

Rows of metallic, mostly smooth and shiny, with only some chipped paint, chairs squatted at the center of the waiting room and stared at the coming and going passengers. The clock just stroke 12am, and the sun had already stowed away its subtle light. It seemed like that the sun was afraid of the cold that it had hidden behind the thick clouds. The steam from his mouth and nostrils had condensed into layers of frost flowers, freezing around Xi He's classic knit hat, like the silver beard that Santa Claus has worn on his face. He sped up his trace, trotting towards the door of the bus stop waiting room.

As soon as Xi stepped over the threshold, a wave of arid, lugubrious, and smoked-cigarette air rushed toward him, as well as wisps of heat. It felt like the waiting room was like a box of rectangular fermenting dough, and people who were inside of the room were active yeasts, enhancing the temperature. Xi took down his backpack, finding a seat near the center of the room. Before his trousers touched the metallic chair, Xi hesitated. He examined the chairs; every chair had a special hue. It was a hue of evidence that the chairs had encountered various people. It was a hue of reminding the chairs not to forget their responsibilities of serving the public. It was a hue of comfort to the public that everyone could take a seat. He admired the chairs' artistic and authentic shininess and sat down. Suddenly, his eyes were attracted by a glimpse of light; it was a smile that was as splendid as the sunshine. The smile belonged to a girl who wore a set of pink, flower-ornamented cotton clothes. She held a piece of paper and a semi-clear plastic box standing in front of passengers, smiling, waiting for their reactions.

The woman who sat next to Xi sneered and said, "Huh, what a nice girl. It is such a pity that she is a liar. I am sure she is holding a paper that reads, 'It is a wonderful world. Though I can't hear and speak, I will still give a bright smile in return. Please show your love and offer a little bit of caring money to me; I would never forget your generosity. Thank you for your support.'" Xi listened quietly and secretly observed the woman as she spoke. She wore the most fashionable gold-colored snow boots, silver fur coat, and carried a black briefcase.

"What if the girl is a real victim? No matter what, she looks no more than ten years old." Xi rebuked.

“Have you watched The Central News? The Central News has reported that some idlers pretend to be deaf and dumb and therefore to get “caring money”. It was said that those “deaf-mute” people particularly and purposely gathered at crowded places, held a “certificate” of disability and written “offer love” documents, babbled and gestured to ask people to “donate” money,” the woman replied.

Xi disagreed, “She is only a kid.”

“The Central Television also stated that it was illegal for anyone to beg. You should believe The Central Television; it only reports authentic bureaucratic declarations,” retorted the woman.

Xi did not know what to refute, after all, the woman was right, the government is The Central Television. At that moment, the girl came in front of the woman, Xi noticed that the woman quickly pulled out her phone, lowered her head, and held her phone with both of her hands. The girl wore her smile, stood in front of the woman quietly. Then she gingerly, slowly, half-extended her right hand, and gently patted the woman on her shoulder. The woman snorted, disgusted, and waved the girl to go away without looking up.

When the girl smiled and pointed at the words “offer a little bit of money” with her frostbitten index finger to him, Xi decided to donate a few bucks to her. As Xi stretched his hand into his pocket, the girl pointed at the word “Thanks”.

“You should have not offered any money. The girl is quite sly. She did not go to that rustic, strong, and swarthy farmer, instead she came to us. She knows a college student like you and a civil servant like me are good people. However, I have already seen through her guile,” the woman declared proudly after the girl walked away.

The woman continued, “You better be aware to not be surrounded by a group of “deaf-mute”. Those people are organized by professionally criminal teams. Once you give money to one of them, the rest would dash to you within 5 minutes.”

Head down, clasping his fingers, Xi sat there like a kid who made a blunder and was listening to the adult’s instruction.

“Ah, see, here comes another one,” the woman pointed toward the direction of 4 rows before her.

It was an old woman who wore an insubstantial jacket; her head was covered in a homemade triangle towel hat. Her forehead had been covered full of wrinkles, like the bark of an aged tree, printed with the traces that had been marked by time. Her eyes were obscured by her eyelids, exposing the thin seam slightly, exuding yellowish light. Her protruding cheekbones were like two tiny hills on her gaunt face. Apparently, she was holding a clear plastic box and a little green pamphlet.

“I can never understand why those old people do not stay at home and enjoy their lives. The government has offered social pensions to them. Oh, have you watched the latest Central Television news? It says some beggars wear dilapidated clothes deliberately so that they can win sympathy from people like me, but I am not silly. They even put a piece of green paper inside of a clear plastic cover to fake the disability booklets, but I am not a fool.” the woman slightly tapped her right foot to express her complacency.

Watching the old woman extend her box to one person and another, Xi thought about his own grandma. He had heard numerous times about the stories how his great-grandparents' wealth and reputation were destroyed because they were landlord, how his grandparents turned over the grain they planted, grew, and harvested to the government, and how his grandparents had to eat dirt in order to survive. With all those devotions to the country, the government now distributes 50 dollars in social pensions a month to his grandparents since 2 years ago. Ironically, his grandparents were lauding the government. Xi pondered where his grandparents would be if they were not living with his parents.

As the old woman approached Xi, the woman quickly picked up her briefcase, brushed off the invisible dusts on her coat, dashed to the seat 6 rows before her, and gently sat down. Xi was shocked by the appearance of old woman's hands when she held out her little box to Xi. She had a pair of hands that looked like ivy vine: dark, shriveled, and twisted. The turquoise pamphlet was opened to the page that was covered with one after another red governmental proved stamps.

The wind howled. The crowds came and went, stopped and kept on. Xi looked around; among those busy figures, there was not even one pair of familiar eyes. A chill feeling abruptly battered Xi's heart. He could not help but pull up his collar and hold his arms tightly to prevent the biting cold to further penetrate his heart. Looking at the direction of the coming bus, it seemed that there was no end in sight.

Rows of chairs watched Xi gradually got lost in the crowds, embarked on a journey to find warmth.