

agnes b.

The first time Ga-Chai took the train to work was when he first noticed the back of the girl on the platform carrying an agnes b. on her left shoulder. The night before, Ga-Chai and his girlfriend Amy had had a fight and he had gone drinking alone. Driving home, he had crashed onto a sidewalk. His passenger door was smashed and the car had to be taken in for repairs. Luckily he hadn't injured any pedestrians, and there were no cops around. His neck was a little strained, which hurt a bit, but that was all.

The girl was standing at the very edge of the platform, with her back to Ga-Chai, staring out at the vanishing point of the metal tracks. Her hair was not long, and was parted and braided, showing a bit of slender white nape. She was wearing jeans with a simple Jean Seberg-style Tee - long-sleeved, with blue and white stripes. She had her shoulders back, collarbones out, her slender arms hanging loosely at her sides, palms open, and tush perked up. Gazing at her from behind, he imagined how her chest would be thrust forward in front. Ga-Chai's left hand gripped his heavy briefcase, and he strained to see the girl from another angle. The train tracks in front of her curved away to her left. But there was something strange about the way she looked from behind. Unable to figure out where she was off-kilter, Ga-Chai stared and stared, leaning so far forward it seemed he was about to fall off the platform onto the tracks. The train approached the station, and Ga-Chai rushed into the first car.

At first Ga-Chai thought it was the effect of the agnes b. on the girl's left shoulder. It was a flat, trapezoidal, zippered, agnes b. handbag, dark blue with white trim, the kind of retro-style travel bag favored by young women, and not the ordinary thing a typical OL¹ loves to carry. The bag was neither big nor small, but it was bulging, though it wasn't clear with what. There was almost no room on the train and the girl was standing at one of the doors opposite him, looking out the window with both hands pressed against it. Ga-Chai stood far behind her. He stared at the back of her head, her hair with its center part, then at her shiny nape, and then further down. Halfway down her back was where things began to look wrong. It was only then that Ga-Chai realized that the girl's spine was slightly curved to the left.

From then on, Ga-Chai took the same train to work every day, but he never managed to get a direct look at agnes b.'s face. In his mind's eye, he saw over and over again her curved back and the agnes b., which seemed to sink lower and lower down her left side. Of course, Ga-Chai did not know the girl's name, and only secretly call her agnes b. Sometimes Ga-Chai thought he wanted to talk to agnes b., but he never found an excuse. All day he would daydream about the image of her back, and he even neglected to patch up his fight with Amy, so that cold war continued. Ga-Chai could not stop himself from fantasizing about agnes b.'s naked body, always as seen from behind. He constantly imagined himself fingering each knob of her deformed spine.

Eventually Ga-Chai's car got fixed, but he sold it and kept taking the train instead. One day, at another station, somebody jumped off the platform and all the trains had to be stopped. When it started to look as though service was not going to resume anytime soon, people began to drift out of the station, leaving only Ga-Chai and agnes b. standing there. Turning her head around and checking to see that everyone else had left, agnes b. said to him quietly, "Don't you remember me?" Ga-Chai jumped back, startled, thought he heard wrong, and racked his brain to recall her face. agnes b. continued, "My mom brought me to your clinic four years ago. I was fourteen then. You had me take off my clothes and bend over to be examined, and you pressed your fingers all over my back. You said that my spine was deformed, that it was a birth defect, that it was too late. You said that if I were younger it could have been straightened, but now it could only be treated through exercise. You said that when I grew up, my muscles and bones would degenerate, causing back pain that would affect my heart and lungs. You said that in serious cases this condition could damage the nervous system and possibly lead to paralysis." Ga-Chai wanted to tell her that he was not a doctor but an accountant, but, in the end, he just murmured, "It looks like you're fine now, don't worry about it." agnes b. let out a little laugh, and, in a voice that he could not distinguish as a child's or a woman's, said, "Back then, your hands were icy cold." Then, she strode towards the exit, the agnes b. bag in her left hand swayed and swayed in the air, lightly, as if nothing were in it.

¹OL is an acronym for "office lady" in Japanese slang.

BURBERRY BLUE LABEL

WHEN YUET-YAN INTRODUCED LAM FUEN-TUNG TO YIP BUEN-HA, SHE LAUGHED AS IF IT HAD JUST OCCURRED TO HER: “YOUR NAME MEANS WINTER AND YOUR NAME MEANS SUMMER, A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN!”¹ BUT INSTEAD, YIP BUEN-HA ASKED KNOWINGLY INQUIRED” WOULD MISS LAM’S FATHER ALSO BE A TRADITIONAL CHINESE HEALER?”² LAM FUEN-TUNG JUST SMILED WEAKLY, COVERED HER MOUTH WITH A FIST, AND COUGHED. THE CAMEL-COLORED BURBERRY RAINCOAT THAT SHE HAD DRAPED OVER HER ARM SLOPED DOWN, NEARLY TOUCHING THE GROUND.

YIP BUEN-HA WAS ORIGINALLY INTERESTED IN YUET-YAN, BUT SHE ALREADY HAD A BOYFRIEND. SHE THOUGHT YIP BUEN-HA WAS DEPENDABLE AND HONEST, AND SO SHE FOUND HIM SOMEONE SINGLE, TWENTY-NINE, PRETTY, AND WITH A SWEET CHARACTER – IF A LITTLE TOO QUIET. SHE WAS DEFINITELY WORTH MEETING, AND YIP BUEN-HA AGREED TO BE SET UP. INITIALLY HE HAD NO EXPECTATIONS, BUT ONCE HE SAW HER HE LIKED HER, THOUGH HE DIDN’T KNOW IF IT WAS JUST BECAUSE OF THE NAME THING. HE ASKED HER OUT RIGHT AWAY. LAM FUEN-TUNG DIDN’T REFUSE, BUT HER RESPONSE WAS SOMEWHAT LUKEWARM.

THAT YEAR’S WINTER WAS VERY MILD, BUT WHENEVER YIP BUEN-HA SAW LAM FUEN-TUNG SHE ALWAYS HAD THE BURBERRY OVER HER ARM, THOUGH SHE NEVER HAD IT ON. THE TWO OF THEM DIDN’T GET FAR BEYOND DINNER AND MOVIES, PRETTY ROUTINE. ONCE YIP BUEN-HA WANTED TO LIVEN THINGS UP, SO THEY TOOK THE FERRY TO CHEUNG CHAU.³ LAM FUEN-TUNG, HOLDING THE BURBERRY AS USUAL, LEANED ON THE DECK RAILING. THE EARLY MORNING OCEAN BREEZE BLEW A STRAND OF HAIR ACROSS HER LIPS. YIP BUEN-HA STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND TO BRUSH IT BACK. WHEN THEY REACHED THE SHORE, HE MOTIONED FOR THE COAT, AND TOOK HER FREED HAND IN HIS. HER HANDS WERE COLD, LIKELY NUMB, SO HE RUBBED THEM TOGETHER BETWEEN HIS. LAM FUEN-TUNG LOOKED UP AT HIM, HER USUALLY PALE FACE REDDENED CONSUMPTIVELY, BUT BEAUTIFULLY.

YIP BUEN-HA FELT THAT EVERYTHING WAS GOING WELL, EXCEPT THAT THE BURBERRY MADE HIM UNEASY. HE TRIED TO ASK LAM FUEN-TUNG NONCHALANTLY WHY SHE ALWAYS HAD THAT BIG COAT WITH HER. SHE SMILED, SAYING, “NO REAL REASON.” WEARING AN IVORY-COLORED LIGHT WOOL SWEATER, SHE WAS WALKING ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF THE STREET. HER LUNGS HAD IMPROVED A GREAT DEAL RECENTLY, AND YIP BUEN-HA THOUGHT THAT MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, SHE MIGHT NOT NEED THAT BIG COAT ANYMORE.

BUT LAM FUEN-TUNG’S COMPLEXION REMAINED THE VERY OPPOSITE OF THE SUNNY DAYS. SOMETIMES SHE WOULD COUGH INCESSANTLY – A

DRY COUGH, AS IF EVERY LAST THING INSIDE HER LUNGS HAD BEEN FORCED OUT. YIP BUEN-HA WOULD TURN PALE AND LOOK ON HELPLESSLY. THE ONLY THING HE COULD DO WAS ASK IF SHE'D SEEN A DOCTOR, BUT SHE WOULD INSIST, "IT'S NOTHING, IT'S NOTHING." ONCE, WHILE LAM FUEN-TUNG WAS IN THE LADIES' ROOM, YIP BUEN-HA SEARCHED THE BURBERRY INSIDE AND OUT, BUT FOUND NOTHING. ALL HE LEARNED WAS THAT IT HAD COME FROM THE FACTORY STORE IN BRITAIN. LATER HE ASKED YUET-YAN ABOUT LAM FUEN-TUNG'S PAST, BUT ALL YUET-YAN SAID WAS, "FAN-DONG'S ALL RIGHT, REALLY, HER LIFE'S BEEN SIMPLE. SHE'S NEARLY THIRTY AND SHE'S STILL NEVER HAD A REAL RELATIONSHIP BEFORE, SO NATURALLY SHE'S NOT SO AT EASE. IT'S ALL UP TO YOU, OKAY?"

YIP BUEN-HA DECIDED THAT LUM FAN-DUNG MUST HAVE SOME SPECIAL AFFECTION FOR BURBERRY, SO HE BOUGHT HER THE NEW BLUE LABEL WRIST CLUTCH. IT WAS BLACK NYLON WITH A DIAGONALLY CHECKERED LINING AND A ZIPPER CLOSURE. THEY HAD PLANS TO GO TO A PERFORMANCE AT THE ARTS FESTIVAL THAT NIGHT. IN THE MORNING, IT WAS STILL WARM AND SUNNY, BUT THE WEATHER REPORT ANNOUNCED THE ARRIVAL OF A COLD FRONT. YIP BUEN-HA ONLY HALF-BELIEVED IT, SO IN THE END HE WORE AN EVERYDAY SUIT JACKET. WHEN THEY SAW EACH OTHER, LAM FUEN-TUNG ACCEPTED THE GIFT, THANKED HIM, AND THEN CAREFULLY WRAPPED IT BACK UP AGAIN.

AS THEY WERE COMING OUT OF THE HONG KONG CULTURAL CENTER, A GUST OF FRIGID WIND SUDDENLY SWEEPED BY, SENDING EVERYONE BACK INSIDE WITH GASPS AND CRIES. THEN IT STARTED TO DRIZZLE AND THE WHOLE SKY DARKENED WITH MIST AND FOG. UNEXPECTEDLY, LAM FUEN-TUNG'S CHEEKS TURNED ROSY PINK, AND HER EYES FLASHED WITH A RARE LIGHT. OPENING UP THE BURBERRY RAINCOAT AND PUTTING IT ON, SHE RAN OUTSIDE INTO THE RAIN, THREW HER ARMS WIDE OPEN, TURNED HER FACE UPWARD, AND SPUN AROUND IN CIRCLES. THE BREATH FROM HER LIPS MADE THE STREETLIGHTS LOOK LIKE AN ORANGE MIST. YIP BUEN-HA REALIZED THAT THE BURBERRY WAS SO LONG IT REACHED HER ANKLES, AND THE SLEEVES EXTENDED BEYOND HER FINGERTIPS. IT WAS AS IF A GIANT SILHOUETTE WERE WRAPPED AROUND HER. HE STOOD BY HIMSELF IN THE DOORWAY AND HUGGED THE BLUE LABEL BAG.

/NO. 1/ "TUNG" IN LAM FUEN-TUNG'S NAME MEANS "WINTER" AND "HA" IN YIP BUEN-HA'S NAME MEANS "SUMMER." /NO. 2/ "FUEN-TUNG" AND "BUEN-HA" ARE ALSO THE NAMES OF CHINESE HERBAL MEDICINES – THE COLTSFOOT AND THE PINELLIA TERNATA, RESPECTIVELY. /NO. 3/ CHEUNG CHAU IS A SMALL OUTLYING ISLAND OF HONG KONG. MOSTLY RESIDENTIAL, AND WITH AN ATTRACTIVE WATERFRONT, IT IS POPULAR AS A WEEKEND SIGHTSEEING DESTINATION.

CHE ★ CHE WAS CALLED CHE FOR ONLY THAT ONE YEAR—BEFORE THAT EVERYONE CALLED HER CHI. IT WAS 1997, THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF LATIN AMERICA'S REVOLUTIONARY LEGEND CHE GUEVERA. THE WHOLE WORLD WAS AWASH WITH CHE FEVER, RENEWING ITS IDOLATRY OF THE 1960S SAINT OF LEFTIST STUDENT MOVEMENTS. THAT FAMOUS OLD PHOTO OF CHE SPORTING A GUERRILLA BERET AND A LONG MOUSTACHE APPEARED ON T-SHIRTS, WATCHES, FOOD PRODUCTS, SOUVENIRS. CHI BOUGHT A RED COMMIE CHE TEE, PUTTING IT BACK ON AS SOON AS IT CAME OUT OF THE WASH, WEARING IT ANY SEASON, EVEN UNDER HER WINTER COAT, UNTIL EVERYONE WAS FAMILIAR WITH THAT MOUSTACHED FACE ON HER CHEST. SO SHE NICKNAMED HERSELF CHE. ★ CHI BOUGHT THE CHE TEE WITH HER BOYFRIEND, KIN. "ONE FOR EACH OF US," SAID KIN. "THIS MOUSTACHE GUY SURE LOOKS HOT." THE TWO OF THEM WORE ARMFULS OF BRACELETS, HAD LONG, LOOSE, BLOND-STREAKED HAIR, RODE THEIR MOTORBIKE EVERYWHERE AT LIGHTNING SPEED—THE ENVY OF ALL TEENAGERS. ONE NIGHT KEN'S BUDDY BALDY CALLED TO ASK CHI OUT TO KARAOKE, BUT ONCE HE GOT DRUNK HE STARTED GROPING HER, WHILE THE REST OF THE GUYS JUST STOOD THERE WAITING THEIR TURN. THE NEXT DAY, KEN TOOK HIS BROTHERS TO BALDY'S PLACE, AND WITHOUT A WORD BEAT ALL THOSE GUYS TO A PULP, BREAKING BONES AND EVERYTHING. A MONTH LATER, CHI WAS WAITING IN TSIM SHA TSUI EAST FOR KEN ONE NIGHT, AND FINALLY SAW HIS BIKE WEAVING UNSTEADILY TOWARD HER. HE STOPPED IN FRONT OF HER, AND PULLED ON HIS JACKET. SOMETHING WAS STUCK INTO HIS TORSO, A KNIFE. THE BLOOD DIDN'T SHOW MUCH ON THAT RED CHE TEE, IT JUST TURNED A LITTLE BLACK. KEN FELL FROM THE BIKE. ★ AFTER KEN DIED, CHI LEFT HOME. SHE DIDN'T TAKE MUCH, JUST WHAT SHE HAD ON. OUT ON THE STREET, SHE RAN INTO HER FATHER, WHO WAS JUST GETTING HOME FROM ALL-NIGHT MAHJONG. HE ASKED HER WHERE SHE WAS GOING, AND SHE SAID, "JUST GOING TO WALK AROUND A WHILE, NOT SURE HOW LONG." CHE BRAIDED HER LONG HAIR INTO DREADS, COCKED THE VELVET CAP, AND GOT ON KEN'S MOTORBIKE TO START HER PURPOSELESS JOURNEY. SHE THOUGHT SHE WOULD DRIVE UP ALONE INTO MAINLAND CHINA, THEN MAYBE TO THE MIDDLE EAST OR INDIA, BUT IN THE END, SHE JUST ARRIVED AT THE BUILDING LOBBY OF A FRIEND. AND JUST LIKE THAT, CHE BEGAN BOUNCING AROUND FROM PLACE TO PLACE, STAYING WITH ONE FRIEND AFTER ANOTHER. ★ KEN'S UNCLE ALWAYS HAD STUFF TO SELL—SILVER JEWELRY, CRYSTAL, WATCHES, BOOTLEG CDS, UNAUTHORIZED DESIGNER GOODS, THINGS OF THAT SORT. SO CHE GOT SOME MERCHANDISE FROM HIM TO PEDDLE ON THE STREETS. WHEN SHE WAS LUCKY, SHE'D KEEP A FEW HUNDRED DOLLARS FOR HERSELF, OTHERWISE SHE'D GO HUNGRY—YOU CAN'T EAT A STALL OF JUNK. CHE

WAS BRILLIANT TO STILL HAVE THAT MOTORBIKE, THOUGH. BEING MOBILE, SHE COULD STOP ANYWHERE TO SELL AND AT THE FIRST HINT OF TROUBLE QUICKLY TAKE OFF. ONLY ONCE WAS SHE STOPPED BY THE ANTI-HAWKER INSPECTORS.¹ CHE FEIGNED SOME TEARS AND SOBS. THE OLD GUY HAD PROBABLY NEVER ARRESTED A LITTLE GIRL BEFORE, AND DIDN'T WANT TO HAVE TO GET ROUGH, SO HE LET HER OFF. CHE ALSO RAN INTO BALDY ONCE. SHE WAS ON HER MOTORBIKE WHEN SHE SAW HIM SITTING ON A ROADSIDE FENCE OUTSIDE A MOVIE THEATER WAITING FOR SOMEONE. AS SHE DROVE BY HIM, SHE DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING ELSE TO HIT HIM WITH, SO SHE BANGED HER HELMET INTO THE BACK OF HIS HEAD. THEN SHE SPED OFF. ★ BY THE TIME SUMMER RETURNED, CHE'S CHE TEE HAD BECOME UNBEARABLY OLD AND DIRTY. THE MAGAZINES WERE SAYING THAT A CHIC NEW CUBAN RESTAURANT HAD OPENED IN CENTRAL, WITH AN ENSHRINED PORTRAIT OF CHE GUEVERA. CHE HAD ALWAYS ASSUMED THAT CHE GUEVERA WAS CUBAN. ONE DAY, CHE SET UP HER BLANKET OF GOODS IN A PEDESTRIAN WALKWAY IN CENTRAL. A CROWD OF DEMONSTRATORS MARCHED BY, PROTESTING WAGE CUTS AND LAYOFFS. IN THEIR RANKS WAS A STUDENT FROM THE UNIVERSITY'S SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT. THE UNIVERSITY STUDENT NOTICED CHE SELLING BRACELETS, POINTED AT HER SHIRT, AND CRIED: "LONG LIVE CHE!" AT NIGHTFALL HE CAME BACK, WANDERED AROUND LIKE HE WAS LOOKING FOR SOMEONE. SHE HAD LONG PACKED UP HER THINGS AND WAS SMOKING IN A CORNER. SEEING THAT HE WAS SO HOPELESS, SHE FINALLY CALLED HIM OVER. ★ CHE AND THE UNIVERSITY STUDENT SAW EACH OTHER A FEW TIMES. SHE WOULD DRIVE HIM BACK TO HIS DORMITORY ON HER MOTORCYCLE. HE WOULD RIDE IN THE BACK WITH HIS ARMS AROUND HER WAIST, SHE WOULD SIT IN THE FRONT, DRIVING AND QUIETLY CRYING. ONCE SHE TOOK HIM TO THE TEMPLE STREET MARKET. HE LET HIMSELF GET ROPED IN BY A "FORTUNE TELLER," WHO WAS HAPPY AND GAVE HIM 2-FOR-1, SO SHE GOT A FORTUNE TOO. SHE WAS SHOCKED WHEN SHE READ IT: "MISS, IN YOUR LAST LIFE, YOU WERE A GOOD MAN AND A HERO. YOU WERE NOT CHINESE, BUT ARGENTINIAN, WITH BIG AMBITIONS FOR YOUR GENERATION, BUT SADLY DIED YOUNG." THE UNIVERSITY STUDENT FOUND THIS HILARIOUS, "OH, THIS GUY MUST REALLY BE A MYSTIC," AND EVEN JOKINGLY CALLED CHE "OLDER BROTHER." CHE'S HEART WAS FILLED WITH SORROW, SHE LOOKED DOWN AT THE PORTRAIT ON HER CHEST, AND WALKED ON ALONE, AHEAD OF HIM.

¹ THE HONG KONG GOVERNMENT'S FOOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT MAINTAINS A HIGHLY ACTIVE INSPECTION AND CONTROL TASK FORCE TO POLICE THE INFORMAL ECONOMY.

♡ Hello Kitty ♡

When Joui Kit-Yuk started primary school, everyone was required to have English names. So her mom wrote Kitty in her notebook, saying that Kit-Yuk's sharp little eyes were just like a kitten's. Kit-Yuk didn't grow up to look much like a cat, nor was her personality at all catlike. But for every birthday and holiday, all of her friends would get her Hello Kitty presents, because everyone thought Kit-Yuk was obsessed with Hello Kitty. ☆

Kit-Yuk in fact had no special affection for Hello Kitty, though she didn't especially dislike her either. It was just that once, when she had placed third in the fourth-grade examinations, her mom had bought her a Hello Kitty thermos as a reward. After that, all her friends started getting her Hello Kitty gifts, and, to make things easier for them, Kit-Yuk always acted like she loved Hello Kitty. Of course, they thought it was easy being friends with Kit-Yuk. ♡

Just as the Hello Kitty gifts piled up in Kit-Yuk's home, so her friends accumulated over the years. Friends from university, secondary, and primary school were always keeping in touch with her, constantly planning reunions. Kit-Yuk wasn't very outgoing or talkative at these get-togethers, but her old classmates always thought first of Kit-Yuk, and once they remembered her they would want to plan yet another reunion. ☸

In university, Kit-Yuk studied accounting, so her friends would joke about how someday she would work at Sanrio, the company that makes Hello Kitty. Kit-Yuk would avoid saying anything, and after graduating she went to work instead at one of the Big Six accounting firms. She put away all her Hello Kitty pencil cases and cell-phone holders, and strode to the office in proper business attire. During the first week of training, a young man who was wearing a dark-blue dress shirt with a golden yellow tie passed her in the hallway and said to her, "Hey Kitty, I'm Stephen. I'm also in the H group." They shook hands. ☆

Stephen was her senior at that time. From then on, whenever Kit-Yuk worked with him, he would be very patient and helpful. Stephen, like Kit-Yuk, wasn't very talkative, sort of the opposite of

his loud gold tie. Every morning he would say "Hi Kitty!" and then lower his head to work. As far as dating, that was something that wouldn't happen for a full year. They took seven days off then and went to Japan for a holiday, which made all their friends envious. But the fact that Kit-Yuk didn't go to Hello Kitty Land or Tokyo Disney was completely unthinkable for everyone. When pressed to talk about what they did on that vacation, Kit-Yuk was at a loss. All she remembered was the misty atmosphere and long slow days of the Hakone hot-spring resorts, the two of them lost in silent intimacy. ♡

Hello Kitty is not only timeless, but is now growing stronger and stronger, suddenly extending into many product lines. Aside from stationery, you can now buy a Hello Kitty toaster, radio, TV, camera, cell phone, vacuum cleaner, electric fan, credit card, blanket, furniture, PDA, car, practically everything under the sun. Nowadays you can find Hello Kitty dressed as a panda bear, a chick, a puppy. Hello Kitty can simulate anything, and everything becomes a Hello Kitty simulacrum. Fans say that Hello Kitty is the only gift-product character without a mouth, and that this makes her unique and unearthly. Critics say Hello Kitty is dispassionate and expressionless. ☆

When Kit-Yuk and Stephen separated, her girlfriends rushed to get her the newest Hello Kitty stuff - supposedly for her birthday, but really to cheer her up. They were all eating at a restaurant and Kit-Yuk opened each gift to the group's bubbly excitement. Kit-Yuk felt truly grateful. After dinner, Kit-Yuk went to the ladies' room to fix her makeup. She put on layer after layer of lipstick, and then, grabbing some tissue, practically rubbed her mouth off. ☼

That night, before going to bed, Kit-Yuk drew lipstick mouths on each of the 126 Hello Kittys in her room. She dreamt that she was in the hotel at Hakone. It was dawn and she was applying lipstick at the dressing table, while an unknown man slept on the tatami. Her lipstick got thicker and darker, and with one wipe of the tissue, her mouth was gone. ♡

Kit-Yuk woke up with a start. The sky was half dark. The Hello Kittys around her all had no mouths. ☼ ♡ ☆

* icq

* there was a period of time when many people on icq knew pie chart. this included a few regulars, like jen, ricky, betty b., big foot, jacque, mini, hello hello, xiao, cherie, etc. they all asked the same question: "pie chart, who are you really?"

* pie chart's answer was different every day, depending on who else was online that day: "today i'm 40% ricky, 27% mini, 15% xiao, 13% vivian, 9% diana, 5% little wave...", and so on and so forth. pie chart's interests were very diverse and covered every random thing, so people would often seek out pie chart to chat. pie chart would never ignore anyone, since being online meant being available. as a result, some people found pie chart a little promiscuous.

* of everyone, jen and betty b. got along best with pie chart. jen was always telling pie chart private stuff, and whether the stories were true or not, pie chart would always respond earnestly, sometimes staying online the whole night with jen. afterward jen would say: "can you belong to me 100%?" pie chart would answer, "you're so silly, is there such a thing as a 100% pie chart?" then jen would press, "then what percent are you yourself?" pie chart would hesitate but reply, "pie chart has no self."

* once, somebody with the screen name bar chart came looking for pie chart on icq, scolding: "you're just shameless." betty b. tried to comfort pie chart, saying, "icq is full of people with no life." pie chart asked, "then what about us?"

* betty b. had just been dumped, so it was a good thing pie chart was around to hang out with, or else making it through the night would have been difficult.

pie chart said, "i just like to share." so betty b. would say a lot about herself, about her family, who she had a crush on at school, how once at the playground a stranger took off her pants and molested her, what male teacher she wanted to sleep with, and so on. she also asked pie chart if romance was in the picture, and what about sexual experiences? pie chart responded with: "tons and tons, in all varieties." betty b. was supremely excited, but pie chart immediately said, "now please don't say let's meet up in person, or anything stupid like that."

* pie chart also once said to jen, "don't start thinking that i live somewhere close to you, that only happens on tv." then pie chart disappeared from icq.

* jen got into college and worked a summer job at a pancake house. there was a girl there named pai, who looked much more experienced. with her robust body and large round hands, she made carrying six pizzas look easy. once when they were making salads, jen casually asked her, "have you played around with icq?" pai perked her ears and said, "i what q?" jen paused, slowly stirring a bucket of pineapples. pai was a really good person, willing to help people, hardworking, a little too straightforward sometimes, but still sensitive. after work, she always found an excuse to wait for jen and would nonchalantly walk with him. after walking together a few times in the night, it was hard to resist becoming lovers. pai took out her workday ponytail. as they strolled, her surprisingly long hair whisked across jen's face. jen suddenly asked her if she knew about pie chart. pai raised her eyebrows, saying "pie chart? i failed high school math."

miu miu flannel

it was on a night three years ago that miu wai-sze was in a car accident. she was celebrating her sixteenth birthday. her boyfriend kut was taking her home in a taxi. and it collided head-on with a truck. both the taxi driver and kut died. miu wai-sze spent two months in the hospital. and when she left she was paralyzed from the waist down. the doctor said she would spend her life in a wheelchair. after that, miu wai-sze always kept on the pair of black leather, clear rubber-soled dr. martens boots, because they were her birthday gift from kut, and also because they had survived the car crash with her.

after miu wai-sze got out of the hospital she did not go back to school and did not work either. she just stayed home all the time. either she'd watch tv and veds, or read comic books, trying to find something to laugh at, or she'd stare at mementos of kut, shedding one tear for each thing. there was nothing her family could do for her. it was a good thing that they were well off enough that she had a stay-at-home mom who could take care of her day and night.

one day miu wai-sze had a sudden urge to go outside, and mom pushed her in the wheelchair to the park. mom told her to sit alone for a while. while she herself ran to the store for some groceries and came right back. miu wai-sze didn't like sitting in the sun with all the dragonflies flying around her, so she wheeled herself over to the shade of the trees. under one tree she saw a young man feeding a scraggly brown-and-white-striped cat. as soon as the cat saw miu wai-sze come over, it scurried off. the man looked up at miu wai-sze, squinting his eyes. the tree's shadow moving across his face. the next day miu wai-sze came back, quietly sitting off to the side without speaking as she watched him feed the same cat. she sat like that four days in a row before he introduced himself, saying, "i'm brother cat." then he pointed to the cat saying: "this is mao mao. and you?" miu wai-sze hadn't spoken to a stranger for a long time, and her voice didn't sound like her own. "i'm miu wai-sze."

brother cat always fed mao mao at the same time every morning. despite wind or rain. miu wai-sze would also come, and gradually started to feel that there was something in life to look forward to. it wasn't that she especially liked cats, and it wasn't because she had a crush on brother cat. she didn't know

why, but every morning she had hope, and a place to go. once brother cat pointed at miu wai-sze's boots and said: "you've been wearing those for a long time!" miu wai-sze was surprised. she had thought that because the boots never touched the ground, they would last forever, but it turned out that through the passage of time alone they had come to look old. miu wai-sze and brother cat rarely spoke to each other. she didn't know what he did, and he didn't ask about her life either. if they were to have a conversation, it would be about mao mao: oh, she looks fatter, she's so mischievous, she jumps so high, she's a girl, she's got tiny pupils, she's got sharp claws, she's got a limp now, things like that.

summer went by. one day brother cat suddenly said: "i'm going to be moving, i'm getting married." after a pause he said, "want to come to my wedding?" then turning to look at the insatiable cat, he sighed deeply. after mao mao finished eating, brother cat suddenly picked up a tree branch and struck mao mao hard with it, frightening her so much she leapt away. she turned back, looking at him perplexed, but he just kept driving her away. until mao mao ran so far she was out of view. the harder miu wai-sze looked, the blurrier her eyes got, and her palms were all wet.

the next day, miu wai-sze asked her mother to take her out to buy shoes. in the shop, she immediately fell in love with a pair of strappy, brown flannel miu miu high heels. the salesgirl let her try them on. miu wai-sze used all her arm strength to lift her body, and then actually stood up, and, teetering, walked over to mom. miu wai-sze never went to brother cat's wedding, and never saw him again. she even started to wonder if brother cat had ever really existed. but she could walk again, and when she wore the miu mius with a new dress, she realized again that she was only nineteen years old.

one cool autumn day, miu wai-sze put on the miu mius to go to a job interview. on the way home, she passed by the place in the park where brother cat used to feed mao mao. in the thicket of the trees, she spotted a yellow mound. as she got closer, she saw that it was the cat's corpse, so starved it had no shape. miu wai-sze's legs weakened then and there, and she tumbled to the grassy ground.

Nokia 8810

The reason Lo Ting-fong came to be called Mo Toh-Lo, which later morphed into Mo Lo-Lo, probably had something to do with her Motorola PCN600 cell phone.

Mo Lo-Lo had one peculiar habit, which was that when she was on the phone, she wouldn't ever tell anyone where she really was. Sometimes, when she was lying in bed at home, she would say she was jogging in the park. If she were at the doctor's in Sheung Wan, she'd say she was in Chun Wan having dinner with a friend. If she were at work, she'd say she was swimming at the pool. Nobody would ever know Mo Lo-Lo's whereabouts. If they looked for her where they'd expected to find her, there would be no trace of her. But then, at the most unexpected times, she would suddenly show up. Anyone who could get used to it would become her friend, and eventually it would cease to be weird for them.

Her friends didn't know whether this habit of Mo Lo-Lo's was a fad that began with her getting a cell phone, but then, no one really knew anything about the pre-cell-phone Mo Lo-Lo. Mo Lo-Lo worked at a cell phone network shop. She had changed companies twice, but never her profession. Mostly she worked at sales booths. Their sales team would visit all the major shopping centers of Hong Kong, Kowloon, and the New Territories, holding up cell phones while calling out along the streets: "The best and the fastest service provider, no monthly fees, no service charges, free phones, bonus credits, family-friendly, special promotion, great deal," and so on.

Mo Lo-Lo was doing a promotion at the Shatin New Town Center when a guy in a black leather jacket bought a new Motorola Star Tac from her. After he got his new phone, he asked her what her name was. She pointed at his phone and said, "Motorola." She motioned to him to return his receipt, and wrote her cell-phone number on it before slipping it back to him. The next day before she got off work, Mo Lo-Lo answered a call and a voice said, "I'm Ben. I'm looking for Motorola to have dinner with me."

Ben got to know Mo Lo-Lo's phone habit pretty quickly. She had lost several boyfriends because of it before, but she didn't care enough to change. This, Ben also knew. Ben worked in a graphic design firm as a web designer. When he got bored at work, he'd play cell-phone hide-and-seek with Mo Lo-Lo. He worked really hard at guessing, and she never got bored with feeding him clues. But of course he could never really tell if he ever got it right. Once when he was working late, he called Mo Lo-Lo, who said she

was in the shower, which aroused him. Then, as he stepped out of the office, Mo Lo-Lo was hiding around the corner waiting for him. That freaked him out.

One summer evening, Ben excitedly showed Mo Lo-Lo his brand-new Nokia 8810. It was the world's smallest GSM cell phone, with a reflective silver body and an internal antenna. It was officially priced at \$7,380, but on the gray market it was selling anywhere between \$10,000 and \$20,000.¹ There were only three hundred of them in the whole city. Mo Lo-Lo found it strange that he hadn't asked her about getting one for him through work, but he said that he had bought it through a friend. As she was checking out Ben's new treasure, she could make out two distinctly different sets of fingerprints on its reflective body. Ben said that once the new stock comes in, he'd buy one for her too—girls could use it like a makeup mirror. Shaking her head, she wiped the silver phone clean with her sleeve, took a look at her reflection, then pressed her finger and mouth on it, and gave it back to Ben. After dinner, Ben said he had to go home to work on a deadline for the next day.

Mo Lo-Lo did not go home, but wandered the streets aimlessly. She called Ben's home phone and let it ring over and over, but no one answered. She called his cell phone, which went to his voice mail. After she had called five times in a row, Ben finally answered. She asked him where he was, he said he was at home. "But no one answered your home phone." "I've been switching over to my cell phone." "No one answered your cell phone." "I was in the bathroom." "You can't answer the phone in the bathroom?" "I didn't bring it in with me. How would I know you were going to call?" "Where are you really?" "Stop trying to pick a fight." Mo Lo-Lo hung up on him. Ben tried to call her back dozens of times, but she didn't answer.

Late at night, Ben had just stepped in the door when his cell phone rang. It was Mo Lo-Lo. He asked her where she was. She said, "I'm here." Ben flicked on the lights, and saw in the reflective surface of the Nokia phone that there was a lipstick mark that looked like it was on his cheek under his ear. He rubbed the phone, looked at his reflection again, but it was still there. He looked more closely, and then realized that it was on his face, two red lips, strangely moist and itchy.

¹ Dollar values are given in Hong Kong dollars. In the late 1990s, the approximate exchange rate with the American dollar was 1USD=7.7HKD.

PRADA

SUKI WAS SURE SHE REMEMBERED CORRECTLY. SHE HAD SPENT \$3,000 ON THE PRADA HANDBAG.¹ THAT AFTERNOON NELSON HAD COME OVER TO HER OFFICE AND WAITED FOR HER IN THE LOBBY. THEY WENT TO A CAFETERIA FOR SANDWICHES AND, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BUSY ROOM, HE SUGGESTED THAT THEY BREAK UP. SUKI HAD REMAINED SURPRISINGLY CALM, HELD ONTO HER SANDWICH AND CONTINUED TO CHEW, ONE MOUTHFUL AT A TIME, AS THE BREADCRUMBS SCATTERED ALL OVER THE TABLE. THAT DAY AFTER WORK, SUKI WENT BACK TO THE MALL WHERE THE CAFETERIA WAS AND WANDERED AROUND IN CIRCLES UNTIL MOST OF THE STORES HAD CLOSED, AND BOUGHT THAT PRADA BAG, WITHOUT REALLY KNOWING WHY.

FROM THEN ON, EVERY EVENING AFTER WORK SUKI WOULD GO BY HERSELF TO THAT CAFETERIA AND EAT SANDWICHES. EVEN THOUGH SUKI HAD BEEN LIVING ALONE SINCE GRADUATING FROM UNIVERSITY, NOT UNTIL THEN DID SHE REALLY KNOW WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE ALONE. NOT THAT SHE COULDN'T HANG OUT WITH HER FRIENDS OR GO SEE HER FAMILY, BUT SHE PREFERRED TO BE ALONE SO SHE WOULDN'T HAVE TO EXPLAIN THINGS TO ANYONE.

THE FIRST PERSON TO DISCUSS THE PRADA BAG WITH SUKI WAS HER OLD SCHOOLMATE FANNY. THAT NIGHT SUKI WENT TO THE CAFETERIA TO EAT SANDWICHES, AS USUAL. IT WAS ONLY WHEN SHE GOT TO THE CASH REGISTER WITH HER TRAY THAT SHE REALIZED SHE HAD NO CASH IN HER WALLET. SHE HAD JUST BOUGHT TICKETS TO A MUSICAL. SHE AWKWARDLY EXPLAINED TO THE CASHIER, WHO MADE A "DON'T SAY ANYTHING" GESTURE, AND, WHISPERING "YOU'RE ONLY SHORT \$10, IT'S ON ME!" WAVED HER AWAY WITH HIS HAND. SUKI PICKED UP THE TRAY, AMUSED. AFTER SHE FOUND A SEAT, SHE TURNED HER HEAD TO LOOK AT THE BOY, BUT HE ACTED AS THOUGH NOTHING HAD HAPPENED. THEN SHE SAW FANNY COME INTO THE CAFETERIA.

AT THAT TIME, FANNY WORKED AS A REPORTER, AND HER WORK CLOTHES WERE T-SHIRTS AND JEANS. SEEING SUKI DRESSED IN A WHITE PANTSUIT, SHE CLUCKED WITH ENVY, AND WHEN SHE SAW THE PRADA, SHE EXCLAIMED, "REAL OR FAKE?" SUKI SAID, "IT'S GENUINE." FANNY SHOT BACK: "OF COURSE IT IS, YOU'RE SO DRESSED UP, HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY CARRY FAKE STUFF? HOW ARE YOU AND NELSON? WHEN ARE YOU TWO SHACKING UP?"

SUKI AND NELSON HAD STARTED DATING THEIR FIRST YEAR OF UNIVERSITY. THEY WERE TOGETHER DAY AND NIGHT, AND HAD NO DOUBTS ABOUT THE FUTURE: CAREERS, MARRIAGE, CHILDREN. THEY WOULD NEVER HAVE DREAMED THAT AFTER ONLY ONE YEAR OF WORKING AT DIFFERENT FIRMS, EVERYTHING WOULD CHANGE. THINKING BACK ON IT, SUKI WASN'T THAT HURT, AND SHE WOULD SMILE SADLY TO HERSELF.

ONE DAY THE BOY AT THE CAFETERIA NOTICED, AND ASKED HER WHAT SHE WAS SMILING ABOUT. HER FACE TURNED RED. WHENEVER THIS BOY MADE SUKI'S SANDWICHES, HE ALWAYS DID SOMETHING EXTRA, LIKE SLIPPING IN SMOKED SALMON. WHILE SUKI WORRIED ABOUT GETTING HIM IN TROUBLE, SHE DID ENJOY THE SANDWICHES. WHEN SHE TRIED TO PAY BACK THE DOLLAR SHE OWED HIM, HE WOULDN'T TAKE IT, SAYING THAT TO BE ABLE TO TREAT HER TO LUNCH MADE HIM HAPPY. SUKI SURMISED THAT SHE WAS AT LEAST THREE OR FOUR YEARS OLDER THAN HE WAS, AND SINCE SHE WAS SECRETLY FLATTERED BY HIS FLIRTATIONS, SHE WAS PRETTY EMBARRASSED BY IT ALL.

SUKI WAS ASKED THREE MORE TIMES WHETHER HER PRADA WAS AUTHENTIC OR COUNTERFEIT. ONCE IT WAS WHEN SHE RAN INTO A COLLEAGUE AND HER BOYFRIEND. ANOTHER TIME IT WAS AN OLD HIGH SCHOOL CLASSMATE WHO ASKED. THIS CLASSMATE WAS A TEACHER, WHO WAS CARRYING THE EXACT SAME PRADA, THOUGH SHE SAID HERS WAS A FAKE. AFTER THOROUGHLY COMPARING IT WITH SUKI'S GENUINE PRODUCT, NEITHER OF THEM COULD FIND MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE, WHICH THEY BOTH FOUND ODD. THE THIRD TIME WAS WHEN SHE WENT HOME FOR DINNER. HER MOTHER, IN THE MIDST OF PRESSURING HER TO FIND A NEW BOYFRIEND, ASKED WHERE SHE BOUGHT HER COUNTERFEIT PRADA. WHEN SUKI SAID IT WAS AUTHENTIC, HER MOTHER SCOLDED HER FOR BEING STUPID AND LECTURED HER THAT SHE HAD TO LEARN TO BE AS THRIFTY AS SHE HERSELF WAS.

SUKI NEVER THOUGHT ANYTHING WOULD HAPPEN WITH THAT BOY, BUT WHEN ONE NIGHT SHE DIDN'T SEE HIM IN THE CAFETERIA SHE MISSED HIM. SHE COULDN'T HELP ASKING THE OTHER SERVERS, AND FOUND OUT THAT HE HAD CHANGED JOBS. SUKI'S STOMACH WAS EMPTY, BUT SHE COULDN'T EAT. LEAVING HALF A SANDWICH, SHE LEFT THE CAFETERIA. OUTSIDE, SHE SAW THAT HE WAS WAITING FOR HER. HE SAID, "WILL YOU TAKE ME OUT FOR A DRINK?" SUKI THOUGHT FOR A MOMENT, AND SAID, "OK, WHERE?" THE BOY WAS WEARING TRENDY NEW JEANS, AND HE AND SUKI IN HER GREY SUIT LOOKED LIKE BROTHER AND SISTER. HE GESTURED AT HER BAG, SAYING, "I'LL CARRY THAT FOR YOU." SUKI HESITATED, AND HE RESPONDED, "ARE YOU AFRAID I'LL DIRTY YOUR DESIGNER STUFF?" SUKI FOUND HIM SO CORNY THAT IT WAS FUNNY, AND HANDED HIM THE BAG, SAYING, "JUST TAKE IT, IT'S COUNTERFEIT. BOUGHT IT IN SHENZHEN² FOR LESS THAN TWO HUNDRED BUCKS."

¹ DOLLAR VALUES ARE GIVEN IN HONG KONG DOLLARS. IN THE LATE 1990S, THE APPROXIMATE EXCHANGE RATE WITH THE AMERICAN DOLLAR WAS 1USD 7.7HKD.

² SHENZHEN IS A CITY ON THE BORDER OF MAINLAND CHINA AND HONG KONG, WHERE MANY CONSUMERS SHOP FOR COUNTERFEIT DESIGNER GOODS.

RED WING When Tam Chi-wing put on the pair of Red Wing shoes, she learned what it was like to be in a world of her own.

Tam Chi-wing's earliest memory of running was that time at the mall when she was five. She had reached her hand out for a Little Twin Stars ponytail holder, but Mom said she couldn't have it, so she squeezed it into her palm, turned, and ran. Mom kept chasing her, and she ran far, far away, but the shopping center was so big, it was impossible to find the exit.

Her most spectacular marathon may have been when she was ten. At that time, Mom and Dad were on the brink of divorce and were fighting every day. Tam Chi-wing started wailing, so she got a beating. Suddenly, she threw open the front gate and ran out of the apartment, running wildly through the hallways of the housing block. She didn't stop even when she lost both her slippers, and ran and ran until she was seven blocks away at Grandma's house. It was only when she looked down at her bloody feet that she felt any pain. She hadn't expected that by her making that run, Mom and Dad wouldn't divorce. But then, they never really reconciled either, it was just always cold between them.

After that, even though Tam Chi-wing kept running, it never seemed as big a deal. Running was the only way she knew to solve a problem. If she forgot her homework, or if she was embarrassed that she couldn't answer a question in class, Tam Chi-wing would push aside her desk and dash out of the classroom. The teacher could never block her fast enough. Most of the time, Tam Chi-wing wanted to run far away from her classmates. Tam Chi-wing's eyes were narrow and pointy, so whenever she looked at anyone she looked harsh. This gradually became offensive, and she began to be hated by her classmates. In class, they loved to pull her hair or throw chalk at her, instigating the desired outcome—when they had tormented her enough, she would run off. Tam Chi-wing was constantly running here and running there, and so she never had the chance to stop and say even a few words to anyone.

Once, after gym class, some girls stole Tam Chi-wing's school uniform skirt. She asked for it once quietly, then stammered,

unable to say anything more. She dashed out of the changing room, and ran into Kwong Kin-sheng in the boy's class. Kwong Kin-sheng got up and ran after her. After school the next day, some of the girls in her class ambushed her outside, tied her hands and feet with rope, took off her shoes and socks, and burned the soles of her feet with cigarettes. They cruelly jeered, "See how well you can run now," and warned her to stay away from Kwong Kin-sheng. Tam Chi-wing limped home. The next day she put on long stockings and went right back to school.

When Tam Chi-wing was not running, she would wander around in the shopping mall. There, she didn't need to run, because nobody recognized her or bothered her. Nobody even noticed her. She could stroll around, slowly, by herself, and let her gaze wander among all the dazzling things around her. Once she had saved up enough money, she would bring something home that would become a part of her. That way, she didn't need to ask Mom or anyone else. Once Tam Chi-wing's legs had healed, she went out and bought a pair of scarlet Red Wing work boots. They had white soles and square toes. As soon as she put them on, she felt that she could walk into Takuya Kimura's and Puffy's exciting but lonely world.¹

When she got back to her building, Kwong Kin-sheng was sitting on the edge of the flower planters waiting for her. Once they saw each other, Tam Chi-wing turned and ran. Kwong Kin-sheng ran after her, calling out, "Don't misunderstand me, don't be scared, let's stop and talk a bit." Soon, however, Kwong Ken Sen fell behind huffing and puffing, and completely lost sight of Tam Chi-wing. As for Tam Chi-wing, wearing the pair of Red Wings, with one burst of speed she ran past the property's garden fence and up the building's pedestrian bridge. The more she ran, the faster, the higher, the farther she went, away from the bridge, and the road, and the ground, and the earth, running until she came to a land where no one could catch her.

¹ Popular Japanese actor Takuya Kimura and the Japanese female pop duo Puffy are celebrity endorsers of Red Wing shoes.