Olette Trouve
from *Purple Bamboo Park*

Ayi was small, a small and stout ayi. Her eyes were very close together and when she wore her spectacles she knew she looked just like a pig, in spectacles, but that was all right, since she was born in the year of the boar and had always kept her nose down, looking for treasures in the mud. Sundays were her only day off. Usually she would rise at dawn and cycle over to Ritan Park to hug trees, swing her arms around and around, and jog backwards down the ancient paths. Then she would stop by the street market on her way home to buy vegetables for the coming week. In the afternoon she would clean her own rooms and wash her broad white underpants at the communal faucet, where she loved to gossip with Old Yang, who lived next door to the sink, and peek in through the windows at Yang's grandson stretched across the length of three chairs, watching television. Often Yang invited her in for supper and Ayi would sit crowded in with the family around the fold-out table, slurping her noodles and watching the cross-talk on television, laughing in such a funny way, with tiny bits of noodle sometimes flying out of her mouth, that everyone else laughed with her and she felt like a real granny. But lately, she often came up with excuses not to join them, and even if Yang insisted, pulling her by the sleeve, Ayi found that she couldn't even follow the rapid cross-talk, such was her dread of going back to her empty rooms.

This Sunday, though, her employers the Zhangs had asked her to join them on an excursion all the way across the city, to Purple Bamboo Park. Ayi was so excited that during the night she kept waking, wondering if it was time to get up. Finally, at four-thirty, she heard a pot clanging next door: all the ladies her age across Beijing were beginning to stir, and Ayi too sprang out of bed and set her hair in curlers. She cooked porridge in her biggest black pot and boiled a batch of egg and chive dumplings. There was only one dress to choose: the dark-blue silk hand-me-down from Husband's mother, and of course, anklet nylons and the pair of pumps she had found at Lan Dao for only forty yuan. The pink ribbon that the sales girl had used to tie up the shoebox Ayi now wound around the lid and pot. She wedged the tin of dumplings beside it in the basket on the back rack of her bicycle, and she was ready to go. Pushing through the cluttered alleyway leading to the street, she finally had to stop and catch her breath. Sweat trickled out from her curls and dripped off her earlobes. She felt a little pool forming inside her bra.

It was only half past seven, but this was August in Beijing. Ayi was very good at guessing the time and the temperature, and she would have been able to tell that it was nearing 30 degrees centigrade, but that didn't account for the humidity, for the muddy tint of smog that obscured the sun, for the lack of a breeze, of the winds that plagued Beijingers in the springtime, whipping their faces with grit from the Gobi Desert. Her neighbors shuffled past her on their way back from the communal toilet, still in their cotton pajamas, the men in white tank tops pulled up over their pale bellies. Where are you off to? they asked. She told them that the Zhangs, who treated her like their own mother, had invited her out on a family excursion. Oh, they want you to tend the baby! the women answered. You should make them pay for working on your day off. Tending the baby is hardly work, Ayi told them. She minds me better then she does her own mother.

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Sunday mornings were the busiest time in the hutong street market. People came not just for the longans and peaches, for the bok choy and fatty slabs of meat that hung from hooks in the stalls, but also for all the extra goods placed along the sidewalks by anyone who

had something to sell. Here you could find anything from plastic buckets to oily bicycle parts to piles and piles of pink ladies' bras, all of the same size. Not many people could push through the crowd, paw among the wares, come up with the last or best of its kind, and haggle for it as ferociously as Ayi could, but this morning she steered her bicycle through the crowds without even looking at the stacks of ripening fruit that even today delighted the heart of any Beijinger who could remember the mean times.

She rode past Ritan Park, past the side street of delicate, shrugging willows, past the gates and fences of the old embassies, guarded by boys in oversized uniforms and shaded by the lusty ginkgo trees that lined the street like sturdier, more befitting soldiers. When she reached massive Chang'an Boulevard, she put her foot on the curb and wiped her arms and neck with the handkerchief she kept wedged up in her sleeve. After the traffic-guard finally turned his shoulders north and south, she crossed the street to the pink high-rise apartment building where the Zhangs lived, next to Sci-Tech, the Japanese department store. Down the ramp she plummeted, her brakes squeaking, to the cool basement parking lot, where she turned the miniature key that locked the back wheel of her bicycle. But really, who would steal a rusty old Phoenix? The same one she had saved and saved for, to give her daughter on her first day at University. It hadn't been the one that Hua had wanted. She had kept it chained outside her dormitory, summer and winter, and returned it to her mother with a rusted chain, the leather seat cracked and stiff, the day before taking the train to her new job in her father's work unit in Tianjin.

"Ayi, working on Sunday?" The parking lot guard raised his head from his desk and then slumped back down, resting his chin on his forearms.

"Not work, play!" She lifted the pot and the tin of dumplings and laughed when she saw the boy sit up expectantly. "All right, all right!" she said indulgently. "Don't they feed you at your work unit?"

"Never enough," the boy answered, pulling out a small metal plate and a pair of chopsticks from his desk drawer. "How I wish the other ayis were like you."

Ayi's heart bobbed slightly in her chest, like a little boat rocking back and forth in the shallow water, as she doled out six dumplings for him: not enough to fill a boy's stomach, just a snack. "Husband upstairs can eat twenty dumplings in one sitting, but I made a few extra, just in case."

The boy bent his downy face over the steaming dumplings, though he did not lift his chopsticks until he had run ahead of Ayi, punched in the code, and opened the big metal door for her when it buzzed.

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She rode up nineteen floors, feeling an upwards tug on her intestines, as she did every morning except Sundays, usually. When she reached the Zhangs' door she pulled out the key that hung from the long red string tied around her neck, and then wondered if today she should ring the bell. No answer. Cold air seeped under the door and chilled her toes; just that easily a woman her age could get sick. She waited for her sweat to dry, picking at all the places where her dress was sticking to her body, and looked out the hallway window at the gray network of alleys and divided courtyards of the hutongs far below. Down there, everyone knew each other's business: arguments, friendships, debts and favors raced back and forth in the alleyways. Nothing was forgiven, nothing was new; everything was recycled, from the cardboard patching the roofs to the memory of grudges handed down from one generation to the next—kept alive, always, on the watery nourishment of gossip. Here, the neighbors just ignored each other. The only ones who spoke to her were the other ayis, and from them she learned of the strange eating habits of their mostly foreign employers.

And the pay these ayis received, some of them a thousand yuan a month! They bragged to Ayi that they cheated on the shopping; something the maid of a Chinese family would never be able to get away with. To all this Ayi could only think of one thing to say: Just think, they can fire you at any moment! What do they care? Anyway, she told them, she had the best sort of job security: family affection.