

FAMILY SECRETS

by Ding Liying

translated by Nicky Harman

The translation of Ding Liying's short story Family Secrets was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival for the Manchester Translation – the first in an annual series of commissioned translations from around the world. The story was presented at a special event organised in association with the Confucius Institute at the University of Manchester and Comma Press during the 2010 Manchester Literature Festival. Family Secrets will also be included in an anthology of Chinese short stories to be published by Comma Press in 2011.

Manchester Literature Festival
Beehive Mill, Jersey Street
Manchester M4 6JG
www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

Copyright © Ding Liying
The English translation from Chinese
Copyright © Nicky Harman 2010

Manchester Literature Festival would like to thank Arts Council England and the Confucius Institute for their generous support of this project.



Family Secrets

I'm a hopeless newspaper columnist, I have to admit. I live on the outskirts of town and every time I go to work, to take phone calls, I can never quite get there on time. I mean, you can't tell what's going to happen on the way, can you? Once I actually saw a three-car pile-up and the car in the middle was scrunched up like a piece of waste paper. I was stuck on the bus with the other passengers for a whole hour. By the time I rushed into the office puffing and panting, I'd used up all my energy in fighting the crowds on the tram and walking the rest of the distance to work.

Today, I got in tired and thirsty, with my trouser legs rucked up from running. As soon as the lift doors opened, I could see Chen at the far end of the corridor, all ready to go home. He was squatting down in the office doorway, holding a key between his teeth, tying his shoe laces. He had his motor cycle helmet on, and was wearing a long, bulky puffer jacket. The moment he stood up, he looked like an astronaut ready for take-off. I greeted him apologetically: 'I'm late again.'

'That's OK, at least it's only 20 minutes today.' The key dropped out of his mouth as he gave a laugh, but his face was so constricted by the helmet that it looked more like an unpleasant grimace.

'I really am sorry,' I said, pulling out my reporter's notebook, ballpoint pen and stainless steel thermos mug. 'Your girlfriend will be worried.'

'You know what? I always allow an extra hour, or at least half an hour, if I'm meeting someone after work.' He stood upright and did a little karaoke-style jig on the spot. 'I'm used to you, see?'

'I'm really so sorry,' I adjusted my headset and rubbed my hands together.

'Well, I'd better be off,' he pulled on his gauntlets, 'It'll be cold outside.'

'It looks like snow.'

'Can you manage on your own?'

'Yes.'

I watched him disappear into the lift. 'Hey-ho', I said to myself. 'Everything's fine. I'd better get down to work.' I got up and closed the door, turned up the air-conditioning a degree and took off my ski vest.

I was the only one left in the office, and the phone still hadn't rung.

I took a swig of the hot ginseng tea which I had brought with me. I had to admit I was a lousy columnist. Every time I got some overwrought person on the phone, bawling their eyes out or spilling their secrets, I simply didn't know how to handle them. I would sit there paralysed with dismay, taking constant sips of tea or neurotically twisting the phone cable. After each call, I had to remember everything they had told me, and regurgitate it all in the first person, in my column. Some of them sent me letters saying how well I wrote and how I'd helped them get it off their chest. But that wasn't the way I saw myself. I had given myself the pen-name Lulu, with the character 'lu' which means revealing secrets.

I glanced around at the cramped office. There was a wall-mounted air-conditioning unit, and a calendar of a pretty sea-side scene somewhere abroad. The sky and the water were limpidly clear, and a few holiday-makers were gathering seashells. The figures were so tiny that they appeared far, far away and completely out of reach. The room also held two desks, two revolving chairs, and a filtered water dispenser. A broom and a mop stood in one corner. I sometimes wondered what I was doing in an office like this, taking these messy, hopeless phone calls. Why wasn't I at home with my family – my husband and kid? What on earth was I doing sitting in this stifling space, listening to these desperately sad stories?

I loathed this job. It felt like being employed to listen to tittle-tattle, like some gossip-columnist on a Western tabloid, only interested in other people's scandals. Perhaps I was actually beginning to grow a big nose like a foreigner too. But I had to support myself. My parents lived elsewhere in China and I was on my own. Every month, the rent was 500 *yuan*, the phone bill 100 *yuan*, gas and electricity etc came to at least 100 *yuan*. Then there was my life insurance, internet fees and the payments on a fridge and computer. Even if I didn't eat anything at all, the bills still came to over 1,000 *yuan* a month. I'd had the same lipstick for three years and my disposable contact lenses were almost used up. God, I really needed the money....

Anyway, I did the job just so that I could get by. It really gave me no pleasure. I didn't express my own opinions in my articles, or write with any sympathy. The repulsive stories we printed in the paper seemed to exist independently of me. I never wrote about my feelings or about how astonished I was by the things I heard. Quite honestly, sometimes they seemed unbelievable, but when it came down to it, I always wrote the stories down prosaically and dispassionately.

Once a man phoned to tell me that, ten years previously, he had raped his five-year-old daughter. Is that true? I asked him. Of course it is, he replied. But now I've told you the whole story, I've got it off my chest, I've unburdened myself. But I didn't want him to get it off his chest like that. Another time, a young man called: he'd just had a bust-up with his girlfriend and life wasn't worth living any more. He was going to slash his wrists and end it all. My instant reaction was to tell him that slashing your wrists didn't necessarily kill you, and he'd better think of another way. What I meant to say was he shouldn't be in such a hurry to kill himself, why not try and find another girlfriend? He said I was quite right, he'd cut his wrists once and it hadn't worked. So then we mostly talked about whether suicide was really necessary. I was trying to encourage him to want to live again. But two days later, I got a suicide note from him, saying he was going to gas himself instead. I don't know what else I could have said.

Only last Wednesday, just before nine o'clock, a girl phoned to say she was planning to jump from the top of the Jinmao Tower if her boyfriend stood her up that evening. I told her I didn't think the Jinmao Tower had been finished yet. So she said she'd just go out looking for the tallest building in Shanghai she could find. I couldn't be sure what she was going to do but from the sound of her voice, I didn't think it would be anything too terrible. So I didn't pursue it any further. But you see what kind of a job I have! They're all stark staring mad. And I always tell them, 'I quite understand the situation you're in' though actually I don't understand any of it.

I look down at my shoes, count the fine cracks in the uppers, and say to them: 'I completely understand your situation.' But, really, I don't understand a single thing about their lives.

Of course, I always have to take my readers' and the newspaper's tastes into consideration. The article has to have the right effect, so even if I'm seething with indignation, I have to suppress my anger and disgust. Any story that's not strong enough, I edit it so it's a bit more logical and reads better. Of course, this doesn't do

the callers any good. In fact, there's no way I can give them any real help. Not only can I not stop these terrible things from happening, I also can't protect anyone from harm, let alone heal their wounds. I really have no idea what to do for them.

Sometimes, if no one phones for a few days and I've used up all my old material, I'm forced to make something up. I might write that some guy had said he'd seen a flying saucer, and everyone thought he was mentally ill. I might write about how he's in torment and has no one to unburden himself to, and has finally found me at the newspaper. I might talk about his angst, as if he's a philosopher. After all, he has seen a flying saucer, and no one believes him. If you saw an article like that, you'd think I was proud at what I'd written up. But let me tell you, since the day the hotline opened, no one has called to say they've seen a flying saucer. Because there are no such things as flying saucers. All I ever hear about are failed love affairs and marriages; young people constantly slashing their wrists; forty-something women always being abandoned; STDs; drugs; gay love...I've had it all. Huh! Sometimes, I really find it hard to believe I'm sitting in the safety of my own office with a nice, scenic calendar decorating the wall. I feel like I'm on a ride to hell in a rudderless spaceship which has run out of fuel. Who knows what ghastly thing's going to happen next?

Actually, most of them just call to have a quiet moan. One tells me her husband has gone off looking for new pleasures and has ditched her for a newer model; a man says he wants to visit prostitutes but he's afraid of catching an STD. Now he's screwed up the courage to ask me whether it's true that getting gonorrhoea is no worse than catching a cold. I could tell you a hundred such cases. And I could also tell you about a hundred others: there's a girl in her twenties who's become some man's mistress and makes her living by selling her youth, never realising what she's lost but miserable all the same. Everybody belly-aches about how exhausting and hard life is. But if you suggest they try a different way of living, they say, no. That's how life is, you work your arse off and then you go and splurge it all. Until death brings an end to your troubles. If you try and tell them that death won't necessarily solve their problems or that sometimes they bring their troubles on themselves, I guarantee that no one will believe you. So there's nothing I can say. If only to keep my job, I sit here day after day waiting for those incoming calls and for someone to tell me what trouble has just hit them. It'll always be one sort of trouble or another.

Just then I looked at the aluminium office window. It seemed like a kind of great thick book, its open pages filled with a painted black sky and the dark outlines of tower blocks in the distance. What was it trying to tell me? I could see the beacon lights on the tops of sky-scrapers, tirelessly blinking like so many full stops. I suddenly felt all choked up: you couldn't ever stop time passing! What I wanted to know right now was exactly what it was that was being pushed beyond the margins of the pages of this great, cold book. What was it that we'd allowed to fall through the cracks?

Suddenly the phone rang. I hurriedly pulled myself together and flicked the incoming call switch down.

'Hello, is that Lulu? I've got something to tell you.' I heard the voice of a middle-aged woman in my left ear.

'Hang on a moment,' I said, and switched the ear-phone to the right ear. I always made one ear work and let the other rest. I took a mouthful of tea, and screwed the lid firmly back on my mug. Then I cleared my throat and said: 'OK, you can speak now.'

For a while there was no reply. I tried again: 'Can you start by telling me a bit about yourself?'

'Not really,' she said with a sigh, and her voice grew quieter. Then she was speaking again. I could hear her now, but it sounded like she had a salted plum in her mouth. 'Are you recording this?'

I laughed. We only had an ordinary telephone, and it had no recording function. But to reassure her, because the law was still very sensitive about certain intimate matters, I said: 'No, you can relax.'

I brought the mouthpiece nearer.

She paused, then said: 'Honestly, I'm not worried about being recorded. I've read all your articles, you know.'

'Really? What do you think of them?'

'They're very good. They always ring completely true.'

'All our stories are based on callers' true stories. But if you really don't want me to write down what you say, then I won't. It doesn't matter, I can keep it confidential.'

'Oh no, I don't want it confidential. I want you to publish every detail of it. I want everyone to know.'

'Fine,' I said. I opened my notebook, clicked down on the biro cap and waited.

'But I'd like to ask you a personal question.' She hesitated, then asked: 'Are you married?'

I knew that when people had something difficult to say, they often didn't believe that their listener would understand. So I had to encourage them. 'No,' I said: 'I'm an old maid.' I stressed the words 'old maid' and put warmth into my voice, to make her feel relaxed and lighten the atmosphere a bit. Then I added: 'But don't worry, I've got a degree in Chinese and psychology. I can guarantee that I'll understand whatever you tell me.'

'That's not what I mean. What I'm saying is, if you're not married, then don't. Getting married is just so much nonsense – the reality is it's terrible.'

'Can you say a bit more about that?'

'It can completely destroy someone.'

And then she finally got into her stride. She had been married for 18 years, and as she talked about it, her voice became clearer. She seemed to have taken the plum out of her mouth now.

'I'm 43,' she said, '20 years ago I was the belle of my college. No one would believe it from the way I look now, dowdier than a cleaner.'

I knew I didn't need to say anything, it was all just going to come out. The floodgates had opened and, even if I had wanted to, it would have been difficult to get a word in edgeways. She told me she had married a fellow student who had courted her for four years and he was the love of her life. She had one child, now at university. At this point, I felt like saying, Well that's alright then, what's the problem? But I kept quiet.

'I completely devoted myself to my family, and never had a career of my own,' she said, adding that she had given up an opportunity to study overseas as a postgraduate so as to support her husband through his science research. She had done everything for him. I didn't say a word, and she carried on. These women almost always said the same thing and it went something like this: they had slaved away and made all those sacrifices and then, just when the husband had made it and they could enjoy his success together, a third person appeared on the scene. So I waited patiently.

She loved him so much, she said. They were in the same work unit and once she'd given blood for him at their college clinic. I wondered why. Surely he had his own blood, hadn't he? But she just repeated: 'I love him so much.'

Still I waited, knowing what was coming - a young girl would suddenly burst onto the scene.

And sure enough, that was what had happened. 'My husband, that man lying in our bed, has betrayed me,' she said.

I finally got a word in: 'Your husband's at home?' 'Yes, tonight was our farewell dinner. He's drunk. I'll go and wake him up in a bit. He's going to take everything he owns and move into his girlfriend's flat tonight. He can lie there for the moment so I finish talking to you.'

She must have moved a chair, as I heard a scraping sound. Then it grew quiet again at the other end of the phone. Wherever she was, I couldn't hear a single sound.

'I didn't want to wash our dirty linen in public. I've been covering up for him for five years and during that time he hasn't stopped nagging me for a divorce so he can be with his girlfriend openly. But I just couldn't, I love him too much. I couldn't leave him, so I've put up with it and played deaf and dumb all this time. Actually, everyone at work knows. They all talk behind my back. I've become a laughing stock.'

She gave a long sigh, then repressed it and fell silent.

I never know what to say at times like this. Maybe I should have suggested something like, 'Don't be sad. Ms Wang, or maybe you're not Wang, lets call you Ms Li, please don't be sad. Go into the kitchen, pour yourself a nice cup of tea. Sit down, just like I'm doing. Have some tea and you'll feel better. Then take a good look at yourself. There's absolutely nothing wrong with your body, and that's the truth. Honestly, you can go on living no matter who it is that you've left. That's true of every one of us....' That's what I should have said, but I didn't, I don't know why.

I heard a suppressed sob.

'Are you crying?' I asked.

'Yes, I'm always crying,' she struggled to get the words out.

'Maybe it would do you good to have a good cry.'

'I think today will be the last time.'

'I hope so. We all have to look to the future, don't we?' And then I asked a really stupid question. 'What do you look like?'

She stopped crying. 'Everyone says I'm good-looking.'

'Large eyes, fair-skinned?' I sounded even more ridiculous.

'That's right.' She'd always been proud, she said, but marriage had heaped shame and humiliation on her. For the sake of her child or rather, to be precise, for her own sake, and to keep her family together, she'd kept calm and quiet. 'Do you know, I even begged him to stay three nights a week with me and four nights with her?'

I looked down at my shoes and studied the fine cracks in the uppers. I said how much I sympathized. It really wasn't easy to be dignified nowadays, I said. I said a bit more, I can't remember exactly what. I do wander off the point sometimes.

I looked at my watch. It was five past eight – we'd been talking for 20 minutes. I could hear she wasn't angry any more. Her voice was firm and I could not hear tears or gulps. She sounded cool and resolute.

'You're alright now?' I asked. She didn't answer, just repeated once more: 'You don't know how much he loved me then. He swore he'd love me for ever...' 'Yes, well, nothing stays the same.' I swapped the ear-phone over to the left ear again. I scribbled three words down in my notes: middle-aged affair. It was like the name of an ordinary illness: as far as its symptoms were concerned, we all knew what they were, there was no point wasting time describing them. Experience told me that they always ended up getting divorced. That was what always happened. The husbands always got their own way. But a forty-something divorced woman was getting on in years, hurting and on the scrap-heap. I understood them only too well. And then there were those that just felt overwhelmed with regrets.

Well, anyway, she and her husband had divorced. The court had awarded her all their property and custody of their child, she told me.

'That's excellent,' I said. 'You're quite lucky. Some people get nothing at all.'

'Oh yes, I'm lucky', she said. 'I was the belle of my college!' And she actually laughed a little – though the sound made me feel distinctly uneasy.

'Sorry, can you hang on a moment? I must just go and call him. Maybe he'll have something to say too'. She had cheered up now. 'I'll just be a moment. It might give you something new to put in your article.'

I heard the click of the receiver being put down, and a flapping sound as she walked away. She's wearing slippers, I thought. And I heard a door opening.

Then it went completely quiet at the end of the line. I agonised over whether to put the phone down or not. How much longer should I hang on? I pictured her as she was now: skinny, sallow-faced, a stack of dull, straw-like hair over her ears. Hands all wrinkled and coarsened by the washing powder. But you could still see from her large eyes how attractive she must have been as a young woman, even though now she was hollow-eyed with misery.

I glued my ear to the receiver. If it had been morning, I should have been able to hear the odd twitter from a bird, or the flap of a wing. And at this time of night, there should have been the sound of a TV, the financial news or some sports event, or an advertising jingle. But there was absolutely nothing - just deathly silence.

I closed my notebook, clicked my biro off, then on again. I began to fiddle with it. The barrel was shaped like an injection needle (a reader who worked in a hospital had given it to me). I held it between two fingers as if I was going to give someone a shot and started jabbing it into the table top.

One jab, two jabs.... I had absolutely no idea what to do next. The sharp point of the biro gouged pits in the desk top. Then I heard two distant yells. I thought, she's shouting at that fickle, drunken husband of hers to get up, though I couldn't be quite sure that that was what it was. It sounded muffled. Maybe the sound had come in through her window - an adult calling a child in to dinner, perhaps. I thought, I should be somewhere else too just now. I should be at home with my imaginary husband and children eating dinner. Or strolling along a beach somewhere in the South. I should not be witnessing so much human misery. I thought of the ocean and the pure, balmy sky in the office calendar. I thought of astronauts. Chen had been dressed just like one today! What was he doing now? Making love to his girlfriend?

Two minutes later, I heard footsteps approaching. Someone picked up the receiver. 'Hello!' It was her. 'Hello. What's happened?' I said quickly. 'Does your husband want to talk to me?'

'I'm very sorry, he says he doesn't want to say anything. He's died.'

I gasped. 'You mean, you're pretending he's dead, so he can't hurt you any more?'

'No, I killed him,' she said calmly.

'You can't have!'

'Yes, I have! Just this minute. Didn't you hear?'

My mouth felt dry and there was a lump in my throat, as if a piece of sausage had stuck in it. I could see the curved mouthpiece of the headset trembling under my nose. I couldn't get a word out.

'Don't you believe me? Listen, this is a vegetable knife and here's a fruit knife, listen to it...'

There was a grating sound in my ears. My teeth began to chatter. I didn't dare believe she was telling the truth. Any moment now, I thought, she's going to tell me it's a joke, she just wanted to scare me because I tell too many stories in my column about shameful things and no one ever gets the punishment they deserve. She's just about to say sorry. I so wanted to hear her laugh and say, 'It was a joke'. But her voice was hard and cold, and deadly serious:

'He deserved everything he got,' she said. 'I put up with it for all those years. My whole life's been destroyed. I've had enough! He just did what he pleased. He swore that he would love me forever, till death parted us. He swore.'

By the time I was able to speak again, she had put the phone down.

All I could hear was the dialling pips.

The sound of the pips suddenly seemed to pour into my ear, until my head was full of them. Then they were flying around the office, more and more of them, like wriggling larvae, colliding against each other, sending terrifying echoes back from every corner.

I sprang up from the revolving chair, shouting some name or other and nearly breaking the phone cable. I was such an idiot. If she'd really done it, I should have been able to stop it... I paced up and down, perhaps just testing whether I could still make my legs work. In spite of everything, I still hadn't given up all hope. This time tomorrow she might be on the line again: 'Lulu, it was all a huge joke, and now I owe you a sincere apology.' It probably wouldn't be as long as that – she'd calm down and then she'd ring me back and say, 'Everybody needs a bit of fun, don't they?' Then

she'd exclaim, 'What a life we lead, eh?!' And I would give a great sigh of relief and smile through my tears: 'I absolutely understand.'

When it comes down to it, I really am a pathetically hopeless newspaper columnist!

Biographical Notes

Ding Liying was born in Shanghai in 1966. She is one of a new generation of Chinese women writers whose work focuses on the lives of ordinary urban women and the underlying repressed tensions in their lives. She has been critically acclaimed for her short stories and essays, her lyric poetry and most recently for translating the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. She was awarded the Anne Kao Poetry Prize in 1999.

Nicky Harman translates contemporary Chinese literature, as well as teaching translation at Imperial College London. She has translated a number of prize-winning authors, ranging from Xinran to Hong Ying, Han Dong and, most recently, Zhang Ling. She translates fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose, and likes nothing better than to immerse herself in the translation of a good, full-length novel.