

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*

By Yiyun Li (2005)

5223 Words

A ROCKET SCIENTIST, MR. SHI TELLS PEOPLE when they ask about his profession in China. Retired, he then adds, out of modesty, when people marvel. Mr. Shi learned the phrase from a woman during a layover at Detroit, when he tried to explain to her his work, drawing pictures when his English failed to help. "A rocket scientist!" the woman exclaimed, laughing out loud.

People he meets in America, already friendly, seem more so when they learn his profession, so he likes to repeat the words whenever possible. Five days into his visit at his daughter's place, in this Midwest town, Mr. Shi has made quite a few acquaintances. Mothers with babies in strollers wave at him. An old couple, the husband in suit and the wife in skirt, show up in the park every morning at nine o'clock, her hand on his arm; they stop and greet him, the husband always the one speaking, the wife smiling. A woman living in the retirement home a block away comes to talk to him. She is seventy-seven, two years his senior, and was originally from Iran. Despite the fact they both speak little English, they have no problem understanding each other, and in no time they become friends.

"America good country," she says often. "Sons make rich money. "

America is indeed a good country. Mr. Shi's daughter works as a librarian in the East Asian department in the college library and earns more in a year than he made in twenty.

"My daughter, she make lots of money, too."

"I love America. Good country for everybody."

"Yes, yes. A rocket scientist I am in China. But very poor. Rocket scientist, you know?" Mr. Shi says, his hands making a peak.

"I love China. China a good country, very old," the woman says.

"America is young country, like young people."

"America a happy country."

"Young people are more happy than old people," Mr. Shi says, and then realizes that it is too abrupt a conclusion. He himself feels happier at this moment than he remembers he ever did in his life. The woman in front of him, who loves everything with or without a good reason, seems happy, too.

Sometimes they run out of English. She switches to Persian, mixed with a few English words. Mr. Shi finds it hard to speak Chinese to her. It is she who carries the conversation alone then, for ten or twenty minutes. He nods and smiles effusively. He does not understand much of what she is saying, but he feels her joy in talking to him, the same joy he feels listening to her.

Mr. Shi starts to look forward to the mornings when he sits in the park and waits for her. "Madam" is what he uses to address her, as he has never asked her name. Madam wears colors that he does not imagine a woman of her age, or where she came from, would wear, red and orange and purple and yellow. She has a pair of metal barrettes, a white elephant and a blue-and-green peacock. They clasp on her thin hair in a wobbly way that reminds him of his daughter when she was a small child-before her hair was fully grown, with a plastic butterfly hanging loose on her forehead. Mr. Shi, for a brief moment, wants to tell Madam how much he misses the days when his daughter was small and life was hopeful. But he is sure, even before he starts, that his English would fail him. Besides, it is never his habit to talk about the past.

IN THE EVENINGS, when his daughter comes home, Mr. Shi has the supper ready. He took a cooking class after his wife died, a few years ago, and ever since has studied the culinary art with the same fervor with which he studied mathematics and physics when he was a college student. "Every man is born with more talents than he knows how to use," he says at dinner. "I would've never imagined taking up cooking, but here I am, better than I imagined."

"Yes, very impressive," his daughter says.

"And likewise"-Mr. Shi takes a quick glance at his daughter-"life provides more happiness than we ever know. We have to train ourselves to look for it."

His daughter does not reply. Despite the pride he takes in his cooking and her praises for it, she eats little and eats out of duty. It worries him that she is not putting enough enthusiasm into life as she should be. Of course, she has her reasons, newly divorced after seven years of marriage. His ex-son-in-law went back to Beijing permanently after the divorce. Mr. Shi does not know what led the boat of their marriage to run into a hidden rock, but whatever the reason is, it must not be her fault. She is made for a good wife, softvoiced and kindhearted, dutiful and beautiful, a younger version of her mother. When his daughter called to inform him of the divorce, Mr. Shi imagined her in inconsolable pain, and asked to come to America, to help her recover. She refused, and he started calling daily and pleading, spending a good solid month of his pension on the long-distance bill. She finally agreed when he announced that his wish for his seventy-fifth birthday was to take a look at America. A lie it was, but the lie turned out to be a good reason. America is worth taking a look at; more than that, America makes him a new person, a rocket scientist, a good conversationalist, a loving father, a happy man.

After dinner, Mr. Shi's daughter either retreats to her bedroom to read or drives away and comes home at late hours. Mr. Shi asks to go out with her, to accompany her to the movies he imagines that she watches alone, but she refuses in a polite but firm manner. It is certainly not healthy for a woman, especially a contemplative woman like his daughter, to spend too much time alone. He starts to talk more to tackle her solitude, asking questions about the part of her life he is not witnessing. How was her work of the day? he asks. Fine, she says tiredly. Not discouraged, he asks about her colleagues, whether there are more females than males, how old they are, and, if they are married, whether they have children. He asks what she eats for lunch and whether she eats alone, what kind of computer she uses, and what books she reads. He asks about her old school friends, people he believes she is out of contact with because of the shame of the divorce. He asks about her plan for the future, hoping she understands the urgency of her situation. Women in their marriageable twenties and early thirties are like lychees that have been picked from the tree; each passing day makes them less fresh and less desirable, and only too soon will they lose their value, and have to be gotten rid of at a sale price.

Mr. Shi knows enough not to mention the sale price. Still, he cannot help but lecture on the fruitfulness of life. The more he talks, the more he is

moved by his own patience. His daughter, however, does not improve. She eats less and becomes quieter each day. When he finally points out that she is not enjoying her life as she should, she says "How do you get this conclusion? I'm enjoying my life all right."

"But that's a lie. A happy person will never be so quiet!" She looks up from the bowl of rice. "Baba, you used to be very quiet, remember? Were you unhappy then?"

Mr. Shi, not prepared for such directness from his daughter, is unable to reply. He waits for her to apologize and change the topic, as people with good manners do when they realize they are embarrassing others with their questions, but she does not let him go. Her eyes behind her glasses, wide open and unrelenting, remind him of her in her younger years. When she was four or five, she went after him every possible moment, asking questions and demanding answers. The eyes remind him of her mother too; at one time in their marriage, she gazed at him with this questioning look, waiting for an answer he did not have for her.

He sighs. "Of course I've always been happy."

"There you go, Baba. We can be quiet and happy, can't we?"

"Why not talk about your happiness with me?" Mr. Shi says. "Tell me more about your work."

"You didn't talk much about your work either, remember? Even when I asked."

"A rocket scientist, you know how it was. My work was confidential."

"You didn't talk much about anything," his daughter says.

Mr. Shi opens his mouth but finds no words coming. After a long moment, he says, "I talk more now. I'm improving, no?"

"Sure," his daughter says.

"That's what you need to do. Talk more," Mr. Shi says. "And start now."

His daughter, however, is less enthusiastic. She finishes her meal quickly in her usual silence and leaves the apartment before he finishes his.

THE NEXT MORNING, Mr. Shi confesses to Madam "The daughter, she's not happy."

"Daughter a happy thing to have," Madam says.

"She's divorced."

Madam nods, and starts to talk in Persian. Mr. Shi is not sure if Madam knows what divorce means. A woman so boldly in love with the world like her must have been shielded from life's unpleasantness, by her husband, or her sons maybe. Mr. Shi looks at Madam, her face brightened by her talking and laughing, and almost envies her for the energy that his daughter, forty years younger, does not possess. For the day Madam wears a bright orange blouse with prints of purple monkeys, all tumbling and grinning; on her head she wears a scarf with the same pattern. A displaced woman she is, but no doubt happily displaced. Mr. Shi tries to recall what he knows about Iran and the country's recent history; with his limited knowledge, all he can conclude is that Madam must be a lucky woman. A lucky man he is, too, despite all the big and small imperfections. How extraordinary, Mr. Shi thinks, that Madam and he, from different worlds and with different languages, have this opportunity to sit and talk in the autumn sunshine.

"In China we say, *Xiu bai shi ke tong zhou*," Mr. Shi says when Madam stops. It takes three hundred years of prayers, to have the chance to cross a river with someone in the same boat, he thinks of explaining to Madam in English, but then, what's the difference between the languages? Madam would understand him, with or without the translation. "*That we get to meet and talk to each other-it must have taken a long time of good prayers to get us here,*" he says in Chinese to Madam.

Madam smiles in agreement.

"There's a reason for every relationship, that's what the saying means. Husband and wife, parents and children, friends and enemies, strangers you bump into in the street. It takes three thousand years of prayers to place your head side by side with your loved one's on the pillow. For father and daughter? A thousand years, maybe. People don't end up randomly as father and daughter, that's for sure. But the daughter, she doesn't understand this. She must be thinking I'm a nuisance. She prefers I shut up because that's how she's known me always. She doesn't

understand that I didn't talk much with her mother and her because I was a rocket scientist back then. Everything was confidential. We worked all day and when evening came, the security guards came to collect all our notebooks and scratch papers. We signed our names on the archive folders, and that was a day's work. Never allowed to tell our family what we were doing. We were trained not to talk."

Madam listens, both hands folding on her heart. Mr. Shi hasn't been sitting so close to a woman his age since his wife died; even when she was alive, he had never talked this much to her. His eyes feel heavy. Imagine he's traveled half a world to his daughter, to make up for all the talks he denied her when she was younger, but only to find her uninterested in his words. Imagine Madam, a stranger who does not even know his language, listens to him with more understanding. Mr. Shi massages his eyes with his two thumbs. A man his age shouldn't indulge himself in unhealthy emotions; he takes long breaths, and laughs slightly. *"Of course, there's a reason for a bad relationship, too—I must be praying halfheartedly for a thousand years for the daughter."*

Madam nods solemnly. She understands him, he knows, but he does not want to burden her with his petty unhappiness. He rubs his hands as if to get rid of the dust of memory. "Old stories," he says in his best English. "Old stories are not exciting."

"I love stories," Madam says, and starts to talk. Mr. Shi listens, and she smiles all the time. He looks at the grinning monkeys on her head, bobbing up and down when she breaks out laughing.

"Lucky people we are," he says after she finishes talking. "In America, we can talk anything."

"America good country. " Madam nods. "I love America. "

THAT EVENING, Mr. Shi says to his daughter, "I met this Iranian lady in the park. Have you met her?"

"No."

"You should meet her sometime. She's so very optimistic. You may find her illuminating for your situation."

"What's my situation?" his daughter asks without looking up from her food.

"You tell me," Mr. Shi says. When his daughter makes no move to help the conversation, he says, "You're experiencing, a dark time."

"How do you know she would shed light on my life?"

Mr. Shi opens his mouth, but cannot find an answer. He is afraid that if he explains he and Madam talk in different languages, his daughter will think of him as a crazy old man. Things that make sense at one time suddenly seem absurd in a different light. He feels disappointed in his daughter, someone he shares a language with but with whom he can no longer share a dear moment. After a long pause, he says, "You know, a woman shouldn't ask such direct questions. A good woman is deferential and knows how to make people talk."

"I'm divorced, so certainly I'm not a good woman according to your standard."

Mr. Shi, thinking his daughter is unfairly sarcastic, ignores her. "Your mother was an example of a good woman."

"Did she succeed in making you talk?" his daughter asks, and her eyes, looking directly into his, are fiercer than he knows.

"Your mother wouldn't be so confrontational."

"Baba, first you accused me of being too quiet. I start to talk, and you are saying I'm talking in a wrong way."

"Talking is not only asking questions. Talking is you telling people how you feel about them, and inviting them to tell you how they feel about you."

"Baba, since when did you become a therapist?"

"I'm here to help you, and I'm trying my best," Mr. Shi says. "I need to know why you ended up in a divorce. I need to know what went wrong and help you to find the right person the next time. You're my daughter and I want you to be happy. I don't want you to fall twice."

"Baba, I didn't ask you before, but how long do you plan to stay in America?" his daughter says.

"Until you recover."

His daughter stands up, the legs of the chair scraping the floor.

"We're the only family for each other now," Mr. Shi says, almost pleading, but his daughter closes her bedroom door before he says more. Mr. Shi looks at the dishes that are barely touched by his daughter, the fried tofu cubes stuffed with chopped mushrooms, shrimps, and ginger, the collage of bamboo shoots, red peppers, and snow peas. Even though his daughter admires his cooking every evening, he senses the halfheartedness in her praise; she does not know the cooking has become his praying, and she leaves the prayers unanswered.

"THE WIFE WOULD'VE done a better job of cheering the daughter up," Mr. Shi says to Madam the next morning. He feels more at ease speaking to her in Chinese now. *"They were closer to each other. Wasn't that I was not close to them. I loved them dearly. It's what happened when you were a rocket scientist. I worked hard during the day, and at night I couldn't stop thinking about my work. Everything was confidential so I couldn't talk to my family about what I was thinking about. But the wife, she was the most understanding woman in the world. She knew I was so occupied with my work, and she wouldn't interrupt my thoughts, and wouldn't let the daughter, either. I know now that it was not healthy for the daughter. I should've left my working self in the office. I was too young to understand that. Now the daughter, she doesn't have anything to say to me."*

Truly it was his mistake, never establishing a habit of talking to his daughter. But then, he argues for himself-in his time, a man like him, among the few chosen to work for a grand cause, he had to bear more duties toward his work than his family. Honorable and sad, but honorable more than sad.

At the dinner table that evening, Mr. Shi's daughter informs him that she's found a Chinese-speaking travel agency that runs tours both on the East Coast and the West. "You're here to take a look at America. I think it's best you take a couple of tours before winter comes."

"Are they expensive?"

"I'll pay, Baba. It's what you wanted for your birthday, no?"

She is his daughter after all; she remembers his wish and she honors it. But what she does not understand is that the America he wants to see is the country where she is happily married. He scoops vegetables and fish into her bowl. "You should eat more," he says in a gentle voice.

"So, I'm going to call them tomorrow and book the tours," his daughter says.

"You know, staying here probably does more good for me. I'm an old man now, not very good for traveling."

"But there's not much to see here."

"Why not? This is the America I wanted to see. Don't worry. I have my friends here. I won't be too much of an annoyance to you."

The phone rings before his daughter replies. She picks up the phone and automatically goes into her bedroom. He waits for the bang of the door. She never takes a call in front of him, even with strangers trying to sell her something on the phone. A few evenings when she talked longer and talked in a hushed voice, he had to struggle not to put his ear on the door and listen. This evening, however, she seems to have a second thought, and leaves the bedroom door open.

He listens to her speak English on the phone, her voice shriller than he has ever known it to be. She speaks fast and laughs often. He does not understand her words, but even more, he does not understand her manner. Her voice, too sharp, too loud, too immodest, is so unpleasant to his ears that for a moment he feels as if he had accidentally caught a glimpse of her naked body, a total stranger, not the daughter he knows.

He stares at her when she comes out of the room. She puts the receiver back, and sits down at the table without saying anything. He watches her face for a moment, and asks, "Who was it on the phone?"

"A friend."

"A male friend, or a female?"

"A male."

He waits for her to give further explanation, but she seems to have no such intention. After a while, he says, "Is this man-is he a special friend?"

"Special? Sure."

"How special is he?"

"Baba, maybe this'll make you worry less about me-yes, he is a very special one. More than a friend," his daughter says. "A lover. Do you feel better now that you know my life isn't as miserable as you thought?"

"Is he American?"

"An American now, yes, but he came from Romania." At least the man grew up in a communist country, Mr. Shi thinks, trying to be positive. "Do you know him well? Does he understand you-where you were from, and your culture-well? Remember, you can't make the same mistakes twice. You have to be really careful."

"We've known each other for a long time."

"A long time? A month is not a long time!"

"Longer than that, Baba."

"One and half months at most, right? Listen, I know you are in pain, but a woman shouldn't rush, especially in your situation. Abandoned women-they make mistakes in loneliness!"

His daughter looks up. "Baba, my marriage wasn't what you thought. I wasn't abandoned."

Mr. Shi looks at his daughter, her eyes candid with resolve and relief. For a moment he almost wants her to spare him any further detail, but like all people, once she starts talking, he cannot stop her. "Baba, we were divorced because of this man. I was the abandoner, if you want to use the term."

"But why? "

"Things go wrong in a marriage, Baba."

"One night of being husband and wife in bed makes them in love for a hundred days. You were married for seven years! How could you do this to your husband? What was the problem, anyway, besides your little

extramarital affair?" Mr. Shi says. A disloyal woman is the last thing he raised his daughter to be.

"There's no point talking about it now."

"I'm your father. I have a right to know," Mr. Shi says, banging on the table with a hand.

"Our problem was I never talked enough for my husband. He always suspected that I was hiding something from him because I was quiet."

"You were hiding a lover from him."

Mr. Shi's daughter ignores his words. "The more he asked me to talk, the more I wanted to be quiet and alone. I'm not good at talking, as you've pointed out."

"But that's a lie. You just talked over the phone with such immodesty! You talked, you laughed, like a prostitute!"

Mr. Shi's daughter, startled by the vehemence of his words, looks at him for a long moment before she replies in a softer voice. "It's different, Baba. We talk in English, and it's easier. I don't talk well in Chinese."

"That's a ridiculous excuse!"

"Baba, if you grew up in a language that you never used to express your feelings, it would be easier to take up another language and talk more in the new language. It makes you a new person. "

"Are you blaming your mother and me for your adultery?"

"That's not what I'm saying, Baba!"

"But isn't it what you meant? We didn't do a good job bringing you up in Chinese so you decided to find a new language and a new lover when you couldn't talk to your husband honestly about your marriage."

"You never talked, and Mama never talked, when you both knew there was a problem in your marriage. I learned not to talk."

"Your mother and I never had a problem. We were just quiet people."

"But it's a lie!"

"No, it's not. I know I made the mistake of being too preoccupied with my work, but you have to understand I was quiet because of my profession."

"Baba," Mr. Shi's daughter said, pity in her eyes. "You know it's a lie, too. You were never a rocket scientist. Mama knew. I knew. Everybody knew."

Mr. Shi stares at his daughter for a long time. "I don't understand what you mean."

"But you know, Baba. You never talked about what you did at work, true, but other people—they talked about you."

Mr. Shi tries to find some words to defend himself, but his lips quiver without making a sound.

His daughter says, "I'm sorry, Baba. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Mr. Shi takes long breaths and tries to maintain his dignity. It is not hard to do so, after all, as he has, for all his life, remained calm about disasters. "You didn't hurt me. Like you said, you were only talking about truth," he says, and stands up. Before he retreats to the guest bedroom, she says quietly behind him, "Baba, I'll book the tours for you tomorrow."

MR. SHI SITS in the park and waits to say his farewell to Madam. He has asked his daughter to arrange for him to leave from San Francisco after his tour of America. There'll still be a week before he leaves, but he has only the courage to talk to Madam one last time, to clarify all the lies he has told about himself. He was not a rocket scientist. He had had the training, and had been one for three years out of the thirty-eight years he worked for the Institute. *Hard for a young man to remain quiet about his work*, Mr. Shi rehearses in his mind. *A young rocket scientist, such pride and glory. You just wanted to share the excitement with someone.*

That someone—twenty-five years old, forty-two years ago—was the girl working on the card-punching machine for Mr. Shi. Punchers they were called back then, a profession that has long been replaced by more advanced computers, but of all the things that have disappeared from his life, a card puncher is what he misses most. His card puncher. "*Name is Yilan*," Mr. Shi says aloud to the air, and someone greets the name with a

happy hello. Madam is walking toward him with basket of autumn leaves. She picks up one and hands it to Mr. Shi. "Beautiful," she says.

Mr. Shi studies the leaf, its veins to the tiniest branches, the different shades of yellow and orange. Never before has he seen the world in such detail. He tries to remember the softened edges and dulled colors he was more used to, but like a patient with his cataracts taken away, he finds everything sharp and bright, appalling yet attractive. "I want to tell something to you," Mr. Shi says, and Madam flashes an eager smile. Mr. Shi shifts on the bench, and says in English, "I was not a rocket scientist."

Madam nods hard. Mr. Shi looks at her, and then looks away. "*I was not a rocket scientist because of a woman. The only thing we did was talk. Nothing wrong with talking, you would imagine, but no, talking between a married man and an unmarried girl was not accepted. That's how sad our time was back then.*" Yes, sad is the word, not crazy as young people use to talk about that period. "*One would always want to talk, even when not talking was part of our training.* And talking, such a commonplace thing, but how people got addicted to it! Their talking started from five minutes of break in the office, and later they sat in the cafeteria and talked the whole lunch break. They talked about their hope and excitement in the grand history they were taking part in, of building the first rocket for their young communist mother.

"*Once you started talking, you talked more, and more. It was different than going home and talking to your wife because you didn't have to hide anything. We talked about our own lives, of course. Talking is like riding with an unreined horse, you don't know where you end up and you don't have to think about it. That's what our talking was like, but we weren't having an affair as they said. We were never in love,*" Mr. Shi says, and then, for a short moment, is confused by his own words. What kind of love is he talking about? Surely they were in love, not the love they were suspected of having—he always kept a respectful distance, their hands never touched. But a love in which they talked freely, a love in which their minds touched—wasn't it love, too? Wasn't it how his daughter ended her marriage, because of all the talking with another man? Mr. Shi shifts on the bench, and starts to sweat despite the cool breeze of October. He insisted they were innocent when they were accused of having an affair; he appealed for her when she was sent down to a provincial town. She was a good

puncher, but a puncher was always easier to train. He was, however, promised to remain in the position on the condition that he publicly admitted his love affair and gave a self-criticism. He refused because he believed he was wronged. *"I stopped being a rocket scientist at thirty-two. Never was I involved in any research after that, but everything at work was confidential so the wife didn't know."* At least that was what he thought until the previous night. He was assigned to the lowest position that could happen to someone with his training—he decorated offices for the birthdays of Chairman Mao and the Party; he wheeled the notebooks and paperwork from one research group to the other; in the evening he collected his colleagues' notebooks and paperwork, logged them in, and locked them in the file cabinet in the presence of two security guards. He maintained his dignity at work, and went home to his wife as a preoccupied and silent rocket scientist. He looked away from the questions in his wife's eyes until the questions disappeared one day; he watched his daughter grow up, quiet and understanding as his wife was, a good girl, a good woman. Thirty-two guards he worked with during his career, young men in uniforms and carrying empty holsters on their belts, but the bayonets on their rifles were real.

But then, there was no other choice for him. The decision he made—wasn't it out of loyalty to the wife, and to the other woman? How could he have admitted the love affair, hurt his good wife, and remained a selfish rocket scientist or, even more impossible, given up a career, a wife, and a two-year-old daughter for the not so glorious desire to spend a lifetime with another woman? *"It is what we sacrifice that makes life meaningful"*—Mr. Shi says the line that was often repeated in their training. He shakes his head hard. A foreign country gives one foreign thoughts, he thinks. For an old man like him, it is not healthy to ponder too much over memory. A good man should live in the present moment, with Madam, a dear friend sitting next to him, holding up a perfect golden ginkgo leaf to the sunshine for him to see.

* Source: redredlove.com