

## Kitchen

*by Xu Kun (1965- )*

The kitchen is a woman's point of departure and her refuge.

Crockery stands elegant and gleaming in the kitchen, its multiple curves and pristine whiteness casting intricate patterns of porcelain reflection in the fading light of early evening. Tiled walls and flooring stretch unblemished and unbordered, so that marvelous ideas projected onto them are beamed back into the depths of the eye. Red wine and blackcurrant cordial in their slender-necked bottles can stain lips crimson on contact, without allowing even the time to draw breath. Rings of flame on the gas stove flicker incandescent blue in the lamplight, and spray from stewing meat hisses on the iron stovetop, its fragrance rich and pervasive, permeating the room on a cloud of white steam. Asparagus and celery are cooking in a haze of pale green, and steam from purple rice gruel and cornmeal soup fills the room with mauves and yellows.

The colors, tastes and fragrances of the kitchen combine in a silent record of the lives of women. Not that a woman knows why the kitchen has always belonged to her sex; it has never occurred to her to ask. But when her time comes, she moves involuntarily to the kitchen, as her mother did before her.

On this summer's evening, after a sudden thundershower, a breeze has wafted away the sultry heat and the city noise. The world is at rest. The city sun sets flamed behind the highway overpasses, and shafts of red light drift down, shining on a woman called Zhizi as she bustles about the kitchen, her trim figure charmingly outlined in gold by the evening light. The woman moves swiftly and dextrously, and as she cuts, rinses, steams and fries, she glances out of the window towards the west. It seems as if the setting sun has some kind of tacit understanding with her, beaming tenderly back at her through the leaves of the magnolia tree by the window.

Zhizi's gaze is soft and gentle in the red glow of the light.

This is not her own kitchen, but another's, a man's. The woman Zhizi is putting a plan into action, expressing her love for this man in the language of the kitchen.

A whole mandarin fish, scored with horizontal and vertical cuts, is garnished with sliced garlic, shredded onion and slivers of ginger, and then set to steam. Lettuce and lotus root, glossy and beaded with water from rinsing, wait in the salad bowl to be tossed with the dressing. Steam billows up from under the lid of a stainless steel pot. Zhizi lets her hands go still, she catches her breath and looks round at the sitting room. Through the clear glass door of the kitchen, she sees the man Song Ze curled up languidly on the sofa, a newspaper hiding most of his face. His hands, his feet and his body are long and large, muscular arms emerging from the short sleeves of his T-shirt, long legs stretched out carelessly in blue-jeans pulled tight by the bend at his knees, showing the firm strength of his thighs--Zhizi blushes, unable to suppress her pleasure. Hastily she looks away and turns her attention to the sun as it sets outside the window.

By now only a semi-circle of the sun's orb remains, and that is being devoured, swallowed ravenously by the trees and the steel and concrete buildings. In that instant, Zhizi's face burns red, radiant, ecstatic.

I love this man. I love him.

Zhizi says this to herself, over and over again. And as she says it, she is intensely embarrassed.

Zhizi is a self-confident executive "superwoman." At her age, love is not something that comes simply and easily. Experience has hardened Zhizi's heart, so sentimental and impressionable in youth, into a cocoon, indifferent, impassive, and aloof. Years of strife and contention have toughened Zhizi, who was once weak, docile, unconfident and prone to tears. Now she is tempered steel, a success story, a celebrity in the business world.

But with her position and status secure, this rare lotus blossom is no longer content with the muddy pond of commerce in which she has grown and flourished. Instead, she longs to hide herself away in a hothouse, to return to the home that she once so proudly and willfully rejected.

Whatever the reason, she wants to return to the kitchen, to go back home.

In lonely sleepless nights, this successful professional woman feels homesick, nostalgic for the kitchen in a home she left long ago, for a kitchen viewed in the sepia tints of memory.

A kitchen at home cannot possibly be as stressful as the restaurant banquet of the business world, cannot be so hypocritical, so distasteful. There is no scheming at the table at home, no contrivance or pretended enjoyment, no explicit or implicit sexual harassment, no innuendo that cannot be avoided or rejected, no din of karaoke blaring in your ears, brutalizing your senses and destroying your appetite. Early evenings at home, there is only the bubbling of stainless steel pots as the steam escapes from them, and after that, the intimacy of food relished by a family together.

What bliss to sit with a family eating home-cooked food! That is the only true relaxation and rest. In the callowness of youth, she never understood this. The day she got her divorce and walked out, there was one thought in her mind she'd had enough! She'd just had enough! She'd had it with her stultifying marriage. She'd had it with the monotony of the kitchen. She'd had it with all the kitchen appliances. The pots and pans, the crockery and utensils, the oil, salt, soy sauce and vinegar all drove her to distraction. The repetitious drudgery of the kitchen had ravaged her spirit and wasted her talent, had made it impossible for her, a brilliant graduate from a top university to reach her potential. She left. She had to leave. She absolutely had to leave. She wasn't prepared to be a kitchen maid all her life. She made a dash for the door, and headed for the new life of her dreams.

She left without a backward glance, leaving husband and child behind her, fleeing the besieged city.

And now here she is back again, back of her own accord. Willingly, with no qualms, impetuously, she stood tall and walked into this man's kitchen.

This is truly a remarkable turn of events.

If not for the walking out, could there be today's longing for return?

That's not something she thinks about.

At this moment, all she wants is to be back in the kitchen, a kitchen that she can share with another person. She has experienced married life, has loved and been loved, and understands the gulf between single and married life. A home with one person isn't a home, and a kitchen for one is not worthy of the name. Her wish right now is to be in love, to be

part of a family, to share a kitchen. She will be happy to stay home, carefree days without number, patting one thing, stroking another, with nothing in particular to do, reaching for the implements in her kitchen as the feeling takes her, hearing them tinkling as she touches them. She is quite willing to prolong the time it takes to prepare meals, going to the markets daily to buy the freshest vegetables, then bringing them home, washing them punctiliously and plucking every leaf from its stem. Before making a meal she will check in a cookbook for recipes, and regardless of how long it takes, ensure that the dishes have a proper nutritional balance. While she is attending to all of this, her feelings will be tranquil as water; it will never occur to her that she might be wasting her time or her life. Her delicate hands will get red and blotchy at the fingertips from the water that the vegetables soak in, the joints in her fingers will swell up, but she will not complain or feel resentment. She longs for her heart to be like that water, mild and bland, as she passes her time away in the kitchen, never giving a thought to the struggles that might be taking place outside. She will be happy with only two other people at table, her husband and child, eating the meals she has prepared: they won't have to praise her cooking, as long as they tuck into their food and eat till their mouths glisten with oil, till they are sleek and plump.

She grins slyly at the image of them sleek and plump.

She really doesn't want to make a living in the world outside any more, her nerves jangling all day, trying to satisfy the conflicting demands of all sorts of all sorts of people. For whatever reason, is sick of people. All the kinds of people that exist in the market for wealth and fame: the mean, the bigoted, the petty-minded, the calculating, the hedonists... the very sight of them makes her eyes swim. Dealing with people all day gets on her nerves. She wants to run away and have a new life, flee to a place where there are no other people, and the kitchen is her final refuge.

She has never felt so close to a kitchen, never loved a kitchen as she does today.

Steam drifts upwards from the stainless steel pot on the stove; Zhizi's fancies drift with the steam. Through the mists of her imagination, the sun descends slowly below the branches of the trees, descending all the while as her fantasies reach their conclusion. The long-limbed man Song Ze finishes the paper, gets up and stretches languidly, then ambles over towards the kitchen, asking if Zhizi wants any help. Hearing the solicitude in the man's question, she contentedly replies, "You don't have to. I'm fine." Today is the man Song Ze's birthday, and she wants to do all the cooking herself so that he can appreciate her culinary abilities to the full.

Why is she so keen to show off her skills to this man? And what will happen after the show? Zhizi doesn't want to think about it' she is not prepared to torture herself so cruelly. She wants to preserve her self-respect. Whatever will be will be, Zhizi tells herself. Zhizi just hopes that the outcome will be the one she has in mind. It concerns her that she is demeaning herself in her dealings with this man, even acting a bit like his servant. Because usually, with her being a female star in the world of commerce, it is the men who crowd around her, ready to do her bidding. She is always haughty towards them, wary of being tricked or taken advantage of. Right now, she has some trouble explaining to herself why she is offering herself so blatantly to this man!

What the heck! She's here now; so why waste effort in explaining why?

The tall man with the long hair, Song Ze, his hands fidgeting, walks up to her a

couple of times and realizes there's nothing he can do to help. It is obvious that Zhizi has planned this evening's dinner meticulously: realizing that this bachelor's kitchen will not have everything she needs; she has brought the vegetables, meat and other ingredients with her. She has the condiments she will need to prepare the meal, like vinegar and soy sauce. Zhizi has even brought her own apron, a pinafore of fine cotton, with a narrow sash around the waist, decorated from top to bottom with little clumps of forget-me-nots. The soft apron fits snugly, accentuating the slenderness of Zhizi's waist. Zhizi could have worn a matching bonnet to protect her hair from the smell of grease and smoke, but after consideration, she decided against the bonnet, just pulling her hair back and keeping it loosely in place with a hair-clip in the shape of a fish, so that her glossy black hair is fully visible to the man Song Ze.

As Song Ze stares at the woman's graceful figure, his heartbeat quickens. He is an artist, and artists never fail to be moved by beauty. She is a close friend, their relationship starting when Zhizi provided the capital for him to mount his first successful one-man show. Their friendship has developed from amicable partnership to greater intimacy. But however close the friendship, he would never impose on her to put on a birthday celebration for him, especially if it meant she would do the cooking herself. This is a favour he could not have expected and finds it hard to accept.

To have a good looking woman offer to come to your house to put on a birthday dinner for you is a fine thing, something that doesn't come easily. The man feels slightly nervous, feeling that the woman, Zhizi, has done him too much of an honour; at the same time, he feels just a bit resentful of all the bother. After all, an entire evening spent at his own home eating a meal isn't exactly thrilling. Artists are always on the lookout for excitement. Just in the time that Zhizi has been working in the kitchen, he's had three or four calls from girls inviting him out for parties, and he's had to turn them down in a whisper. The flirtation, the hugging and kissing that goes on in a karaoke room or at a party is more likely to inspire the artist to creativity than a quiet birthday dinner at home. But he's taking the long view--fooling around with young female admirers isn't as good for his future prospects as improving his relationship with this female executive. Men always consider these matters in terms of the greatest practical benefit. So it's decided; he will stay home and get romantic with his financial backer.

His decision made, the man focuses on the form of Zhizi. And gradually, he begins to feel attracted to her as she works, busily but calmly, in the kitchen. She moves tidily and elegantly, a jasmine flower brought into bloom in the kitchen's heady fragrance. The aromas of vegetables being steamed and fried are infused with the scent of a woman, and the man Song Ze allows himself to fantasize. Not quite knowing what to say, he leans languidly in the doorway, one leg crossed over the other, biding his time, sending romantic glances towards Zhizi as she busies herself about the kitchen.

Zhizi senses the man's attention, and it makes her slightly nervous; her face blushes pink, and she feels a little short of breath. Even as she strains to hear the man's harsh breathing, she commands herself to stay cool, to conceal the pounding of her heart, to make her actions look perfectly normal. Isn't attention from this man precisely what she has been hoping for? Now it's happening as she wanted it to, what's the point in getting tense about it? Her cutting of the vegetables takes on a theatrical quality.

The kitchen is too small for two people to move in without some part of their bodies coming into contact. So each remains in place, their bodies slightly tense, making polite conversation. The man doesn't understand the female executive's real intentions. Song Ze is highly skilled in matters of courtship, but he doesn't want to make a false move with Zhizi, who is always so proper in her behaviour. He doesn't know what she wants him to do, how far she wants him to go. So he plays it cool, casually flirtatious, but keeping his distance. You have to treat this whole situation, a single man and a single woman together in the same room, as being a romance that is half truth and half pretence. Any other way would be too boring, not artistic enough for an artist like himself.

And the woman Zhizi can't decide how to get things started either. She is hoping for romance, ideally a romance that will develop naturally, proceed smoothly and achieve success in due course. She would really prefer the advances to come from Song Ze. But if he does come on to her, it's possible that she might be turned off by him and reject him. Seeing him there standing there, making no move, she feels both hope and despair. She recognized his talent, she managed his business affairs, she appreciated the instinctive spirit of his art. Later on, she set her sights on him, because in the course of their acquaintance, she saw in him her ideal of the true artist--someone who is the perfect blend of wildness and spirituality, who can be skillful, inspired or abandoned as the situation requires. She feels herself surrounded by people whose culture makes them decadent and effete, and sees in him a raw elemental humanity that retains its spiritual connection to the supernatural world. And this is what she craves.

Thanks to the backing and management of this female executive, Song Ze has indeed achieved success and become well-known. She judges the man through his art, believing that he must be like his paintings, and the paintings must be like the man. And so she has fallen in love with the product she manages.

The protracted tension in their bodies is becoming unbearable. With the eyes of the man, Song Ze, on her, Zhizi feels her back soaked with sweat. If things stay deadlocked like this, Zhizi's slender body will break under the strain. She keeps on glancing at the man beside her out of the corner of her eye, her face blushing hot, leaning slightly towards him, her posture clearly demonstrating encouragement, expectation and confusion. The man recognizes the inclination of that soft body; but he is also confused, indecisive and hesitant. He almost leans forward a couple of times, but in the end he can't quite bring himself to it.

Water splashes as Zhizi dips her hands into the sink, the sound conveying her frustration at his reticence. Tension and hesitation kill Song Ze's interest in flirting, so he says, "I'll go and lay the table," and makes a hasty retreat from the kitchen.

Now, finally, Zhizi has the space to relax. She lifts her arm to dab the fine sweat on her forehead. Song Ze is clattering round in the living room, getting out plates and chopsticks, setting out the wine and laying the table. A short-legged coffee table has been pressed into service as a dinner table. Things in an artist's home aren't going to be conventional; some soft cushions embroidered with flowers are scattered on the hand-woven Persian carpet, and the bed is only half the usual height, just a Simmons mattress laid on the floor. The leather couch against the wall is massive and plushy, giving the impression that the artist carries out most of his day-to-day business lounging on the sofa.

Song Ze puts the iced birthday cake that Zhizi has bought him in the middle of the

table. The chocolate icing gleams sweet and rich under the light. Song Ze stares pensively at the icing but he still can't quite fathom what's going on. To this point, that other kind of feeling has not developed, and he is still behaving the way he always does when he is interacting socially with Zhizi. 'That other kind of feeling' is the one he has when the art-loving girls throw themselves at him, that sharp arousal inside, that crazy abandon that comes on when he knows he's going to have them. And when he feels this abandon, he always gets what he wants.

Right now; the feeling just isn't there. What's up? What's going on here? Song Ze is a little worried about his failure to get excited. What he doesn't realize is that, when he has his mind on commercial success and status, when it isn't all just for fun, he can't get physically aroused so easily. As Song Ze sits down and opens the wine, he takes a quick look back at the kitchen. It seems as if Zhizi has realized that her figure has caught the attention of the man through the glass door, so all her movements, the bend of her waist and the straightening of her arm, are relaxed and economical, all calculated to appeal to him. Zhizi's silhouette complements the contours of the kitchen. It is like a paper-cut figure inscribed with the message; I am perfectly in place in this kitchen! Only with a woman like me in it can this kitchen come to life!

But all is emptiness in Song Ze's eyes.

The sun has set. The last glimmer of colour is gone from the clouds, and darkness has descended. The curtain lifts on the night and people and things outside are obscured. The triumphs of the kitchen have been transferred to the table, a dazzling array of colours, aromas wafting enticingly. Song Ze, after waiting anxiously half the evening, feels his strength depleted, and is in need of nourishment. But the sight of the banquet spread before him when he is so hungry has the effect of making him fearful, at a loss for what to eat first. He looks up at Zhizi again. Zhizi looks lovingly at him, her appearance transformed. Once she finished working in the kitchen, Zhizi slipped into the bathroom to freshen up. She added some eye shadow, meaning to show the affection in her eyes more profoundly. She outlined her lips with lip pencil. Should she add more blush to her cheeks? Zhizi pondered this for a moment and decided against. When they get to the kissing stage, their lips and faces in contact too much in the way of cosmetics would leave her looking a mess. Her makeup complete, she took a silk evening dress out of her bag, and changed out of the smart green suit with the white collar that she was wearing when she arrived. The suit is too stiff and awkward, not right for intimacy, while silk is more sensuous, simpler and livelier. She has done all this in preparation for a night of love. Sure, it's a lot of trouble, but her heart is filled with expectation, and the effort is worth her while.

Zhizi comes back into the room resplendent in a long black silk gown that shows off her long neck and smooth arms, her skin gleaming ivory under the lamplight. Those parts that are not revealed are swathed in pure silk, hinting at their elemental mystery, appealing to the artist, Song Ze, to discover them a little bit at a time.

Song Ze hasn't been able to work up much enthusiasm as yet, but Zhizi's dress and makeup certainly catch his attention. One of the strengths of the artist is to notice beauty and savour it to the full. Song Ze now hastens to express his delight: with an exaggerated display of emotion he puts one hand to his breast, the other hand, holding the bottle, frozen in space. He gazes admiringly at Zhizi, and murmurs, "Oh, my God! Lovely! You're really lovely!"

Zhizi is thrilled, but is too shy to show it, merely saying modestly: "Thank you." She glances around, wondering where to sit. Song Ze is lounging on the couch, which takes up one side of the table. Zhizi wonders if she could sit down on the couch beside him, to get up close to him... things would be a lot more convenient that way. Zhizi blushes and tells herself off: wouldn't that seem too pushy? She steals another glance at Song Ze, but that wretched Song Ze gives her no pretext to sit beside him. He need only pat the cushion beside him, or say to her jokingly, "Your seat awaits you, madam," and she could easily sit down there. But apart from his show of delight, he offers no other sign. This forces her to squeeze by him and go round to the other side of the table, seating herself with the table between them, her casual grace masking her intense disappointment. When things haven't really got started, she can't lower herself too far.

The red wine in the long-stemmed glasses is rich with romantic promise. The host has turned off the ceiling light, the wall lights and the standing lamps; red candles flicker in their candlesticks. Easy listening melodies play from speakers recessed in the corners of the room, the singing nasal, blending seamlessly with the sound of a saxophone. Gracefully, Zhizi cuts the birthday cake into pieces, selecting a slice with a red butter-cream rose for Song Ze's plate, and for herself a slice with a tender green icing leaf. When the Happy Birthdays have been said, they fall back to commonplaces, never reaching the heightened emotions that wine can inspire. Zhizi and Song Ze touch glasses, each offering toasts to the other, almost as if they are trying to get themselves drunk.

Actually, Zhizi doesn't intend to get drunk; merely to get some courage from the wine, to summon up the courage necessary to carry the process to its conclusion. Song Ze hasn't given much thought to why he's drinking, he wants to do justice to Zhizi's culinary artistry by eating it eating with relish, and he wants to loosen his tongue in praise of her skill. His words of appreciation are sweet music to Zhizi's ears, bringing her immense satisfaction. Yet Zhizi's own chopsticks hardly move, partly because cooks seldom have much appetite for delicacies they have prepared themselves, and partly because Zhizi's thoughts are not on food at all. As the wine takes effect, she stares tipsily across at Song Ze, fixated on the beautiful way his cheeks ripple as he eats, watching lotus blossoms emerge from his mouth as he compliments the woman, watching the way he flicks back his artistically long hair, watching the handsome clean-shaven chin of this forty-year old man. Zhizi is in love, adoring, her face burns as if it will catch fire, her eyes feeling as if sparks are shooting out of them.

Zhizi feels a little loving, a little resentful, a little frustrated, a little itchy at the base of her teeth. She knocks back wine angrily and hopelessly. She has no idea how Song Ze feels about her--even now, he still hasn't made any moves. He might at least propose a dance, or else make some other suggestion, to display the techniques that he uses in situations of this kind. What's he expecting from me? Zhizi wonders. I've done everything I can. A woman my age can't go any further and maintain her self-respect. She feels she can't go on waiting indefinitely, if she doesn't get what she wants soon, this waiting is going to be more than she can bear.

So Zhizi keeps drinking and pouring, her eyes and her carriage giving evidence of increasing unsteadiness.

Song Ze has been keeping up a steady flow of compliments, wagging his head as he

speaks, but as he pauses for breath he realizes that he only hears his own voice, that Zhizi hasn't said a word. Hastily he reaches over to pour Zhizi some more wine, and take a closer look into her eyes as he does so. What he sees is Zhizi intent on weaving a web for him. Zhizi is very drunk. Her gaze is moist and soft, clinging and dense, wrapping itself tightly around his body, imprisoning him in her affection. Once caught, he can give up any hope of ever breaking free. Song Ze feels weak, he trembles, and half the wine splashes out of his glass.

Zhizi picks up her glass, drips running down the side, stands up shakily and says: "A toast to this evening!"

Song Ze says: "Sure, to this evening!"

Without waiting for Song Ze's glass to come towards her, Zhizi jerks hers forward to clink against his. But her aim is unsteady, and the glass lunges straight at his chest. Song Ze involuntarily lifts a hand to protect himself and the entire contents of the glass splash out, showering his T-shirt and trousers.

Zhizi gasps: "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." Song Ze says: "It's okay, doesn't matter," and then looks around for something to wipe himself off with. Zhizi blurts out: "I'll do it." She stretches out a shaky hand to hold him back, rises unsteadily to her feet and stumbles to the kitchen, where she finds a dishcloth and some paper towels to wipe the wine stains off his clothes. As she comes out of the kitchen, she walks directly over towards him, leans against the sofa, and without giving him a chance to tell her not to, she leans forward and, half squatting, half kneeling, she props herself against the couch and starts to dab at his trousers. The man maintains his position awkwardly on the couch and lets her do it. She is so close to him that her hair brushes his chin, their bodies lean into each other, she can smell his body and the wine on his clothes. Half drunk and half sober, she hesitates for a moment: should she just throw herself into his arms?

But in that instant's hesitation, the moment when she can naturally throw herself on him and embrace him is lost. After the moment passes, it would be too contrived to think of falling into his arms, too forced, the sequence of events too awkward, too improper.

Love is something that you can't use reason for, you have to act on instinct, she thinks. In love, the mind is superfluous, she thinks. As she thinks this, she feels utterly dejected, she just wants to cry.

But at this moment, large warm hands at last reached out to her and gently embrace her. Not to take her in his arms would be inexcusable, Song Ze reasons. Song Ze is just being nice to her, doing the right thing, putting his arms around Zhizi's back and letting her lean against him. Zhizi hears the man's powerful heartbeat. She presses her head close to his chest, and squeezes her eyes tight shut. Tears of self-pity trickle down, but she doesn't bother to wipe them away. Her body is utterly weak, she is helpless, incapable of moving. As she is held to the man's chest, she feels her bones go soft, her armour of restraint crumbling away. All she can think is: I love this man. I love him. To be with the man I love is fine. It's fine.

As the man holds her limp boneless body, he feels his own flesh suddenly swell, alcohol and instinct fermenting into arousal. Roughly he raises up the face that was resting against his chest, and presses his mouth to it. His lips rove all over her skin, which is smooth as satin. As his lips taste saltiness, he pushes her away to look at her, and sees that the woman is crying, streams of tears rolling down either side of her nose. Suddenly he feels



incredibly touched, and he moves his lips back to her, sliding them down from her eyes bit by bit, licking away her tears, and then kissing her mouth. Initially she is defensive; even in her dazed state, she manages to keep her lips together, not giving him the chance to get inside. So he draws on experience, his hands caressing her as he kisses her; until she is water in his hands. The man senses that his moment has come, he lowers her gently onto the sofa, and pushes his tongue forward like an antenna. Sure enough, the woman's fiery lips open like a clam shell, instinctively pulling his tongue inside her mouth.

Suddenly the man feels himself sucked in, with no way he can get himself out. The remarkable thing about this sucking is not its passion or compliance, but its ferocity, its desperate strength; this is a force that wants to devour him whole, to use his body for a gallows to die on. This is more than the man can stand, so he shifts his body and moves his tongue, so that just the tip is moving around inside her mouth, light and tantalizing, not daring to stay in one place, not allowing her to consume him as she desires.

As his body is working to bring her under his control, his mind is panicking: this is awful! Awful! This woman, this crazy woman wants to love me to death! Song Ze has played the game of seduction countless times, and knows the difference between kisses; even the slightest variations cannot escape his sensitive tongue. Women who play and then let go certainly don't kiss like this. Their kisses are light and carefree, like the touch of a dragonfly skimming water, restless and fleeting, vanishing like ripples on a pond, a little prelude on the way to bed. Those women are never so serious, so desperate, so determined, so impetuous, clinging to his tongue, holding on to him for dear life, afraid that he might get away. What if she's really serious? What if she has genuine feelings for him? There's something not quite right about the way she has behaved this evening. Everything that she's done, the language of the kitchen with which she has expressed herself; seems to convey a message: she wants to be the mistress of his kitchen, she is the best choice to be the mistress of his apartment.

The shock of this realization instantly douses the fire in the man's body. This woman is serious! It clicks--the woman hasn't come round this evening for a bit of fun, she has come with serious intent. Her purpose is clear at last. She wants a conclusion. This is not messing around, this is a quest for a decided outcome. He tastes this in the way she kisses. The painstaking excellence of the kitchen language she used showed him what she had in mind, but only now does he read the signs.

The man feels depressed. Depression spreads through his body, and his erection wilts. This is no fun. This is really no fun at all. He's fine with the pretense of feeling, but real love is something he rules out. Responsibility is not for him. Who wants to get hitched at a time when everyone is pursuing fame and fortune? Especially with him being an artist he can't have any constraints. Confronted with the prospect of domestic duties and social responsibilities, his policy is one of self-concealment, avoidance and rejection. Song Ze doesn't even pay the tax owing on the sale of his paintings until the taxman comes to his door and demands it. With his career on a roll, how can he give in to her, how can he take a woman as his wife, take her into his home and look after her? How could he retain his freedom and his wildness if he did a thing like that?

Who says women are irrational, emotional creatures? When they have a target in their sights, they are every bit as calculating as men. The crux of it is that she has picked the

wrong man, chosen the wrong mate. The artist Song Ze has no intention of taking on responsibility, of having to care for anyone else. Fooling around is fine with him, but the real thing is out. She wants to depend on him, but he wasn't, isn't someone who wants to be depended on. The man and the woman have different things in mind; they are fundamentally at odds with each other. If love is faked, then he'll fool around to his heart's content, and feel quite safe and happy doing it; but if there are true feelings involved, then the artist has no true feelings for anyone but himself; for his own reputation and financial benefit. He's not afraid of fun, but he is afraid of seriousness. When an affair involves two people who are faking love, he is in his element--neither of them has any responsibility to the other, and they don't need to bother with scruples. When there are true feelings on one side and faked ones on the other, you can't have as much fun. True feelings on both sides are out of the question.

He can't just end the game abruptly and reject her coldly. Offending a valuable investor is not something he can contemplate. Besides, he is known for his charming ways, and he would not want to appear ungentlemanly with so fine a woman. Anyway, what's wrong with taking some risks with someone who looks as good as this? You only get the thrill when you play close to the edge. He's not going to be forced into marriage, is he?

After a long while of hugging and kissing, the woman feels emotionally drained, stops sucking and opens her eyes to see the man gazing at her; his mouth still on her lips. Their faces are so close that the images are distorted. Embarrassed by this, the woman avoids his gaze, lowers her head and buries her face in his chest. The man fondles her back and hair as if he were petting a puppy. And she responds in kind, curling up against him and cuddling in to him. Her eyes closed, she savours the last remnant of the kiss, feeling fulfilled, seeing that her love has found its home.

For the woman Zhizi, it has been so hard to get to this point! How could she have guessed how experienced the man Song Ze would be in playing out this kind of drama? Artist he is, he almost drowns in the waves of affection from his young female admirers.

The woman Zhizi, immersed in her own one-sided passion, has no inkling of this. A woman lost in love is extraordinary. The woman's passions are on fire; given the slightest hint she pounces, nibbling and biting like a cat in heat. The man plays along, using his skill and experience to keep her from achieving her purpose, but still getting enjoyment from responding to her pursuit. Though the passion in the man's body diminished as soon as he sensed her aims, another kind of interest is still roused. Now, even as he is physically involved, he feels detached from the action, as though this is a love scene, and he is the director in total control, rehearsing with an actress. He has been playing with her passions all along, and now he wants to go a bit further, to continue the rehearsal. He reckons he's pretty good at this role!

The man Song Ze feels very pleased with himself.

The woman becomes even more seductive, the woman is utterly abandoned to her passion. The woman's face is inflamed, as if she is determined to burn him and herself to ashes. The woman drinks red wine with him, feeding it to him sip by sip from her mouth into his. Curled up against his chest, the woman slices red apples, leaving faint saw-toothed serrations from the knife on each piece, and then the two of them nibble along the serrations until their lips meet, the flesh pressing together in a frenzy of kissing and licking. Song Ze responds amorously to every little trick the woman tries; but he himself makes no advances,

his hand staying outside her dress as he fondles her breast, and then caresses her slender waist, exciting and arousing her unbearably, but going no further, never exploring her thighs inside the high-slit dress, restraining himself like a true gentleman.

The woman can't understand what he means by this. She keeps taking the initiative, but she can't get to the end result; the woman is on the verge of losing all her self-esteem. Wearily, anxiously, she wonders: Aren't I attractive enough? He only has to give the slightest hint, and whatever he wants, she will let him have straight away, she will give herself to him totally, holding nothing back. She wants so desperately for this night of love to have a genuine consummation, something memorable that will confirm the love between them. But this man refuses to satisfy her; he only frustrates and tortures her. Frustration makes her wilder and more aggressive, wrapping the silken strands of her passion all the more tightly around him, so that he can't break free from her. He presses his lips more tightly on hers, his hands playing with her body, smugly observing every change in her expression, like an Indian charmer playing his flute to make the snake dance.

The love-play and the struggle goes on, rising and falling in its intensity, without either of them realizing how late it is. The woman sinks into his chest again, intoxicated with the resonance of his baritone voice, and listens as he nibbles her ear and murmurs: "Well, look at that, it's two in the morning. I should be taking you back home."

The woman is shocked. Has she misheard him? Her hand drops from his neck and she looks up at him, confusion showing in eyes welling with tears. Back home? Back to what home? Why back home? What does he mean? Is he kicking her out?

For the longest time, the woman can't think straight. Her self-respect has suffered a terrible blow. What has happened? Is this how it's going to end? What is this attitude of his?

Should she refuse to leave? Should she ask if she can stay the night? What would she be if she said that?

The man seems unaware of his devastation of the woman's feelings. Without another word, he gets up and goes over to the closet for her coat. The man's actions are decisive, resolute, allowing no room for doubt or discussion. His body language makes it clear to her: he has no intention of taking her in. He has had as much fun as he wants, and he doesn't want to go on with it. He has taken all the responsibility he wants to, he has put up with her for the evening, letting her stay half the night, but he can't be said to have seduced and then abandoned her, or anything like that.

As the woman sees what is happening, her great loss and her pride make her gasp for breath, her chest heaves, her face contorts with grief and she is at a loss for words. But she immediately manages to control the trembling around her eyes, forces a smile, brushes the hair back from her forehead, and with pretended casualness she generously offers: "Just let me help clear away the dishes first." Her tone gives the impression that she is quite used to romantic affairs like this, that she is an old hand at this kind of game, that she has just come for his birthday, to make him a birthday dinner; and wants to make a perfect job of it.

Without waiting for the man to protest, the woman gets down to work capably. Her gestures are expansive slightly unnatural, finding it hard not to overact, loudly asking where this should go, where that plate is kept. With deft movements she puts everything back in its proper place. After that, she goes into the washroom to tidy up the smudges in her makeup from the kissing. She emerges serenely from the washroom, picks up the bag of kitchen

garbage in passing, and calmly says to the man standing dumbly at the kitchen door: "Let's go then."

Leaves shiver in the wind, and the shock of the cold makes her feel wretchedly chilled. Zhizi trembles involuntarily. The man comes over solicitously and puts his arm around her shoulder. Zhizi says nothing, but allows him the gesture of concern, her body numb, devoid of all feeling. They hail a cab, and both of them get in the back; when the car starts, he reaches out tenderly and pulls her over against his shoulder. Zhizi doesn't resist; doesn't respond, remains numb, letting him hold her in this meaningless way. Nothing means anything to her any more.

The car glides through the dark night, floating like a feather, but still heavy and sluggish. Occasionally they see red taillights ahead shining ominously. The night is arid. There is no gentle moistness, she thinks. When they reach the entrance of her building, the woman gets out of the car, and the man gets out with her, making a show of hugging her goodbye. When the embrace is done, the man ducks down and gets back into the cab, back along the road they came. The woman watches the red roof-light of the cab that carries him away into the night. He's not really a bad person, she thinks to herself. She is prepared to think the best of him. He did have a sense of responsibility in the end, even if that responsibility only showed itself in the final brief moments of seeing her home. That brief tender moment of kindness will be something for her to hold on to for a lifetime.

The night wind blows briskly through the gate, ruffling the woman's hair; so that several strands stick to her mouth and get in the way of her eyes. As she raises her hand to brush the hair back over her head, her fingers touch wetness on her cheeks. She turns, and switches on the hall lights of her building, ready to hurry upstairs. Something heavy knocks against her leg, and as she glances down, she sees the bag of kitchen garbage. She still has it clasped tightly in her hand.

Now, finally, the tears pour down.