

# LOVE HATE

WHAT KIND OF DAY ARE YOU HAVING?

by George Ding

I'm in a love-hate relationship with Beijing. The proportions of love and hate differ from day to day. Great days have been ruined by surly taxi drivers and horrible days redeemed by a simple act of kindness from a stranger. In a city so large and so varied, I suppose it's only natural for life to swing between the poles of absolute misery and wild euphoria.

## ON A GOOD DAY

### You wake up in the morning.

Your curtains reveal a beautiful, crisp morning. The sunlight suffuses your room in gold. There's not a cloud in sight. The sky shines a bottomless blue, like Bradley Cooper's eyes.

### You head out the door.

You're running a bit late and hop in the first cab you see. Third Ring Road is actually moving at a brisk pace. The driver strikes up a conversation about how much Beijing has changed. He tells you about how all this used to be farmland, and you commiserate over rising *jianbing* prices. As you get out of the car, the driver compliments you on your Chinese. You end up being early for work. As you walk into your building, you spot 20 *kuai* lying on the ground.

### You get to work.

In class, your students are attentive and engaged. They laugh at your jokes and ask questions you know the answers to. You feel confident, competent – hell, even a little taller. After class, one student tells you that she's gotten into her first-choice university, which she attributes to your pedagogical prowess. You are overcome with pride and reminded of why this job is important. While cleaning up the room, you find 20 *kuai*.

### After work, you stop into a restaurant for dinner.

Your boss has organized a company dinner for you and your co-workers. You aren't exactly sure where this sudden philanthropy is coming from but Mr. Wang is in a good mood and orders sea cucumbers for everybody. It's fun catching up with colleagues you don't get to see very often. At the end of the night, Mr. Wang takes care of the bill and, without a word of explanation, goes around the room, handing everyone 20 *kuai*.

### You arrive back at home.

Your apartment is unrecognizable. The dishes are washed and someone has folded all your clothes. Thank God for *ayis*. You join your roommate on the couch and have a surprisingly insightful conversation while watching 5 *yuan* DVDs. You feel the very meaning of life poking at the edge of your consciousness. As you lie down to sleep, you're surprised at how fulfilled you feel. No matter what anyone else says, you are right where you're supposed to be. Under your pillow, you discover 20 *kuai*.

## ON A BAD DAY

### You wake up in the morning.

You smell the sky before you see it. Sniffing the air, you wonder if your apartment has been magically transported to the inside of a coke furnace.

### You head out the door.

You sprint to catch the bus, wheezing like a 70-year-old asthmatic as your lungs desperately try to separate oxygen from particulate matter. As you cough your heart out, the guy sitting in front of you who's been clutching his stomach forcefully ejects his breakfast onto the floor of the bus. Though other passengers scream, you're just amazed. You examine the splatter like a Rorschach test and try to determine where he ate so you can never ever go there. The bus lurches forward and you watch as the juices flow down and around your shoes like a snowmelt rivulet.

### You get to work.

No other students show up to class so it's two hours of solo fun time with Dolphin, the 11-year-old mouthbreather whose parents have sent him to learn English because he will eventually inherit a senior position in his father's company. As you try to get Boy Wonder to say a sentence – any sentence – in English, you wonder if money really can buy everything. You come to the conclusion that in this kid's world, yeah, it probably can.

### After work, you stop into a restaurant for dinner.

The food is drowning in what looks to be gutter oil. The pork has a subtle aftertaste of clenbuterol. But what sends you bolting out of the establishment is the uncatalogued species of insect that bobs to the surface of your soup. You forcefully eject your dinner onto the sidewalk and notice that your own Rorschach test looks exactly like the one on the bus this morning. Mystery solved!

### You arrive back at home.

Your roommate is in the living room with the couch surfer who seems to have no intention of leaving or paying rent. They resume making out as soon as your door is closed. You collapse on your bed, nauseous and delirious. You and the toilet will become very close in the days to come. As the room spins around you, remorse and crippling self-doubt close in. You ask yourself why in God's name you chose to live in this city. You fail to come up with an answer before passing out to the rhythmic thumping from the next room.

