses off and closed his eyes. I propped myself up and leaned over him.

There was only a hand width of air between his face and mine. I could feel his breath. My hair hung down, the ends brushing his cheeks. He still didn't open his eyes.

'Are you sleeping?' I asked.

He didn't answer.

'Bela,' I said, and he opened his eyes. They looked enormous close up. In the moonlight, they weren't blue but appeared dark grey instead. Or maybe that was because my shadow fell across them.

'Bela,' I said. 'Do you think I'm too fat as well?'

I shifted back a little, so I could observe him better.

I liked saying 'Bela'. When I said 'Bela', everything I was feeling could be heard in this single sound.

'Bela, were you in the restaurant only by chance?'

He shook his head. But he did it so slowly that 'shook' wasn't even the right word. The whole time, he kept looking steadily into my eyes.

'You didn't come to the *Glasshouse*,' he said.

That second, I would have given up my whole music collection for a single tape that contained only Bela's voice.

'Keep talking,' I said.

'About what?'

'Anything.'

Bela thought for a moment. 'What's your name?'

I sat back, turned away and stared at the other side of the river. The street lamps among the trees were all shining for nothing tonight. The moon had submerged everything in its alien light. With those three words of Bela's, the magical moment between us had been destroyed. The last thing I wanted was to know what was I called or who I was.

Some of the windows in the villas on the opposite bank were lit up. When I was younger I'd wished that I could live in one of them. I'd wished for blond hair and

parents who looked like those in picture books. Actually, I didn't know if I'd ever stopped wishing that I could be someone else.

Bela sat up too. I continued to gaze at the other bank.

'Don't you like your name?'

On the other side, a heavy silhouette emerged of someone walking along the path. It was Bao. He moved oddly though, without his usual confidence. It was as though he was trudging under double the normal gravity. Suddenly he spotted me and stopped.

'Who's that?' asked Bela.

'The cook,' I said. 'He never washes up and lives in –'

Bao peered over at us. Standing under the lamp light in his baggy T-shirt, he looked almost forlorn, like a large lost child.

'What are you doing over there?' I called across the river.

I had to shout and my voice sounded shrill. Especially with the weird-sounding Chinese.

'What are *you* doing?' he tossed back.

I didn't answer.

Bao called again: 'Your uncle locked up the restaurant.'

I tried to think of the word for 'back courtyard' in Chinese.

'Can't you go through the back?'

'I forgot to take the key with me.'

So Uncle Wu hadn't yet figured out the whole cellar set-up with Bao.

'Why didn't you tell him you forgot something in the kitchen and ask him to unlock it?'

'Because he was already gone!'

'Can't you go to Ling's?'

'He's not allowed to have anyone stay overnight!'

'What did he say?' Bela wanted to know.

I stood up. 'The cook can't get into the restaurant,' I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

'Why does he want to go back? Aren't you already closed?'

Good question, I thought. The cook lived secretly in the cellar and the counter boy didn't have a work permit. My father lay in hospital and Uncle Wu was getting on my nerves with his constant words of wisdom.

Now Bela was standing too.

'He locked his keys inside,' I said. 'I have to go home for the other key.'

I looked regretfully at Bela.

Bao was still waiting.

'I'll get the key and let you in,' I called back.

We walked together over the bridge. Before the narrow entry way, I paused.

'Yeah, so ... I have to go now,' I told Bella.

'I can drive you both. I'm parked here on the street.'

I thought of our horrible apartment block.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'I have to speak with the cook about a couple of important things anyway.'

'What's your phone number?'

'It's in the *Yellow Pages*.'

It was the same old joke that everyone made, about the Chinese being in the *Yellow Pages*.

'The restaurant?' asked Bela.

Bao cleared his throat. I couldn't tell if he really had something caught or just wanted Bela and I to hurry up with our goodbyes.

* * *

In the apartment it was dark and still. The television was switched off. Uncle Wu must have already gone to bed. I checked the top of the sideboard in the hallway but the keys weren't there. Nor were they lying on the coffee table. I knocked on my bedroom door and heard a gentle snoring.

As I pushed the door slowly open, I felt like an intruder. At first I could hardly see anything. The curtains had been drawn, blocking out the glow of the almost-full moon. Only a dim light penetrated from the hallway. My eyes soon adjusted. Where should I search? I looked on the desk – nothing there. Uncle Wu's trousers were draped over the back of a chair. I swallowed, reached into the right pocket and touched a handkerchief. Instantly, I retracted my hand. It's not the most thrilling experience to grab your uncle's used hanky.

In the left pocket though, I finally felt a key. I could tell by its shape that it belonged to the restaurant. I pulled it out, went over to Uncle Wu and peered at him. He was lying on his back, his arms down straight along his sides.

'*Nei hai ping koh* – who are you?' he suddenly asked, his eyes still closed. Or were they open just a crack? It was hard to tell.

'*Hai ngo* – it's me,' I said.

‘*Ping koh* – who?’ he said, as though he was on the phone and didn’t know who was on the other end of the line.

I didn’t answer. I was convinced that Uncle Wu was talking in his sleep.

‘*Mutt yeh?*’ he asked confusedly, as though the world baffled him.

‘*Mow yeh* – nothing,’ I said.

I waited a little longer until Uncle Wu was in a deep sleep again, his breathing calm. I’d finally decided to leave when he said: ‘I had to pull the plug.’ His voice sounded oddly monotone. Not at all like when he talked with my father.

Uncle Wu shifted onto his side, so that he was facing the window, his back towards me. I thought about slipping slowly out of the room. But then he started speaking again.

‘I caused the accident. So I had to deal with the consequences. That morning I went in. I couldn’t bring myself to look at my wife. I was meant to press a switch but straightaway I pulled the whole plug out of the socket. The doctor and a nurse were standing just outside the door. They were so surprised to see me come out again. I’d hardly been inside for a minute.’

I heard something like a faint wheezing.

‘They both ran after me and tried to pull me back into the room. They wanted me to say a proper goodbye. But I shoved them away, then ran off. I’d never run so fast in my life, not even when I was a young man.’

I stared at Uncle Wu’s back. His body lay completely still.

‘What did you do then?’ I asked softly.

‘I did something strange. I never told anyone about it.’

Chinese actually never do anything strange. They always think in practical terms. Feng-Shui, kitchen gods and lucky numbers are the only ways they allow themselves to be superstitious.

Uncle Wu went on. ‘If I’d told anyone, they would have thought I’d lost my mind. They would have packed me off to a mental asylum.’

‘Of course not,’ I said.

‘I walked along the streets and went into a *dim sum* restaurant.’

Often *dim sum* is translated as ‘to touch the heart’. That’s because *sum* means ‘heart’ and *dim* means ‘touch’. But the translation isn’t entirely correct. *Dim* doesn’t refer to everyday types of contact: it isn’t ordinary touching or grasping or stroking. *Dim sum* are dainty morsels. Similarly, *dim*-touches are small and refined. A *dim* is a dab. The way a calligraphy brush makes a quick forward movement, the tip imparting a delicate ink stroke, before withdrawing again.

Uncle Wu continued. 'All the tables were taken,' he said. 'Only one big round table had an empty seat. So I sat down, even though I didn't know the other people. But there was a clean bowl and chopsticks in front of me. Like in every *dim sum* restaurant, the dishes were served on a Lazy Susan in little bamboo baskets. I just helped myself to the food. The others at the table acted as if I wasn't there.

Then a waitress pushed her little trolley through the room calling out, "*Har gow! Har gow!*" I waved her over and ordered three baskets. She asked for the receipt, where the dishes get stamped. Someone at the table passed it to her and she stamped it three times, then went off.

Everyone was staring at me now but I didn't care. I took all three baskets of *har gow* off the Lazy Susan for myself.'

My father liked eating *har gow* too. Small steamed dumplings filled with prawns. The rice noodle wrapping is so fine that you can see the fragile pink of the prawn meat shimmering through.

'The *har gow* tasted so good, even without soya sauce,' said Uncle Wu. 'They were moist and tender, not dry at all. Then a person at the table said to me, "I know who you are."

I thought, so now finally someone is going to get annoyed. He was sitting three places down and I immediately recognised him as an old school friend of my wife. He asked how my wife was. I told him, "I don't know the woman you're talking about. I'm not the person you think I am."

The school friend said, "Excuse me", even though he knew exactly who I was. I just kept eating, and even helped myself to some *lo bak koh* and *siu mai*.'

I waited, but Uncle Wu didn't say anything else.

'What happened then?' I asked.

'I had to go to the shop,' said Uncle Wu. 'It was already late. So I got up and left. I picked up the car from the hospital parking lot. On the drive back, the other cars kept beeping madly at me. I said to myself: they all know what you did today.

At the shop I got the meat out from the cool room and laid it on the big cutting block. But as soon as the knife touched it, I knew I couldn't do it. I couldn't slice through that flesh.'

Uncle Wu made a sound that I had never heard before. Something between a whimper and a grunt. It was more animal than human.

I thought about putting my hand on his shoulder but didn't stir.

'You didn't sell anything that day?'

After a silence, he said, 'I sold the same amount as usual. I phoned Uncle Bat. He didn't have any work and came straight away. I told him how he should carve the meat. At the time he didn't say anything but afterwards he told Ly and Duc that I had become strange.'

What was so strange about that? He had done the most rational thing he could. He had pulled the plug, eaten and kept the shop running. He deserved to be admired for it.

'I never told anyone about what happened in the restaurant. They would have all talked even more about me.' Uncle Wu gave a hollow laugh, the way you do when something is too terrible to even try to find the right tone for it.

'The others have children,' said Uncle Wu. 'They wouldn't have become strange. Only people with no children become strange.'

He was quiet again.

'Your father hasn't turned strange, even though he's all alone here,' he said. 'That's because he at least has a child. At the same time, he wanted to come to Australia. But he thought you'd be angry at having to give up your friends in order to move where all his family and old acquaintances are.'

I must have forgotten to breathe. I took a gulp of air.

'You're still too young to understand it all,' said Uncle Wu. 'But perhaps someday you'll think about how your father gave up everything for you.'

I ran back down the stairwell. As I came out of the entrance, Bao was standing there, annoyance all over his face.

'Did you have to make the key yourself?' he complained.

'Lock up and be upstairs tomorrow by eleven,' I said, and pushed the key into his hand.

Bao suddenly looked uncertain. 'What do I say to your uncle when he sees me in the restaurant tomorrow with the key?'

'He's so tired,' I said. 'He won't come into the restaurant until later.'

Bao went on his way.

As I watched him, a thought came into my head. That in the end there was no difference between walking an empty street alone at night and sitting in a crowded *dim sum* restaurant among strangers.

* * *