

Drink It Dry

Rachel E. Hicks

The old woman lies in the smoky dark and grins at the sound of Mao Mao, her rooster. The new Li Jing Tian Cheng apartment residents must be turning over in their beds, cursing his hoarse croak – it’s only four o’clock in the morning. She pulls the padded cotton quilt over her toothless mouth and giggles quietly as he croaks again, a withering sound just outside her window. She clucks softly, and he hops up on the sill, squeezing through the empty panes. He lands dustily on her stomach, peering toward her face with no affection in his bleak stare. Still, she grabs his feet and runs her palm over his back, and he lets her. She shifts to one side to keep the light from the newly installed lampposts by the playground out of her eyes, a gritty feeling gathering in her stomach. Lately, it all presses against her wall, her chest – middle-class children in bright clothes shrieking outside in the evenings, grannies in pleather sneakers carrying purses and knitting bags scolding them just to hear their own voices, the way her view of the Ba river closed up and disappeared little by little with each new high-rise. And later this morning, her meeting with Cadre Wu, the local party leader.

After a moment, Mao Mao disappears again through the window and she sighs. She looks up toward the hole in the farmhouse roof that she can’t quite see – the lamppost light doesn’t reach that far. She meant to get the hole at the base of the chimney repaired. It has been letting in rain and even, last week, a snake. She shudders at the thought of the wet slap its thin body made hitting the cement floor; without thinking she had turned and hacked it in half with the knife she was using for cutting garlic. Then she had sat down shakily on her plastic stool to watch its writhing come to a slow stop.

She wonders about the snake. Was it an omen? She’ll ask her neighbor up the hill, Li Sun, to come fix the hole for her. Yes, he would do that. She’ll give him some cabbage

and a pouch of the Pu’er tea leaves Cadre Wu, who visited yesterday, gave her. She frowns in the dark. Cadre Wu had startled her.

She was struggling to open her eyes after her midday rest, and she had realized with a start that a figure was standing in her open doorway. She raised herself with a grunt and grabbed her cane, which she used now occasionally, thrusting it toward the door.

“Who’s there?”

“Forgive me, Auntie. It is Cadre Wu come to see you.” As her eyes adjusted, she saw him bow deeply. When he straightened, he pushed his sunglasses up onto the top of his head and smiled at her. His eyes were a bit too large and drooped on the outside edges, and his face was round and smooth. She thought of a picture she’d seen in her granddaughter’s school book of a moon with a face. He had a tight crew cut and wore a white, stiff shirt tucked neatly into black pants. His black shoes had a new layer of dust, but looked recently polished. “Auntie, are you well today? How are your cabbages?”

She frowned at him and set about making tea. “Come,” she said, putting her dead husband Lao Yi’s cup down on the table. Cadre Wu came in, bowed again, and sat down on the stool. He folded his hands in his lap and they looked at each other. It came to her then – a memory of Wu as a child, her son’s classmate. Her son had implicated Wu as ring leader of a group of boys who had terrorized the farmers’ dogs in the hills – using handmade slingshots to shoot them with sharp rocks. After several weeks of this, a group of farmers came down and confronted the boys after school, when parents and grandparents were there to collect them. Wu hung his head and stayed at the back of the group until her son confessed that it had been his idea. He was always a bit intimidated by Wu. The old woman remembered how, as the embarrassed headmaster focused the heat of his fury on her son, the corner

of Wu's mouth had twitched upward, a convenient tear on his cheek.

"Auntie," he began, "how is your granddaughter? Does she have a good job in Shenzhen?"

She snorted and looked away. "I don't know."

"I bet she is doing well. Is she taking good care of you? Sending you money?" He studied her carefully as he said this. In her mind she saw Fei Fei, her pouty lips and tight jeans, her nonchalant wave as she boarded the bus. She had known then she'd never hear from her, even if she managed to stay alive and out of trouble.

"Not a jiao." She didn't want Fei Fei's money, if it ever came. Her response seemed to animate Cadre Wu; he sat up straighter and leaned forward.

"You know, your husband was a good worker. His memory should always be honored in this community."

The water was ready, and she poured it over the pinch of leaves in his cup. Lao Yi had been an average farmer; he had done nothing with vigor or passion. It was true that he left no enemies, which perhaps was somewhat remarkable. No one in the town missed him greatly, but neither did they have any bitter remarks upon his departing. The fact that they could each console her with an honest, kind word about him when he passed lifted them in their own estimation; they experienced a small surge of genuine goodwill, and it pacified their consciences for a time. She wondered where Cadre Wu was headed.

"How are your new neighbors, eh? These apartment buildings are first rate. I heard word that even a foreign family will be renting one next month – the new English teacher at No. 2 Middle School. Americans." So, that was it. She glanced out of the window at the new buildings. Construction crews were working on the newest one, just meters from the northern curve of her farmhouse wall. A foreign family. Americans. She sat down on the other stool.

"Too noisy. Kids on the playground late at night." The playground abutted the closest wall, and kids were always pelting things at Mao Mao, for fun. City kids. The city of Bazhong used to hug the river, a mile east, but it was fattening up and spreading its girth right up to the edge of her land. New development, business, even a highway under construction to link up with the ChengYa expressway. She didn't understand what was fueling it, feeding it. Now she was on the frontline, behind her the terraced plots of other farmers, other families who fed themselves and the growing city. Ridiculous – that they should be swallowed up, bought out like the others, the ones whose ancestral land now groaned under the weight of these seven-story apartment buildings. Who would feed the city, if they did not? She felt the grit in her stomach, the scrape of it deepening, widening. She didn't understand.

"Ah, kids! They must have a little play, I suppose. A little relief from their studies. Don't mind them." She studied

his face as he spoke, and the dough of his face tensed a little. The blood ran more quickly in her veins, hot with growing hostility. But it must not show. She scraped the tip of her cane across the cement, back and forth, as if absent-mindedly. Cadre Wu began to shift on his stool. He cupped his hand around the tea cup and slurped noisily. Lao Yi's cup. She restrained herself from grabbing it out of his fleshy hand and looked toward the door. Mao Mao high-stepped over the threshold, blank eyes on Cadre Wu's back. He stopped and screeched once, without a warm-up croak, and Cadre Wu's tea sloshed into his lap. His head whipped around so fast that his sunglasses flew off his head, cracking one lens on the floor.

She cackled, jiggling the phlegm in her throat, and spat to the side. "Scared of a chicken, Cadre Wu? In need of a little re-education on the farm, eh?"

Cadre Wu picked up his glasses slowly, testing the cracked lens with his pudgy forefinger. Without looking at her, he said – more to himself than to her – "Bazhong is getting better. Change is good." He stood up and bowed slightly, narrowed eyes on the cock. "I brought you a gift." He handed her a bright red gift bag. "In honor of your husband." He stepped over the threshold, placing the sunglasses carefully over his eyes. "Please come to the apartment office tomorrow morning. I would like to discuss something. 9:00."

The blood ran more quickly in her veins, hot with growing hostility. But it must not show.

She forces herself to lie still until she can feel dawn slithering up the other side of the mountain, pale gray and silent. Behind closed eyes she sees the farm mongrels stirring up and down the terraced plots, shaking their heads and blinking toward the dim east. She needs to use the toilet.

Mao Mao swivels his stringy neck at her as she shuffles out the door and crosses to the outhouse. Stars are fading and the air is soft and warm. She squats with difficulty, grasping the wooden dowel rod she screwed into the back of the door so she can keep her balance.

As she walks back to the house, she clears her nasal passages and hocks the phlegm toward Mao Mao, who steps gingerly over it. She begins to prepare water for tea. Pinches dry leaves from the package with stout fingers, drops them into a stained cup. It is one of only two left on the shelf. She pauses, gazing at the other cup, the one Lao Yi used every day. It's still there.

The morning fifteen-year-old Fei Fei left to find factory work in Shenzhen, the old woman had taken down her granddaughter's cup and thrown it out the window. Lao Yi had looked up at his wife over his own cup, set it down, and gone outside to sweep up the pieces. He buried them behind the outhouse with the others.

But Lao Yi's cup still sits on the shelf. He hadn't meant to leave. He had shrugged a silent, jovial apology and rested his head back on the pillow, smiling as he went. She knew the smile was because she was strong, and her health would not fail for a long time yet; he was sorry to be the weaker, but knew she would forgive.

Already it's been one year, and she still feels steady strength in her fingers, in her taut wrists and short, bowed legs. She sips her tea and stirs her rice porridge. Outside the open door, Mao Mao begins again. She closes her eyes to listen, her heart drawn to him and his raspy throat. Each month he sounds more and more like his neck is being twisted, but he crows on and still walks along the border wall with a proud strut.

When the sun peeks over the ridge above her house, she is already walking the short rows of cabbages in back with her dipping bowl. She inspects each head and sprinkles the ground around it with water. Her fingers pry cabbageworm larvae off a few heads; she spits and curses. Li Sun will send his daughter by in a few days to carry some of the cabbages to the market for her. She hopes most of the heads will be healthy.

She stoops to pinch off another larva and grinds it under her plastic sandal. Then she walks to the spigot beside the house and refills her bowl. Returning to the cabbages, she waters them slowly, frowning. She stops at the end of the last row. The bowl is empty in her hand. She looks at the lightning hills behind her. Perhaps two more hours until 9:00. The cracked sunglasses, the fleshy face, the request – no, command – that she come to the office. For what? What does she have that he needs? A lightness, a current, runs through her chest. As it did when the snake fell.

Children in red scarves are pouring out of the apartment stairwells, kicking and teasing each other as they walk to school. She waits until they are out of sight and then grabs her cane, walks the gravel lane to the corner, stepping onto the sidewalk near the Hu Hui convenience store. Another corner and she is outside of the Li Jing Tian Cheng apartment office.

In the large window she sees a model, astonishingly detailed, of the whole complex. She's never seen something like this before. There's a miniature black front gate with its arched sign, the guard house. Trim lanes curve around the tall buildings, past the two playgrounds – tiny slides! She is disoriented – where is the hill whose feet rest in her cabbage patch? In her mind, the schoolchildren walk in reverse, back through the tiny front gate, separating into the tributaries of

lanes that lead to the different buildings. Which one leads to the playground, the one by her low wall? Where is –?

She steadies herself against the glass. Leans her forehead against its coolness. Where the wall should be, curving inward by the climbing bars, there is no wall. Another seven-story structure stands there, the outer wall of the complex behind it jutting right up against the bottom of the hill. She steps back, spits to clear her head. Cadre Wu's moon face hovers in front of her, his lips touching Lao Yi's cup. A small sound, a *yip!* escapes her mouth. She looks around with narrowed eyes, then walks home, grinding her cane tip into dirt at each step.

9:00 comes and goes.

About an hour later she hears car tires on gravel. She is sitting in the shade at the back of the house, peeling apart two cabbage heads, dropping the cupped leaves into a basin of water. She doesn't look up. More than one door opens, closes quietly. More than one set of feet walking toward her. They stop in the sun – she sees six black shoes, two sandaled feet. Li Sun. She looks up. He is grinning at her, hands pressed as in prayer, already pleading. Cadre Wu and two others she doesn't know stand erect.

“Good morning, Auntie. Cabbages good?” Cadre Wu seems pleased, animated by this challenge. He crosses his arms and smiles. She doesn't answer. “The sun is high, Auntie. Remember we agreed to meet at 9:00? Apartment office? No problem. It's easy to forget. Shall we have our little talk here?” They each take a step closer. Li Sun slides into the shade beside her, touches her shoulder. She squints up at him – he stands ready to betray her – but how? For what gain?

“Auntie, you see the progress we are making here in Bazhong. In three months we'll be connected to the Cheng Ya Expressway – already businesses are coming here from Chengdu. Our people are profiting, everyone working together to make Bazhong a great city.” Cadre Wu speaks quietly, the prepared speech rolling easily off his tongue. “In each age, the people do their part. Auntie, it's a new age of revolution. You and your husband have served the community well for many years. Now we need you to serve in a new way.”

To disappear. To lie down among the cabbages and sink into the soil. She can already smell it on her skin. The curved roof tiles, the water spigot, the stick broom, the chimney – seeds for growth. In her mind she sees a building rising up from her floor, herself lying in its long arm of shade reaching across the cabbage field. Broken and buried with the teacups.

Li Sun bends toward her, hands still pressed. “It's time. That's all. What else can we do?” Cadre Wu coughs once. “They will take care of us – apartment, food, clothing. A good exchange – we help Bazhong, our needs are supplied. You don't need any more of this hard work. Time to rest. Enjoy life!”

“Auntie, we have workers scheduled to come in one

week. That should give you enough time to move your things. Mr. Li will help you – he can show you later today the apartment we've picked out just for you. It's by the river – a nice view to thank you for your service. And easy to do your washing from the bank."

The grit has turned to a solid stone. She touches her stomach tenderly. Her nostrils flare, and she picks up her cane, points it at the black car in the sun. Her cane shakes slightly, which enflames her further. She jabs it at the car again, brushing off Li Sun's hand on her shoulder. The men bow slightly and turn to go. Cadre Wu turns back once.

"Next week. Tuesday. You'll be ready."

There is quiet conversation at the side of the car. Li Sun watches the other men get in, hesitates, then turns away from her and begins walking up the hill on the farmer's path. It is getting hotter. The water in the basin holds cups of cabbage leaves, drops glistening on pale green. She carefully lifts one foot at a time and submerges them in the cool water, leaning her head back against the side of the house. In her mind the snake continues to writhe after it is cut in two. Did it imagine it had a chance?

Li Sun didn't come by later to show her the apartment. Either he was afraid of her, or he knew she wouldn't go. His daughter came two days later, however, and loaded fifteen of the best cabbage heads into her baskets. Her eyes took in a quick survey of the house and the small parcel of land; the old lady knew she'd been told to look for signs of preparation, of acquiescence. There were none.

The following evening she leans against her low wall, watching the children play on the slides and climbing bars. Each time one of them shrieks, her eyes narrow. Mao Mao stalks the wall beside her. Once in a while she leans to the side and spits the phlegm she hocked up. The other grannies gather in clucking huddles, watching her from the corners of their eyes. So, they know. Most likely everyone knows by now, is counting the days until Tuesday. They see her watering her cabbages each morning, see her make a show of moving slowly down each row, tipping her bowl. They see smoke curling from her chimney each morning and night, see her taking her tea on the back porch in the evenings. No one visits her.

They don't see her fingers shake as she pinches tea leaves and drops them into her cup. They don't see her scanning her roof, or the floor, for snakes, or the way she holds Mao Mao more tightly to her when he lets her, running her hand down his feathers. How she touches her fingertips to her doorframe each time she walks through it now, rubs them in the oil splatters on her wall near the stove.

Monday night she lies in bed and reaches her hand through the open pane, opens and closes her fist. How strange her thick fingers appear against the moonlight, the occasional cloud. She can feel her cabbages pulling life from

the soil out back, growing heavy and full. All these things. Things she can touch, that contribute to the sum of her unremarkable life, each day much like the last. The day they were married, Lao Yi tripped on the threshold when they were entering the house. He had laughed there, on his knees on that floor, one hand covering his mouth. He lacked any self-consciousness, did not worry that she would think him foolish. She had just shaken her head and pulled him up, smiling a little.

Each time one of them shrieks, her eyes narrow. Mao Mao stalks the wall beside her.

All these things: the cups, the rough cement floor, the grease stains, the old, padded cotton quilt. She runs her hands over it. Lao Yi bought it new after their son's delivery – the old lady flushes with shame in the dark at the thought of all that blood, of her daughter, then four, standing against the wall with her hand over her mouth. Useless child. Thin bones like her father. Her movements always in haste, without actually being helpful. Dropping things. Crying often, silently – this always puzzled the old woman. Her anger always flared up when she would see those thin shoulders shaking. And how her son grew to torment the girl! He was base and broad and completely unsentimental. She hasn't missed them since they left years ago for migrant work in Shanghai, but is glad they still return for Spring Festival each year. Though she doesn't pine for them, she expects that annual duty and is glad for the extra money they send.

She is awake in the lightening dark. The humidity is thicker than yesterday, and she can feel a light line of sweat on her upper lip and forehead. She wonders how to steel herself against the crowd she knows will be watching, imagines remaining in the house until brought out by force – what would that be like? Maybe she should stand in a strategic place instead: between the front door and the apartment wall. Will anyone be moved to pity? Does she want them to pity her?

She is still considering all of this as she pours her tea. Lao Yi's cup rests beside her on the table this morning – she pours a little tea into it. "Gan bei," she whispers in a toast – *drink it dry*.

She hears the beeping of a truck backing up at the same time she becomes aware of murmuring conversation outside. She picks up both tea cups and walks to her door. A foreman is waving the truck closer down her lane. Two other workers

in hard hats stand smoking to the side of the house, near the cabbage patch. Already there are ten to fifteen of her new neighbors gathered on the other side of the wall. No one looks her in the eye.

More workers – day laborers – appear on the gravel road from behind the truck. They are carrying empty boxes and a few rice paper bags. As they hesitate in front of her, she squats down stiffly and sits on the threshold. They look at each other, then step past her, brushing against her, and disappear into the house. She hears quiet shuffling as they begin putting things in the boxes and bags – her few dishes, pots and pans, quilt and bedding. They discover the back door, which they use to load up the truck.

The shattering of roof tiles at her feet startles her. Workers are crawling like crabs along her roof...

Then, a different sound, coming from above – a sliding and *chinking*. She turns around and sees the darkness of the room pierced with slants of light. Dust dances in the thick shafts of light and for a moment she is breathless with the beauty of the light breaking through, illuminating the singularity of her small life.

The shattering of roof tiles at her feet startles her. Workers are crawling like crabs along her roof, using their feet to push the curved tiles down the slope of the roof to the ground below. She looks into the faces of her neighbors. Some of them hold her gaze almost with hostility. Others look away. Mao Mao appears behind her, clucking quietly. She stands and walks back through the house, now mostly empty and open to the sky above, to the back door. Mao Mao follows her out into the garden, where she sets down the tea cups, fills the water bowl, and begins walking her cabbage rows, sprinkling the dirt. Li Sun and his daughter stand at the end of one row. He holds one hand out to her. She smiles at him and continues to water. At the end of the next row she sees a pair of dusty black shoes.

“It’s time, Auntie.” Cadre Wu is sweating heavily, his white shirt stuck to his stomach. She can’t see his eyes behind his sunglasses, but she stares in his face. She takes a step closer and he flinches slightly. Slowly she pours a stream of water from her bowl onto his shoes until they gleam.

“You should wear different shoes on a farm, Cadre Wu. See, I’ve cleaned them for you.” There is a chuckle, a hoot, from the growing crowd. She is surprised by a small surge of pity for Cadre Wu, who steps back angrily.

“It is time for you to go!” he says, his voice raised. Then, glancing at the crowd, he reverts to an obsequious tone. “Come, we have a wonderful new home for you. Your friend will take you.” He beckons to Li Sun.

She feels her friend’s arm around her shoulder, but she doesn’t budge. She watches the giant claw of the excavator raise itself above the far wall of the house, feels the vibration in her bones as it swings down and smashes through concrete. She will watch it all, every minute of it, she knows now. She will remain in the center – this one life, her beating heart, strong arms and bowed legs, the grease stains and broken cups – while they tear it down around her.

Cadre Wu says, “Come” once more, then shakes his head and walks over to the wall. “Stubborn!” he says to the people watching. He tries to grin. “Doesn’t realize she’s getting a good deal.” Another crash. Dust obscures everything momentarily. Cadre Wu coughs, waving a hand in front of his face. As the dust clears, the crowd sees the old woman motionless, facing the ruination of her home. Her blouse is missing a button in the middle, and a tuft of her gray hair sticks up on one side. Dust has settled in a fine layer on her arms and face, which displays a mixture of resolution and shock.

Her new neighbors shuffle their feet, begin to glance down. “A good deal!” Cadre Wu repeats, coughing again. “A modern apartment, near the river.” He holds out his hands to the crowd.

By ones and twos, they begin to walk away. Another crash. All that is left now is the western wall. And the rows of cabbages. A small child with a thin line of snot running from his nose is led away past Cadre Wu; he giggles at his sweaty moon face. Cadre Wu turns away, back to the old woman, whose back is turned against him. Rage lunges through him like a tiger, startling him.

In the last hour of dark the next morning, the old woman reaches out her hand for the window. It scrapes against rough cement. A momentary heave of fear disorients her. She rubs her hand along the wall, clucks softly to Mao Mao in the darkness, listens for his scratchy step outside the window on the opposite wall. All is silent in Li Sun’s farmhouse. Everything is strange. In two more months, he will also have to vacate, do his part for this new era of revolution. She clucks again, but Mao Mao doesn’t come. Suddenly she needs to hold his stringy body against her chest. She sits up slowly and shuffles to the door. It’s darker up here on the hillside. Down below the terraced fields, Bazhong curves like a gluttonous dragon along the river, its golden lights shining even at this hour.

As she pauses outside the threshold to let her eyes adjust, a pungent, warm odor wafts up from her feet. Trembling, she reaches down and her fingers brush sticky feathers. The old cock lies still in a dark puddle of blood, his neck at a right angle.