Sealed Off: A Short Story By Eileen Chang

The tramcar driver drove his tram. The tramcar tracks, in the blazing sun, shimmered like two shiny worms oozing out from water: stretch, then shrink, stretch, then shrink. Soft and slippery, long old worms, slinking on and on and on . . . the driver stared at the wriggling rails, and did not go mad. The tramcar would have gone on forever, if the city hadn't been shut down. It was. The streets were sealed off. "Ding-ding-ding-ding" rang the bell. Each "ding" was a small, cold dot: dot after dot, they formed a line that cut through space and time.

The tramcar stopped, but the people on the street started rushing around: those on the left rushed over to the right, those on the right rushed over to the left. The metal shop gates came rattling down, all in a single sweep. Matrons tugged madly at the bars. "Let us in!" they cried. "At least for a little while! There are children here, and old people too!" But the gates stayed tightly shut. The two sides glared at one another through the bars, feeding off each other's fear. On the tram, people were fairly calm. They had somewhere to sit, and though the tram interior was shabby, it was still quite a bit better, for most passengers, than their rooms at home.

Gradually the street grew quiet too–not a complete silence but voices turned blurry, like the soft rustling of a marsh-grass pillow, heard in a dream. The huge, shambling city sat dozing in the sun, its head resting heavily on people's shoulders, its drool slipping slowly down their shirts, an inconceivably enormous weight pressing down on everyone. Never before, it seemed, had Shanghai been this quiet–and in the middle of the day! A beggar, taking advantage of the breathless, birdless quiet, lifted up his throat and began to chant: "Good master, good lady, kind sir, kind ma'am, won't you give alms to this poor soul? Good master, good lady. . ." But soon he stopped, overawed by the eerie quiet.

Then a braver beggar, a man from Shandong Province, broke the silence firmly. His voice was round and resonant: "Sad, sad, sad! No money do I have!" An old, old song, sung from one century down to the next. The tram driver, also from Shandong, succumbed to the sonorous tune. Heaving a long sigh, he folded his arms across his chest, leaned against the tram door, and joined in: "Sad, sad, sad! No money do I have!"

A few passengers got off. There was some scattered conversation among those who stayed, and a group of office workers, over by the door, resumed the discussion they'd been having. One of them flicked his fan open–it made a quick ripping sound–and delivered his

conclusion: "Well, in the end, his problem is simply that he doesn't have any manners." Someone else snorted, and smiled sarcastically. "No manners, you say? He sure knows how to kiss up to the bosses!"

A middle-aged couple who looked very much like brother and sister stood together in the middle of the tram, holding on to the leather straps. "Careful!" she yelped. "Don't get that on your trousers!" The man flinched, then lifted his hand, dangling a parcel of smoked fish. He held the greasy paper parcel with gingery care, several inches out from his trousers. His wife did not let up. "Do you know what dry cleaning costs these days? Or what it costs to have new trousers made?"

Lu Zongzhen, accountant for Huamao Bank, was sitting in the corner. When he saw that smoked fish, he remembered the steamed spinach buns that his wife had asked him to buy at a noodle stand near the bank. Women are always like that! Buns that are bought in the hardest-to-find, most twisty-wisty of little alleys have to be the cheapest and the best. She didn't consider how it made him look–a man smartly dressed in dapper suit and tie, with tortoiseshell glasses and a leather briefcase, and then, tucked under his arm, these steaming hot buns wrapped in newspaper–how ridiculous! Still, if the city was sealed long enough to affect his dinner hour, the buns would do, in a pinch.

He glanced at his watch; it was only four-thirty. The power of suggestion? Already he felt hungry. He loosened one corner of the paper wrapping and peeked inside. Snowy white mounds, giving off soft little whiffs of sesame oil. A piece of newspaper had stuck to a bun, and gravely he peeled it away; the ink had transferred to the bun, and the writing was in reverse, as in a mirror. He pored over the words till he could make them out: "Obituaries . . . Positions Wanted . . . Stock Market Developments. . Now Playing . . ."–all normal, useful expressions, though funny, somehow, seen on a bun. Eating, it seems, is serious business; it turns everything else, by way of contrast, into a joke. Lu Zongzhen thought the words looked funny, but he didn't laugh: he was a very straightforward fellow. He went from bun-print to newsprint, but after perusing half a page of old news, he had to stop: if he turned the page, all the buns would fall out.

While Lu read his newspaper, the others did likewise. People who had newspapers read newspapers; those who didn't have newspapers read receipts, or rules and regulations, or business cards. People who were stuck without a single scrap of printed matter read shop signs along the street. They simply had to fill this terrifying emptiness–otherwise, their brains might start working. Thinking is painful business.

Not a problem, however, for the old man across from Lu Zongzhen, clacking two polished walnuts around and around in his hand: a rhythmic little gesture can fill in for thought. The old man had a clean-shaven pate, a ruddy yellow complexion, and an oily sheen on his face. When his brows were furrowed, his whole head looked like a walnut. And his brains were like walnut meat–sweet, slightly moist, and in the end, very bland.

To the old man's right sat Wu Cuiyuan, who looked very much a young Christian wife, even if she was unmarried. She wore a white linen cheongsam with narrow blue piping all around–the navy blue, next to the white, looked like the dark border around an obituary–and she carried a little blue-and-white-checked parasol. Her hairstyle was utterly banal, afraid of attracting attention. Actually, she had little reason to be afraid. She wasn't bad-looking, but hers was an uncertain, unfocused, timid kind of beauty, always trying not to offend. Her whole face was bland, limp, undefined: even her own mother couldn't say for certain whether it was long or round.

At home she was a good daughter, at school she was a good student. After graduating from college, Cuiyuan had become an English instructor at her alma mater. Now, with the city sealed off, she decided to make use of the time by grading a few papers. The first one was a male student's. It railed against the evils of the big city, full of righteous anger, the prose stiff, choppy, ungrammatical. "Lipstick-wearing prostitutes . . . cruising the Cosmo . . . seedy bars and dance halls." Cuiyuan paused for a moment, then pulled out her red pencil and gave the paper an "A." Ordinarily, she would have gone right on to the next one, but now, because of all this time for thought, she couldn't help wondering why she had given this student such a high mark. If she hadn't asked herself this question, she could have ignored the whole thing, but once she did ask, her whole face flushed red. Suddenly she understood: it was because this student was the only man who, with perfect frankness, no qualms whatsoever, raised such topics with her.

He treated her like someone who had been places and done things; he treated her like a man, like a trusted friend. He respected her. Cuiyuan usually felt that no one at school–from the president on down to the professors, the students, and even the janitors–respected her. The students' griping was especially hard to take: "S. U. is really falling apart–getting worse all the time! A Chinese person teaching us English is already bad enough, and this one's a Chinese who's never even been abroad . . ."

Cuiyuan took abuse at school, and she took abuse at home. The Wu household was a modern, model household, devout and serious. The family had pushed their daughter to study hard, to climb upward step by step, right to the very top . . .A girl in her twenties teaching at a university! It set a new record for women's professional achievement. But her parents were losing their enthusiasm; now they wished that she had slacked off a bit as a student and worked harder at getting them a wealthy son-in-law.

She was a good daughter, a good student. All the people in her family were good people. They took baths every day; they read the newspaper every day. When they turned on the radio, they never listened to local folk opera, comic opera, that sort of thing, just symphonies by Beethoven or Wagner; they didn't understand what they were listening to, but they listened anyway. In this world, there are more good people than real people. . .Cuiyuan wasn't very happy.

Life was like the Bible, translated from Hebrew to Greek, from Greek to Latin, from Latin to English, from English to Mandarin Chinese. When Cuiyuan read it, she translated the Mandarin into Shanghainese. Some things did not come through.

Cuiyuan put the student's essay down and buried her chin in her hands. The hot sun beat down on her back.

Sitting next to Cuiyuan was a nanny with a small child stretched out on her lap. The sole of the child's foot pushed against Cuiyuan's thigh. Tiny red cloth shoes, decorated with tigers, on a soft but tough little foot . . . this at least was real.

A medical student who was also on the tram had taken out a sketch pad and was carefully putting the last touches on a diagram of the human body. The other passengers thought he was sketching the man who sat dozing across from him. Since they had nothing else to do, they crowded around, clumping together in threes and fours, leaning on one another with their hands behind their backs, watching the man sketching from life. The man with the smoked fish whispered to his wife: "I can't get used to this cubism, this impressionism, that's so popular these days!" "Your trousers!" she hissed.

The medical student meticulously wrote in the name of every bone, nerve, muscle, and tendon. One of the office workers half covered his face with a folding fan, and quietly informed his colleague: "That's the influence of Chinese painting. Nowadays, a bit of writing is often added to Western art too–clearly a case of 'Eastern ways spreading westward.'"

Lu Zongzhen didn't join the crowd; he stayed in his seat. He had decided that he was hungry. With everyone gone, he could comfortably munch his spinach-stuffed buns. But then he looked up and glimpsed one of his relatives, his wife's cousin's son, back in the third-class car. He deeply disliked this Dong Peizhi. Peizhi was a man of humble origins who harbored a great ambition: to marry a young lady of means, to serve as a starting point for his climb to the top. Lu Zongzhen's eldest daughter had just turned thirteen; even so, she had caught Peizhi's eye. The mental calculations he had made pleased him no end, and his manner grew ever more assiduous.

When Lu Zongzhen caught sight of the young man, back in the other car, he gasped softly in alarm, afraid that Peizhi, seeing the father of his intended, might seize this golden opportunity to go on the attack. Trapped in the same car with Dong Peizhi while the city was shut down–that would be unbearable! Zongzhen quickly closed his briefcase, wrapped up the buns, and fled to a seat on the opposite side of the tram. Now Wu Cuiyuan, sitting next to him, conveniently obstructed the view. There was no way his nephew could see him.

Cuiyuan turned her head and shot him a look. What a mess! This woman must think that he was making a pass, switching seats like that, for no apparent reason. He recognized that look women get–face rigid as can be, not a trace of a smile in the eyes or on the lips, not

even in the little hollows by the nose, and yet, somewhere, a trembling hint of a tiny smile that is on the verge of breaking out. When a woman feels that she really is very attractive, she just can't help but smile.

But–damn it! Dong Peizhi had spotted him after all and was coming toward the first-class car, very self-deprecating, bowing even at a distance, with his long, red, blushing face, and his long, gray, monkish gown–a chaste, long-suffering young man, the perfect social-climber son-in-law. Thinking fast, Zongzhen decided to steal a page from Peizhi's book and move in on an opportunity. So he stretched one arm out across the windowsill behind Cuiyuan, soundlessly announcing his flirtatious intent. He knew this would not scare Dong Peizhi into immediate retreat, because in Peizhi's eyes he already was a dirty old man. According to Peizhi, everyone over thirty was old, and everyone who was old was nasty. After he'd witnessed Zongzhen's disgraceful behavior, Peizhi would feel compelled to go and tell his wife all about it. Well, if she got riled up, that was fine with him. Her fault for saddling him with a nephew like that. Let her get angry–it would serve her right.

He didn't care too much for this woman sitting next to him. Her arms were white, true enough–white like squeezed-out toothpaste. Her whole body was like squeezed-out toothpaste, no shape at all.

"Whenever will this blockade end?" he said in a low, smiling voice. "It's awful!"

Cuiyuan jumped and turned to look at him, at which point she saw his arm stretched out behind her. Her whole body froze. But come what may, Zongzhen could not let himself pull that arm back. His nephew stood just across the way, watching him with brilliant, glowing eyes and the hint of an understanding smile. If, at this moment, he looked his nephew in the eye, maybe the young fool would get scared and drop his gaze, flustered like some sweet young thing; then again, Peizhi might give him a knowing wink–who could tell?

Zongzhen gritted his teeth, and renewed the attack. "Aren't you bored? We could chat a bit, no harm in that! Let's . . . let's talk!" He couldn't keep the plaintiveness out of his voice.

Once again, she was startled and turned to look at him. Now he remembered, he had seen her get on the tram–a striking image, thrown up by chance, and nothing she could have planned. "You know, I saw you getting on the tram," he said softly. "In the window at the front of the tram, there's an advertisement with a piece torn out, and I saw part of your face, just a bit of your chin, through the tear." It was an ad for Lacova powdered milk, and it showed a fat little child. Under the child's ear, this woman's chin had suddenly appeared; it was a little spooky, when you thought about it. "Then you looked down to search for change in your purse, and I saw your eyes, then your eyebrows, then your hair." When you considered her features in isolation, one after another, you had to admit she did have a certain charm.

Cuiyuan smiled. You'd never guess that this man could talk so sweetly–he looked like such a respectable businessman! She looked at him again. At the edges of his nostrils, the cartilage glowed red in the sunlight. The hand at the end of his sleeve, the hand that rested on the newspaper, was a tanned, living hand–a real person! Not too honest, not too bright, but a real person! Suddenly she felt flushed, happy. "You shouldn't be talking like that," she murmured, and turned her face away.

"Huh?" Zongzhen had already forgotten what he'd said. His eyes were fixed on his nephew's back–that tactful young man had decided that three's a crowd, and he didn't want to offend his uncle. Anyway, they'd meet again, since they were such a close family, no knife sharp enough to sever their ties; so Peizhi retreated to the third-class car. Once he was gone, Zongzhen withdrew his arm, and acted like a respectable man. Casting about for something to say, he glanced at the notebook lying on Cuiyuan's lap. "Shenguang University," he read out. "Are you a student there?"

Did he think she was so young? That she was still a student? She laughed without answering.

"I graduated from Huaqi." He repeated the name. "Huaqi." On her neck there was a small, dark mole, as if someone had given her a sharp pinch. Zongzhen rubbed the fingers of his right hand across the nails of his left, absentmindedly. He coughed slightly, then continued. "What field are you in?"

Cuiyuan saw that he had moved his arm. She thought that his change of attitude had come in response to the subtle influence of her own fine character, and that she therefore owed him an answer."Literature. And you?"

"Business." Suddenly he felt their conversation was getting stuffy. "When I was in school, I ran around joining student movements. Now that I'm out, I run around trying to earn a living. I can't say I've ever studied much."

"Does your job keep you very busy?"

"Terribly busy. In the morning I take the tram to work, and in the evening I take it home, but I don't know why I'm going to work, or why I'm going home! I'm not the least bit interested in my job. Sure, it's a way to earn money, but I don't know who I'm earning it for!"

"Everyone has family to think of."

"Oh, you don't know–my family–" A short cough. "We'd better not talk about it!"

"Here it comes!" thought Cuiyuan. "His wife doesn't understand him. Every married man in the world seems to be in desperate need of another woman's understanding."

Zongzhen hesitated, swallowed hard, and forced the words out: "My wife–she doesn't understand me at all."

Cuiyuan looked at him, and frowned to show her sympathy.

"I don't know why, every evening when the time rolls around, I go home. What home? I don't really have a home." He removed his glasses, held them up to the light, wiped off the moisture with his handkerchief. Another little cough. "So–I just have to keep going on, and try not to think about it. I can't start thinking about it!" Cuiyuan always felt a certain revulsion when a nearsighted person removed his glasses in front of others. It was indecent, like taking off your clothes in public.

"You–you have no idea what this woman is like!" Zongzhen continued.

"Then why, back then, did you . . . ?"

"Even back then, I was against it. It was my mother who chose her. Of course I wanted to choose for myself, but, well, she was very beautiful, and I was quite young . . . a young man, you know. . ." Cuiyuan nodded.

"And then she changed into this kind of person. She even got into a huge fight with my mother, who turned around and blamed me for marrying her! She has such a temper. . . she didn't even make it through elementary school."

Cuiyuan couldn't help saying, with a tiny smile, "You seem to think that diplomas matter a lot! Education doesn't make that much difference–for a woman." She didn't know why she said that, hurting her own pride.

"Well of course, you can laugh about it because you've been to college. You don't know what kind of–" He stopped, breathing hard, and took off the glasses he had just put back on.

"It can't be that bad, now can it?" Cuiyuan said.

Zongzhen made a jerky, awkward gesture with the glasses in his hand. "You don't know what kind of–"

Cuiyuan responded quickly: "I know, I know." She knew that if he and his wife didn't get along, it couldn't be only his wife's fault. He too was a person of limited intellect. What he wanted was a woman who'd forgive him and accept him for what he was.

The street erupted in noise as two trucks full of soldiers rumbled by. Cuiyuan and Zongzhen stuck their heads out to see what was going on; to their surprise, their faces were drawn into sudden proximity. Seen near up, anyone's face is somehow different–tension-charged like a close-up on the movie screen. Zongzhen and Cuiyuan suddenly felt they were seeing

each other for the first time. To his eyes, her face was the spare, simple peony of a watercolor sketch, and the strands of hair fluttering at her temples were pistils ruffled by a breeze.

He looked at her, and she blushed. When she let him see her blush, he grew visibly happy. Then she blushed even more deeply.

Zongzhen had never thought he could make a woman blush, make her smile, make her turn her face away, then turn it back again. In this he was a man. Usually Zongzhen was an accountant, a father, a head of household, a passenger on the tram, a customer in the store, a local citizen. But to this woman who knew nothing about him, he was only and entirely a man.

They were in love. He told her all kinds of things: who at the bank was his real friend, and who was just pretending; how his family squabbled; his secret sorrows; his schoolboy dreams . . . unending talk, but she was not put off. A man in love likes to talk; a woman in love changes her ways and doesn't want to talk. She knows, without even knowing that she knows, that after a man really understands a woman, he won't love her anymore.

Zongzhen was sure that Cuiyuan was a lovely woman–pale, wispy, warm, like breath in winter. You don't want her, and quietly she drifts away. Being part of you, she understands everything, forgives everything. You tell the truth, and her heart aches for you; you tell a lie, and she smiles as if to say, "Go on–you're just pulling my leg!"

Zongzhen was quiet for a moment. Then, suddenly: "I'm thinking of marrying again."

Cuiyuan quickly assumed an air of shocked surprise. "You want to divorce your wife? You can't do that, can you?"

"I can't get a divorce. I have to consider my children's happiness. My oldest daughter is thirteen this year and she's just passed the secondary school entrance exam, with a good score too."

"What's that got to do with it?" Cuiyuan thought.

"Oh," she said aloud, and coldly, "you plan to take a concubine."

"I plan to treat her like a wife," said Zongzhen. "I'll–I'll take good care of her. I won't let her suffer in any way."

"But," said Cuiyuan, "a girl from a good family won't want to be a concubine, will she? And so many legal problems . . ."

Zongzhen sighed. "Yes, you are right. I can't do it. Shouldn't have even mentioned it . . . I'm too old. Thirty-five already."

Cuiyuan spoke very deliberately. "Well, these days that's not considered old at all."

Zongzhen was still. Finally he asked, "How. . . how old are you?"

Cuiyuan ducked her head. "Twenty-five."

Zongzhen was silent for a while. "Are you available?" he finally asked. Cuiyuan didn't answer. "You aren't," Zongzhen said. "And even if you were willing, your family would oppose it . . . that's the problem, isn't it?"

Cuiyuan pursed her lips. Her family–her prim and proper family–how she hated them! She'd had enough of their lies. They wanted her to find them a wealthy son-in-law; Zongzhen didn't have money but he did have a wife. Well, if they got mad, that would be just fine with her! It would serve them right!

The tram was filling up again. Apparently the people outside were saying that the "all clear" would come any minute now. One after another, the passengers got on and sat down; they squeezed against Zongzhen and Cuiyuan, forcing them to sit closer, then closer again.

Zongzhen and Cuiyuan wondered how they could have been so dense, not sitting closer on their own. Zongzhen felt he was too happy–he had to fight against it. "No, no, it just won't work!" His voice was agonized. "I can't let you sacrifice your future! You're a fine person, with such a good education . . . and I, I don't have much money. I can't ask you to bury yourself like that!"

Well, of course, it always comes down to money. He was only being reasonable. "It's over," Cuiyuan thought. In the end she'd probably marry, but her husband could never be as dear as this stranger met by chance . . . this man on a tram in the middle of a sealed-off city. . . it could never be this natural again. Never again . . . oh, this man, he was so stupid! So very stupid! All she wanted was one small part of him, a little part that no one else wanted. He was throwing away his own happiness. Such an idiotic waste! She wept, but it wasn't a gentle, maidenly weeping. She pretty much spit the tears all over his face. He was a good man–the world had gained one more good man!

What use would it be to explain things to him? A woman who has to use words to touch a man's heart is a sorry figure.

Once Zongzhen became anxious, he couldn't get any words out, just kept shaking the umbrella Cuiyuan was holding. She ignored him. Then he tugged at her hand. "Hey–hey–there are people here, you know! Don't! Don't get so upset! Wait a bit, and we'll talk it over on the telephone. Give me your number."

Cuiyuan didn't answer. He pressed her. "You have to give me your telephone number."

"Seven-five-three-six-nine." Cuiyuan spoke as fast as she could.

"Seven-five-three-six-nine?"

She would not answer.

"Seven-five-three-six-nine, seven-five . . ." Mumbling the number over and over, Zongzhen searched his pockets for a pen, but the more frantic he became, the harder it was to find one. Cuiyuan had a red pencil in her bag, but she purposely did not take it out. He ought to remember her telephone number; if he didn't, then he didn't love her, and there was no point in continuing the conversation.

The city started up again. "Ding-ding-ding-ding" rang the bell. Each "ding" was a small, cold dot: dot after dot, they formed a line that cut through space and time.

Cheers rippled through the vast city. The tram started clanking its way forward. Zongzhen suddenly stood up, pushed into the crowd, disappeared. Cuiyuan turned her head away, as if she didn't care. He had gone. To her, it was as if he were dead.

The tram picked up speed. On the evening street, a seller of curdled tofu had set his shoulder pole down and lifted his rattle; eyes shut, he shook it back and forth. A big-boned blonde with a straw hat slung across her back bantered with an Italian sailor. All her teeth showed when she grinned. Cuiyuan's eyes saw them and they lived, lived for that one moment. The tram clanked onward, and one by one they died away.

Cuiyuan shut her eyes fretfully. If he telephoned her, she wouldn't be able to control her voice; it would be filled with emotion for him, a man who had died and come back to life again.

The lights inside the tram went on; she opened her eyes and saw him sitting in his old seat, looking remote. She trembled with shock–he hadn't gotten off the tram after all! Then she understood his meaning: everything that had happened while the city was sealed off was a nonoccurrence. The whole city of Shanghai had dozed off and dreamed an unreasonable dream.

The tramcar driver raised his voice in song: "Sad, sad, sad! No money do I have! Sad, sad, sad—" An old beggar woman, thoroughly dazed, limped across the street in front of the tram. The driver bellowed at her. "Swine!"