My cousin Zhang Qing and I may not have been the prettiest girls in our small town, but we certainly thought we were. One day, while my aunt was out, the pair of us sneaked into her room and pulled all her scarves out of the drawer. Then we stripped down to our vests, wound the scarves around our heads and shoulders, and stood gawping at ourselves in the mirror.

‘Hey, why are we such good-lookers?’ said Qing. ‘We’re the best-looking in the whole world,’ I said. ‘So who wins out of us two?’ Qing asked. I gave her a long look, then said reluctantly: ‘You’re prettier than me.’

My cousin pulled the scarf down a bit, décolleté-style, so you could see her collarbone. She had soft budding breasts and turned sideways on to the mirror, sticking her chest out so she could admire her figure. I gazed at her breasts enviously, because I had nothing. We carried on messing around, rifling through the drawers again and finding my aunt’s lipstick. It was the kind that coloured up when it was on your lips. We smeared it on and waited and waited, then my cousin said: ‘It only goes red in the sunshine.’

Still swathed in scarves, we went out onto the balcony to sun ourselves but it was still early in the year and chilly. (Of course, neither of us would have admitted that to the other.) We stood there like a couple of hungry nestlings, pouting our lips at the sun and waiting for them to turn bright red.

After a bit, my cousin’s face reddened with the cold and she sneezed violently.

Somehow, my aunt always knew what we had been up to when she left us alone. This occasion was no exception. Qing got a beating. That prettiest face in the world was soon running with tears and snot, and no longer quite so pretty. My aunt thrashed her daughter from the sitting room to the bedroom and from the bedroom to the sitting room, while my cousin cried so hard that I felt my heart breaking for her. I stood by the front door, not daring to move, bawling my eyes out.

Then my aunt had to go and start the dinner. When I heard her tearing the spinach, I sneaked into the bedroom where my cousin lay sprawled limp and exhausted on the bed. She had no more tears left to cry and sobbed soundlessly. ‘I’m so envious of you for not having a mother!’ she said fiercely.

I did not know how to comfort her. I just sat beside her on the bed, patting the hem of her jacket and said: ‘Honestly, it’s quite nice to have a mum.’

My aunt always enjoyed taking me to school. The nights I stayed over, she carried my
school bag and we were out of the door before 7.30 in the morning. We went through the South Gate market and my aunt always had plenty of people to exchange greetings with:

‘Hello Chen, fish for dinner today, is it?’ ‘Mr Zhu, are you having water spinach again?’
‘Doing good business today, Mrs Li?’ ‘Hello, Mrs Cai!’ they greeted her politely: ‘Taking your niece to school?´

My aunt always puffed herself up and retorted angrily: ‘What do you mean, my niece? This is my daughter!’

After this happened quite a few times, the market shoppers got the message. Now, they called to her: ‘Good morning, Mrs Cai! You and your daughter are off to school early!’

That made my aunt happy. She gave a loud, clear response and made me call a greeting too.

One day, after we had gone through the old city gate, my aunt took me by the hand and said suddenly: ‘Yun Yun, I really am your mum. Don’t you ever forget that!’

‘I won’t,’ I promised.

‘If anything’s wrong, you just tell me. So long as I’m here, I’ll make sure no one ever pushes you around,’ she declared.

‘Yes,’ I said.

That afternoon after school and after much searching, I found my father in the compound of the old people’s home where we lived. He was hemmed in by a bunch of old men who were watching him play chess. As I squeezed through, my dad banged the horse down on the board, taking his opponent’s chariot and shouting in elation: ‘See my “White horse bright hooves”!’ ‘Come and cook dinner, Dad,’ I said, but he wasn’t listening. ‘You played like a fool today, didn’t you, old Chen,’ he said.

He finally realized I was there: ‘Yun Yun! You home from school?’ Affectionately, he sat me on his knee, holding me firm with one arm, while with the other, he carried on playing chess.

I’d been watching chess for so long that every move my dad made I could name: ‘Gunfire blasts the mountain’ or ‘Horse walks into the slanting sun’ or simply ‘Checkmate!’ When it was checkmate, we could go home for dinner.

Mostly, it was noodles for dinner. My dad threw a handful of noodles into the water and, when they were cooked, he took a ladleful for himself, gave me a bowlful, and added soy sauce or lard. Then he took a bowl of cooked, minced meat from the cupboard and put a big spoonful on top and we sat there together and gulped down our dinner.

My dad slurped his noodles down, breathing heavily and had finished in less than a minute. He threw the ladle into the sink, wiped his mouth and said to me: ‘Yun Yun, wash the dishes, right?’
‘Right,’ I said.

And before I knew it, he was out of the house and I could hear him next door: ‘Mr Zhong, come and have a game of chess!’

I did the dishes and then my homework, or the other way around, or maybe I just did the dishes and, instead of my homework, I stole one of my dad’s martial arts novels. Or I shut the house up and dropped in on the neighbours. The old folks always made me welcome. As soon as they saw me coming, they looked out titbits for me: a couple of slices of boiled pork in garlic sauce, or a White Rabbit milk candy left over at the bottom of a tin. Mrs Yu, who lived at the opposite end of the compound, had the most spending money - ten yuan a month - and sometimes she even gave me a bit of chewing gum, a rarity in those days. Mr Zhong who lived in our row of houses, on the other hand, was very poor. He habitually went around in a khaki military great coat, a hand-me-down from my dad. Wherever I was, I was free to please myself until nine o’clock at night, by which time all the old folks were asleep, except Mr Zhong and my dad who were still locked in combat at the chess board. I could go to bed, or not, as I chose, either in dad’s bed or in my own small bunk bed, and so long as I slept, no one cared whether I lay on my back or my side or my stomach. Except for my cousin who warned: ‘You should never sleep on your stomach!’

‘Why not?’

‘You’ll squash your chest and your breasts will never grow!’

I was alarmed. I took a look at the small swellings on her chest, and back at my own chest, flat and skinny as pork ribs, and swore to myself that I’d never sleep on my tummy again. It’s not too late, I thought. They’re sure to grow sometime.

It was summer by then and when I slept at my cousin’s, we shared her sleeping mat of bamboo slats and just wore our knickers. We played at being a pair of lovers. My cousin, with those small breasts of hers, was the woman, so that left me being the man. We cuddled up affectionately, and she rested her head in a womanly way in the crook of my neck. I, like a man, put my arm around her shoulders. ‘Kiss me,’ Qing said. So I did. She pointed to her breasts: ‘Kiss me there.’

I was startled: ‘How can I kiss you there?’

‘But couples always do that,’ she said confidently.

So I kissed her delicate nipples. They were tiny, and slid from between my lips, like two cold, boiled peas left over from my dinner.

After I’d kissed them for a while, Qing felt she owed me something in return. ‘Shall I kiss you?’ she offered.

‘Sure.’

So, always fair, Qing kissed my nipples just the way I’d kissed hers. Her lips were
wet. ‘What do couples kiss like this for?’ I asked.

‘You’re too young to understand,’ she said between kisses.

We were growing up quickly and, after the summer holidays, Qing started sixth grade and I went into third grade. ‘You shouldn’t spend so much time over at her house, now she’s working for her middle school entrance exams,’ Dad said to me. But I went over there anyway, in any spare time I had, because they had a 21-inch colour TV. Once we’d watched the Flower Fairy cartoons, Qing would start to dress me up: she tied my hair up in a red scarf, and wound a long yellow scarf around my neck. Finally, she put rouge on my lips and cheeks. Then I helped fix her up and we sat on the balcony where we could see the sports field of the middle school next door. Every evening, it was full of young people taking a stroll, some of them in couples.

‘This time next year, when I’m in middle school, I’ll have a boyfriend too.’

‘You’ll be too young to be in love,’ I objected.

‘Humans only live to love,’ she said.

I felt an odd tightening in my chest at her words. Sitting close together, my hand in hers, my hair tied up in a red scarf, I suddenly saw a white shadow moving to and fro on the field. I peered at it: it was a white horse.

‘There’s a white horse over there,’ I said to Qing.

‘Where?’

I pointed. ‘There!’

‘I can’t see it.’

A cold shiver ran through both of us. ‘You know what I heard,’ Qing said. ‘If you tie a red scarf around your head, you’ll see a ghost.’

With shrieks of alarm, we pull the scarves off our heads and rushed back into the sitting room.

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When school began again, my aunt and my dad took my cousin and me to see Qing’s new teacher, the Mrs Xiang we all knew. My auntie was laden down with bags, which she deposited with a clatter on the teacher’s desk. ‘Mrs Cai, you really shouldn’t have brought all these presents, you’re too kind, I don’t know what to say!’ said Mrs Xiang.

‘Oh, it’s nothing,’ said my auntie. At New Year we all got so much food given us at work, far too much for us to eat. Please don’t think anything of it.’

I sat on the sofa watching this exchange of civilities, itching for them to hurry up and sit down and open the boxes of sweets, so I could have some of my favourite peanut toffees. My cousin sat woodenly beside me. The purpling bruises and scabs on her face, where my auntie had dug her fingers in, were still visible.
Finally they sat down and Mrs Xiang opened the sweets: ‘Yun Yun, Zhang Qing, come and have some.’

As I hurried over to take some sweeties, I heard my auntie say to the teacher: ‘I hope Zhang Qing won’t be any trouble in your class this term.’

‘No trouble at all,’ said Mrs Xiang. ‘Zhang Qing’s such a good girl.’ She reached over and stroked my cousin’s face. Qing didn’t protest but her face was expressionless.

My auntie pulled the teacher’s hand away and clasped it affectionately in her own: ‘She’s not good at all!’ she said. ‘Her dad and I have been so angry with her!’

‘All kids makes mistakes,’ said Mrs Xiang. ‘But they can mend their ways.’

My auntie gave a despairing sigh: ‘If only she would! But she goes around from morning till night, looking like the devil’s got into her! Anyway, if she cheats you, you have my permission to give her a beating.’

I was still chewing my sweetie when my cousin stood up and pointed to my auntie: ‘What mistakes did I make? I didn’t make any mistakes. And no one has the right to give me a beating!’

My auntie’s mouth gaped as if she’d swallowed a duck egg. Then she quickly pulled herself together and launched herself at her daughter, digging her fingers into Qing’s face and yelling: ‘You bad girl! Flunking out of school and playing around with boys at your age! And I only had a couple of words with you and you ran away from home! How can you say you never made a mistake? Are you going to mend your ways? Are you?’

My cousin in her turn dug her sharp fingernails into my auntie’s hand and shrieked back: ‘It’s not illegal to have a boyfriend! What’s wrong with having a boyfriend?’

My dad rushed over to pull them apart but my auntie dealt him a swift blow and redoubled her efforts to subdue her daughter. ‘Bad girl!’ she ground out between gritted teeth, ‘I just can’t keep you under control.’

Mrs Xiang appeared rooted to her chair with terror as the battle raged. I carried on eating sweets and tried to reassure her: ‘It’s nothing, Miss, nothing at all.’

The words were hardly out of my mouth when my cousin swept all her mother’s gifts, from the teacher’s desk onto the floor, which brought a stinging slap in response. Trembling with rage, my auntie yelled at her: ‘You slut! So young and such a slut! Playing around with a boy like that!’

My cousin slumped to the floor, just like one of those beautiful but ill-starred girls on the TV. She turned her face up to her mother, her eyes filled with tears, but what she said was: ‘I’m not as much of a slut as you!’

My auntie threw herself on her: ‘Who are you calling a slut?’

The pair wrestled on the floor, squashing a tangerine which had rolled out of the gift bag. The muddy blood-red juice went all over the back of Qing’s green windcheater,
like fresh pooh.

In the space of a few days, my cousin seemed to have grown as shrewish and quarrelsome as her mother. The teacher hesitantly got to her feet and reached out to them: ‘Please don’t fight! Don’t fight!’ but her words were drowned out by the accusations the combatants were hurling at each other.

Finally it was my dad who pulled my auntie to her feet, looking the way he did when he was about to spank my behind: ‘Cai Xinrong! Have you gone mad? Why are you beating her?’

It looked as if my auntie was going to have another swipe at him, but suddenly she crumpled and seemed to get smaller. My cousin lay on the floor, crying as if her heart would break. There was no room on the floor for my auntie so she threw herself weeping at my dad instead. My dad patted her back: ‘It’s all right, it’s all right, stop crying, stop crying now, what a scene you’re making!’

At this point, I thought it was time for me to put in a word. I got to my feet and said: ‘Stop crying! Stop crying!’ Mrs Xiang stood behind me and echoed my words: ‘Stop crying! Stop crying!’

We really didn’t know which one of them we were trying to comfort.