

Pounds, Ounces, Meat

by Zhu Wen

(From the short story collection '**I Love Dollars**'; abridged)

ONE burning hot afternoon last June, I had to go to the telecom tower to pay an overdue phone bill. Because before this, I'd paid, overdue again, an electricity bill and overdue fines for the past half year, for a while I'd not had the money to pay my phone bill. The telecom office issued me two warnings, then cut my line off. Now, after finally scraping together the money to pay the phone, I was hoping against hope this month's electricity bill would have a heart and come a bit later than usual. Electricity and phone bills are, I suppose, what you might call a contradiction of everyday life. On the bridge by the old Drum Tower I was stopped by a shabby individual, clearly someone who'd wandered in from out of town, with a black bag tucked under his arm and an unnerving gleam in his eyes. He told me my physiognomy was most unusual; he simply had to tell my fortune, he wouldn't charge a cent. The plastic on top of the bridge had melted tackily in the sun: crossing felt like walking over spat-out chewing gum, or smoker's phlegm... or fresh dog shit. I include these comparisons purely to illuminate, not disgust, you understand. If I were to suggest you imagine it was raw meat underfoot, now that, I admit, would be nauseating.

Fuck off, I told him as impatiently as I could manage. Briefly, all too briefly, the man was transfixed by shock, too transfixed to manage any kind of response, till I'd reached the end of the bridge's elevation and was about to set off down the steps on the other side.

Good luck's coming your way this year! he screeched vengefully at me across the asphalt.

About fucking time, I muttered to myself as I descended. When I was halfway down, I happened to look up and see a girl with a healthily tanned face coming toward me up the steps, carrying a black parasol and a copy of *I Love Dollars*. My heart began to pound. I wasn't sure, at that moment, whether this counted as my good luck or not. In subsequent weeks and months, I often thought back over this scene, about this girl and that book, about how she kept the latter pressed beguilingly up against her chest, blinding me to its obvious flatness.

One evening two months later, after a blazing argument, my new, healthily tanned, girlfriend and I went to the market to buy something to eat. As we turned to leave for home, now the proud purchasers of a premium piece of pork fillet, we discovered that a great lump of bone had magicked its way into our meat, and went back to have it out with the stall holder and his cleaver. Never one to be pushed around, my girlfriend got right on, using her voice box exactly as God had intended.

Easy there, lady, said the unfazed butcher.

He took back the plastic bag in which the meat was encased, pulled the bone out from the middle, and threw it on to his table: So, according to you, how much should this weigh? he asked.

Four hundred grammes, I said, as bought 400 grammes of fillet.

Fine, he said, and put the meat on the electric scales. You want to know much it weighs? he said. See for yourselves.

My girlfriend and I crowded round. The funny thing was, it DID come to 400 grammes, even a bit over.

The stall holder smiled beatifically at us: That's cleared that up, I think. I threw in the bone for free, it makes a lovely soup stock.

Weighing the bone in his hand, he was about to throw it back in the bag when he suddenly raised his eyebrows at us: I'll ask you first this time, so you don't get the wrong idea. D'you want the bone?

No, we replied emphatically, ever-mindful of our dignity.

Without another word, my girlfriend picked up the bag and headed for the reweighing stall at the front of the market. I followed close on her heels.

The old man in charge of reweighing looked up at us from his knitting: Where'd you buy this?

Fourth stall on the right, we said.

No need to check, then, he said serenely, pushing the plastic basket containing the wool further up his arm. He won't have shortchanged you. That's Cao Hong, he's been the best stall holder around here for years now, won prizes for it, you don't need to worry.

Still skeptical, we put the meat on the scales; perplexingly, still 405 grammes.

By now, my girlfriend had the light of battle in her eyes and the bit between her teeth: He's bound to be in cahoots with the stall holders, she muttered to me. Just look at him, how can you trust a man who knits? Come on, let's go and check elsewhere.

If I'd expressed my opposition, she'd have turned on me. So I immediately murmured my agreement. But the problem was, where could we find a dependable set of scales? There was set of old-fashioned suspension scales at a fast-food stall not far off, but they were no good: everyone knows scales like those can be tampered with. A little farther down, there was a set of greasy electronic scales at a state-owned osmanthus duck stall. We had no problem with osmanthus duck, naturally, but were the scales beneath it to be trusted? My girlfriend was beginning to regret not bringing her pocket-sized spring balance with her. But even if she had, it wouldn't have been much use: the springs were so old they sometimes turned 500 grammes of chestnuts into a kilo. You didn't know when you'd been lucky or when you'd been had.

I think we should go by feel, I said, after thinking it over. All we need is an expert to do it for us.

Just then, an old lady with thinning gray hair hanging down over her shoulders happened to be walking by, away from the market, carrying a full bag of food. Smiling as ingratiatingly as I could, I approached and made my request. Without another word, she set down her basket and began slowly unlocking her shoulders, backward and forward. I held out toward her the plastic bag containing the meat. but she didn't take it.

Wait a second, she said, I've just been carrying a heavy basket, I need to readjust or I won't be able to guess right.

There was something in what she said, I thought, so I stood by and waited patiently. Once she'd loosened her shoulder joints, the old lady sighed, then started shaking out her wrists, one flick after another, first quick, then slow. Just as I thought she was about

to stop, she restarted the entire process. My girlfriend threw her head back like a warhorse and snorted several times at the heavens. She was getting impatient, I could tell. Unmoved, the old lady next threw herself into massaging, then pressing down on her right hand with her left, listening for a crisp crack from every joint.

All right then, hand it over.

What?

The meat!

Oh. Suddenly remembering, I quickly passed her the bag. I watched as the old lady curved her index finger like a hook, hung the plastic bag on it, and slowly focused on the task at hand, lowering her eyelids as she did so. After a very, very long pause she reopened her eyes and looked briefly, but intently, at me.

Should I count the bag in?

What?

The weight of the bag, should I count it in?

Eh? Oh, I don't mind, up to you.

I need an answer!

All right, count it in.

The old lady nodded, then reclosed her eyes. My girlfriend tapped her heels restlessly on the cement road, darting furious glances at me. My throat was dry with the tension. The old lady was still refusing to open her eyes.

Excuse me, I eventually croaked out, deeply embarrassed: We really need to get going, any chance you could hurry up?

A little under a pound.

What? What d'you mean, a pound?

About fifteen ounces.

Ounces? No, no, no, we need to know what it is in grammes.

You young people don't know how much an ounce is?

No, we don't.

All right, then: one pound is 0.454 kilograms. You do the maths.

My new girlfriend and I stood there like idiots. The old lady returned the plastic bag to us, swung her basket over her shoulder, and prepared to set off again. I quickly reached out to stop her escaping. She frowned.

I'm warning you, young man, let me pass. I've a dozen people at home waiting for me to cook dinner for them.

Don't leave us in suspense like this, I begged her, just tell us what it is in metric.

The old lady looked me up and down. Don't you know how to convert? she asked.

Why should I lie about something like that? I said. Please don't keep us in the dark.

This was not what the old lady wanted to hear. Work, work, work, dawn till dusk, that's all I do, every day. Where d'you think I'm going to get the time to waste keeping you in the dark? Just figure it out.

Saying this, she slipped under my armpit without even needing to duck her head. In a few decisive strides, I was once more barring her way.

Please, I said, tell us what this weighs in grammes, I'm begging you now.

The old lady twitched her chin. Stop whining. If you really want to know, I can tell you, but first admit you can't work it out for yourself.

All right, I said impatiently, I admit it.

The old lady shifted the basket over to her left hand: You youth of today! She pointed her liberated right hand up my nose. You can't cook, you can't convert pounds to metric, you can't do anything! You don't study, you can't tell rice from beans, you treat your family like dirt. You're all useless. Look at you! You've hands and feet of your own, why d'you need an old woman to cook your meals? Working her fingers to the bone. You should be ashamed of yourselves! And I know I shouldn't say this, but I'm going to anyway: what if I keel over one day, what'll you do then? Go begging?

Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't have gotten a word in edgewise, so I just let the old lady get it out of her system.

The beginnings of a tear shone in one eye: Best not to start, only gets me angry. I've had it, slaving my guts out for you! Is this your idea of fun? Because it's not mine.

She flung her basket violently to the ground, sending tomatoes and potatoes rolling everywhere.

No, I said, feeling a response was finally required, it's not, actually.

But by now, the old lady was bent over, scrabbling to retrieve her purchases, racing after errant tomatoes and potatoes on their bid for freedom.

A trailer-bicycle piled high with vegetables pushed along by a clean-shaven, middle-aged man ambled towards us, crushing to a pulp the tomato at the head of the pack. Whipping her outstretched right hand, the old lady crouched, face down on the ground, her eyes closed in heartbreak. After replacing some of the potatoes and tomatoes in her basket, I tried to help her up. Pushing me away, she clambered a couple of paces forward and solemnly peeled off the ground, using both hands, the flat muddy pancake that had once been her tomato. Levering herself up on a crooked elbow into a kneeling position, she shakily straightened one leg, then the other. Almost breathless from the effort, she then turned and ran a few steps to catch up with the trailer, which hadn't gone far.

And so the old lady and the middle-aged man joined battle, the former accusing, the latter refusing to admit anything.

You won't get away with this, said the old lady. Take it from me, this tomato was crushed thirty seconds ago by that front wheel of yours. Go and look for yourself if you don't believe me, the wheel's bound to be wet still.

What if the wheel was dry? Tomatoes these days are grown under plastic covers: the flesh is dense, but there's hardly any juice. Exactly as I'd feared, the man walked forward, lifted his handlebars and the front wheel off the ground with one hand, and spun the spokes with the other.

So where is it, then?

The old lady over in close: not a trace of juice.

Then the old lady started waving over at me. I glanced, in consultation, at my girlfriend, who veered, glowering, off to one side of the fracas. Obviously, if I heeded the old lady's appeal, I'd get in trouble with my girlfriend. To my left, a wizened old lady, to my right my young, attractive girlfriend; an easy choice to make, you would think. Making for the old lady, I bent down to her level and waited obediently for instructions.

Hey, young man, you tell him what happened!

What?

Who squashed my tomato?

I pointed, with due circumspection, at the middle-aged man: It was him.

You hear that? Now, which wheel was it?

I pointed at the front wheel: That one.

You sure?

What?

Are you sure?

I'm sure.

Anything else to say for yourself? the old lady, now overbearing in triumph, asked her defendant, hurling the squashed tomato down at his feet.

After thinking it over, he shook his head. So what do we do now?

The old lady said she'd bought six tomatoes, costing 2.5 *yuan* altogether, making each tomato 0.41666 *yuan* on average. Rounding it up, he owed her 0.42 *yuan*.

After a brief, stunned pause, the man demanded to see the other five. The old lady brought over the basket and, one by one, rummaged out the tomatoes from in amongst the potatoes, cauliflower, asparagus, lettuce, ginger, onions, long chillies and pickled garlic.

I disagree, the man pronounced after thorough investigation, these five are all quite big, but the one I squashed was obviously much smaller.

The old lady glared upon her adversary suddenly realising he was not defeated yet. Well, what do you say we do?

The man pulled out from his bicycle trailer a carrot and laid it in front of the old lady: Look, I bought four carrots, 625 grammes altogether. At 2.4 *yuan* a kilo, they cost me 1.5 *yuan*, which makes each carrot 0.375 *yuan* on average, but this one is the thickest and longest, it's bound to be worth more than 0.42 *yuan*. Take this, and we're even.

The old lady closed her eyes a while, out of habit, then grabbed the hostage carrot and tucked it into her own basket. But take it from me, she added as an afterword, though the current official price for carrots is 2.4 *yuan*, you can sometimes get them down to 2.3. As I'm running late and I've got to get hem to cook for my children, I'll leave it here for today.

The man stared, dazedly, at his elderly opponent: They broke the mold when they made you, he mumbled to himself, and no mistake. Swinging his leg unsteadily over his crossbar, he moved off.

The old lady pulled the carrot back out and repositioned it in a more appropriate gap in the basket. Then she looked up at me.

Hey, young man, what time is it?

What?

I said, is it 5:50 yet?

Er, 5:40.

Heavens, they'll be starving. But then that's a good thing. Let them.

Without any kind of farewell, she swung her basket over her shoulder and rushed off.

I turned to look for my girlfriend, who had long since disappeared. The harder I looked, the harder she was to find. So I just stood where she'd been a minute ago, lit a cigarette, and slowly smoked it down. And, as anticipated, half a cigarette later, a flat-chested but otherwise healthy looking girl with a plastic bag walked up to me, hyperventilating with rage. I threw my cigarette away and walked after her.

Slow down a bit. Did you find some scales?

Yes!

Nice one. So... how heavy was it?

405 grammes.

Fuck!

Fuck what?

Fucking 405 fucking grammes!

Go fuck yourself.