ROSEANNE THONG

Paying the Price

BING LIANG SWEPT BACK a greying wisp of hair, swallowed hard and heaved the thick, cedar log back as far as his arms would allow before ramming it into ancient brass. It met with resistance first, then jarred and kicked like the rifles he had fired during militia training over thirty years ago. The final reward was sweet—a resonating mantra that pealed out in invisible concentric rings. He was amazed how completely the sound squelched the drone of Xian's endless traffic below.

In ancient times, the bell atop its lofty perch in the walled city had sounded at two-hour intervals throughout the night, giving a final, lusty clang when the city gates opened at dawn. Bing Liang wondered who had counted off the seconds back then and how they'd known when two hours had fully expended their last crumbs of existence in a world before Rolex and digital displays. He vaguely remembered hearing something about an hourglass, but perhaps he was mistaken—his sense of history was sketchy after only six years of itinerant schooling in an era that had cremated the past.

His hands still trembled from the thrill of release when he picked up the log for a second swing. The bell sang again, this time, a eulogy to newfound independence. In rippling waves, it reported his divorce from an unhappy marriage, his daughter's recent betrothal to a stable Lanzhou chemist, and the success of his small roadside noodle stall in Luo Chuan—known locally as "*the one with the green benches by the public toilets*"—doing increasingly well since the bus depot had moved next door.

These were the first breaks Bing Liang had ever received. His life had otherwise been a gathering of hackneyed, tired routines with a bit of warm bread kneaded in. And now, a great openness spread before him—the idea of enjoying his country for enjoyment itself—a rousing notion equaled only by Bing Liang's new stirrings from within. He had arranged for a two-day journey including a tour of the terra cotta warriors and Emperor Qin's tomb, as well as time to buy a new winter coat and a souvenir or two. He would then return by long-distance bus number 203 on its spiraling, 300-kilometre journey back to the loesses of Shaanxi Province, where he would spend the rest of his days dishing up spicy noodles to road-weary travellers.

"Excuse me!" a sharp, grating voice blurted out. "You there, ringing the bell!"

Caught in the act of reverie, Bing Liang jumped. It was the same reaction he had experienced years ago when caught napping at school.

"Five Yuan per gong!"

Bing Liang could not exactly see the owner of the voice, but its impetus marched itself around the corner of the wall—a towering hand-hewn structure of granite blocks—and it halted in mid-air before him. He reached for his wallet, an involuntary reflex towards authority after so many years, but then caught himself in time. Ten Yuan? That was three bowls worth of noodles, and hearty portions at that! Ten Yuan? He had had no idea there was a fee.

"Walk around the corner," the voice commanded flatly. "I'll issue a receipt."

The thrill of bell ringing had vanished, and now a flush of a different sort blistered his cheeks. The nerve, to spoil his moment! He followed the voice to a small, glassed-in ticket taker's booth frozen against the wall's late afternoon shadow. A young woman with bad acne and heavily oiled curls extended a gloved hand from a small, half-moon hole in the glass.

"What's wrong? There's a fee, you say?" Bing Liang's voice restrained a souring tide. "There's no sign next to the bell."

The girl smirked at his words. She was his daughter's age and a single child, no doubt. Probably raised without respect for elders. Bing Liang remembered the witch-hunts after Mao's short-

lived "Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom" campaign. Students from a neighbouring village had turned on the local schoolmaster, leaving him with two fewer teeth and a future of forced labour. Those days were over, but this young girl—too young to have experienced such atrocities—would certainly understand the power of youth; the raw clout of single children.

"I know your kind!" snapped the girl, posturing for confrontation. "An out-of-towner, huh? Trying to sneak off without making a contribution. Where's your sense of civic duty?"

"Duty?" Bing Liang stumbled. "I've already paid five Yuan to climb the steps. Now you want more?"

Bing Liang was wary of city folk. Some were hucksters who took outsiders for all they had. But he was no bumpkin. Who did she mistake him for?

"Think about the bell's upkeep!" she demanded. "Electricity, polish, washing the steps...."

She was well versed in her argument and had no doubt used it often, but Bing Liang wouldn't budge. It wasn't a matter of money—he had enough to stay a third or fourth day if necessary. It was a matter of ethics. His divorce had taken four numbing years because his wife, hatching one final plot behind his back, had sent a weekly parade of cakes to the presiding authorities. Now, free from his past, Bing Liang hoped things would get off to a better start. A new start. It was important to him, the way the first sale of noodles each morning indicated good luck for the business hours ahead.

"I'm not trying to cheat." Bing Liang adopted a fatherly tone just in case the girl would respond to it. Maybe there was still some reasoning with her.

"I'm concerned about fairness, that's all. I have a food stall in Luo Chuan and have never taken a tip. Not once in my life. It would be wrong—taking advantage. Not even from foreign tourists! We should only take what's right."

"Fairness!" the girl laughed, tossing back her oiled curls. She made him feel naïve.

"It's not fair to charge for something that's not advertised. Don't you agree?"

Short on patience, the girl shot up from her stool, reached for a small wooden sign on the booth's façade, and rapped on the hand-painted black characters indicating five Yuan.

"What exactly does *this* say?"

"But it's not in front of the bell!"

"That's because you came up the wrong way!"

She pointed to a tiny arrow directing travellers up the right side of the staircase. However, the left side did not deny entry, nor did it cause inconvenience to staff or visitors. In fact, there were an equal number of steps in both directions leading to the bell—approaching from the left or right made no difference at all.

"Well?" the girl persisted.

"Well what?"

"Pay up, you scoundrel!"

The girl was cheeky, indeed, and what's more, she enjoyed the game.

"*You're* the scoundrel!" Bing Liang hoisted his voice. "How dare you!"

Now heady with righteousness, he marched towards the booth. He had no relations to maintain here, no face to save. From the way he saw things, there was nothing to lose from defiance.

"I should *report* you!" he snapped. "You and whoever runs this bell tower."

The ticket taker smiled confidently and slid off her rotating, patent-leather stool. The booth door creaked open, and she stepped outside to face Bing Liang, calmly smoothing out a red pin-striped miniskirt all the while.

"Shall I get the police then?"

Bing Liang glanced around, noting that a small group of tourists had gathered on the bell tower terrace—a newlywed couple and a group of men and women in business attire.

"Police?" he called her bluff. "Great idea!"

How stupid did she take him for? She would have to leave the tower to make a report, and he could easily escape in the interim. But escape was not the point. Bing Liang did not want to run. He wanted to score the point—to set his own terms.

Ggggooonnnnnggggg—ooonnnng—oonnng—nnng

The bell announced new, unseen visitors who had come up the left side of the stairs. Bing Liang smirked as the ticket taker squeezed back into her booth and slammed the door behind her.

"Pay around the corner!" she barked at the newcomer, committing Bing Liang to silence with an icy gaze. "Five Yuan per gong!"

But Bing Liang laughed boldly—a hearty laugh from the centre of his being. The gong had given him power.

"So I'm not the only fly in your web today!"

Two students with matching sweatshirts from Shaanxi Girls' College peeped tentatively around the corner, puzzled as ever.

"There was no sign," explained the first girl. "We didn't know."

"Exactly!" Bing Liang snipped, sandwiching his body between the girls and the toll booth as he gesticulated wildly. "There's no sign to the left. No sign near the bell. It's corruption at its worst. A deliberate attempt at fraud!"

The girls, caught off guard, recoiled. Bing Liang's intrusion had startled them as much as the unexpected fee had. The second girl reached for her purse, but Bing Liang thrashed his arms before her.

"I'll give you twenty Yuan if you *don't* pay! Twenty Yuan to fight corruption!"

The girls looked at each other nervously, knowing that payment was the easier option. Bing Liang shook his head, dismayed. They were probably smart, sensible girls—the kind raised to do exactly as they were told. An old hatred returned.

By this time the crowd had grown. Five German tourists joined their ranks, wedging large, parka-clad bodies into a semicircle around the ticket booth. One of their members, translation dictionary in hand, tried to lighten up the mood by practising mispronounced Mandarin phrases: "Long live the Communist Party!" "Wishing you health and fortune!" But the crowd's attention soon reverted to Bing Liang, and the tourist, still craving attention, made his way towards the bell. He was overweight, with a large, fleshy frame that reminded Bing Liang of stuffed sausage. The bell released a soft, ignoble gong as the piling slipped through wobbly fingers. "Lifeless," thought Bing Liang.

But the tourist paid up, earning himself a favourable nod from the toll taker, who then turned to Bing Liang and dished out the worst insult she could.

"You see ... even the foreign devils have more pride than you!"

It was a caustic remark, forcing the crowd to take sides. Not demonstratively, for that was asking for trouble. No one wanted to involve themselves directly. But they whispered among themselves—whispered for Bing Liang's benefit.

"It is unfair," declared one man in a smart, western-style suit. "There is no sign posted."

"Oh, pay the price!" huffed the woman by his side. "It's a small fee, and for the good of Xian."

The other Germans, delighted by the commotion, took out their cameras—first snapping close-ups of Bing Liang's reddened face, and then of the reacting crowd on the terrace. The photo session was summary. The crowd dispersed in seconds and the two college students paid their fee.

"You've been had!" Bing Liang called back to the departing girls. "You've lost more than you realize!"

With heightened rage, he raced back to the bell, snatched up the wooden rod and bashed it into the bell with all his might. It rang ten times, then twenty and thirty; each time stronger and clearer than the last. Some say it was loud enough to wake Emperor Qin from his mountainous tomb, fierce enough to evoke cavalcades of terra cotta warriors from still-undiscovered vaults. Thirty-five, forty. Bing Liang's thrusts wedged out the ghosts of forced labour who had built the bell tower six hundred years before. Forty-five, fifty, fifty-five—one for each year of his life, his old life!

Then his anger was gone, and a sense of completeness encased his being. He choked first, then caught his breath and laughed with pure, unfettered joy. A surge of icy wind lifted his hair. He raised the cedar again and beat out forty-five final gongs—forty-five plus fifty-five for a total of one hundred rings—for the one hundred years that he was now sure he would live—live well, and with new purpose.

And then he stopped.

The old bell shuddered. Bing Liang laid his hands on its surface, first reading the vibrations, and then the Braille relief of horses, chariots and imperial grandeur—a history denied. It was truly a work of art, but there was no time to enjoy it now. Hordes of people had ascended the tower, paying the steep, five-Yuan fee just to find out what was going on. One hundred gongs—imagine that! There had never been such clamour before. It was either an announcement of great importance, or the harbinger of impending doom.

The first to ascend the staircase were two public security officers, followed by a visiting dignitary and several security guards.

Right behind them were uniformed students, aproned restaurant chefs, old men with birdcages and a fried tofu hawker with her mobile wok, who thought that five Yuan was now a good financial investment. This group was trailed by children clutching balloons, tourists clutching cameras and lovers clutching each other.

"A hundred gongs!" several onlookers muttered.

"I counted more," insisted another.

Bing Liang, still not identified, walked briskly to the toll-taker's window without looking back.

"I believe I owe you 505 Yuan," he whispered, looking directly into her shallow, unmoved eyes. There was neither rancour nor anger in his voice, only the desire to move on.

"Here is 600," he coughed, setting down a clump of damp bills, leaving just one attached to his wallet. "Please keep the change."

Bing Liang stole down the stairs as the audience fought for a glimpse of the brass bell and clamoured for the latest gossip. He slipped easily into the rush-hour crowds below, stopping only long enough to admire the fleece coats at Gwang Gwang Department Store—coats that he could no longer afford—before buying a cheap, miniature brass bell from one of the city's souvenir stalls. Then he swiftly boarded long-distance bus 203, easing into a front seat by the window—a perfect seat without cigarette burns or torn upholstery—that afforded a full view of a vast, unclouded sky.