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#### About the Book

'This was a summer the islanders would never forget . . . Woken out of the deepest dreams, people walked outside or stood by their windows and looked out, bewildered at a seemingly shrunken world.'

On the island of Wayo Wayo, every second son must leave on the day he turns fifteen as a sacrifice to the Sea God. Atile'i is one such boy, but as the strongest swimmer and best sailor, he is determined to defy destiny and become the first to survive.

Alice Shih, who has lost her husband and son in a climbing accident, is quietly preparing to commit suicide in her house by the sea. But her plan is interrupted when a vast trash vortex comes crashing onto the shore of Taiwan, bringing Atile'i with it.

In the aftermath of the catastrophe, Atile'i and Alice retrace her late husband's footsteps into the mountains, hoping to solve the mystery of her son's disappearance. On their journey, memories will be challenged, an unusual bond formed, and a dark secret uncovered that will force Alice to question everything she thought she knew.

#### About the Author

Wu Ming-Yi is a Taiwanese writer, painter, designer, photographer, literary professor, butterfly scholar, environmental activist, traveller and blogger. He is the author of the novel *Routes in the Dream* (2007), as well as a number of non-fiction books and short story collections. *The Man with the Compound Eyes* is his first novel to be translated into English.

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# The Man with the Compound Eyes

Wu Ming-Yi
Translated by Darryl Sterk

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## 1. The Cave

THE TRICKLING OF water through the fissures in the subterranean rock was suddenly drowned out when the mountain made an immense but also somehow distant sound.

Everyone fell silent.

Then Jung-hsiang Li shouted. That sure wasn't groundwater surging. Wasn't loose rocks shifting or bedrock bursting, either. And it obviously wasn't a vocal echo. It sounded more like when something bumps into a flawless glass vessel – from somewhere within the glass you hear a spider's web begin to spread before the cracks appear. The sound vanished straightaway, and the only thing the people in the cave and the control room could hear was the huff of each other's breathing and the hiss of the radios.

Detlef Boldt heaved a huge sigh of relief and asked, 'Did . . . did you all hear that sound just now?' speaking in English with a heavy German accent. Nobody replied, not because they hadn't heard it, but because they didn't know how to describe it. Then the electrical system cut out, and deep in the mountain the cave went black. It was too dark to see a thing. There it was again. It was as if some colossal being was marching through the mountain, either towards them or away.

'Shhhh! Stay quiet!' Jung-hsiang Li deliberately kept his voice down, lest the sound waves induce vibrations in the rock walls and cause another collapse. But actually everyone had quieted down already.

# 2. Atile'i's Last Night

THE PEOPLE OF Wayo Wayo thought the whole world was but a single island.

The island was situated in the midst of an immense ocean, far from any continent. As far as island memory reached, the white man had once visited the island, but nobody had ever left and brought back news of another land. In the beginning, people believed, there was nothing but a shoreless sea, until Kabang (the word for 'God' in the Wayo Wayoan language) created the island for them to live on, as if placing a small, hollow clam shell in a tub of water. The island followed the tides, floating around in the ocean, which was a source of sustenance for the people. But some of the ocean's spawn were the avatars of Kabang. The asamu, for instance, was a black-and-white fish sent to spy on people, and to test them. For this reason, it was counted among the creatures that could not be eaten.

'If you are so careless as to eat an *asamu*, you will grow a ring of scales around your navel, a ring of scales that you could never finish peeling off your whole life long.' Leaning on a whalerib staff, the Sea Sage hobbled over and sat under a tree every day at dusk to tell the little ones all the stories of the sea. He talked until the sun dipped below the waves. He talked until the boys became youths, and until the youths endured the rite of passage and became men. His speech carried the smell of the sea, and there was salt on his every breath.

'So what if we grow scales?' one boy asked. The children here all had enormous eyes, like the eyes of a nocturnal animal.

'Oh my child, people can't grow scales, just like a sea turtle can't sleep with its belly to the sky.'

Another day, the Earth Sage took the children to the field in the hollow, to the place where the *akaba* grew. One of the only starchy plants on the island, the luxuriant *akaba*, a word that meant 'shaped like the palm of a hand', seemed to raise innumerable hands in supplication to the sky. The island was small and the people lacked farming tools, so pebbles were piled around the plots, to keep the soil moist and to serve as a windbreak. 'You must love the land, my children, and ring it in with your love. For the land is the most precious thing on this island. It is like rain, like the heart of a woman.' The Earth Sage showed the children how to arrange the rocks. His skin was dry like cracked mud, and his back was arched like an earthen mound. 'In all the world, the only things worth trusting in are the land, the sea and Kabang, my children.'

At the south-east corner of the island was a coral lagoon, a good place to catch fish with thrownets or to collect clams. To the north-east, at a distance of ten husks (ten throws of a coconut husk) there was a cay, a coral reef that was fully exposed at ebb tide. This was where the seabirds flocked. The Wayo Wayo hunted the birds with gawana. To make a gawana, they tied branches into a tool that had the virtues of club and spear, with one end blunt and the other end sharpened to a point; then they passed a rope of saltgrass through a hole in the blunt end and tied one end into a noose. Armed with a gawana, a fisherman would row his talawaka near the cay and let the ocean current carry him along, pretending to ignore the birds as he prayed to Kabang. When he drifted within range he would hurl his gawana. Blessed by Kabang, the noose would slip, just so, over a seabird's neck, and a deft flick of the wrist would impale the bird on the pointy end. Blood would trickle down from the point, as if the gawana itself had suffered a mortal wound. The only resistance the albatross, the booby, the pelican, the petrel and the seagull could put up was proliferation. When the birds stopped in spring to build nests, people would feast on eggs, wearing cruel and satisfied smiles on their faces.

As on any island, there was never enough fresh water on Wayo Wayo. The only sources were rain and a lake at the centre of the island. Consisting mainly of fish and fowl, the diet was salty, giving the people a thin and dark appearance and often leaving them constipated. At dawn they would squat over pit latrines, facing away from the sea, often getting teary-eyed from the strain.

The island was so small that most people could set out after breakfast, walk all the way around and return not long after lunch. For the same reason, people were accustomed to a rough parlance of 'facing the sea' or 'facing away' to orient themselves, and the only way to face away was to face the hillock at the centre of the island. People talked facing the sea and ate facing away. They conducted rituals facing the sea, and made love facing away, so as not to offend Kabang. There were no chiefs among the people, only 'elders', the wisest of whom were called 'old men of the sea'. The front door of the home of a family in which an old man of the sea had lived faced the shore. Adorned with shells and carvings, Wayo Wayoan houses looked like capsized canoes. They stuck fish skin to the walls, and the whole community would gather round and build a coral fence out in front to block the wind. The islanders could neither walk to a place where the sea could not be heard nor have a conversation in which the sea was not mentioned. In the morning, they greeted each other, 'Are you going to sea?' At noon they asked, 'Shall we test our luck at sea?' And at night, even if the weather had been too rough to go fishing today, they exhorted one another, 'You must remember me a story of the sea.' As a rule, the Wayo Wayo went fishing every day. Fishermen who met on shore would yell, 'Don't let the mona'e steal your name!' Mona'e meant wave. When people bumped into one another, one would ask, 'So how's the weather at sea?' Even if a gale was blowing, the other had to reply, 'Very fair.' The tonality of the Wayo Wayoan language was sharp and sonorous, like birdsong, with each utterance ending in a light trill and a plop, like a hungry seabird that swiftly dives and breaks the waves in search of prey.

Occasionally, the people went hungry, the weather was too rough, or two of the villages would come into conflict; but no matter how he spent his days, everyone was skilled at telling diverse stories of the sea. People told tales at meals, when they met, at rituals, and when making love. They even told them in their sleep. A complete record had never been made, but many years later anthropologists might know that the islanders had the greatest number of sea sagas of any people on Earth. 'Let me tell you a story of the sea' was on the tip of everyone's tongue. They did not ask how old people were, but simply grew tall like trees and stuck out their organs of increase like flowers. Like the obstinate clam they just passed the time. Like a sea turtle each islander died with the curl of a smile at the corner of his mouth. They were all old souls, older than they appeared, and because they spent their lives staring at the sea they all had melancholy miens and tended to get cataracts and go blind in old age. When they were ready to go, old folks would ask the youngsters by the bed, 'What's the weather out at sea like now?' People believed that dying while gazing at the sea was the grace of Kabang. Their lifelong dream was to arrive at the moment of death with an image of the ocean in the ocean of the mind.

When a boy was born, his father would select a tree for him and carve a notch for each resurrection of the moon. When there were a hundred and eighty notches, the boy had to build a *talawaka* of his very own. Years before, the anthropologist S. Percy Smith had described the *talawaka* as a 'canoe'. Actually, it was more like a grass boat. The island

was too small to have enough trees with trunks thick enough to be made into canoes. Students of anthropological history smile at Smith's mistake, but nobody would laugh at him, as anyone who saw a *talawaka* would assume it was a dugout canoe. A *talawaka* was made by weaving sticks, rattan stems and three or four different kinds of silver grass together to form a frame and applying three coatings of plant pulp. Peat from the bog was used to plug any remaining cracks, and the craft was waterproofed with sap. A finished *talawaka* really did look like a finely finished canoe made by hollowing out the trunk of a sturdy tree.

The finest and sturdiest *talawaka* on the island was made by a youth named Atile'i. Atile'i's face had the typical traits of his people: a flat nose, profound eyes, shining skin, a sad, slouching spine and arrow-like limbs.

'Atile'i, don't sit there, the sea fiends will see you!' hollered a passing elder upon seeing Atile'i sitting by the shore.

Once, like everyone else, Atile'i thought that the whole world was but a single island drifting on the sea like a hollow clam shell in a tub of water.

Having learned the art of *talawaka* construction from his father, Atile'i was praised as the most skilled *talawaka*-maker among the island youth, even more skilled than his elder brother Nale'ida. Though young, Atile'i had the physique of a fish and could catch three ghostheads on a single breath. Every girl on the island pined for Atile'i and hoped that one day he would waylay her, throw her over his shoulder and carry her off into a clump of grass. Three full moons later, she would discreetly inform Atile'i that she was with child. Then she would go home, act normal, and wait for Atile'i to arrive with a whalebone knife and a marriage proposal. Maybe that's what the most beautiful girl on the island, Rasula, was hoping for, too.

'Atile'i has the fate of a second son. What good is a second son who can dive? Atile'i is destined for the Sea God, not for Wayo Wayo.' Atile'i's mother often complained in this vein, and people would nod knowingly, understanding that raising an outstanding second son was the most painful thing in the world for any parent. Atile'i's mother grumbled day and night, her thick lips trembling, as if the more she bemoaned her son's fate the greater his chance of avoiding it might be.

Unless an eldest son died young, the second son seldom married and went on to become an 'old man of the sea'. Upon reaching his one hundred and eightieth full moon, he would be sent out to sea on a mission of no return. He could take no more than ten days' worth of water, and was not allowed to look back. Hence the saying, 'Let's just wait until your second son returns', which simply meant, 'Perish the thought'.

With flashing eyelashes and sparkling skin, covered in crystals of salt, Atile'i looked like the son of the Sea God. Tomorrow he would brave the waves in his *talawaka*. He climbed the highest reef-rock on the island and gazed down at the distant swells, at the white creases in the fabric of the sea. The seabirds flying along the shore reminded him of Rasula, who was as nimble as the shadow of a bird in flight. And like a shore pounded by the waves for many eons, his heart, he felt, was about to break.

According to custom, Atile'i's admirers laid ambush at dusk. Atile'i had only to wander past a clump of grass and some young maiden would accost him. Every time he hoped the girl in the grass would be Rasula, but Rasula never appeared. Atile'i made love over and over again to the girls in the grass, for this was the last chance he had to father a child and leave some small part of himself behind on the island. In fact, as a matter of propriety and morality, he could not refuse their propositions: the girls of Wayo Wayo could ambush a second son on the night before he went to

sea. Atile'i broke his back making love to the girls in the thickets, taking no pleasure, intent only on nearing Rasula's place before dawn. He had a feeling he would meet her there. Each girl along the way sensed that once inside her Atile'i was in a rush to leave. Hurt, they all asked, 'Atile'i, why don't you love me?'

'You know that people can't pit their hearts against the sea.'

Atile'i finally made it with pale fishbelly dawn on the horizon. A pair of hands appeared from inside the grass and lightly drew him in. Shivering like a seabird ducking beside a boulder to dodge a flash of lightning, Atile'i could barely get an erection, not because he was exhausted but because the look in Rasula's eyes was like a jellyfish's sting.

'Atile'i, why don't you love me?'

'Who says I don't love you? But you know no man can pit his heart against the sea.'

They cuddled for a long while. Eyes closed, Atile'i felt like he was hanging in thin air, gazing down upon the open ocean. He gradually became aroused, tried to force himself to forget that soon he would go to sea, wanting only to feel the warmth inside Rasula's body. At dawn, the villagers would all go down to the shore to see Atile'i off. Except for the Sea Sage and the Earth Sage, nobody would have noticed that all through the night departed spirits of second sons had been coming home. They all wanted to ride with the youth whose skin sparkled like the son of the Sea as he piloted the *talawaka* he had fashioned himself, carrying a 'speaking flute', a final gift from Rasula, as he rowed away to the fate he shared with them, each one, the fate of every Wayo Wayoan second son.

# 3. Alice's Last Night

ALICE SHIH GOT up early one morning and decided to kill herself.

Actually, she had mostly made all the necessary preparations. Or perhaps one should say now nothing stood in her way: there wasn't anything she wanted to leave anybody, and she did not have much of an estate. She was simply someone who wanted to die.

But Alice was an obstinate person. She cared about all the people she cared about. There weren't many left, her son Toto and the students who had entrusted her with their hopes and dreams. Once Alice had known what she would need. Now nothing was clear.

Alice had tendered her resignation, returned her faculty ID. She could finally let out a big sigh of relief: now the torment of this life would end and she could try her luck in the next. Alice had gone to grad school to pursue her dream of becoming a writer. She had sailed into this faculty after getting her Ph.D. With her appearance and sensitive disposition she seemed in Taiwan's conservative society typecast for the role of the writer. A lot of people envied her; after all, for a literary person, this was the smoothest road one could possibly take. Only Alice knew the truth: that becoming a good writer was no longer the issue, that she simply had no time to write. Stifled by administrative duties, she had not had a breath of fresh, literary air these past few years. Oftentimes it was already sunrise before she was ready to leave the office.

She decided to give away all the books and things in her office to her students. Trying not to get all emotional, she treated each of the students she had mentored to a meal as a way of saying goodbye. Sitting in the dreadful campus cafeteria, she observed the different expressions in their eyes.

'So young,' she thought.

These kids imagined they were on the way to some mysterious destination, but there wasn't really anything where they were going, just an empty space like a basement, a place that was heaped with junk. She tried to keep a glimmer of sympathy in her eyes, to let her students think that she was still listening and interested in what they had to say. But Alice was just a shell through which air was blowing, all words like stones being tossed into an empty house that didn't even have windows. The only thoughts that flickered through her mind were memories of Toto and possible ways of ending her life.

On second thought, that seemed a bit unnecessary. The sea was right on her doorstep, wasn't it?

Alice had not bid farewell to practically any of her colleagues. She was afraid she might reveal the knots of revulsion towards the world that life had tied in her soul. Driving through town, Alice felt things looked about the same as when she first came here over ten years before, but she was struck by the sense that this was no longer the land of gorges and villages that had drawn her here. down the east coast, separated from the overdeveloped west by the Central Mountain Range, Haven had once seemed a refuge. But now the huge leaves, the clouds that would gather all of a sudden, the corrugated iron roofs, the dry creek beds she would see along the road every couple of miles, and the vulgar billboards - all the things she had at first found so endearing - were gradually withering, growing unreal, losing their hold on her. She remembered her first year in Haven: then the bush and the

vegetation came quite close on either side, as if neither the terrain nor the wild animals feared the sight of man. Now the new highway had pushed nature far away.

Originally, Alice reflected, this place had belonged to the aborigines. Then it belonged to the Japanese, the Han people, and the tourists. Who did it belong to now? Maybe to those city folks who bought homesteads, elected that slimeball of a mayor, and got the new highway approved. After the highway went through, the seashore and the hills were soon covered with exotic edifices, not one of them authentic, pretty much as if a global village theme park had been built there as a joke. There were fallow fields and empty houses everywhere, and the fat cats who owned these eyesores usually only appeared on holidays. Folks in the local cultural scene liked to gush about how Haven was the true 'pure land', among other cheap clichés of native identity, while Alice often felt that except for some houses belonging to the aboriginal people or buildings from the Japanese era, now maintained as tourist attractions, the artificial environment had been intended to spite the natural landscape.

Which reminded her of this one conference coffee break when her colleague Professor Wang started spouting off about how sticky the soil in Haven was, how 'stuck-on-Haven' he felt, and not for the first time. What a disingenuous comment! Alice couldn't help telling him, right to his face, 'Don't you mean stuck-in-Haven? There's fake farmhouses and fake B&Bs all over the place; even the trees in the yards of these places are fake. Don't you think? These houses! Ug. What's so great about it if all it does is cause phonies like that to stick around?'

Professor Wang was at a loss for words. For a moment he forgot to wear the mantle of the senior faculty member. With his drooping eyelids, grey hair and greasy appearance, he looked more like a businessman than like an academic. Honestly, there were times when Alice could not tell the

difference. Professor Wang eventually managed, 'If you say so, then what should it really be like?'

What was it really like? Alice ruminated on the drive home.

It was April. Everywhere was a sluggish, damp smell in the air, like the smell of sex. Alice was driving south. To the right was the Central Mountain Range, a national icon. Occasionally – no, more like every day – Alice recalled the way Toto had looked standing up on the car seat, gazing at the mountains with his head sticking up through the sunroof. He wore a camouflage hat, like a little soldier. Sometimes her memory would dress him in a windbreaker, sometimes not. Sometimes he would be waving, but not always. She imagined that Toto must have left the foot-sized indentation in the car seat that day. That was the last impression she had of her husband and son.

Dahu was the first person she called for help after Thom and Toto went missing. Dahu was Thom's climbing buddy. A member of the local rescue team, he knew these hills like the back of his hand.

'It's all Thom's fault!' She was frantic.

'Don't worry. If they're up there, I'll find them,' Dahu reassured her.

Thom Jakobsen was from Denmark, a country without any true mountains. He was a flatlander who became a climbing fanatic soon after arriving in Taiwan. After finishing all the local trails with Dahu, he went abroad to train himself in traditional alpine climbing techniques. He wanted to prepare for an ascent on a mountain of over seven thousand metres, three thousand metres higher than the highest peak in Taiwan. Taiwan became a place he only visited on occasion. Alice, feeling herself getting older day by day, was almost no longer able to handle not knowing if or when Thom would

return. But even when he was by her side his expression would wander far away.

Maybe that was why lately Alice tended to think first of Toto, then of Dahu, and only then of Thom. No, she hardly ever thought of Thom. He thought he knew everything there was to know about mountains, forgetting there were none back where he was from. And how could he? How could he take their son climbing and not bring him back? What if he had got sick that day or forgotten to charge the battery or even slept in a bit longer? Everything would have turned out different, Alice often thought.

'Don't worry, we're only going insect hunting! I won't take him anywhere dangerous. We'll be fine. Everyone knows the route we're going on.' Thom had tried to reassure her but she heard a hint of impatience in his voice.

Most people could not believe that at ten years old Toto was already a skilled rock climber and mountaineer who knew more about alpine forests than the average forestry graduate. Alice understood Toto belonged to the mountains and tried not to stand in his way. Maybe Dahu was right that fate is fate, and that when the time comes, fate can fly like the shaft that finds the wild boar.

Dahu was a close friend of Alice and Thom's. He was many things: a taxi driver, a mountaineer, an amateur sculptor, a forest conservationist and a volunteer for some east-coast NGOs. He had a typically stocky Bunun build. He also had a charming gleam in his eyes; best not gaze right at him or you might think he has fallen in love with you, or that you have gone and fallen for him.

A few years before, his wife had abandoned him, leaving behind their daughter Umav and a note. She just wrote how much money she had withdrawn from the account and what she had taken from the house as well as the words THESE ARE MINE, without offering an explanation. Like a relinquished pet, Umav was just another item on that list of possessions left behind for Dahu. At first, Dahu would send Umav to stay at Alice's place for a few days at a time. He had the best of intentions, but the truth was he had no idea how to cheer up his daughter, and Umav and Alice only ended up making each other even more depressed. Alice would realise she had not said anything to Umav all afternoon. The girl would have spent the whole time looking bleakly out to sea, clipping and unclipping her bangs, unable to get her hair right. So Alice bluntly asked Dahu not to bring his daughter over any more. Later, after the rescue mission failed to find any trace of Thom and Toto, she also stopped answering his regular sympathy calls.

Alice resolved to wall herself in. The only thing she looked forward to was sleep. Though sleep was just closing her eyes, at times she could see more clearly then. In the beginning she made a point of meditating before bed so that Toto would visit her in her dreams. Later she tried not to dream about Toto, only to discover that not dreaming about him was more painful than dreaming about him. Better to dream of him and bear the pain of waking up and realising he was gone. Now and then, lying awake late at night, she would pick up the flashlight and tread into Toto's room to check on a boy who was not there, wanting to see whether his breathing was regular. Memory confronted her like a boxer whose power punches were too quick to dodge. Sometimes Alice wished she still felt lust; as anyone who has once been young will know, desire is the best antidepressant in the world, dulling the force of memory and keeping a person in the present. But the Thom who appeared in her dreams no longer offered her desire. Holding a climbing axe in his right hand, he would hack away at his left hand as it morphed into a mountain wall. He never said a single word. Each time she tried to grasp the meaning of a dream, she would call the police to see if there was any news. 'I'm sorry, Professor Shih. If we hear anything, you'll be the first to know.' The police had gone from whole-hearted to half-hearted, as if taking her calls had become a matter of routine. Once in a while there was even a hint of disgust in the voice on the other end of the line. 'It's that woman again. She's just not gonna leave us alone,' Alice imagined the policeman saying to his partners after hanging up the phone.

This April it had been constantly raining and unseasonably warm. Unable to turn over, having bashed themselves senseless, there were supine beetles everywhere under the campus streetlights at night. Now there was a scarab inside the car. Alice rolled down the windows, but it could not find a way out. It just kept smacking against the windshield, its blue forewings faintly glowing.

These past few months, Alice discovered how dependent on Toto she had become. It was only for his sake that she had bothered to eat breakfast and keep a regular bedtime and learn how to cook. Alice had also learned to be more careful, since her safety was her child's safety. Anytime he went out, she had to worry that some goddamn drunk driver might smash his warm young face into the sidewalk, or that his classmates might bully him, or even his teachers, as people who spend a lot of time around children can sometimes be shockingly cruel. Alice remembered the girl with the dirty uniform she and her classmates used to gang up on. They taunted her day in, day out. They would splatter her dirty clothes to make them even dirtier, as if to show how clean their own clothes were by comparison.

Alice passed a bridge over a floodplain to the left. The bridge had been washed out a few years before. The new bridge had been built higher up in the hills, almost three kilometres further inland. A burst of honking forced Alice's attention back onto the road.

A few minutes later, the car rounded a stretch of coastline, formerly the most famous in Haven. Years before, a developer had gone in, shovelled away part of the mountain, filled it in, firmed it up and built an amusement

park. And then, with the full backing of that mayor who was knee deep in corruption charges, the developer kept right on digging away at the mountain wall on the other side of the site. But a major earthquake over nine years ago had caused the foundations of most of the facilities to shift, rendering the rides inoperable. The company filed for bankruptcy to avoid having to pay compensation. What with the rising sea level and the encroaching shoreline, the uncleared cable-car pylons and Ferris wheel looked stranded now. To one side, on a boulder that must originally have been part of the mountain, sat an angler, his boat roped to a pylon. Alice kept driving along the New Coastal Highway, until finally her own distinctive abode came into view in the distance, as sunlight sprayed down on the land through a light rain. Despite the drizzle this was the best weather in weeks.

Her house was by the sea. But since when had the sea gotten that close?

Alice opened the door, which now served no meaningful purpose, and looked around at the last of her possessions: the sofa, the mural Thom and she had collaborated on, the Michele De Lucchi chandelier, and the dried-up house plants. She and Thom had selected everything together. The hollow in the pillow, the facecloth in the bathroom and the storybooks on the shelf all bore the marks of Toto's presence. Making a final inspection, Alice realised she had not figured out what to do about the aguarium. It would just be too cruel to leave the poor fish to wait, bewildered, helpless and speechless, for death once she died first. Sitting on the sofa, she remembered a student of hers named Mitch who really liked keeping fish. But she no longer had a cell, and she had cut the phone line. She mulled it over and decided she would just have to make one last trip to the university to arrange for Mitch to get the plants and fish. Of course, Mitch could take all the equipment if he wanted. Alice got back in the car. Thank God there was still about thirty kilometres of juice in the battery.

Alice called Mitch from the department office. Mitch soon arrived with a girl by his side. They all got into Alice's car. Mitch had an athletic build but appeared nebbish, a bit of a doormat. A lit major, he seemed a classic case of passion without talent. Mitch introduced his girlfriend as Jessie. The girl had a mischievous look in her eyes, a sweet smile and extremely fair skin, and was covered in accessories, but her appearance was about the same as any young woman on the boulevard. Jessie was wearing a pair of skinny jeans. She said she had taken two courses from Alice, and though Alice had no particular impression of her, the girl seemed somehow familiar. The car was silent and stuffy the whole way back; Jessie and Mitch pretended to take in the scenery along the way to avoid having to talk to Alice.

The three of them treaded in mutely through the back garden. When Alice opened the door, Mitch gasped with surprise, crouched in front of the aquarium and asked, 'Hey, isn't that a shovelnose minnow?'

'That's right.' Those fish had been raised by a friend of Dahu's to be reintroduced into the wild. He had given Toto the ones he didn't release.

'Wow! You don't find these in the wild any more. Can I see what's in the cabinet?'

'Sure.'

Mitch opened the cabinet below the tank. Thrilled, he said, 'It even has a cooler and a pH control! Awesome!'

'It's all yours.' Mitch's exclamations were getting on Alice's nerves.

Mitch could hardly believe his ears. He confirmed she was serious and called a classmate. Soon three big strong boys arrived in a SUV and bustled the equipment into the back. Alice noticed Jessie quietly glancing at the digital photo frames hanging on the walls and at the spines of the books on the shelf.

'If you see a book you like please feel free.'

'Uh . . . for real?'

'A few books won't make any difference.' In the end Jessie only took a collection of short stories by Isak Dinesen in the original. Head cocked, Alice asked, 'You read Danish?'

'Oh no, it's just, um, for a memento. Danish looks really neat.'

Before getting in the SUV Jessie came over and asked: 'Professor Shih, will I see you around campus?'

'Probably not.'

'I was just wondering if I could send you stuff I write? I'd totally understand if it's not okay.'

Alice had nodded, then shaken her head. Now, without any emotion, she remembered who the girl was.

After Mitch and Jessie left, Alice wandered into Toto's room and flopped onto the bed, which once had that familiar smell. Now Alice did not have to worry about the fish dying, only about how she would die, which somehow did not seem to matter as much. She stared up at the map on the ceiling of the hikes Thom had taken Toto on. They had drawn it together. Often she'd be cooking while they were in here hatching secret plans. Mountain climbing was always their thing, and all these years, no matter how hard Thom tried to convince her, she just would not go. She would not go to church, either.

'Sometimes in life you should be able to say no,' Alice thought.

Alice would never forget her first climbing experience. More a hill than a mountain, the Emperor's Hall was located in the rocky country to the south-east of Taipei. At the time intercollegiate co-ed socials were popular, and Alice got dragged along to one by a classmate. Never a sporty person, she was all right for the first half of the climb, but once she went past a little temple she had to pull herself along with a rope and clamber over roots, until she made it

to this ridge where there was nothing to hold onto. People kept encouraging her, and at the time Alice was too timid to refuse. She carried on for another few minutes and then broke out in a cold sweat and suffered a panic attack. She did not scream to get some gallant boy to help her along, as a typical girl might have done. The tears just started falling. Why of all places did they have to come here? One boy offered his arm but she refused. The fellow looked polite but was actually empty-headed (as she had discovered riding on the back of his motorbike). Instead, she made her own way back down, half-walking and half-crouching. She had never gone hiking since.

The map had intersecting red and blue routes labelled with different coloured flags. She did not know what the colours meant and could only try to imagine the alpine vistas Thom and Toto had seen. Who knows how much time they spent on it or what was going through their heads when they were drawing it? She followed the routes with her eyes. Although she never went climbing, she had often looked at the map and planned treks with Toto, as if playing a game. She knew the map just as well as Toto and Thom, but for some reason she had always had a funny feeling that a few routes were not drawn quite right, though she could not say why. Alice kept staring until her eyes glazed over. It started getting dark outside, and the routes on the ceiling gradually withdrew into shadow. Alice pictured Toto sitting on his high stool or standing on Thom's shoulders as he traced out a route, until finally she lost track of time and sank into a deep sleep.

Sometime later that night there was a strong earthquake, strong enough to reawaken people's childhood memories. At first, she was still half-asleep; after all, she had been living in earthquake-prone Haven for quite a while now and had felt worse than this. But when the earth was still shaking over a minute later, and the tremor was getting stronger and stronger, Alice sat up in bed automatically, instinctively

wanting to take shelter or flee the house. How ironic! Why should a person who is ready to die care how it happens? Alice lay back down and seemed to hear a great dull roaring coming from somewhere, as if the mountain itself was about to move. She recalled that huge earthquake that hit when she was in elementary school. No one in her family was killed, but her school had collapsed, and a science teacher who really liked her named Miss Lin as well as a boy who sat next to her in class, often gave her treats and wore spectacles had both been crushed to death. After school the day before, he had walked with her in the student procession and given her five silkworms. Five days after, maybe as a result of eating mulberry leaves that had not been cleaned properly, the silkworms all produced mushy black poops and died, their bodies all shrivelled up. Those were the two most intimate memories she had of the event. An earthquake does not have to kill you to induce mortal terror; it is enough that it can take away something dear to you, leaving nothing but a shrivelled skin behind.

The rumbling sound lasted several minutes before the world fell silent again. Alice was so tired she fell right back to sleep. It was not yet light out when she awoke to the inexorable rhythm of the waves. She got up, looked out the window, and found herself standing on a remote island in the midst of an immense ocean, as frothy waves rolled relentlessly across the distance towards the shore.