



Stephan Thome

Plum Rain

Novel

(Original German title: Pflaumenregen. Roman)

approx. 528 pages, Clothbound

Expected publication date: 11 September 2021

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2021

Sample translation by Laura Wagner

pp. 11 – 21; 428 – 438

1

She was running so fast that the world blurred before her eyes. Down the hill, along the narrow alley between the dormitories and past people shouting after her to be careful. ‘Umeko-chan, you’ll fall if you run like that!’ Her pigtails came loose from her shoulders and fluttered behind her, clack-clack-clack went the wooden sandals on the trodden-in ground. Neither her shoes nor her dress were suitable for running, but down at the school she could already hear the excited murmur of the spectators, eagerly awaiting the start of the game. Why hadn’t she left earlier? At the last minute she had decided to pray for victory up at the shrine, now she reached the levelled path in front of the mine and turned left. A staircase next to Director Yamashita’s property led down into the township.

She slowed down briefly. Tall bamboo blocked the view of the house, the largest and most beautiful in all of Kinkaseki – apart from the Crown Prince’s chalet, which did not count because no one was living in it. Once, her father had taken her with him when he had to deliver an important document to the Director after work. The inside smelt of hinoki, on the valley side there was a well-kept garden with white gravel paths and a pond full of goldfish. Mr Yamashita and his wife were driven to Zuihō station by a car, parked as always in front of the main entrance, when they went away for the weekend, or the wife was driven to Kyfun to do some shopping. The silent chauffeur was never seen without his uniform and white gloves.

‘Umeko-chan!’

Carefully, so as not to stumble in her haste or step on a snail, she had taken the first steps. Here and there the ground was still damp from the recent rain. Now she stopped, raised her eyes and recognised the elegant appearance of Mrs Yamashita behind the fence. She was holding a parasol made of light paper in her left hand and indicated a wave with her right.

‘Mrs Director Yamashita ... Hello!’ when Umeko bowed, she felt how out of breath she was. For a moment she felt dizzy.

‘Running so fast, you are going to fall,’ the Director’s wife said with a smile. In her plum kimono and the obi embroidered with camellia flowers, she seemed as graceful and distinguished as ever. Like a gentlewoman in old Kyōto, Umeko thought.

‘It’s because of ... the game,’ she uttered with difficulty. ‘Us against the Krun intermediate school. If we win ...’ The calmer she tried to speak, the more breathless she became. Besides, she remembered that it was impolite to babble on like she did at home. ‘Onii-san is the first pitcher,’ was all she added to explain her excitement.

A new round of applause rang up the hill from the school grounds. Either the line-up was being announced or the game had already started.

If she was disgruntled, the Director’s wife did not let on. The soft light of spring falling through the bamboo leaves accentuated her pale skin and delicate features. The locals said that her family was in fact from Kyōto and had a pedigree that reached back many centuries. ‘His fastball is hard to hit, I hear,’ she replied, to Umeko’s surprise. She would not have thought that Mrs Yamashita was interested in baseball. Did they really talk about the school team and her brother’s pitching skills in the Director’s house?

‘If he plays well today,’ she blurted out, ‘he might be able to go to the Japanese Trade School in Taihoku next year and compete in the Kōshien Cup one day.’

‘Is that so? You must be very proud of him.’ Mrs Yamashita was as polite with children as she was with her peers – although of course she had no peers in Kinkaseki. The local gold mine was owned by Nippon Mining Holdings, Inc. and was the largest in all of Asia. Without the Japanese, her father said, they would only be a few adventurers digging for gold with their bare hands here, just like in the olden days, but instead the township had its own hospital, a cinema and two schools. Furthermore, a newspaper article had recently been published about Keiji because he had completed a full game without conceding a point, so perhaps that was why Mrs Yamashita knew about it. His fastball comes at lightning speed, the article had said, and hits the catcher’s mitt like the thunder in spring. For a moment, Umeko felt the benevolent gaze resting on her and forgot that she was in a hurry. Blue roses and orchids were already in bloom in the garden, and large black butterflies were fluttering around. The Director’s wife raised her

hand once more: ‘Then we should hope that we win today, shouldn’t we? But you be careful nonetheless, the ground is still slippery. What a beautiful dress you are wearing, take good care of it.’

‘Thank you very much, Mrs Director Yamashita!’ Umeko called and bowed. ‘Have a great day!’ She managed to walk as ladylike as her outfit demanded halfway down the stairs – her mother had sewn the dress herself – then she clenched her hands into fists and started running again. Behind the cinema, a small glimpse of the sea came into view, stretching smooth as glass to the horizon. Far out at sea, rain was falling, but the clouds over the hills were white as snow and unusually still in the sky, as if they too wanted to watch the spectacle that was taking place on the sports field next to the Gold Luck Temple. The final game in the championship of the northern school districts.

Never before had the Kinkaseki middle school come so far.

Normally, Japanese teams from Krun and Taihoku settled the victory in the north among themselves. Schools that covered large areas, where the sons of high-ranking officials and rich businessmen were used to training in the best conditions. Taihoku had usually won in recent years, but before this season, two important players had moved back to Japan, Keiji had said, adding: ‘This is our chance.’ Kinkaseki didn’t even have a proper baseball field, the mining company team played their games in Zuih, and today’s game should have been played in the middle school yard, but it was still flooded from the spring rains. The sports field near the Gold Luck Temple, which Umeko reached at this very moment, belonged to the primary school she attended, and there were deep puddles here as well. From a distance, it looked as if the ground was covered in mirrors.

Her heart pounding, she pushed her way through the crowd. All the pupils and teachers had turned up, as well as some parents and even local residents who had nothing to do with the school. They all wanted to be there when her brother drove the opponent to despair with his throws. ‘Sumimasen,’ she shouted, struggling forward as best she could. If she hadn’t been delayed on the way, she would have reached the spot where she had arranged to meet Reiko in time for the first pitch. She could already hear the deep smacking noise the ball made as it hit the catcher’s mitt and she would have liked to give all the people blocking her view a kick up the backside. There was applause, someone called Keiji’s name. A couple more metres. She had to be careful not to get her dress dirty and keep an eye out for her friend, and if she met a teacher, she mustn’t forget to say hello. Above their heads rose the green overgrown hills that surrounded the village on three sides like the stands of a stadium. Halfway up, where the bare rock was breaking through, was the red-painted torii of the shrine – that’s where she had started

running just a few minutes ago; no wonder she was now gasping for breath like a fish out of water.

‘Umeko-chan!’ This time it was Reiko who called out to her from the crowd. Relieved, she raised her hand and waved, soon she was standing next to her friend and could finally see the pitch. Some of it, anyway. She had never seen so many people on the sports field. Since there was no fence enclosing the field, the headmaster had ropes put up to keep the spectators back.

‘What have I missed?’ she asked, pning.

‘Wherever have you been?’

Instead of answering, she stretched her neck. Keiji stood upright like a soldier at the pitcher’s position, his expression one of utmost concentration. Father had given him the catcher’s mitt, which he held to his chest before each throw, as a reward for his good grades. A Mizuno mitt made of real leather! The next moment he thrust his head forward to see what the catcher was indicating to him. ‘It’s the first one, is it?’ she asked hoarsely. ‘The first batter? I can’t see the board.’

‘He sent the first one home with three balls,’ Reiko replied. ‘Just like that.’

‘Oh, I see. He’s in a hurry again.’

‘Now tell me where you were!’

‘Took a coin up to the shrine.’ They looked at each other briefly and Reiko nudged her. Her friend would have liked to have an older brother, whom the whole school admired, too, but she only had younger siblings and quite a few of them at that. Her family of nine lived in a tiny house between the railway tracks and the sea, so they didn’t go to school together in the morning, but met in the courtyard and said goodbye after class at the big gate opposite the sports field. But they were still best friends.

Keiji’s next pitch was out. After that, he aimed too high again, but this time on purpose, and it worked: the opposing batsman was tempted and hit nothing but thin air. ‘Good boy,’ Umeko muttered under her breath. The generously scattered sawdust formed a mound where her brother stood, just as she had seen on photos of the professionals. Again, he held his glove to his chest and nodded to the catcher. By now she had watched him often enough to recognise his fastball even before it was thrown. The batsman stood on his toes and seemed to vibrate with concentration, but as if pulled on a string, the ball whizzed past him into the catcher’s mitt. A murmur went through the crowd. ‘Strikeout number two,’ Reiko said with satisfaction and Umeko could no longer contain herself.

‘Onii-san, ganbatte kudasai!’ she shouted with all her might. A few older pupils turned around to look at her, laughing, and she blushed immediately but it still felt good. In the wooden box next to Keiji’s bed, his treasure chest, was a well-worn photo of Kōshien stadium near Ōsaka, where the national school championship was held. It held more than fifty thousand spectators, and even here on the island all the matches were broadcast live on the radio. To fulfil his dream, however, her brother would have to transfer to a secondary school in the capital and win the Taiwanese championship – unfortunately, only one team from the colonies was allowed to participate each year.

The next batsman looked fearful as he stepped onto the field, and soon after that the first half-inning was over. Applause accompanied her brother as he left the field with measured steps. Three up, three down, they called it. Umeko felt as though she was finally able to take a deep breath for the first time that afternoon.

At the third base, a shelter for the teachers had been built out of wooden poles and white fabric. She recognised Teacher Honda, who was talking to her colleagues, and would have liked to run and say hello to her class teacher. She had learnt to imitate the way she held her hand in front of her mouth when laughing, four fingers and with a little distance to her lips. It looked very ladylike, but she usually forgot to do it when she suddenly burst out laughing.

Both teams were already returning to the pitch.

As expected, an evenly matched, exciting game developed. The opposing team’s pitcher also threw a powerful fastball, and it took until the third inning before Kinkaseki managed its first hit. A hit by the batsman down the line that took the runner to second base. The crowd cheered as if they had scored, but on the very next ball the opposition destroyed their hopes by taking out two runners at once – double play. The Krun players looked quite confident in their blue jerseys, which even sported their names. In the fourth inning, Keiji got the first hit, and because they made a mistake on defence, the opponent even got as far as third base. Umeko and Reiko held each other’s hands so tightly that it hurt. Her brother stayed on the spot longer than usual, then took his sweat cloth from his belt, wiped his forehead and put it back in his pocket. The cloth had been embroidered by her mother with his name and the sign for “victory”. As he nodded to the catcher, everyone guessed what was coming and held their breath tensely. The runner at third base looked like a hound tugging at the leash, but he didn’t get a chance to charge. Lightning, thunder, cheering. With three flawless fastballs in a row, Keiji fended off the danger.

When her friend wanted to go to the bathroom during the following break, Umeko shook her head. At the teachers’ dugout, she saw several strange men and was certain that coaches

from Taihoku had come to watch her brother. Her parents didn't like the idea of letting him go to the capital, but if the chance arose, they wouldn't say no. The fact that officially there were only national schools did not change the differences, Keiji had said. In Japanese schools, the walls were whitewashed and there were never forty students crammed into a classroom like there were here. Her biggest wish, as she had recently confided to Teacher Honda, was to attend the Japanese girls' school in Zuih in a few years.

'Ganbatte ne,' her teacher had replied. Even though she had smiled, a moist shine remained in her eyes, as though she had just received sad news. Every time Umeko spoke to her, she wanted to touch those bright, slender hands. Teacher Honda didn't wear elegant kimonos like the Director's wife, but Western clothes, and since she was from Fukuoka, she could be mistaken for a local with her dialect, but the women in the movies weren't any prettier than she was. When she went shopping, excited whispers followed her, Mother had told her. No one could explain why a young woman like her was teaching at Kinkaseki primary school. Some people claimed that her husband had been killed in China, although the teacher was far too young to be a widow.

As loud applause brought her back to the present, the shadows on the field suddenly seemed longer to Umeko. In the fifth and penultimate inning, the score was still nil-nil, but a runner had just reached second base, hence the thundering applause. When the next batter managed a single, the cheering swelled into a hurricane. The jersey of the opposing pitcher, who kept glancing anxiously at his coach, said "Fujita". Was he running out of steam? Enthusiastically, Umeko joined in the rhythmic cheering of the crowd. The game was recorded on two blackboards, there was a round zero in the "Out" column: no batsmen had been retired yet, and with runners on first and third base, a score was literally in the air. Now or never, she thought.

Even the players on the sidelines no longer managed to stay on their bench. With a thick towel around his shoulder and throwing arm, Keiji stood with his teammates and Reiko asked, startled, if he had hurt himself. Her friend took a lively interest in the game, but you couldn't say that she knew anything about it. 'He just needs to keep his arm warm,' Umeko reassured her. 'His muscles, to be precise.'

Kinkaseki's next batsman was the son of a miner and played barefoot. Instead of waiting for the right opportunity, he went all out every time, even chasing balls that the umpire would have deemed out. Umeko clicked her tongue in disapproval. When she saw Keiji take off his towel and pick up the bat for the third time that afternoon, her heart leapt. So far, he had not managed a hit, nonetheless the audience murmured expectantly. Someone shouted in

Taiwanese: 'Let's go! Show those arrogant Japs!' Laughter rose here and there, but the teachers didn't react, Umeko noted, and continued to drink their tea unmoved. Someone was always misbehaving. The next ball slipped out of the pitcher's hand, then he regained his composure and sent Keiji's teammate off the field with two precise throws.

'Oh dear,' Reiko whined. 'I really have to go.'

Umeko had tensed every muscle from head to toe and felt nothing. 'Go ahead,' she said, 'no one is going to get me out of here.' She would probably get a fever or a nosebleed in the evening, but she didn't care.

When her brother entered the field, he didn't seem nervous at all. He bowed briefly to the referee, kicked a stone aside and got into position. His front knee slightly bent, he bounced back and forth. For a few seconds Fujita and he looked at each other, challenging each other without moving, only the end of Keiji's bat was making small circles in the air. Umeko felt her teeth grinding. When the ball left the pitcher's hand, she held her breath. Her brother twitched but did not strike, with a hollow plop the throw landed in the catcher's glove. She waited a second to see if the umpire would call a strike – only when he didn't did she exhale.

The audience applauded. 'Good eye,' someone said. The longer the game went on, the more difficult it became for the pitcher, who had to look into the low sun. The houses on the slopes above the school fell into the shade. Every time she sat at the shrine at this time of day and looked out towards the sea, she thought that there was no place more beautiful than Kinkaseki in the entire world. The second throw came, Keiji pulled through and caught the ball with the top of the bat – from where it bounced out. Umeko almost bit her hand. The coin she had deposited at the top of the shrine appeared in her mind's eye. 'Please, please, please,' she whispered.

To her horror, Keiji missed the next ball. The pitcher clenched his fist, her brother caught the momentum of his own swing, bared his teeth and shook his head. When she looked towards the dugout, Umeko realised that Teacher Honda had clasped hands together in front of her mouth as though she was praying.

[...]

[...]

When Julie arrives at the restaurant, the birthday party is complete. Two tables have been reserved and provide seating for twenty guests. Her father's middle brother, Hua-zhe, has brought his wife and three daughters, the youngest of whom is a year older than Paul; the two sit at the back table and are having a good laugh. Three of A-mah's former colleagues, with whom she exercises in the mornings and whom Julie has only met briefly, have also turned up, together with two husbands who have hearing loss written all over their faces: Whatever is said, they smile. As usual, Harry sits next to A-mah and Ba next to Grandfather. The role of the host, which falls to the eldest son, is limited to choosing the menu and paying for it later. If I wanted to make speeches, I would have become a politician, he likes to say. Julie's mother sits to his left, red spots on her face because she hasn't been able to help anyone for too long. The waitstaff hurry around with headsets in their ears. Long ruby covers over the chairs exude tastefulness and the average age at the other tables is also rather high.

'Aiya,' A-mah exclaims as she hugs Julie to mark the occasion. She is wearing a long-sleeved dress and a necklace with beads of green jade. Julie has rolled up Lu's painting and tied a red ribbon around it. Her uncle doesn't react when she waves it at him, so she hands it over herself. 'Here, Lucy drew this for you.'

'Who?'

'Your granddaughter in America. Hua-li's youngest.' She has to help her grandmother unroll it. Apart from the fact that she didn't skip rope but double Dutch on the roof the drawing could have been drawn by her own childhood self. 'Do you like it?'

'Of course,' replies A-mah as though she had been asked if she still knew her name. She probably hasn't received any other gifts and doesn't understand why she gets one from someone who isn't even here. Rolling the paper back up, Julie hands it to Harry as she sits down next to him. 'Make sure it doesn't get stained.'

'Thank you for printing it out,' he says.

'Thank you for the letters.'

'Have you taken a look yet?'

'I was in the library all day.' Across the table she hears Ma reply to the woman sitting next to her: 'No, not yet,' and nods at them encouragingly: You can keep talking about me. Meanwhile, Ba orders a menu of fish head casserole with oyster sauce, Dongpo pork and braised eel, tofu with crab roe and marinated chicken in Shaoxing wine – the more calories, the

better. Before he orders the whisky, he makes sure with a quick sidelong glance that his wife is distracted by the starters that are coming out now and have to be shared out. Buddhist lay organisations like Tzu Chi live off people like Ma, and even though Julie likes family celebrations, she longs for her quiet flat for a moment. When Dave wanted to tempt her with London yesterday, he called the fact that his parents were no longer alive a ‘selling point’. No family obligations, this was supposed to mean and wasn’t said in all seriousness, but she still found it sad.

‘Professor Nakashima said that he sent you a photograph from Jinguashi?’ Harry poured tea for her and tried to sound as nonchalant as possible. ‘From way back when?’

‘Apparently the only one from his mother’s possession. A group picture of the entire school, you can’t recognise anyone.’

‘Have you shown it to my mother?’

‘She was able to confirm that it was her primary school, that’s all. If you want to see it,’ she added, ‘you have to finally tell me what you are planning. Letters, photos, visiting places – no more secretiveness!’ All he had told her about the conversation with the professor in Dadaocheng yesterday was that he found him likeable and a little odd. Nakashima had obviously put on his Masakado act.

‘What am I supposed to be planning?’

‘Don’t beat about the bush! Why are you researching so close to home all of a sudden?’

‘Alright,’ he sighs but avoids looking at her. ‘The project is unformed, unscientific and likely to die an early death. I want to write about our family. I don’t know how or what, really. I don’t even know why. But somehow I feel the urge to do it.’

‘Very good. Sounds more interesting than anything else of yours I’ve read so far.’

‘Thanks. What I expected from your professor was mainly reassurance.’

‘And you have received it, I suspect.’

‘Apparently he has no qualms about leaving well-trodden academic paths.’

‘Why should he?’ The first dishes arrive together with the whisky that Ba pour straight away. ‘Is there any text yet?’ she asks and answers herself. ‘Of course there is, otherwise you wouldn’t say a word about it. How much?’

‘A few chapters that are shaping up to be a novel. Where it will lead in the end remains to be seen, probably nowhere. Literary scholars shouldn’t write novels, right?’

‘Unless they have something interesting to say. It happens. Do you need a first reader?’

‘Oh, I’m a long way from that.’

‘I understand. So you need one urgently.’ She rests her gaze on him a little longer than usual. Since he has met Helen, he no longer dresses as conservatively as before and seems younger than he is. Shortly after that they are interrupted when the laden tabletop starts to spin. One of the two deaf spouses engages Julie in conversation about various American states. He overheard that she had gone abroad and he seems to be one of those fellow countrymen who automatically assume it was to the USA. ‘The steaks in Texas?’ Shaking his head, he indicates the size of a cat with both hands. When everyone looks at their plates, she takes a sip of whiskey from Harry’s glass, that he is not drinking from anyway. She, on the other hand, feels like a touch of drunkenness. Despite the air conditioning going at full blast the air in the room is stale and stuffy to her.

They celebrated Grandfather’s eightieth birthday at the same restaurant. With five tables, if Julie remembers correctly. She was suffering from jetlag because she had only just returned from England a few days prior and felt as though she had also travelled back in time, to her early youth. All around her retired civil servants spoke in strange phrases. At the time, Ma Ying-jeou was still president and in these kinds of circles a hero, of course, celebrated wordily. His predecessor, the man on A-mah’s sunhat, was in prison for corruption and the birthday party for one would like to see him rot in there. Julie remembered that she had Lu on her lap, her eyes already falling shut, and observed her grandmother, whose smiling face did not reveal what was going on inside her. Maybe nothing out of the ordinary, after all, she had been living in this environment for more than fifty years.

Then Harry tapped his glass and got up.

Afterwards, Ba said that his brother had asked him first if he, as the elder, wanted to say a few words. He didn’t, naturally. But Harry had been of the opinion that a milestone birthday deserved recognition, which Ba could only explain by the fact that the professor had been living overseas for too long.

She has forgotten most of the speech. He opened with a line from a poem of the Tang period that has become a figure of speech; about childhood sweethearts that stay together for the rest of their lives, or words to that effect. Even though her uncle was normally a good public speaker, his delivery seemed a little stiff to Julie. He had obviously prepared himself thoroughly at home and he was probably nervous. Helen, who didn’t understand a word, still listened like a music teacher at her student’s first recital. The other guests listened raptly as Harry talked about Sunday afternoons when he went to Sun Yat-sen Hall to eat ice cream with his parents. Mother would always order taro flavour and Father would always tell him about when they used to go there just the two of them. He casually intimated that this had been an unusual

relationship by the standards at the time but pretended that it only proved the power of their mutual love all the more. The smile on A-mah's face was as unshakeable as if she had turned into a statue. What finally threw her son for a loop, however, was not her face, but Grandfather's. Julie remembers this clearly because she noticed it at the same moment he did.

Afterward, she silently pondered whether Harry should have seen the debacle coming. But then again, hadn't she always believed that it was A-mah who had been forced to pretend all her life too? The stranger in her own home. Mother of three sons, whose name included the character *hua* for China and whose school uniforms sported badges that said: 'I am Chinese and mustn't speak Taiwanese.' The one who bought a satellite dish with her savings to watch news on NHK instead of the local propaganda that was being shown in the living room ... She must have felt strange, but when Julie looked in Grandfather's face that night it was so distorted with pain that she feared it was a heart attack at first. Her uncle lost his train of thought, wanted to drink some water and spilt half of it. Startled, Helen handed him a napkin, then he blathered on about the famous movie by Edward Yang, which is also called *Qingmei Zhuma* and looked like a tightrope artist in that endless moment before the fall. Nobody was able to follow anymore. The guests began to whisper amongst themselves and gave him, when it was finally over, pitying applause. Julie was glad that she could pretend as though she was tending to the child on her lap, others hurried towards the toilets or praised the fabulous food decisively. One single person in the room kept smiling blithely as though nothing had happened. As though she was secretly enjoying it. To Julie it seemed as though she had literally looked straight at both sides of the truth for a few seconds and for the first time in her life A-mah seemed eerie to her. To this day she hasn't been brave enough to mention the incident to her.

This time, fortunately, no one gives a speech. While they eat, her father goes outside to smoke and after a while Julie joins him there. The heat has been sticky and uncomfortable all day, now it gives way to a gentle evening.

'Full already?' Ba smokes every cigarette as though it were his last. Ma is going to wipe off the traces of ash on his shirt inside.

'Quick break,' she says and feels her dress sticking to her back. 'By the way, you should hold back on the whisky, you're red like a lobster.'

'Hm-m.'

'And smoke less. And lose weight. When was the last time you went to the hairdresser?' The heavy scent of tyres and motor oil wafts over from the autoshop across the street. The urge to wind her father up leaves Julie like the urge to sneeze that she gave in to. 'I had to think about Grandfather's eightieth birthday all night,' she says. 'About Harry's ill-fated speech.'

Ba nods but is looking at his phone and doesn't answer.

'What year was it that Grandfather's brother died? The middle one.'

'Eighty-nine, why?'

'At Tiananmen?'

'Nonsense, he died in March.' He grind his cigarette butt under his heel and would already like to smoke the next one, but he seems to be ashamed of his greed in front of her.

'Did you meet him?'

'I went over a couple of times with Father to visit him. Why?'

'And?'

'And? Are you familiar with the expression "Five Black Categories"?''

'Ba, I'm a historian.'

'No one survives what they did to him. Nothing to be done.'

'Didn't you even buy a flat for him? How was that possible abroad?'

He can control himself for ten seconds then he lights the next one. 'Just like everything in the world, with connections and money. The flat, two television sets, new furniture ... If I hadn't intervened, Harry wouldn't have been able to go to university.'

'Maybe it would have been better to find a psychiatric hospital for him.'

'Over there?' he asks and grimaces.

Before she can respond, the door of the restaurant opens. Laughing and with their switched-on phones in their hands Paul and his youngest cousin come outside. 'Where to?' Julie calls out and points her index finger at them like a pistol.

'Chasing Pokémons.'

'Have you finished your meal, young man?'

'Oink, oink,' he says and pats his belly, in female company he has to be silly, of course. Pokémon GO has only just arrived in Taiwan, but the news are already reporting accidents because road users and pedestrians are staring at the screens instead of the road. 'Have fun, be careful,' Julie yells after them and is surprised by how motherly she sounds. Yesterday in Dadaocheng they bought a t-shirt for Lu with a local black bear on it and Paul had to laugh out loud when she said that this was Taiwan's response to the damned pandas over there. Fat and lazy. His laugh is still like it was before, a childishly happy chuckle.

'Speak Chinese with him,' Ba says when they are alone again, 'or he is never going to learn.'

'You talk Chinese to him. I prefer to be understood.'

‘He’s scared of me, like all children. Even you used to take cover when we hadn’t seen each other for while.’

‘Because then you smelt funny,’ she retorted, only half joking. Every time he brought the strange aroma of garlic, coal fires and cheap tobacco with him from Shanghai. Ma would have liked to put him out on the balcony for a week to air out. Once he had grown the nail of his little finger long to use it as a toothpick. Or for the ears?

‘In ten days I have to go back,’ he says and scratches his head.

‘To China? You only just got back.’

‘Can’t let them out of your sight for a minute. Turn your back to them and they empty your back pocket.’

‘Explain this to me: If you despise all Chinese people, why do you insist on being one?’ She nearly asked him if he had a mistress over there like most Taiwanese big-wigs. Considering his wealth, a “small three” would probably overlook the crewcut and the yellow teeth.

‘What a load of rubbish,’ he says. ‘Aren’t they teaching you anything sensible at uni?’

In the past, she had fantasised that she was an only child because Ma wanted to punish him for his infidelity. She still couldn’t rule it out, she’s probably never going to find out, and besides, sometimes you want to know something at any cost that you don’t want to know at all. She saves herself a reply.

Two cigarettes later they return to the others.

After the mains, there is soup, and finally fruit. Harry is sitting with his second brother, who is a successful IT engineer and what’s more so reticent that it borders on autism. His name means “China’s wise man,” his wife, who works as a teacher and needs her humour at home as well, calls him Laozi. What remains of the feast is wrapped up and handed out to the guests by Ma.

The celebration ends shortly after eight.

The husband who was just explaining the USA to her wishes Julie success when they say goodbye. A-mah’s friends prefer to call it luck and what they mean by that is that she might find a husband after all, but they don’t sound particularly confident. Things aren’t looking good for a woman with a doctorate. Since it’s only a few hundred metres to the flat, Julie doesn’t protest when Ba makes to drive. He takes her grandparents with him, the other elderly people get into waiting taxis. Then everyone except for Harry and her have gone and he asks if they should continue their conversation elsewhere.

‘I would love to just walk for a bit,’ she says and for a moment she is sure that she is going to move to London in the near future.