

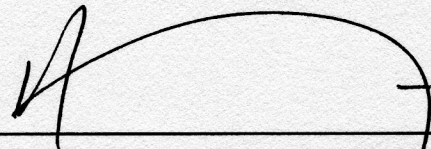
# The House of Life

A THESIS

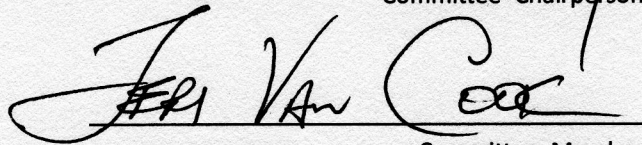
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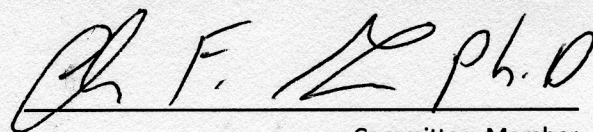
BY



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*The House of Life*

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

WITH CREATIVE WRITING EMPHASIS

By

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**ABSTRACT OF THESIS**

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The story is set in a Chinese village, during 1970s. Souyuen, a woman in her forties, is the mother of two sons and three daughters. The Chinese tradition of males carrying the family name has given Souyuen, and her mother-in-law—Grandmother, the determination to obtain a grandson. However, the one-child policy comes out with the return of Mee, the elder son, from an army camp. It has become an emergency to get Mee married and have a son before the policy is reinforced. Souyuen and Grandmother set up a trap for Mee and Pyieng, who is a remote relative and a childhood acquaintance of Mee, in order to make them married. Later, though, Mee confesses he has a girlfriend, the family insists he should marry Pyieng to save her reputation. The pressure from Liongtan—Souyuen's husband, and the intervention of Souyuen and Grandmother forces Mee into marriage with Pyieng. When the first child of the couple turns out to be a girl, Souyuen shifts her attention to Xee, her second son, who lives in the city. But Xee's first child is also a girl. Defeated, Souyuen returns to her home, not knowing that what awaits is the failure of Mee's marriage, and a mistress that revealed the crime she committed more than twenty years ago.

## Prologue—Married Daughter Is Like Spilt Water

The sky was tinged by the dawn. The roosters in Tengwei—officially Second Production Team—announced the break of the day with full vigor. The only way leading into this village, in 1979, in China, was an unpaved road that crooked through the paddy fields, with mud puddles that scattered along. In front of the rolling hills, the road split into smaller paths and ascended to the humble houses nestled in a little recess of the hill. One path among them, however, led to the west ridge. The puddles on the way were filled with stones, which made it more even and welcoming. It wound between the pine trees and bamboo, and ended in front of an adobe house.

It was a tall, old brick house with grey tiles and cracked ocher wall, facing the north. From the outside, it looked like a two-floor house. Dried pine twigs were piled up on the front porch, under a dim lamp which added an inharmonious modern tone to the picture. Beside the lamp, a three-meter high red-painted wooden door opened inwards. The gate looked like a hollow eye. A smaller hinged grey door, which stood close in front of the big one, covered the lower half of the doorway. It was kept closed to keep chickens and ducks outside. Below, a stone threshold lay there steadily and silently, with a tiny cat hole in its bottom left. The only window on the front was a square and dim opening on the left side of the door, covered with a dirty linen screen which allowed almost no light through.

It was a Saturday. When every other house was still asleep, this one was already

awake in a busy and joyful atmosphere. Walking into the hall, which also served as dining room and living room, there were two doors on each side of the gate, both bedrooms doors. At the end of the hall, in the left corner, two other doors opened closely on each wall. A faded portrait of Chairman Mao was pasted on the wall above the pendant lamp. All four dusty corners were peeling off. A row of liver red painted chairs sat along the wall, like soldiers. A new red dining table was guarded by four thin and tall benches in front of the kitchen door. Shimmering light and smoke that smelled of burning pines and steamed rice floated out from the right door that led into the kitchen. In there, one bare bulb hovered above a rectangular white tiled cooking range.

A fleshy woman in her early forties sat by the left side of the range. She was in a dark cotton-stuffed jacket, a pair of matching pants, and unembellished cloth shoes. Two small but bright eyes stared into the hearth fire as she added more twigs with long scissor-shaped tongs. Her thin and short eyebrows vaguely defined her full, round face. Her flat and up-turned nose sat above a tiny pout pocket in the middle of her thin upper lip. Her husband complained about her nose a lot, since all their children—except the elder son—inherited it. Short, soft hair slightly curved behind her ears. Two tea sticks were stuck in the piercings of her earlobes. She pulled out the tongs from the hearth and rested its hot end on the floor between her feet. Suddenly, she bent her head and smiled to herself. It lingered on her face a while.

“Can’t hold back that smile, eh, Souyuen?” a mid-aged man asked as he stepped inside the kitchen. Unlike her, he was short but solid. His dark skin glowed with the

dancing hearth fire. Short black hair stood straight on his round head like soldiers guarding a sacred land. He held a green-painted iron bulldog clip in his hand. It was the treasured talisman he always had in his pocket.

“Nothing. Just thinking about Mamao. You remember? The first word she could say was your name. Liongtan, Liongtan. That was her first word.” She chuckled as she poked the black soil floor with the tongs. “Oh . . . remember that? Who knows where she learned that.” She stood up, removed the wooden cover of the steamer and checked the rice.

“From Mother of course.” Liongtan sat down beside Souyuen and stared into the hearth. Resting his elbows on his knees, he held the bulldog clip with both hands, and started to pull out his stubble with it. He rolled his lips inwards, and thrust his tongue to push out the right lower corner of his mouth. With each pull of the clip, he adjusted his tongue a bit. Souyuen used to admire him doing that when she first started to learn her newly-wed husband’s little habits.

“Of course,” Souyuen repeated. They both smiled; their minds went far beyond the fire and the boiling water in the pot to a distant place where they were both still young.

“It’s so fast, huh?”

“It is.” Souyuen sighed and raised her head to the dim bulb hanging on the black-smocked beam, trying to hold back her tears.

“Cheer up! She’s only getting married,” Liongtan said. “I’ll get the fire. Go and see how they’re doing.”



Souyuen handed over the tongs. As she stepped outside to the hall, a black figure rushed out with her. It was a dog. Its fur shined and eyes glowed vividly like a child, four paws were snow white.

The house had a tall roof, but it was only one floor inside. Above the half opened heavy red door, there was a wide wooden shelf that fixed between the two walls of the hall. Bundles of hay lay up there. Souyuen looked at the shelf and wondered how many times she found out her two sons, Mee and Xee—when they were still kids, were hiding above because of some awful naughty things they had done, like forgetting their shoes by the pond and misleading the villagers to bustle around the water trying to find a body. When Souyuen caught them sleeping on the hay shelf, their bare feet and newly tanned skin were ironclad evidence. But both of them were grown-ups now, and had left the house. Souyuen had five children. The eldest girl married off already; Mee joined the army; Xee went up to college. Today, Souyuen's second daughter was getting married and leaving the house.

She reached the huge gate, and dragged it full open. It creaked heavily on its hinges like an old man's dry and stiff joints. Fresh cold air flushed in. It was a clear winter morning. The sun was still under the endless bamboo woods. She could see the half-moon hanging on the west sky. Its light, translucent white was fading away as sun rose higher. Souyuen stepped onto the threshold, one hand rested upon the small grey door. The black dog jumped up on Souyuen's knee. With a silent understanding, she unbolted the grey door. The dog squeezed out between the narrow gap and ran to a peach tree that stood at the rim of an abrupt slope.

A zigzag path beside the tree led down to the paddy fields that spread out on the plain at the foot of the hill. The dog started barking—its everyday morning exercise. Some dogs from the houses in the recess returned its call. Souyuen watched until she heard an old voice calling out from inside one bedroom.

“Souyuen!” That was Grandmother, demanding her. She was Souyuen’s mother-in-law, but ever since Souyuen had her first kid, Grandmother had become the old woman’s name. Her ears had lost their sharpness during recent years. And she took full advantage of it. Since her yelling was now blameless, she added all her grudge to her volume and would shoot them at whoever irritated her.

Souyuen entered the side room. It was also cold inside. The dim light coming from the window on the west wall sketched the silhouette of three short figures. Mamao, a short, thin, girl with medium length hair. She was sitting in front of a tall desk below the window. Grandmother stood behind the chair, brushing Mamao’s hair with a wooden comb. Jionsa, Souyuen’s youngest daughter, leaned back on the desk, with her elbows resting on the surface of the table, and hands holding a dark blue coat. As Souyuen closed the door, both girls turned their heads a little and greeted her, “Mother.”

The old woman rolled her eyes. “What took you so long? The breakfast ready?”

“I don’t know,” Souyuen said carelessly.

“You don’t know,” Grandmother mimicked, and started braiding Mamao’s hair.

With her head tilted back and forth slightly with each pull the old woman made, Mamao asked Souyuen, “How do I look?”

“Good. You look pretty.” Souyuen watched as Grandmother tied the end of the braid with a red string. Mamao was her second daughter, a very plain girl. She was born malnourished. Her thin and short build, her sunken yellow cheeks, and her unusual craving for food were the testimonies of the starvation about twenty years ago. She never grew fat again; no matter how well she ate during her puberty. If Liongtan didn’t insist to keep the girls during the starvation, Mamao would not have lived. Souyuen peered at Grandmother. How murderous could a woman become when she was desperate? It was this woman who wanted to drown the new-born baby in a spittoon, when Souyuen was dying on the bed. But Mamao survived, so did she.

Somehow, Souyuen couldn’t blame Grandmother for making that decision—though she hated this unpredictable old woman for every silent torture she forced on her through decades. In an era when neighbors, colleagues, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters all equally became comrades, a boy was still more important than a girl. Grandmother was a living example who survived every disaster because she stuck to the rule, because she managed to sustain a son. This shrunken antique used to be a fruitful woman. Her once fleshy bottom, now two empty dangling bags, guaranteed her four sons and one daughter. But Liongtan, the youngest son, was all she had left now. Two elder sons died in the civil war; the third one retreated to Taiwan with Kuomingtang force, and never came back. They never even heard from him again. The youngest daughter was given away during the Civil War. Souyuen knew Liongtan longed to meet his little sister again. He told her the baby finally learned how to call him after his tireless effort of repeating “brother” to her. He lost

his baby sister just after she learned that. Did Grandmother have any burden on her conscience? Souyuen would never ask.

The silent rivalry between Souyuen and Grandmother couldn't change the fact that the old woman was also her mother now—a sealed deal as long as Souyuen was married to her son. It was from her that Souyuen learned a mother's—also a mother-in-law's—desire and hope.

Watching as Jiongsa helped Mamao put on the mandarin suit, Souyuen couldn't help but wonder what Mamao would suffer after she went to that home beyond the paddy fields; who would she cope with; how much would she resemble her rival after a few decades.

“Mother, how do I look?” Mamao asked again, standing up. The dark blue mandarin suit all buttoned up to her thin neck.

“You look great.” Souyuen walked up to Mamao, and took the red paper flower Jiongsa was handing her—a full red peony blossom which was too big for the small-build bride. “There.” Souyuen carefully pinned it on her chest and straightened the label attached under the flower that bore modest, neat calligraphy of “bride.” “All set.”

Mamao's nimble fingers straightened once more each petal of the paper flower which she made herself—she made the whole set of her wedding suit. She worked in a clothing factory. The family's clothes were guaranteed by her job. She brushed and straightened the front of the suit with her hands, then turned around and let Souyuen do the back for her.

Mamao turned back and stood there. Everyone was silent. An aura of sadness suddenly filled the room. Souyuen's eyes flitted across Mamao's face, and around the room. The wardrobe beside the window was half open; Mamao's clothes were no longer in their usual place. Some dowries wrapped in red paper—though not abundant, but wrapped with patience and nicety—sat in the corner of the tall desk. The single big thing among them was a cotton quilt in a red cover. Another same red paper peony was tied on it with a ribbon. A full set of satisfying dowry was supposed to include a radio, sewing machine, and bicycle. But they could not afford any of them. Besides, the bridegroom already had a bicycle. So the family eliminated them from the list. But now, the frugal dowries seemed almost shabby. Feeling sorry, Souyuen half turned her face, trying to avoid eye contact with Mamao. "Alright, I'd better go and help out in the kitchen," she said.

"I'll go." Grandmother commanded, "You and Jiongsa paste these on the front door." She handed Souyuen two pieces of folded red paper, and then said to the bride, "It'll be a long day. Better get more rest."

Souyuen went outside to the front porch, and unfolded the paper. Only the front side of the paper was dyed red. Calligraphy characters of a pair of "happiness" were written with black ink—best wishes to the new couple. Souyuen looked at it for a while and sighed. There was always another one, the mother-in-law, between the two happy couple. She carefully held one piece up against the wall on the right side of the door. Some yellow bamboo tubes which were used to hold incenses and candles were nailed on the wall in a row. Each tube had one node on the lower end; the solid,

natural plates sealed the bottom. Some half burnt remains of candles were still in the tubes. The fan-shaped area above the tubes was smoked black. Souyuen tried to raise the red paper a bit more over the blackened area, but she couldn't reach it.

“Jionsa, fetch me a chair.” Souyuen lowered her heels as the daughter walked across the threshold, holding in her right hand a bowl with some steamed rice in.

The girl, who just reached sixteen, set the bowl on the threshold and went inside. She was the luckiest girl in the family, inherited the best parts of genes she could possibly get from father and mother. Her hair was dark and thick, unlike Souyuen's; her nose less flat, like the father and the elder brother; her joints—especially knuckles—were thin, which gave her slim straight fingers and a slender build. Most importantly, her skin was whiter than all her siblings. She was the prettiest among the five children, though according to the common standard, she was merely a plain girl. She had, maybe still was having, a difficult time finding her correct place among her peers.

Jionsa came out with a wooden chair. When she carried it across the threshold, she nearly hit the bowl with it, for which Souyuen criticized her with a few eye rolls. When Souyuen stepped on the chair placed beneath the bamboo tubes, Jionsa pulled her crumpled sleeves and murmured in a disagreeing tone.

“What was that?” Souyuen turned her head to Jionsa while smearing each corner of the paper with the cooked rice.

“Nothing.”

“I heard you murmuring.”

“Nothing.” Her tone raised a little.

“Better be. Today’s your sister’s wedding.” Souyuen pasted the paper on the wall, and moved the chair to the other side of the door. She carefully smeared the other piece of the paper, and held it up. “See if it’s even or not.”

“It’s alright.”

“You didn’t even look. Be serious, girl. It’s your sister’s wedding.” Souyuen stepped down from the chair, and held out the red paper to Jionsa. “Come, you do this one.”

“Why?”

“Mamao’d be happy. Come.” Souyuen took Jionsa’s hand—clenched it—and tried to thrust the red paper into it. She had her own way of conquering people, and didn’t care how others would take it. The two struggled a while until Jionsa eventually gave in and finished the job. They stared at the couplet a while, both in satisfaction, and went inside the house together.

It was almost nine when the bridegroom came with his old bicycle, which had a rusty noisy chain. He was wearing the same dark blue mandarin suit—as the two families agreed earlier—and a dusty worn hat. He smiled as he got off the bicycle, revealing his uneven yellow teeth.

Liongtan greeted him and silenced the barking black dog with one stamp of foot. No more than five times had he met this son-in-law, who was a farmer. He seemed honest enough, probably because of his simple mind rather than any moral virtue. But

when the man sat on a chair, there was a weak vibe of laziness about his parted knees, thrown-back head, and half-closed eyes.

“Only you?” Liongtan asked. “We don’t have enough bikes to get there.”

“My cousin is coming with another bike.” He paused with a short pant. “But he’s from another place. He might be slower.”

“O.K.” Liongtan went inside for his bicycle. As he was unlocking it, the four women emerged from the room, their eyes all wet and red. Souyuen was still mumbling, “Remember what I said. Take good care of your husband, and don’t speak against your mother-in-law. Be good. I’m waiting for your good news.”

Grandmother called out for the bridegroom, with a crying tone; he set down his bike and came to her. She took his hands passionately, squeezing them. “This old granny cannot go to your wedding. Take good care of my granddaughter.” She then took Mamao’s hand and put the shy couple’s hands together with a smile. “Don’t you ever mess over with my little girl. Grandmother will never let you get away with that. Hear me?” Everyone laughed. “Good.”

“Mother,” Liongtan interrupted, “we need to go now. Souyuen will ride with me. Jiongsa you wait until your brother-in-law’s cousin comes. Won’t be long.”

It was an hour’s ride from Tengwei to the village the bridegroom lived in. A river flew between the fields and the road. Its water almost dried up in winter, exposing the bare riverbed and scattered rocks. In the harvested fields, the paddy stubbles stood in the dried and chapped dirt. It was a sunny day, but the wind blew away most of the warmth the sunshine shed on the land and people’s skin.



All along the road Mamao complained that the hard back seat hurt her bottom, the rust on the seat that would smear her new pants, and the wind that messed up her paper peony blossom. The only words the bridegroom managed to dredge up from his overexcited brain were, "We're almost there."

When they finally got to the destination, it was a simple brick house with low grey tiled roof, from which a swallow's nest sought protection. In front there was a tiny pond, two rows of white radish, and one row of green onion.

The wedding altar was simple—a grey wooden tea table stood in front of a newly painted white wall. A portrait of Chairman Mao was pasted on the wall above. His smiling face was fully round with a healthy pink complexion; even the mole on his chin was glowing. But the painter was honest enough to leave the bold shining head as it was. In the portrait, he seemed truly like a benign father who was happy for her daughter on such a special day.

The new couple stood in front the tea table, with their parents sitting on each side, and the village secretary of the Party as witnesses of the wedding. The relatives, friends and villagers surrounded them. The winter atmosphere was warmed up by the smiles on people's faces. Jionsa and a young fellow rushed in right before the ceremony started. The man with her was a handsome, neat one. Jionsa was happy enough with the company on the way here that she didn't mind the delay and rush. They squeezed through the crowding friends and relatives, and stood behind Liongtan and Souyuen.

It was a simple ceremony. The couple said their vows, not to any god, not to their

parents, but to the great Chairman. When the ceremony finished, both mothers of the new couple cried. What was the other's feeling? Souyuen didn't know. But she felt a burden lifted from her shoulders which also left a hollow in her. Beyond the exciting handshakes, the cheering congratulations, the warming happy atmosphere, Souyuen felt lost. She blamed herself deeply for her unblessed womb. Three daughters, and she would have to lose each of them one by one to others—it wasn't until now that she realized she would have to. They would become others' daughters, would have to call another woman mother. And she only had two sons. The feeling of inequity overpowered the happiness of the present scene. Souyuen suddenly thought of her mother-in-law's suffering, losing all the children except one last son. She, for one moment, panicked. The army training, the camp on the island, the sea seemed too dangerous for Mee at once. And the city temptress, the cars, the electricity became hazardous for Xee. Everything could kill her sons, and she would certainly lose them some day.

“Are you alright?” Hearing Liongtan's question, Souyuen was drawn back to reality, and suddenly realized that she was crying out, sobbing and mumbling. Mamao and Liongtan took her into the inner bedroom and seated her beside a burning stove.

“Mother, don't do this. You are making me sad.”

The son-in-law—and later Jionsa—walked in also, asking how she was. Souyuen gathered herself together, pulled her sleeve and wiped away her tears. She shook her head. “I'm just too happy.” She saw the bridegroom's mother standing at the door, looking at her. It reminded her of Grandmother. When she heard what

Souyuen said, she let out a relieving sigh and turned away.

The crowd attending the wedding soon dispersed after some light refreshments—sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, and orange—and tea. The new couple went along with the secretary to town to have their marriage certificate registered. Souyuen and Liongtan went also, after thanking the young fellow who gave Jionsa a ride here for volunteering to send Jionsa back home. When they parted at the registration office, Souyuen cried again, her sleeves were all wet and cold, hurting her hands. She suddenly noticed her fingers were all dyed red by the wrapping of the dowries.

It was seven in the evening when they got back to the house. Liongtan was carrying the bicycle across the threshold, and Souyuen was stamping her foot while taking off her scarf. The black dog jumped on and off the threshold, barking at the bicycle, showing the huge silent steel dog some basic moves it had to learn to get across the threshold by itself.

They were just in time for a simple dinner Jionsa made: steamed rice and egg soup, stewed white radish, and some steamed fish left from yesterday's farewell dinner. Grandmother emerged from the kitchen, holding a *peileng*—a mid-sized bamboo bucket with a woven lid, lined with metal. Inside it, charcoals were glowing red with warmth and cheerfulness. The skin on Grandmother's hands was almost transparent, covered with aging pigments. One could see clearly the net of her veins spreading from the back of her hands into her sleeves.

“Cold outside?” Grandmother yelled to Souyuen. “Fill another *peileng*, Souyuen. There are plenty red coals still in the hearth.”

After Souyuen went into the kitchen, the old woman walked toward Liongtan with a mysterious smile on her face, and pulled a crumpled telegram out from a pocket inside her cotton jacket.

“What’s this?” Liongtan took it.

“Good news!” She smiled again, several teeth missing from the upper row. “Hot and smoking news. Just came this afternoon.”

“What news?” Jionsa spotted the telegram bag. “Grandma, why no telling me first?”

Liongtan took out the sheet inside the little paper bag and unfolded it.

Souyuen came back from the kitchen with another filled *peileng* in her hand. She looked at the three standing beside the table, heads together, face serious as if holding a ritual. When Liongtan finished reading his crucial ceremonial spell from a small piece of paper, Souyuen saw Jionsa’s face lighten. But she only heard the three last words “expect letters, Mee.” Her son’s naive and sincere seventeen-year-old face suddenly came to her. It had been four years since the last she saw him. Souyuen asked, “What letters?”

Jionsa turned around with a big “ha!” She jumped toward Souyuen and stirred the dog that lay beside the bicycle. “Brother’s coming home! Mother, Brother’ll be back in January.”

“Really? Let me see the letter.”

“It’s a telegram,” said Grandmother with a triumphant tone.

She was doing it again, trying to out-compete Souyuen in every possible smallest way. Souyuen took over the telegram and read it with the same ceremonial solemnity.

It was real.

“Things settled. Will be back in January. Expect letters. Mee.”

## ONE—Serve the People

At no more than six in the morning, Souyuen was awakened by the smell of burning pine twigs, bitter and astringent, but a smell that made her feel safe and cozy on a winter morning. Putting on her dark-blue quilted cotton jacket, she unlatched the front door. It creaked open, letting in some light, as well as cold, but refreshing air that hurried right down into her lungs as she pulled both hinged doors aside. It woke up her spirit.

Today was a foggy day. Beyond the muddy ground in front of the house, there was a stone desk and a knife grinder beside it. But they were all concealed by the fog. Souyuen stared at the thick, mysterious whiteness, wondering if she could go farther into the woods or fields where the fog was thick enough. Would it feel the same as in a cloud? She rubbed her eyes with her hand. Her finger tips, especially around her nails, were still red with dye. Liongtan said Souyuen just wouldn't wash her hands hard enough to get rid of the color. He wasn't so happy that she carried them around as her trophies.

She turned around toward the kitchen door at the other end of the dim, poorly decorated hall, and stopped at the grey tea table, peering into the mirror hanging above it on the wall. Her face had grown even fatter like a balloon these recent two or three years. She grabbed the red plastic comb with a broken handle, and greeted her husband with a full smile.

“So early.”

“Yeah, I don’t wanna wake you up.” Liongtan raised his head from the flaming hearth, with his lips curved, and added another bunch of twigs into the fire. “You definitely didn’t sleep well, thinking about him coming back soon.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m awake anyways.” She stood beside him, staring into the hearth; lights filled her eyes and lightened her full round cheeks. “Mother still in bed?”

“Think so. Go ahead and wake Jionsa up also. Isn’t today the exam day?”

“Is it?” Without getting her answer, she turned, combing her short, thin, and slightly curled hair, and walked back to the hall.

The breakfast was soon ready, steamed rice, a bowl of rice soup with green onions and eggs, some mini fish stir fried with chopped green pepper. The family surrounded the table in the usual laziness of the morning. Jionsa ate in an unusual silence, with a long face that almost stuck into her bowl.

“What’s wrong with you? You don’t usually wake up in a bad temper,” Grandmother, unaccustomed to her granddaughter’s silence, asked, scooping out some fish and pepper into Jionsa’s bowl.

“Nothing,” she answered with her lips pouted.

“Don’t talk to Grandma like that.” Liongtan frowned. “Cheer up, alright? The exams won’t chew you.”

“I’m alright. It’s nothing.”

Tired of the meaningless argument, Souyuen finished her rice quickly and went

into the kitchen.

“What’s so hurry? We are still eating.” Grandma put down her bowl, irritated. She never liked her daughter-in-law, always so unappreciative.

“I’m just getting Jiongsa some eggs, Mother. It’s her big day.”

Hearing her saying so, the kid’s face softened. “Don’t bother. I don’t have time for that.”

Waiting until everyone was finished, Jiongsa gathered the elders’ dishes and went into the kitchen. The seventeen-year-old youngster still looked childish with her round and pink cheeks which came from her mother. Her thin and short bangs covering half of her forehead made her even more rustic—she didn’t like her hair at all.

“I know you forgot it’s my exam day today.” Watching her mother set up the kettle, she added, “It’s fine. Don’t bother cooking the eggs.”

“Won’t take long.”

“So, Mee is coming back today?” She handed her the dishes.

“His telegram says so.” Souyuen put them in a plastic basin with hot water. They stood silently washing the dishes in the basin, no detergent—they would have to rinse the dishes twice after this, until all their fingertips were red and wrinkled. Finally Souyuen said, “I’m not forgetting your big test day only because your brother is coming home. You haven’t seen him for a long time too.”

Jiongsa sighed in a tone of agreement. She could not lie to herself on this; she cared for her brothers and sisters. Since she was the last kid, everyone was



overprotective toward her, willing to give her the best they had, except Mother. She always kept her best for the boys. And those were the things that were “none of your kid’s concerns.” The better cotton for boys’ clothes, one or two more pieces of food in their lunchboxes, and longer, better education based on the sacrifice of the elder sisters. All of these things made Jionsga upset about herself being a girl.

And now, time had come for Mother’s next special offer for boys: getting each of them a wife, to update Mother from a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law, and produce more boys. Jionsga overheard Mother and Grandmother talking about a girl fourteen kilometers away north from here, saying how capable she was with farm work, housework, and how good she looked. Their concerns about good looking weren’t the prettiness. It was her big face, thick lips and eyebrows, dark eyes that looked straight and honest, and the fleshy bottom that guaranteed a boy. She surely looked like the kind of wife who would bring good luck to their husband.

Grandmother walked into the kitchen with a chair in her hand. Jionsga took it with a quick, “Let me. Where?” With Grandmother’s gesture, she set it in front of the hearth, the brightest and warmest place in the house.

The old woman rested her withered body on the seat, stretching out her hands toward the fire, and said, “I talked to Fuu Granny. She said she could bring the girl over this afternoon.”

“What girl?” Jionsga immediately made her own conjectures.

“Not you kid’s concern. Go ahead to school, it’s getting late,” Mother urged, and handed her two eggs wrapped in a grey-white handkerchief. “Good luck with your

exams. Check your answers before you hand them in. Hear me?”

“I know. I know.”

After seeing Jiongsa leave on the black bicycle, on which all the kids in the village learned how to ride, Souyuen came back in with a telegram in hand, just taken from the postman who was heading east to the forever green bamboo woods. She waved it at Grandma. “Two, in the afternoon. You were saying the girl can be here?”

“Yes.” she flung a sulky look at her. “Do I need to go and check with Fuu for you again?”

“No.”

“He is my grandson too.”

“Yes, he is, Mother.”

In the afternoon, when the two women settled down by the open gate, behind the threshold, with a big round green-glazed pottery stove on the floor, loaded with burning charcoal, the black dog suddenly stood up from beside Grandma’s chair, sprinted out to the road and barked, wagging its tail like a fan.

He appeared there, from behind the palm tree, where the country road turned west. He was wearing a green military suit. A huge worn but clean camouflage bag was on his back. He had grown much taller. That was the first thing Souyuen noticed. The next second she was wiping her eyes with her sleeve. Did he see it? She turned her head away before she wiped her eyes again.

“Mother!” was his first word, which made both women’s throats clogged.

His skin was much darker, but couldn't conceal the redness on his cheeks and nose tip. His lips were thinner and pursed together. It was a common look during his high school times, when he was really focused on reading. But now he held them that way even when he was walking. His vein-blue, fresh-shaved jaw added a more strict definition to his fine features.

As he came closer, the black dog swirled around him and tried to jump on his legs. "It recognizes you," Grandmother yelled.

"Ahya, good dog. Good. Good." His voice was huskier than it used to be, but steadier, and sounded in musical harmony with the dog's short panting. Comparing to the absent-minded teenager who had left the house four years ago, he seemed now a grown-up, dependable man.

Souyuen's smile pumped all the extra flesh from around the corner of her mouth to under her eyes, making them perfect crescents. She walked a few more steps to greet him, offered to unload his burden, like she used to do when the boys got home from school.

"No, Mother, I got this." He took her hand, led her back to the porch.

"Ah, look who's home." Grandmother reached out her trembling right hand as he entered.

"Granny." With the other hand, he reached back to her and gently pressed her palm which was too skinny compared to Mother's. Half of her index finger's nail was missing.

He sat Souyuen down in the chair, then stood upright to attention. He put his

hands beside his thighs, the middle fingers of both hands aligned with the seam of the pants. His fingers pressed together. Then he stood straighter, lips pursed tighter, and—saluted.

Tears, clasps, and laughter all launched for him together, the soldier, the grown-up man, the homecoming son. The dog sat upright beside him, tail still wagging, and tongue hanging out between its canines.

He then dropped his big backpack on the black, uneven rammed earth floor. He took the chair Grandmother just lifted from the row along the wall. “Let me get this. Granny, how’s your health?”

“No worries.” She smiled her teeth-missing smile. “I can’t die until I have my great grandson peeing on my lap.”

Everyone laughed genuinely. The son then went to the back of the house through the kitchen to wash off the dust he brought home from the long journey. When he came back to the hall, after thoroughly enjoying shedding off the weariness, Mother already prepared salty ginger tea with sesame and yellow pea for everyone. He sat down in between Mother and Grandmother. The black dog lay, again, on his usual spot beside the stove. Mother kept her unique smile on her face, drew her chair nearer, and started, “Mee boy, your grandma missed you so much when you were away.”

“Eh. So I’m back. No more missing.” These words brought up warm smiles from both women’s faces.

“You should have written more often. You brother did better than you,” said Grandmother.

“Mother, Mee was away farther than Xee was. You were busy managing the cooking squad, I guess?”

“I was. But Granny was right, I should have written more.” Mee scratched his forehead.

“So, how was Hainan?” Grandmother remembered reading in Mee’s letter about the special weather there. It was summer all year long. “It must be too cold here for you now. Souyuen, go get more coal.”

“No, Mother.” Mee put his hands on his knees, intending to stand up. “I got this.”

“Let her, you don’t know where the coal is.” Grandmother pinned his knee.

Souyuen stood up. Though tired of doing the old woman’s biddings, she was glad this time because it was for her son also. She fetched the charcoal basket. Hainan was a place so far away in the south, a tropical isolated island—if she remembered right. Mee mentioned it now and then in the letter—the restless sun, the coconut trees, and the black pigs—unlike the pink ones home. No wonder his skin was so dark now. She put some charcoal in the stove, and sat down, looking at him, satisfied. Four years suddenly felt like one quick moment, considering both of her boys were absent during most of that time. Now he was back, and back to her again.

“What they have for food there?” Mother said after she took a sip from the cup, “I’m sure they don’t have salty ginger tea. You miss the food here? We have your favorite chestnut chicken stew ready to be on the stove.”

“Your Fuu Granny is coming for dinner,” Grandmother added, “You remember her? She asked to come see you right after I told her you’re coming back. Every time

she saw me she told me again how you poked the hornet's nest when you were supposed to be helping out with their harvest that summer." She paused and gave the daughter-in-law a slow and meaningful look, winking. "That was when you were what, nine?" She looked at her mother again, who sat sipping the hot tea without a sound, mind far away somewhere. "And that poke really scared her granddaughter, eh?" Another look.

"Ah, right, the girl. Haven't seen her for years," Mother finally picked the conversation up. "What's she called?"

"Piyeng?"

"Oh, you remember her? You were so untamed, running all around village, stealing peaches and oranges, eh? And plums. Your father just hadn't beaten you enough for all that."

"He was only a little kid then, Mother," Souyuen said.

"Aye, and a big kid now. Still needs us to worry about all the things. Say, Mee, how old are you this year?" That was the one most practical question Grandmother could think of to start talking about looking forward and planning the future. She had practiced it with both the elder girls, and it worked perfectly well. One was married off just a few weeks ago.

Mee's eyes drooped. He lifted the cup and took a gulp.

"Twenty, son," Mother answered for him. "You are not a teenager anymore; it's time to consider it."

"Did you hear your mother?" Grandmother pursued.

“Emm, what?” Mee said with an innocent lift of his brows.

“Getting married!” Grandmother said with a meaningful slap on his knee. Mee kept his lips pursed and said nothing.

The two women gave each other a glimpse. Grandmother sighed a long and heavy one. The white fog coming out between her dried lips faded and fused with the smoke rising up from the tea under her nose. She took another slow sip, then put the cup down, looking at the daughter-in-law.

“Tsk, Mother, your grandson is too shy. Getting married frightened him.”

“Mother, I’m not frightened.” Defending himself, Mee’s face flushed. “It’s just too early for me.”

“Nonsense. Why is it too early? Your grandma was married to your grandpa when she was fifteen, and had your eldest uncle at sixteen, seventeen?” An exchange of inquiry and affirmative looks. “Seventeen. I had Lien when I was nineteen.”

“Your mother’s right.” A rare comment Souyuen got from Grandmother.

“Yes. See, Lien and Mamao are both married now. It’s time to at least—”

The black dog suddenly pushed itself up from the comfort spot, ear cocked up straight forward. “Is it Father? Jionsa?” Mee stood up excited, half relieved. The dog rushed out again like an arrow, barking. “What time is it now? Too early for them to be back.”

“Time for you to at least consider it, Son,” Souyuen said as Mee stood up.

Right then, before anyone was seen on the road, there came a high-pitched voice, “Aye! See who’s already home.” Looking back to the voice, a white haired, short and

round elderly woman, bouncing like a ball, rushed toward them quickly like an old hen chasing away other chickens to get her best share of the feeding grain. Her feet were incredibly small, obviously bound into that abnormal triangular shape, wrapping in her tight black cotton shoes. “Piyeng girl, meet your granny and aunt.”

The young woman next to her was wearing a short white and navy plaid quilted jacket, and neat black pants, showing her white socks and strong ankle. She was much taller than her grandmother. Her shining black bobbed hair and thick bangs were like half of a watermelon peel helmeted on her head. Her round, big, dark eyes, and the thick long eyelashes, flat nose, square jaw somehow conveyed a sense of diligence and energy, like a cow.

She stepped forward, looked straight at each woman as she addressed them “Souyuen Aunt, Chong Granny.” Her loud mezzo-soprano voice startled Mee, but Mother and Grandmother seemed used to it. Then she turned to him, holding her head up like a proud rooster—a rare temperament among women—and said, “So you are that hornet poker?”

She earned a round of laughter, except from the son. He stood there, looking at his mother, who laughed the loudest laughter since he got home.

“Alright,” still laughing, Souyuen waved her hand to stop herself, and then fetched two chairs for the visitors. “Piyeng has grown even nicer now, isn’t she?”

“Don’t say that Souyuen Aunt. I gained so much weight after the harvest, just not enough farm work in winter.” Piyeng certainly knew the art of being modest.

“Don’t worry like those city misses—they can’t even stand the wind.” She looked



at her son, half smiling. In a proud voice, she told them how Mee saluted them. The young woman, and her round Grandma, looked at the son with full expectation—Pyieng surely had the most glittering eyes Mee had ever seen—only saw him turning away with blush to make them two more cups of tea.

“See how shy he is.” Souyuen quickly covered the gap. “A big boy now. He’s assigned to work in the town’s government too. Did I tell you he was the chef of the kitchen squad when he was in Hainan? He’ll cook tonight. Stay for dinner.”

“No, no, no. We have to get back before it’s too dark,” said the elder woman, with a more-than-polite smile on her face.

“Do stay.” Souyuen took Pyieng’s hand, as if being afraid that she would flee immediately with her Grandma.

Mee came back from the other end of the hall with tea cups in hands. Seeing this, the young woman giggled and said, “Let me get my tea, Aunt. I’ll stay. Don’t keep him holding the cups.”

Souyuen peered at her son with a victorious smile, let go the girl, stood up, and headed to the kitchen.

“Mother, sit back down, I’ll do the cooking. Alright.”

She smiled even brighter.

## TWO—State Laws, Family Rules

When Jionsa got back from school, Souyuen was talking with a young woman, hand in hand. The young woman's hair was cut short just below the ears, somewhat stylish from the back. Getting closer, Jionsa could not help but notice her protuberant lips, which were like misplaced black snub-nosed monkey lips, trying to escape the strange human face. Why did she look so familiar? No wonder, everyone looked the same in those old, dark, plain jackets. She couldn't even tell a man from a woman sometimes.

She stared at her shoes as she walked to them, hand-sewn cotton shoes. Its cloth came from Mamao's sewing factory. Soles made of those black cloths too, starched hard and folded into several layers. It was called thousand-layer sole. The shoes were forever dusty. The second day you had them on, the color, however dark it was yesterday, seemed already faded. The rim of the soles was worn out like the other pair she had for two years.

She greeted her mother, and was introduced to the new girl. Jionsa's speculation in the morning was right. Mother couldn't even wait until tomorrow, just to give Brother a break from the tiresome travel he had all the way from Hainan. Piyeng, her name was a common one, rose from her chair like a mountain, saying her greetings and friendly compliments to Jionsa with a strong, manly voice.

“Brother's back? Where's he?” She was eager to see if he had grown tall enough

to take this mountainous girl as a date.

“In the kitchen.” Mother peered at her guests with a proud curve of her lips. “Our chef is cooking. Eh, no, not so fast. How was your test?”

“O.K.”

“And?”

“Next Monday come to school for your transcript,” she mimicked her class supervisor, squeaking like a mouse in a mousetrap. She hated him so much, for his favor over the prettier girls, and for his stare on her breasts like a vulture who hadn’t seen a piece of dead body in days.

“Hey, show some respect to your teacher.” Souyuen stood up and shoved Jiongsa into the hall, helping her take off her backpack. “And we have guests here.”

“O.K.” Carelessly, she dropped her bag by the door of her room, and headed toward the kitchen. Beside the luring smell of meat and burning fire, she was greeted by a steady low voice.

“Sister!”

She looked through the smoke rising from the wok. Her brother, Mee, stood on the right side of the cooking range, a flat ladle in hand. He smiled at her. He was definitely taller, but maybe not tall enough for that girl. The relief she felt for him just now wasn’t so much a relief any longer. “Brother, how was your travel?”

“Not so bad.” She noticed the black shadow under his eyes suggested otherwise. His skin was so dark; hair was cut short and stood on his head, just like father’s. No, he looked all like father, holding the handle of the wok with a wet rag, shifting his

weight to the right leg when he lifted the wok from the fire, stirring the dried mini fish with the pepper.

Mee laughed warm-heartedly. “You’ve been staring at the wok since you came in. Hungry? It’s your exam day, isn’t it? Must be tired.”

“Yeah.”

“How was it?”

She looked at the left side of the cooking range. There Father sat, adding more pine twigs to the hearth. Fire lightened his eyes, as he raised his eyebrows and looked at her, also waiting for her answer. His skin was darkened from the summer sun, though not so dark as Brother’s. They really looked like each other more. Even though Brother was away these years, genes surely functioned well in him. Beside Father, under the shelf, Grandmother and another old woman sat, bathing in the gentle hearth fire, arguing lazily about the proper amount of gift money for attending a wedding.

Jiongsa didn’t say anything about the test. “What’s for dinner? I’m starving.”

The dinner table in the house had its own hierarchy, even after father bought the new, red-painted table, even after Mamao was married off, and even when there were guests in the house. The square table had four benches, one on each side, that allowed two to sit together. Grandmother was always the one sitting on the east side. It was the host’s seat. When she was away visiting, the seat remained vacant. Next to her, on the same bench, sat always her kid of the day—usually Mee or Xee. On the south side

next to Grandmother was Father, then Mother. The other two sides of the table were more flexible and for the youngers.

Tonight, with Mee's favorite chestnut chicken stew in the center, surrounded by other dishes, everyone seated themselves in their right places. Beside Grandmother was Mee; Piyeng's Grandma took Father's seat, therefore Liongtan seated himself in his wife's usual position; Souyuen urged Piyeng to sit beside her son, together with her on the north side. Alone on the west side was Jiongsa, holding her chopsticks eagerly waiting for Grandmother and the guests to eat first.

"Son, want some wine?" Liongtan said.

Souyuen snapped at Liongtan before Mee answered, "What, Mee doesn't drink. Don't lure him into your bad habit."

"Mother, it's fine. Today's special. And Father doesn't drink so often. He's happy today."

"Eh, everyone's happy with you back home, son. Come, have just one cup with your father." Liongtan's teeth shined even under such a dim bulb.

Wine was poured into tiny bamboo cups. Then everyone started feasting.

Jiongsa frowned upon Piyeng. She ate with her mouth half open, as did her grandma, totally rustic and impolite. But everyone else seemed fine with that. Jiongsa read once in a book about how well-educated rich ladies in the ancient times ate with their mouth shut. Their cook cut all the food into suitable pieces, so they never really bite. They put the food into their mouth, and the elegant rouge on their lips remained intact. She just hadn't figured out how they drank, because that novel was hand

written in pencil—copied from someone else’s handwriting—which was worn from other’s rude reading manner. Maybe it didn’t mention drinking. They must have some special tricks to keep their manner perfect, unlike that girl, unlike her family too.

She tried to persuade her father to cut the meat thinner, but he said it would take too long, and that the meat would be too hard and dry within the usual cooking time. She wanted her mother to know too, but it either turned into a meaningless argument, or was ignored. Finally, she gave up and decided to accomplish the perfect manner all by herself, avoid biting at all costs, and chew with mouth shut.

Mother started to ask the girl about her work, her school. She answered skillfully like the monitor of Jiongsa’s class answering all the chemistry questions. And she gave much more than Mother asked. After five minutes of boring conversation, Jiongsa had learned, besides Pyieng’s history in her school—she was a class monitor too—and other honors, that she didn’t mind men smoking or drinking, she liked the stir fried mini fish so much that she wanted the recipe, and that she inherited her family’s power to heal all who were bitten by a centipede.

“How do you do that, exactly?” Jiongsa asked, intrigued.

“Sometimes with cold well water, sometimes salt. Depends.” Her voice was a little hoarse from a day’s unceasing speaking.

“How do you decide which to use?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Pyieng said. “I know when I see the wound.”

“You heal them right away?”

“Sure,” Pyieng said with a proud face.

“You’ll have the chance to see Piyeng do it someday. Then you’ll know,”

Souyuen said, putting an end to the unwanted questions.

“So, how was Hainan? Are there many centipedes there?” Piyeng asked, the first time, directly to Mee.

“Yes, everywhere. Called Tiger Leg. It’s as long as the chopstick.”

“Stop that, kid,” said Grandmother. “We’re eating.”

Jiongsa raised her head from the bowl, checked her chopsticks with one quick glimpse, and suppressed her impulse of scratching between her thumb and forefinger.

Hearing no more word from her son, Souyuen looked in his direction. Mee was harvesting his bowl like a diligent farmer in the field. “Son, don’t eat so fast. There’s plenty of it.”

“Emm.” But he was still digging in fast, finishing the rice.

“Here, more chicken.” Souyuen scooped a spoon of meat into Mee’s bowl, filling it full again.

“I’ll get it myself, Mother. Help yourself with more.” And immediately another piece of fish was dropped into his bowl by Grandmother. “It’s enough, Granny. My bowl’s full.”

“Let himself eat,” Liongtan the Father finally said. “He’s not a child anymore. And slow down, that’s bad for digestion.” His command was always nonnegotiable.

“Just used to the rules in my camp. Everyone eats fast.”

“This is not the army. No one’s competing.”

“Right, see how thin you had grown. Eating so fast, like a starved ghost.”

Grandmother pinched Mee's forearm. It wasn't as weak as it seemed. The muscle bulged as he reached his chopsticks out for some chestnut.

Piyeng chuckled. "Girls in your camp would have nothing to eat competing with guys all like you."

"We don't have girls there."

"Oh." She laughed an awkward laugh, looking at her grandma, only to receive a blaming face.

"But we do have the same art troupe coming every New Year to celebrate with us." A pause. "But those girls eat separately," he said with a sudden blush of his ears.

Though the light was dim, Jionsa still caught the unusual color on Mee's face. She said with a mocking tone, "Oh . . . Every year the same girl troupe."

"Don't be silly, girl." Mother peered at Piyeng, as she picked a piece of fish for Jionsa.

"This part is all boney."

Ignoring the complaint, Souyuen turned to the silent Piyeng. "Don't mind her childishness. Here, have more stew. Isn't the food delicious?"

"It is," she said with a cutesy smile.

Jionsa picked all the fishbone out, added more fish juice into her bowl, and mixed them, making her own cat's bowl. She enjoyed the short silence on the table, though the light seemed dimmer, and the dishes had long stopped smoking. Father didn't say anything. Grandmother and Fuu Granny were busy picking the last portion of meat from the fish's belly where it was fattest and with fewer bones. Mee gave a



subtle understanding look to Jionsa and went on digging from his bowl.

“Liongtan, I got Lieng’s mail the other day. I forgot to tell you. She said she contacted a brick factory, they talked about the deal,” Souyuen said suddenly.

“What deal?” Jionsa asked, finishing her bowl.

“Mind your quick tongue, kid. You’ll bite it,” Souyuen said. “She said it’ll be a great bargain.”

“We’ll talk about this later.” Liongtan put a stop to the subject. To him, it was more of a private business. He had the pride of not talking about things that connected to family finance in front of other people, either when their condition was good or bad.

“Sure.” Souyuen obeyed. “Piyeng, already full? Mee, you want more rice?”

“Yeah I’ll get some more.”

“I can get it for you,” Piyeng suddenly offered.

“No, no, no, you are our guest. Jionsa, you go.” Grabbing his bowl, Souyuen handed it over to her youngest daughter.

And off from the table she went, into the kitchen, still wondering what Lieng Sister’s letter and the brick factory were about. But after she came back and handed over the bowl full of rice with her pinky finger up, after she washed the dishes listening to the witty chat of the old women, after she was sent with her brother to see the grandmother and granddaughter off safely on the road, she never heard them talking about the letter and bricks again. She felt so tired, not because of the exams, but rather because of the exhausting dinner and her mother’s skillful performance.

Before ten, she had already tucked herself into the wooden queen-sized bed she shared with Grandmother, with an unfinished novel still open on her pillow. Her brother was writing something at her study desk. The dim lamp obscured his back. The shadow on the wall flickered with the movement of the pen. It was a quiet night; she could only hear Mee's pencil whispering on the paper.

“Brother, what are you writing?” she asked with a yawn.

But he never answered.

### THREE—Give Less Birth, Breed More Pig

It was a bell-like voice that woke Jionsa up the next day. She turned around in the cozy quilt. The light that barely came through the window left the dim and soporific aroma in the room untouched. Jionsa still lingered in her dream of a thick-browed young lad in a mandarin jacket, holding a pistol which reflected the cold light of the rising moon. She was dazzled by his high-bridged handsome nose that wasn't usually seen on a Chinese's face.

“Last Thursday I was asking about the price. Two *yuan* per day.” Jionsa heard a low female voice coming from the hall.

The talking of money efficiently expelled Jionsa's dream. She stuck her hand out of the quilt to reach the novel she was reading before she fell asleep. Mee Brother must have taken the book from the pillow and put it on the tall table. As the cold winter air rushed inside the quilt, she sat up quickly and grabbed the book by its corner, then retreated back into her warm lair. She stayed still for a while, with the book against her chest. She held it like a lover, and imagined the face of the young lad she dreamed. A warm feeling rose from below her chest and seized her heart. But she couldn't recall his face, as if he had turned around and left her only his back. She could see the back of his neck closely and clearly. His left ear was pink as sunlight went through, and his earlobe was thin and small, a sign that this man's life would suffer, according to Mother's superstitious stories. But Jionsa didn't mind, because

she thought thin earlobes were prettier. Short, transparent hair on the rim of his ear glowed with a golden tone.

“I thought it was good enough.” The voice lowered, as if in submission. Jionsga could tell it was her big sister, Lieng. She was here? Sure, it was Saturday and Mee had come back. Last time she saw Lieng was weeks ago, at Mamao Sister’s wedding. She was wearing a greenish brown coat, a pair of dark blue oversleeves—something too dowdy Jionsga would never wear.

Jionsga sat up and pulled on the coat over her shoulders, then opened the book. The first lines that met her eyes were, “A man jumped out from behind the seats, holding two guns against both hit men’s head, and whispered, ‘Long time no see gentlemen. Nobody moves. Now hand over the films.’” She closed her eyes and tried again for the handsome face of the dreamed lover, but couldn’t get it. The conversation in the hall and the mysterious letter Mee was writing last night kept her from concentrating on the book. She decided to get out of the bed.

The first thing Jionsga heard when she opened the creaking door was, “Don’t push it so fast. I’m not prepared to marry that girl. We just met once.” That was Mee sitting on the threshold peeling an orange.

“You didn’t just meet once, you remember her name,” Souyuen said. “You’ll never be prepared, Son. Life keeps coming at you. And we’re not building a new house only for wedding. This house is already old enough. What if someday a tile fell off and killed me? You’d be happy?” She sat on a chair in front of her bedroom door—her usual spot—and watched as Mee carefully peeled the pith off an orange

with his long pinky fingernail which he grew and maintained for trifles—screws or earwax, sometimes the scabs of a mosquito bite. That made him more tender and considerate than a man should be, Jionsa always thought.

“Mother’s right.” Lieng leaned back on her chair, beside Souyuen. Her mouth half open as she listened. She had a round appearance like Mother. Her double chin gave her an old look. But Mother always said that would make Lieng look younger when she was fifty or sixty. Jionsa didn’t want that. She needed to look good now.

The closing door drew Souyuen’s eyes to Jionsa. “Out of bed? Go wash up and your noodle is on the cooking range.” She watched as the daughter went into the kitchen, and frowned at her. The fact that Jionsa was spoiled by her father, brothers, and sisters bothered her a lot. Souyuen was the youngest child among her own siblings. She never wore new clothes for the first twelve years of her life, not even during New Years—the grandest festival of the year. She learned to endure and be humble. Because she knew there would be a day when she could sit back and enjoy the result of her endeavors—such as her sons, and maybe grandsons. An unsatisfying envy toward Jionsa overpowered the love of a mother sometimes. Souyuen wished her daughter could be like her sisters, struggling through poverty.

“And boil some water for tea!” Souyuen yelled, assigning Jionsa chores, even she knew they wouldn’t be enough to turn the daughter into a good housewife.

Hearing no reply, Souyuen turned back to the discontinued conversation and said, “Where were we?”

“Two *yuan* per day for the architect, five more *jiao* for carpenter,” Lieng

answered.

Souyuen didn't say anything.

Grandmother sat aside. Her face was as calm as the surface of a quiet lake. The wrinkle around her mouth deepened as she looked beyond the gate and into the sky. Today it was a distant yet depressing grey. She made no comments, but fished out one chestnut from her pocket and threw it into the burning fire, and waited for it to make some noise.

“Grandma, more?” Lieng asked carelessly.

Grandmother threw another one into the fire with a slight wave of her hand, as if flicking away a feather from her lap. Souyuen turned her head away at this. The old woman was way more agile than she should be sometimes, and could be as deaf as she wanted when she wasn't interested in the game.

Souyuen sat up closer to the fire and stretched her hands over it. She looked at them. Her palm and finger pulps were fleshy, leaving no seam between the fingers. When she was young, she was told that meant her wealth weren't going to leak away between her fingers. She believed, but only to be disappointed by the things she got from life.

Souyuen held up one hand and started to count the working credits the family earned from working for the community through the year. She always calculated using the joints of her fingers. She counted with her thumb, moving it up and down swiftly on the twelve joints of her other four fingers. The other four fingers had twelve joints. Souyuen learned that from her Taoist grandmother, who died before

Souyuen married into this house.

Grandmother could only earn five credits per day with some easier jobs.

Liongtan was working for wages and ration stamps in the government instead. After Mamao left the house, the only two credit-earners under the roof were now Jionsa and Souyuen. Though as women they only got eight credits per day. Mee was having twenty-four hundreds per year when he was in the army camp, but now he was earning like his father. Souyuen tapped her finger pads with her thumb nail. Last year, the family's whole working credits only paid for eighty-nine percent of the groceries and grains they cashed-out for daily use—and those were far from satisfying.

Liongtan had to use his savings to pay the rest. The year before was worse—they were facing deficit. Liongtan's savings couldn't pay their debts, the family was criticized by the commune—they pasted a big-letter poster on the biggest camphor tree. Two *yuan* a day for the architect was definitely too much for Liongtan's monthly wage of six *yuan*. They would have to borrow. The thought of being in debt was torturing Souyuen. She still remembered the look of her relatives when she went to borrow tuitions at the beginning of each semester when all her five kids were in school.

Her thumb nail stopped at the tip of her marriage finger; their savings were not enough. They still need to pay the community for their food. Souyuen leaned back and closed her eyes with a slight sigh.

She knew that they couldn't afford the house now. Xee was in school. Though as a college student he had subsidies, the expenses of city living barely left a small

portion for Xee to send home. The married daughters' help was limited, since they now belonged to other families. It would be a burden too heavy on Liongtan's own shoulders. She kept silent while Lieng looked at her and Mee turned his face away. They both vaguely knew the new house project would not run as smoothly as expected. But neither would venture to make that conclusion before the Mother said anything. They sat there, Jionsa stood by the kitchen door and listened without a sound, the burning charcoal in the stove gave a little pop and some sparks.

Souyuen said quickly after the pause, "We can try to bargain with the architect"—only to let Mee believe there would be a house, so he could settle down his heart and be the obedient and grateful son under the new roof that was build for him.

That was when Souyuen heard the pop of the chestnuts. It startled her like a firecracker. The dog that lay aside suddenly pricked up his ears and tail.

"Take out the other one too. You roast them too long," Grandmother demanded with her goat-like trembling voice as Lieng stuck the tongs into the fire clumsily trying to catch the chestnuts. A burning smell rose up with some black smoke that immediately brought tears in everyone's eyes. Before they started blaming each other, the dog jumped out of the threshold. A bell rang twice with a merry rhythmical crack. The family turned to look and saw Secretary Yang of the Party on his bicycle with his typical politic smile. He could keep that smile on his pink lips for a whole three-hour lecture. His muscles had to be made of marbles. He had two narrow eyes and a fat chin. His thick eyebrows were very emotional, always moving rapidly with his



exaggerated speech. Some young fellows in the village even bet a tube of toothpaste on whether the secretary penciled his eyebrows or not. Surely the bet was never settled since no one dared to nose around the secretary.

While everyone was wondering what he was doing here, the secretary jumped off the bicycle with an elegant swing of his leg over the back wheel, and stopped his saddle in front of the gate.

“What? You are all so gloomy! You comrades already heard the news?” Looking at the family full of tears, he stood his bicycle by the twig pile and stepped inside like he was in his own house.

“What news?” Souyuen said.

“I thought you were all crying because of the new policy.” He waved no at Mee who was offering him a chair. “Don’t bother.”

“No. It’s just some stupid smock from the stove.” Souyuen stood up. “Tea?”

“No.” Secretary Yang waved again, with a careless glance toward the kitchen. “I need to get to the broadcasting office and gather everyone. Come to the sunning field. I’ve got important news.”

“What news?” Souyuen asked again as everyone looked up at the secretary. He was still smiling, as if nothing was wrong. But it made Souyuen worry, though she wasn’t sure what to worry about. The smile of a politician was always suspicious—everyone knew but no one talked about it. She had seen that smile before, on some other secretary’s face. Their eyes looked away when they said it was nothing, with reluctance like a teenager who was tired of explaining everything to his parents.

Finally he said, "You'll know later."

The sunning field was a round ground that was covered with some cheap substitute for concrete. Several cracks started from the rim and were cutting the field slowly. It was the place where the village gathering took place ever since it existed. An old, wooden, bare pole stood in front, but without a flag on it. A humble wooden box squatted beside the pole as the platform. Souyuen stood with her son, Mee, near it.

"Mother, it will be fine. Don't worry."

The words went in her left ear and out of her right one. She couldn't help the strong ominous presentiment. Years ago, before the day when the former Secretary Wong escaped and left the village to starve with no food stock in the barn, he told them to gather on this field. It was a clear winter day too. The smell of dried straw and dirt in the wind was just like today.

The crowd was disturbed by the appearance of Secretary Yang who just announced the gathering request through the loudspeaker. He was wearing his mandarin suit and a pair of green military shoes. His hat pulled lower to cover his eyebrows. Souyuen felt unsafe about this, as if under that shadow of the secretary's hat, some conspiracy was being plotted. He stepped upon the platform ceremoniously and waved the crowd silent.

"Comrades. I have, today, received an important direction from above."

Seemingly excited, he paused. Souyuen saw his Adam's apple roll once as he cleared

his throat.

“The Central Committee of the Party has decided to implement birth control policy.”

What did he say?

“From the next year on, we are implementing birth control among the whole country, comrades.” He paused again, waiting for the crowd to be quiet. “It is for the greater good, comrades,” he said with a short pause after each word to emphasize. “If we keep giving birth to more children, the country’s food won’t be enough for all the people. We can’t afford that to happen. And if the population keeps growing, the earth will explode eventually.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Secretary. Old people die,” some newly married young mother shouted out with a mocking tone.

“You are right, comrade. But the medical science has developed and we live longer now. More children survive and grow up to give birth to more. The Central Committee has decided to limit the number of the next generation. One child for each couple, comrades.”

The crowd stirred like a pot of boiling water at this last sentence. Shouting came from every direction. “Without people who’s gonna do the farm work? You?”

“What kind of theory is that? China’s gonna be destroyed by the Imperials!”

“Yeah, because we won’t have enough soldiers, decades later.” The crowd kept arguing. They hadn’t done this for a long time—they were, for years, used of obeying without question. But now they were like a group of hungry kids who just woke up

from a dream, demanding their reasonable explanation of not getting refreshment.

Souyuen stood stupefied. Her buzzing head silenced every noise around. She licked her lips.

“Mother, are you O.K.?” Mee asked.

The younger people, especially those who weren't married, were not as concerned and irritated as the elders. Mee was one of them. Fewer children, what's the matter? But Mee cared for his mother. She seemed overwhelmed with her lips white and dry like an autumn leaf.

“Mother, are you cold?”

“Why?” Souyuen stared into blank. One child means fifty percent girl. If that happened, the family would be left without an heir. Her hard work through the years would be ruined. She turned her head toward Mee and looked at him. If her son has no son, he will be left alone in this ridiculous world, and when he is eighty or ninety years old he'll die alone. The family name will die with him. That would be a destructive blow, considering Liongtan was already the last kid left of Grandmother. A branch would be cut from the family tree.

“Why? You are shaking, Mother.”

“I wanna go home, Son. Let's go home.”

#### **FOUR—Dare to Think, Dare to Act**

Souyuen hadn't spoken a single word since she came home. She only sat beside the burning stove and stared into the fire. Souyuen had a little thing for burning fire. If she stared into it, she couldn't move her eyes away, as if there was a fairy inside the flame that would lead her to a heaven without pain and worry.

But this time, it led her back to years ago, when they had the most unusual gathering at the sunning ground. It was an autumn morning. The sky was unusually clear, without a piece of cloud. The lazy sun rose and hung on top of the hill, beaming uneasiness.

Half an hour before the meeting, the villagers were all gathered in front of the flag pole, talking about the possible excuses the village's Secretary of the Party would come up with this time. Yet they all knew that no one wished to hear any excuses. It was a reasonable explanation that they wanted to hear, and a barn full of grain that they wanted to see.

By eight, eyes started to look to the road that Secretary Wong always took when he came for a meeting. No one walked down there. Not even a breeze would disturb the dust on the road. With every second ticking, the sun became brighter, the sky unbearably clearer, until nobody was talking anymore. No joke and excuse was capable of bringing up any delight, not even fake ones.

It was half past eight but the secretary still didn't come. "Folks." The one who interrupted the silence was Liongtan. "Someone should check out Secretary Wong's house." He took a few steps to stand by the pole—a thing he always wanted to try. He was still young and proud, maybe also arrogant. His short hair stood on his thin and round head. He continued, "Who wants to come with me?" Several young men stepped out immediately and followed him down the road to Wong's house, a splendid tall house that had a neatly tiled red ridge.

"Be careful, son! Don't fight!" the old grandmother exclaimed, which was copied by several worrisome wives and mothers.

The crowd sank back into silence after the team had left, clouding with gloom under such radiating sun. Still no one talked. Souyuen felt nauseous in this atmosphere. She scorned at the idea of herself getting a heatstroke. This was winter, she told herself once again, but only felt more disagreeable with the weather. She sat herself down by the edge of the sunning ground, facing the road where her husband left, and went back into meditation.

It was two years ago when the Party started communizing villagers. Land, cattles, poultries, all the things in the barn were taken by village commune. Even the name, Tengwei Village became The Second Production Team. Suddenly, having personal property became a crime. The unsophisticated farmers now thought things in the communal barn belonged to every single one in the team. There were no more landlords, no more exploiters above them. They now worked on lands that belonged to the commune—Second Team—and earned their credits, which could be cashed out

as food through the commune. Twelve credits for men per day, eight credits for women and children from ten to sixteen.

They believed they were the owner of the property. They could decide everything and anything. But later Secretary Wong said the property belonged to the nation, they would be distributed evenly to every single person in the nation. So everyone would be equally rich everywhere. Now Souyuen understood that in the same way, it made everyone equally poor, too.

That autumn, the government's trucks loaded with grain left the town, leaving a year's food storage for the village. It was called unified allocation. Surely it was scientific, since the name was so hard to comprehend.

"I know some of our villagers are not happy today." The secretary came to talk to the summoned villagers. "Some of you secretly cried after the trucks left, thinking your effort was stolen. Especially some ignorant women! But I shall tell you. Don't be silly. We used to be poor, be useless. We used to hinder the development of our great nation! But now, under the direction of great Chairman Mao, with our hands and our diligence, our land has rewarded us much. It was a grand harvest, wouldn't you say? More will be produced if we believe in our hands. We could not only feed ourselves, we could even help people in other places. How can you not be happy?"

In a second or two, people stood in silence, some women's eyes sparkled with tears again. Then a loud, long-lasting applause burst out and echoed between the hills, the houses, and the hearts of villagers during the long, long, sleepless night.

Unfortunately, the passion of the villagers couldn't last long. The next year was

an unusual year. In spring when plants needed water, not even one drop of rain fell down from the sky. The pond in the village could not hold a krill. In the summer, not a sound of a frog was heard. The villagers were busy mining through the hill to find a wet well. When they did, the paddy field dried up as an old man's calloused hand.

However, to all the villagers' surprise, the newspaper said not a single word about the drought, as if this happened merely in the collective illusion of the people in this humble village. In the world of the newspaper, everything was good, everyone was happy, every field, every plant rendered plenty fruit, especially among other places in the nation.

At first the secretary answered the villagers' inquiries about the grain stocking with confident smiles. Gradually, his silky tongue could not dispel the suspicion of the village anymore. His uneasiness increased day after day. When the request of sending more food to the village he sent to his superior had been rejected with more wild excuses, he finally understood he was now on his own. The village was forsaken by the nation, and he by the Party. A decision needed to be made. He thus announced today's assemble.

Soon, Liongtan ran back to the waiting crowd breathlessly. The eyes of everyone followed him to the pole.

"Here is Liongtan." An elder silenced the crowd.

"What had happened?"

He said nothing, but raised his hand over his head. A key! An old bronze key was glittering under the sunshine. It was like a beacon that attracted all eyes and held all



breath. He ran down to the barn and pushed the key into the huge rusty lock of the barn. The crowd held their breath as the key turned. Every single sound of the key turning, the opening of the lock, then the moving of the bolt was heard by every single ear.

Two men beside Liongtan helped him push the sacred door open. People crowded into the barn. It used to be full of grain and sweet potatoes. But now, except a small pile of grain that wouldn't fill up any rice urn in this village, there were only people here, helplessly and desperately facing the fact of their destiny which fell upon them like the sunshine that poured in from the three little vents up on the high roof, spreading a faux warm feeling.

“Where is Secretary Wong?” After all, there was someone who should be responsible for all this—the silky-tongued flinching turtle. The villagers all cast their eyes on Liongtan who held up an envelope in his hand and exclaimed, “He has run away!”

It was like a stone being thrown into the water, disturbance spread like waves.

The secretary had packed all he could carry and left the village with his wife and two children in the deep night. No one even noticed his unusual behavior in the preceding week. The letter he left with the key was placed under a stone in the cat's hole. It enclosed a short telegram saying, “Due to the natural hazard, we could not supply Second Team with more food.”

After Liongtan finished reading the telegram, the crowd stirred again. This was a scheme! They were forsaken. Anger and panic filled everyone. They were like ants on

a hot pan. Liongtan stood in front with his brows locked. Suggestions of moving out of town and heading to relatives were brought up at this moment. But they all knew it was impossible. People were not capable of moving around in this system. Only the local commune recorded the credits that villagers earned through farm work, and only credits paid for food. The crowd sighed and argued, and cried with anger and despair, until suddenly, someone called out, "She fainted!"

The crowd separated. Liongtan saw his wife lie on the cold bare ground of the barn.

Souyuen was found to be four-months pregnant with her second child after Liongtan carried her back home. Looking at his wife in slumber, Liongtan knew the family would be like a straw house in a blizzard. The loathsome sun went down eventually and darkness was coming.

"We might not make it," Liongtan murmured at last with two red eyes fixed on the oil lamp. The light was burning like the only hope for him. But it was so vague and dim. He was condemned. The thought of giving up the child rolled in his brain like a burnt potato in frying oil. He stood up and looked at Grandmother who was holding the sleeping two-year-old girl on her lap. "Do we stand a chance?"

It was hard to imagine what waited ahead, but Grandmother was determined. "Son . . . we should keep the kid. It might be a boy."

"What about Souyuen?" he asked, a little irritated. "If she has any mishap, I . . ." He stood up, turning away from the lamp. "Lieng would lose her mother, and me my wife." There was a slight tremble in his voice.

“Son . . . if it’s a boy, we will have an heir. We can’t take the risk to lose one that carries on the family name, like I couldn’t afford to lose you, Son.”

Liongtan understood the necessity of a male child that one could rely on in the last days of life. He could see again the tears in Grandmother’s eyes every time she leaned against the wall in her own bedroom, praying to Bodhisattva for Liongtan’s brother. Her remorse of losing the other kids tormented Liongtan’s conscience. He couldn’t kill his own child, too. It should live, and the whole family too.

Souyuen, half asleep and half awake, knew what had happened to her. She heard her husband and was moved by his faithful heart in life and kindness. But she thought the same as Grandmother—it should be kept; she couldn’t afford to lose a boy.

The following winter was a disaster. After the newly harvested food and what had been left in the barn were gone within two months, the villagers had to hunt for wild animals and fruit. By mid-winter, the hills were dead under the extortion of the hunters. Every night was silent as if even the wind disdained to visit a lifeless place. The villagers dug into every inch of the earth and robbed every possible piece of green that they could eat from the land. The family was saved by the chestnut tree after the grain was gone. For the rest of the time, Liongtan searched the earth for wild taro and other roots. Rumors about severe famine happening in other villages, communities, and provinces were spreading. The old horror tales about how ancient people traded their children for food during famine became a forbidden topic that haunted the darkest part of the subconscious of the people. Everyone was keeping an eye on the kids. Those who left to seek help from other places never came back—but

everyone wanted to believe they had found food and heaven. Gradually, no one dared to go outside. It was better to die in the place where you were born, where your family lived, was always what grannies told their grandchildren.

One day, Souyuen caught Liongtan standing stiff in the cold kitchen. In front on the range was a dig of fine dirt in a patched porcelain bowl. She stood behind him silently, knowing what determined look he was having on his face now. *Guanyin Tu*, the last food of the starving. It satisfied the stomach but blocked the bowels. It was suicide. But starvation drove people insane toward anything that would fill their craving belly. Where did he find these? Souyuen wondered meaninglessly, when Liongtan suddenly picked up the bowl and scooped some dirt with bare hand.

“No!” Souyuen threw herself on him, and knocked the bowl to the ground.

The breaking voice of the porcelain called Grandmother over. She rushed in the kitchen, scared of the thought that someone was losing the last living will, only to see the couple slumping to the ground in each other’s arms, crying like babies.

The crying didn’t draw anybody here. Villagers had heard too much these days that they stopped bothering. No proper burial was held for the deceased. Some houses used up all their straw mats for the bodies. Some dug a tomb for themselves.

In early spring, Souyuen had lost a considerable amount of weight. But the baby was still there in her womb. She looked like a patient with blood-flukes in advanced stage. Time after time she wished it would leave her, leave this world full of despair and suffering. But it had a strong will. It clung to the mother and waited.

In the late spring, Souyuen gave birth to a girl, a tiny creature with dark yellow

and withered skin. When she was born, she didn't even cry. Her thin, purple lips trembled. The exhausted mother lifted her head from the wet pillow and looked at the wrinkled baby. With weak gasps, she asked, "What is it? What is it?"

From the expression of Grandmother, she knew the answer. Desperation struck her back to unconsciousness. Streams of tears rolled down her cheek.

Grandmother looked at the delicate girl—fragile, thin, and helpless. She went out to her son. A slight shake of her head revealed the answer to Liongtan. He opened the door and went inside. Souyuen held the baby tightly in her arms. The baby's faint eyebrows locked deep. Helplessness and fear were on the little face. Liongtan knelt down beside the bed and asked, "How is she?"

"She's . . . not bad, but . . ." The old woman hesitated a second and whispered, "We can't raise her. She is too weak. Son, it's difficult now."

But Liongtan, as soon as he heard it, turned and knelt down before his mother with tears in his firm eyes, and said, "She is my daughter, as I am your son, Mother. We could at least try." He looked again at the little girl. "She's so small. She won't ask for too much."

Then he felt his mother's weak, trembling, but warm body fall on his. They embraced each other and cried a long, long time. They didn't know how many silent tears the half-awakened wife swallowed at her husband's words, before she dropped her head beside her dear girl and fell asleep again.

That was when the family had Mamao.

Along with Souyuen sat the old grandmother. After she heard the news from Mee, she sighed like it was her last breath—as if she was exhaling all her hope—so long and weak. Her lifetime effort of preserving the family name might have been devastated, merely because some expert said China would explode because of too many people. That was pure nonsense to her. The old woman didn't believe a single word. But she understood there was no hope arguing against what they had decided. The only way was to obey—at least superficially.

“Souyuen, heard anything from Piyeng?”

It took Souyuen a while to respond. “No. Why?”

“She likes Mee.”

“I guess.”

“It's best they get married soon. Isn't it?”

Souyuen's skeptical eyes turned away from the stove for a moment. She wondered what this old woman was contemplating. “Why?”

“Feels like the right time.”

Souyuen didn't believe her. There had to be something the old woman was trying to say but just wouldn't say it out loud. The obscure smell of a scheme that Grandmother wouldn't share was irritating to Souyuen. But she wouldn't ask for explanation. She felt defeated in doing anything like that.

There was that contrary look again. Grandmother sat there peering into Souyuen's face. She was tired of playing with this woman, too stubborn and yet not clever enough. If Souyuen was a buffalo, Grandmother was an old fox. All these years,

she had played with this young woman, until they were both old and ugly. Still, she always outsmarted Souyuen, sometimes even without her knowledge. Tired of the easy game, Grandmother leaned toward the fire and said, “You remember the sixties?”

Sixties. That era gave Souyuen’s heart a quiver. It was when the country was still groping about in the residue of decades of war. New policies were put out every day. There was a female *Zhiqing* from Guangzhou who was forced to work in the village but escaped eventually. She nodded.

“Know why she could get back to the city?” Grandmother pursued.

Souyuen didn’t answer. She had no idea where Grandmother was leading this conversation. But the sixty-six was something she couldn’t bear to think about. She hated others for bringing it up. So she shut her eyes and shook her head.

“Silly woman. Because it was all just started. New things are always not perfect. Before the baby starts walking, there will always be a way through the loophole.”

Souyuen seemed to understand. She nodded and looked at Grandmother, expecting her to say more. But the ignorant, or rather vacant, look expelled Grandmother’s desire of teaching this nut head. She stood up and headed out of the kitchen.

## FIVE—One Eyewitness Is Better Than Two Listeners

Jiongsa thought Mee was different. He used to have lots of time to spend with the family. But now he would rather sit in front of the desk and read a *Selected Works of Chairman Mao*, or keep writing on papers he brought home from work. But he always kept an ear on the room door. The faintest sound could turn him around with a smile and a gentle “What’s the matter?”

Last night he did it again, even when Jiongsa tried her best not making any noise. But the old door wouldn’t let her make it. Mee turned around at her. His face concealed in his own shadow. The lamp on the desk was illuminating the desk. Mee asked, “What?”

“Nothing, just grabbing the sewing kit. Mother asks why you don’t go out and talk to them.”

“What’s to talk about?”

“Who knows? Maybe what kind of girls you like.”

Mee laughed. It was dry and meaningless, like cracking a peanut shell. Jiongsa couldn’t tell what was behind it. She left the room without taking anything.

Today she was going to take her transcript of the ended semester to Mother or Father to sign. Who signed it didn’t matter. The important thing was who saw her transcript first. Mother always saw her lowest grade, and would immediately come to the conclusion that Jiongsa was beyond redemption, that she could scarcely be a



loafer for the rest of her life. Jionsa couldn't tell if Mother was joking or not. But that was the most vicious comment one could get, since the loafers were the lowest people among all. If Father saw it first, he would see on which course Jionsa made progress, and would commend her for it. By then Mother would say nothing more than "Keep up with it."

Her school was a forty minute walk from home. The way that led to her school wound along the harvested fields and then merged into a road that went through town where Father and Mee worked. It was a small town, with a crossroad at the entrance. Thus the town was called Tongpokew, meaning a long slope crossing.

As Mother said, twice a month on lunar calendar, people used to come here from villages all around to buy and sell. Except now free market was banned since no one was allowed to own personal fields. Selling and buying were the tail of capitalism. Nowadays only a modest breakfast store and different Supply and Marketing Cooperative stores that were ran by the government were allowed. People lined up in front of them with ration stamps in exchange for clothes, food, daily tools. The road forked into two in front of the gate of the county government, which was opposite to the county's clinic. The right road went to another small town that featured a porcelain factory in which Lieng worked in. The left one went toward Jionsa's school.

The school was the only high school in the area. All the children from the nearby villages attended here. Still, merely five classes were in the old two-floor brick house, half because of lacking educators, half because lots of people wouldn't send their

children to high school. Some believed even middle school was unnecessary.

The school bell rang when Jiongsa arrived, even though no school was going on. A pole stood by the rim of a playground, saluting the grey sky with a faded red flag. She headed to the teacher's office down on the east end of the first floor. The wind was flipping the corner of the old newspaper that covered a panel with broken glass.

“Thank you, Reina, you are so generous. Send your parents my greetings.” It was a familiar voice, a common mid-aged male voice. It slowed Jiongsa's pace. She stopped in front of the door and waited, until the door was open. A girl stepped out, still looking back with a sweet smile on her full lips. She wasn't the best student in class. But the class advisor—at the same time the Chinese and history teacher—liked her the most. She always had gifts for the teachers.

As Reina turned around, she saw Jiongsa. The smile on her face froze and was gone immediately. She rolled her eyes and Jiongsa returned one. With a colder face, Reina left without a word.

The door was left open. Jiongsa took a step toward the door. She saw the teacher putting a paper wrapped thing into the bottom drawer. She knocked and the teacher quickly pushed the drawer back with his tiptoe.

He paused a second before he said, “Come in.”

“Mr. Du” Jiongsa hauled herself toward him. “I'm here to take my transcript.”

“Sure.” The teacher took out a pile of booklets. The class' transcript book was filled in by the class advisor's hand. The rough grey cover of each booklet was covered with suspicious stains. The teacher searched a while before he took out one

from the bottom, and tossed it aside on the desk, not caring to explain what was on the cover. Jionsga remembered last time she handed it in, it was perfectly grey, though a little crumpled. “Come closer. Why you stand there.”

Jionsga obeyed. The grey booklet lay there like a dead frog’s skin that had dried out and left wrinkled stains. She dared not speak, simply stared down at her cloth shoes and waited, as if waiting for a judge’s sentence.

“Well,” the teacher started, “you’ve made some progress this year. But your math is still not good enough. And you should be more active in physical works.”

“Yes.”

A short unexpected silence filled the room. The teacher sat there motionless. Jionsga, for a moment, thought the world had paused for her to catch her breath. She peered into the teacher’s face. The wrinkles on his forehead deepened as he raised his brow to meet her look. Jionsga moved her eyes away and could not bear to see the expectation in the teacher’s eyes. What was he waiting for? She couldn’t smile and say honeyed words like Qi Reina. Jionsga grabbed her booklet and bowed slightly. “Thank you, teacher. Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year.”

Transcript obtained, door closed, Jionsga was out on the street again. She kept thinking about the tone of the teacher when he wished her happy New Year. It sounded as if he was laughing. But Jionsga couldn’t be sure what he was laughing at. She walked with the booklet in her pocket until she reached the main street. The people on the street for shopping seemed to have doubled. Of course, it was New Year.

Jiongsa took a deep breath and walked on.

She moved with the flow of the crowd, not in a hurry to go back home. She wanted to at least wait until Father was off work. Maybe Mee Brother also. She looked around for the tea store. It rendered such nice fragrance that she always stood beside its gate to smell for a while. Jiongsa saw the cloth store opposite. She imagined wearing a red skirt, or a long wind coat—with a notched collar. She was tired of the mandarin collar which made her neck seem so short.

Those thoughts were considered outrageous. Father and Mother would never agree on a notched collar coat, at least not for now. She longed to graduate and start working, so she could have power in the family too.

“Lass, you getting some tea?” The keeper smiled at Jiongsa with a pen behind her ear. She sat on a stool as high as the counter and looked down at Jiongsa, eyes full of plastic friendliness.

Jiongsa took a step back with a shy shake of head. She walked away and heard the woman murmur something. She turned back at it and saw a scornful mouth corner before she hurried away. Face burning, Jiongsa wished there was a hole for her to hide in. She buried her head low and started trotting.

A fresh smell of soap came to her, then a blue shadow. Jiongsa stepped on something soft before she could stop, and tripped. Two strong hands grabbed her arms. A steady and familiar voice called out, “Watch it.”

Jiongsa heard it. Somebody laughed. She felt like she was paraded through the street naked. She would never be able to walk this road again. “Sorry.” Barely a

humming she gave the stranger.

“Chong Jionsa?” The steady voice came again. Jionsa raised her head and saw a young man. His face triggered a *déjà vu*. She seemed to have seen this face from the exact same angle before. His straight nose had to come from a statue. Looking into his eyes, Jionsa suddenly recognized him: the young lad who bicycled her to Mamao’s wedding.

“Xu Weijia . . .” She swallowed back his name, thinking of the embarrassment she brought him, and said instead, “Sorry, your shoe. . . your foot O.K.?”

“Don’t worry.” He smiled. It was sunshine under the grey clouds. “Shopping for New Year?”

“That would be my father’s job. Brother, now, maybe. You?”

“Your brother’s back? The one went to college?”

“No, the one went Hainan.”

“You have two brothers? Do they argue which one of them you like the best?”

Jionsa didn’t notice her embarrassment was now replaced by a relaxed smile. She walked naturally with him. The stores and people on the road faded away from her vision.

“No! I always fight with Xee Brother. He’s a trickster,” Jionsa said with a chuckle.

“I would like to have a sister like you. I’d make a great big brother.” His confident face gave Jionsa’s heart a heavy beat. She had never seen that face on her brothers’ face. It was soft and warm like a big furry dog under the sunshine, long hair,

of course, rare among normal domestic dogs she had seen everyday.

The first conversation they had months ago on the way to Mamao's wedding was a sparkling pleasure during the long and boring grey life she had for years. He asked then, when they were alone without the watchful eye of the adults, if she had ever seen a crane before.

"Only in books," Jionsa, sitting on the back seat of his bicycle, answered while she looked at the back of his neck. The neatly trimmed hair line behind his ear was a perfect smooth arc. The smell of soap was the same as today's, with a trace of sandalwood, which made him more mysterious, like a whirlpool that drew Jionsa nearer—irresistable.

"Do you know there are pink cranes on this planet?"

"Really?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you."

"No?" Jionsa could hear a light smile in his tone. "Comrade, the world is much bigger than you can imagine."

Somehow, hearing this, Jionsa grew silent. She lowered her chin and saw her finger tips whitened as she carefully held the springs under the plastic seat he was sitting on. The blowing wind and the cracking chain sounded harmonious. She looked up, the pale sky seemed so distant. She inhaled and the cold winter air invaded her body. Everything seemed slower. She felt great.

Jionsa was more than happy she ran into him today.

“What was that?” Weijia stopped walking and half turned toward her.

“What?” Jionsa gave him a confusing eye, coming back from her own thoughts.

“Ha. Nothing.” They were now under a camphor tree. The leaves were dark green in the winter. A bitter but refreshing aroma surrounded it. The flowing crowd in between the stores seemed far away. She rested her shoulder on the trunk, and said, “Pink crane is for real?”

He grinned. “You still don’t believe me?”

“No. There mustn’t be such thing.”

He suddenly retracted his smile. Like a villain he said gloomily, “Comrade, draw no conclusion before you’ve seen it with your own eyes. Not knowing is never powerful enough to deny a possible existence.”

She blushed, and stood straight apart from the tree. His eyes became soft again, the short rage totally gone as if it never been there. He was something very different. There inside him was a rare personality. Jionsa wondered. The mysterious nature of this young man drew her nearer, yet at the same time kept her at a distance. He stood closer and smiled. It was as frank and genuine as rain of spring and sunshine of summer. She lowered her head and surrendered. “Guess you are right.”

“No guess. I am.”

She chuckled at his confidence. “Anyways, what are you doing here?”

“Sending some things to my aunt. You know, your brother-in-law’s mother—I’m from her mother’s side. I come every month to send her medicines.”

“You’re lucky. I just saw our tastiest snack stall there.” Jionsa tilted her chin

toward the road fork. “It’s beside the post office.”

The post office was on the main road, north side. A simple glass door opened inwardly. A green postbox stood by the door under the roof. It was surrounded by the steam that came out from a one meter high, half meter deep and wide wooden box. In front of the breakfast store, an old woman, with a black crochet hat on, was busy filling a round wooden mould in her hand with grounded rice. Another wooden box stood next to her. It looked like a narrow dresser with three sets of drawers—the left drawers were two times larger than the right ones.

As they went closer, Jionsa could tell that the first two drawers on the top were empty since the old woman was scooping from the second set. As soon as the three sets were all empty, she went to the back of the store to help her son making *youtew*.

“Ah, that’s *dinggao*.” He smiled and Jionsa could see his breath, so close and clear. She suddenly recalled that last time they met, she never had a chance to see his face from the front.

She looked up toward the old woman. She was using a wooden lid’s flat bottom to wipe off extra rice powder and brown sugar, then covered the mold and put it into a hole atop the steamer box. She could smell the sweet fragrance of the rice and the brown sugar. Imagine how nice it would be to have a freshly steamed hot, soft, melting sweet *dinggao* slowly warming up your mouth, cheeks, then stomach.

While she was watching, a man came over and paused in front of the stall, blocking Jionsa’s view. He was of average height, with a thick brown envelope in his hand. She immediately recognized him.



“Brother!” she called out.

Mee seemed surprised when he turned around. There was something uneasy in him. It took him a pause to decide to put the envelope into the mailbox first.

“Jionsa.” He greeted her. “Who’s this?”

“Xu Weijia. He’s brother-in-law’s cousin, helped out at Mamao’s wedding. We ran into each other in the market.”

“Hey.” Mee shook hands with him.

“Hello,” Weijia said. The smile on his face hadn’t changed a bit. “We were going to eat some snacks. Care to come?”

Mee eyed the young man from head to toe. He was wearing a nice jacket, hair trimmed neatly, a pair of white tennis shoes, and brown corduroy pants. Nice attire. Most importantly, clean. His eyebrows softened. “Thank you, but we are going back for lunch right after. Maybe another day.”

“But . . .” Jionsa was silenced by a pull on her sleeve. She wouldn’t like her brother telling her parents about this. Though there was merely conversation about sweets and birds between the two—surely Jionsa hoped there had been more. She moved to stand by Mee. Weijia was smart enough not to keep talking. He said his polite farewell, and merged into the flow.

“*Dinggao*? What flavor you want?” Mee said.

The old woman nodded as she heard Mee’s greetings. She took the spoon from the left drawer and dug out three full scoops to fill the round mold. Her hand was fast. Before Jionsa called out “Eh, extra sugar, Grandma!” she was ready to put the mold

in the steam hole. She murmured yes lightly, and added one more scoop of brown sugar. Years of practice had made her an expert in such work. She danced elegantly with the molds and the scoops. More steam came up and surrounded the old woman. When she had the *dinggao* ready in the paper bag. Mee handed the coins over.

“Young man, take the change yourself. My eyes ain’t as good as old times.” The old woman looked up at them, and pointed with her crooked forefinger to a white porcelain bowl that had some coins inside. One of her pupils was sealed with a white opaque piece, like a leaf. “That would be eight *fen* if you have one *jiao*.”

When they left, the involuntary look from the old woman was engraved in Jiongsa’s mind, and temporarily made her forget about the envelope that was lying silently in the rusty postbox.

## SIX—Trap the Phoenix and Cage the Dragon

Jionsa could see clearly that Pyieng who sat beside Mother was going to marry Mee. Mother was determined to make it happen, despite Mee's opposition and the quarrels they had during the week. Ever since she came back from a meeting with Mee, a conspicuous aroma of scheme had been around her, making her eye circles darker every day. Grandmother was more relaxed, but she was in it, too. The intuition of a woman was waking up inside Jionsa, enabling her to recognize the unusualness of Mother's narrowed eyes and puzzled look. When Grandmother and Mother's eyes met, there was a certain awkwardness—rather than pure rivalry—between them. One of them must have compromised for a higher benefit, while hating to admit she's working with the other.

Piyeng came for some chicken-feather, garlic-peel trifles. Mother kept sending glances to Grandmother behind the young woman's back. She came with a bag of mini fish, saying it was a New Year's gift from her grandmother. However, Souyuen insisted that she should take some of the home-dried fish and shrimp back.

“Don't embarrass me in front of your grandma by going home empty handed, girl,” Souyuen emphasized again with a warm smile when Jionsa brought the ginger tea to them. Pyieng liked to have double ginger, which was new to Jionsa, since she always preferred double sesame. The rich taste of sesame in salted tea was the loveliest feeling in a cold winter. But what good did double ginger do to tea, except

making it spicier? And it wasn't the outright and frank spicy in the tip of the tongue, rather a mild, everlasting burn reaching out to the stomach from the throat.

"You are so generous, Souyuen Aunt. Ah, thank you." She took the tea Jionsa handed her with both hands, and sipped. "When's Uncle coming back?"

"Won't be long. How about I walk you around the village for a while? We don't have to wait here."

Pyieng seemed reluctant. The stove was more charming than the cold weather outside. It was about a week from New Year. The sun was sinking fast in the afternoon, like a nostalgic son who was hurrying home after years of traveling.

"Maybe we could run into your uncle and Mee."

That was pure nonsense. Father came back from work by bicycle; brother wouldn't be with him. Mee sometimes got off work quite late. He had lots of paper works and mails to take care of. However, Pyieng was lured. She drank all from the enamel cup. With her forefinger she scooped the rest of the sesame from the bottom.

"Hurry, Jionsa will make you more after we come back," Souyuen said, standing up. "Jionsa, get the cups ready."

"I wanna go too, Mother," Jionsa said.

"Why?" An uneasy blink. "What if we don't meet your father and brother?"

"Grandma's home." Jionsa felt an eagerness to follow for the little secret Mother was preparing for the young woman standing beside her.

"Don't go," said grandmother who broke her own silence. "You have cabbage to wash. Don't always think about going outside to play."

Jiongsa stepped away from the threshold with a long face, looking at Souyuen and Pyieng's backs disappearing into the bamboo woods. The road led to a pool where the mini fish and shrimps were caught. The houses surrounded the pool were nested safely inside the recess. The turn of the road often confused people's sense of direction. Before entering the woods, the sinking sun was in the front. When you get out of it, the sun drifted to the left side without being noticed. At the southern bank of the pool stood a camphor tree which was there ever since the village was with its strong trunk and thick branches reaching to the sky. Souyuen stopped on the bank of the pool. A short wooden board covered the ditch that led water down to the fields which spread at the foot of the hills.

“See, this is where I fish.”

“Nice place.” Pyieng stepped across the shaky bridge with a steady step. She didn't even look down to make sure it was solid. The outgoing frankness of her made Souyuen more than determined—she would make a great wife. No fastidious demands, no sour jealousy, no contrary rivalry between them as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law; plus diligence, positive attitude, and wide shoulders and hips.

Up north of the pond was where most of the houses were. Souyuen walked Pyieng farther to the sunning ground, which was once the gathering place for the villagers. Its function was replaced by loudspeakers hanging on trees and telegraph poles. However, neighbors still used this ground for sunning red peppers and *wong-guzi*—the ripe, orange fruit of gardenia.

“So, what do you think of Mee?” Souyuen suddenly asked, with a sly glance

toward the southeast direction.

“He’s a fine comrade.” Pyieng managed to not show her shyness, but her voice still lowered a bit. She wasn’t used to this subject. She flicked away a lock of hair that fell on her cheek.

“You like him?”

“Aunt!” She turned around toward the other side of the road, looking at a shabby house nervously. “Don’t embarrass me.” It was a weird scene. The house was isolated by the barn from the rest of the village houses around the pond. It lay back in a suitable artificial recess that looked wet and gloomy with all the deep green ferns growing along the cliff of the recess.

“We think you two are a very good match. I’m not bragging about my own melon, he is polite and modest.”

“I know.” Pyieng blushed, slightly yet visible. She was biting the inside part of her lower lip, making every effort to not show anything. The shyness on this big girl, though it seemed somewhat awkward, was genuine. Seeing this, Souyuen knew she had another ally on getting Mee to where he should be.

“We all need to take our steps. Come on, let’s move.” Souyuen walked away from the gloomy house. It had histories. Once a broadcast relay station for the village, revamped from a Secretary Wong’s house, later the dorm for five *Zhiqings*, it was abandoned for a while until recently its function was restored. A chain and a huge lock on the two rings of the door knocker secured the secret of the place. Today was the day Mee would come to repair the cable of the speaker that went to the recess. The

old one was chewed by mice. Souyuen tilted her head slightly, peering at the house. It stood there like a cage with the wires wrapping around and reaching out from it.

“Eh, Uncle’s there!” Pyieng suddenly cried out. Souyuen turned back her head and saw two people walking with a bicycle from down the road that wound through the dead winter land. Mee, with handle bars in hand, bent his back in full effort to push the bicycle. He looked like a cattle plowing. The old man followed pushing the back seat that had a reel of cables fixed on. Pyieng rushed down the road like a sparrow.

“Uncle, let me take it here.”

Liongtan stopped as he raised his face to Pyieng. The wrinkles on his forehead creased deep as he tried to recall the young woman’s name. For a second he shook his head slightly and buried it down again, refusing to be helped. The father and son resumed moving with silent understanding of each other. Pyieng grabbed the back seat anyways.

Soon after the bicycle got over a steep rock, Liongtan let go the warm iron bars he was holding. The bicycle went forward smoothly without swaying.

“Quite a caring girl she is. What’s the name again?”

“Pyieng,” Souyuen answered, not surprised at all Liongtan didn’t catch it. He didn’t give his ear to those he didn’t care.

“Not bad,” Liongtan said, breathing out the long and tired breath he was holding in for strength. The two simple words lightened extra hope for Souyuen. It was the express ticket for her goal. Liongtan was the last one beside Mee that Souyuen

thought would cost her to conquer. But he had now given his permission. She wondered whether Liongtan would offer more after today's matter was settled. It had to be done, today. Or else there would hardly be another chance.

Mee parked the bicycle in front of the gate. He looked back and saw Pyieng there smiling at him. Her thick lips stretched her smiling lines out and pumped her cheeks up like two red apples. Her straight teeth seemed fair enough. He thanked her lightly. She smiled even brighter.

At this smile Mee turned his face away to untie the cable reel.

"Let me help," Pyieng asked to lend a hand.

"I'm fine. We don't work our guests here." He tried to balance his voice between cold and polite, only to sound like a robot.

"I came today for the pepper fish recipe. Let me do something as paying for tuition."

Mee let out an awkward dry laugh. He put the cable down the front door and searched for the key. The three people's eyes were all on him, though for different reasons, waiting for him to open the lock.

"Where's my key?"

"Why would I know?" Liongtan frowned impatiently. "Just get the cable inside and we can go back for dinner." He didn't see a way through into the house without the key. "When did you last see your keys?"

"I put it in my pocket yesterday. I checked it before I went bed."

There was no point arguing. The sun had totally gone down. It left just a tinged



orange on the cloud chasing the unreachable sun. Wind wasn't too strong but the land was losing its heat with speed that all four could feel. Somehow the whole group felt obliged to find the key. The cable, compared to one key, was too much trouble to take home and bring it back again. New Year was coming; the village could not enjoy without the radio broadcast. After the maintenance responsibility fell on Mee, he couldn't sleep at night if this thing didn't get done. They'd need to find the key first anyways. Best to do it now. Father didn't want his son to lose any of the common properties. If the key was found by someone with ulterior motives, Mee could be in great trouble. Pyieng was kind enough to believe this was the perfect chance for her to show her affection for this young man and his family. She always liked the soldiers, who had darker skin and strong arms, especially whose hair was straight, short, and thick as trimmed grass. Her secret taste was never known to anyone else. The preference of men was a forbidden topic. As a mother, Souyuen didn't want anything wrong to happen to her boy's work. However, in her eyes there was a tightened nerve that was more occupying than the worry of the current problem. She kept scratching both tips of her pinky fingers with her thumb nails to relieve the tension.

“Mee and I'll go back on the way to look. Souyuen, you women go home see if it's anywhere in the house.” Liongtan had the strategy decided.

“No. Mee, you stay here. Someone needs to keep an eye on these. I'm going with you,” Souyuen said to Liongtan. “It'd be too dark on the road. No, you should go now. I'll fetch a flash light. Pyieng, come with me.”

They went separately.

As soon as the two women went across the bamboo woods, Jionsa came out of the door.

“Mother, you went for so long.”

“Your brother can’t find his key. You fetch me the flash light,” Souyuen said as she stepped across the threshold. Old Grandmother sat inside the kitchen, looking back at her. Souyuen nodded and yelled, “Mother, help Pyieng find the key.”

“We made dinner. Yes. No need to hurry,” the old woman yelled back, waving her hands slowly. Her tricky hearing problems made her louder than she needed to be.

“Pyieng, maybe you could take Mee some food so he could eat before he starts working. The day after tomorrow is the thirtieth, he’d like the cable to be repaired as soon as possible. I’m sorry you need to do this for us. But I’ll make it up.” Souyuen winked. Except she couldn’t wink a single eye while keeping the other one open, so her two small eyes simply blinked together as she pouted her thin lips. It was like a childish, funny blow-kiss. The girl smiled back and walked inside as Souyuen crossed the threshold again and hastened into the thickening dusk.

Pyieng stood beside the kitchen door. Grandmother sat silently, stretching her legs toward the hearth. Jionsa had gone to the back of the house to wash some lunch boxes. Pyieng walked closer to Grandmother, and called out, “Grandma.”

“Don’t be so loud. I’m not deaf,” the old woman said calmly.

Pyieng flinched slightly like a frightened mouse at this sudden quiet answer. She knelt down and asked again, “Grandma, you know where Mee’s keys might be?”

“There, that room.” Grandmother pointed to the door on the left side. And sat

back into the wooden chair again. The silence of her radiated a distant, isolated atmosphere. Pyieng suddenly had a bad feeling about this.

She left Grandmother and entered the room anyways. It was dim. The window opposite to the door faced the hill's artificial cliff. The darkness already settled in. She groped around the door and found a string. A dim bulb flashed after one pull of the string. A desk guarded the window. She walked toward it; there was nothing except an ink bottle. The chair was made of bamboo. Its back and arm rest was hexagon pattern of waved split bamboo. She dragged the chair toward herself. It was light and cold. The smell of mixed ink and dust stirred with the moving chair. She inhaled and liked it, though she thought it could be lovelier if more sunshine could come in.

She heard a click. There were the keys, lying beside a leg of the chair. She picked them up. There were three keys on the ring. One big brown, one silver, and a newer smaller brown. She spotted a padlock hanging on the staple nailed on one drawer.

Guilt seized her the second she wondered what was inside the drawer—curiosity of this nature was forbidden for Pyieng. She, like most people of her generation, believed honesty and loyalty were golden virtues. She put the chair back in place and left the room.

The veil of the night was falling upon the land from the east with some light stars. Only a dark orange remained in the west that merged into the mysterious blue. The waning moon was yet to rise. Mee sat on the cable reel, leaning his back against the door, waiting. How long did he need to wait like this? The silhouette of a girl was

swirling in his brain, unable to expel. She was an elegant young dancer. Her childish face made the mature behavior of her more attractive. She was a pink peony bud, with just three or four petals stretched out bravely in the cold early spring. Like lots of the soldiers in the camp, Mee liked this girl the first time he saw her, and secretly hoped for a chance of an encounter with her. Mee was more than surprised when she came to him and told him her mother used to be in this village. The flattering feeling tightened his tongue so that he couldn't even speak freely.

How long did he need to wait? Mee wasn't sure. He stood up and paced to warm himself up. Then it occurred to him that it was inappropriate to leave Father and Mother out in the darkness searching for the key while he, the strong and able, waited for a result. He looked at the bicycle; it wasn't locked. Only Father had its key. He couldn't leave it here like this.

While he was struggling, footsteps came near. He saw Pyieng half running toward him, with a key ring dangling in one hand, and a bag in the other.

"You have the key?" he asked.

"And dinner." She paused, out of breath. "Your Grandmother had the dinner ready anyways . . ." She gasped for more breath, looking at him. Mee took over the bag and put it down on the reel, then turned to unlock the door. Pyieng offered a hand when he tried to lift the cable. He refused. Mee was trying not to lose his anger from what the mother did to this innocent young woman. He moved the cable and turned on the light.

"Come and sit." Mee beckoned Pyieng inside. "I'll go let them know we found

the key. Please sit for a while and keep an eye out.”

His departure was a little different than Pyieng imagined. He didn't swing his leg over the saddle after pushing the bicycle to get on it. He didn't look back to her and say again be careful. The vague feeling became more than clear—Mee didn't like her, not in the least way. She sank back to the cold chair and took the lunch bag into her arms.

The obscure landline that spread out against the sky was very quiet. The cold air pressed her arms and body closer to the warm bag. She lifted her legs and rested them on the bar between the two front legs of the chair, curling her body, thinking about how many possibilities she had with Mee. The lock on the drawer of his desk suddenly popped up. She buried her head inside her arms. Like a kid fallen asleep after crying for too long, she rested her cheek on top of the lunch box.

“You O.K.?”

A deep sound awaked her. She raised her face in full alarm and saw Mee standing with his bicycle by the door. His face was lit by the lamp over the front door. In that light, his red eyes seemed like they were a dried golden fish's.

She stood up and set aside the dinner. “Just keeping it warm.” She laughed, but the sound that came out of her throat was a choking cough.

“Sorry to keep you here. And the dinner . . .” Mee set his hands on the box, it was still warm. “You must be tired. You should go back to the house and have dinner with my parents. They're on their way back.” Mee looked at his bicycle. “You can take my bike.”

The time had come. This is when she should make the decision, Pyieng told herself. Go, and never come back. Or make it happen.

“Sister, my mother isn’t always so careless, you know, to our guests. I don’t even know what’s today is all about.”

He called her sister, Pyieng stood there looking at him. Though only because of politeness, he called her sister rather than comrade. The handsome lips of his, thin and straight, constantly pressed together, made his look sincerer, yet with a maturity that was too sophisticated for his still young face. Pyieng’s legs were trembling from the stiff post she kept for a while in the chair, and also because of excitement and this fresh, mysterious feeling she was having. She ventured a step forward, and said with her dry voice, “No, I . . . I’d like to help. I’m not picky, we can eat together.”

“It’s late already. I don’t want to keep you here.” He seemed bothered, if not annoyed.

“Hey, for the things I helped today you don’t even ask me to stay for dinner?” Pyieng wasn’t hesitating anymore. The tenderness and politeness of him, and his self-disciplined temper drew Pyieng closer. Mee said nothing, giving his tactic approval. She smiled bravely and opened the lunch boxes and spread them on the modest table. Two pairs of chopsticks were fished out from the bottom of the bag. She sat down, he did also.

Mee wasn’t so sure about all this. There was something about Pyieng that he disliked. Whether it was the dry voice, or the way she set the lunch boxes down—so heavily—he didn’t know. But from that point on, a sense of security and

determination started radiating from her. It softened her rough look and husky voice a bit, but not enough for admissions of everything she, and Mother, hoped for. Mee knew she was part of Mother's plan, though he had no idea how close they were working together. This thought dragged Mee farther from Pyieng. He sat back into his chair, digging rice from the box.

"So, what should we do about this?" Pyieng asked, tilting her chin toward the cable reel.

"I'm gonna replace the old one with this new one. From inside that room," he pointed to the door on the right side with the thicker end of his chopsticks, "to that pole back there." He turned his face slightly, looking at the door that led outside at the end of the living room. It was an iron door with a small barred vent at top. Not only the vent, every window of this house was barred to guard the precious equipment for the villager's entertainment against stealing. Mee set down the lunch box.

"Right, let's get this done and I'll send you home." He walked inside to the broadcast room. A window opened on his left side. Several simple wooden desks and a tall cabinet lined along the wall around the room, like watchful guards that would make spring sunlight that shined on them looked cold. He walked toward the end of the room and retrieved a flashlight from the drawer of the cabinet. He took out the wooden tool box. It was made of simple plywood. Every house in this village, maybe in the whole country, had little things like this if they ever paid a carpenter. Except this solid box was made by Liongtan's hands. The neat rim was polished with sandpaper in order to get rid of the splinters. The nails, screws, and wrench were

organized by the calloused hands of Father himself. Mee stood up with the box, and handed the flashlight to Pyieng.

“*Nho*, take it.” He walked outside to the front porch and opened a wooden box, then pulled off the electric lever. The bulb in the living room went off. Pyieng lit the flash light in silence. Like a ritual, they stepped into the house, into the broadcast room.

Pyieng looked at him kneeling on the floor, prying the nails that fastened the cables on the wall. The flashlight that fell on him made him a beacon in this foggy thick darkness. The rhythmic sound of the hammer claw hitting the nails was like a drummer that hit Pyieng on her heart. She was sure the beat of her heart was audible. She took a step back, naively thinking that would quiet it down; when suddenly, a vague chuckle came from outside the window. Like a rabbit, Pyieng jumped back and turned the flashlight toward window. “Who’s there?”

Mee stood up. “What’s wrong?” A slice of anger leaked out between his teeth. “What?” As he asked, he walked up to the window and checked.

“I heard someone laughing.”

“No one’s here except us. Don’t be so suspicious.” He turned back and knelt down. The room was quiet again until the hammer resumed its work.

A click that came from the living room silenced Pyieng. The nerve of her whole body tensed again like a net that wrapped her up. She stood silently but couldn’t hear anything anymore. Mee stopped his hammer, and looked up at her. She saw his tired face under the flashlight. Boredom and irritated eyes were all red and dry.



Mee stood up. He couldn't believe that this mountainous girl had such thin nerves. The thought that she might be pretending to please him irritated Mee more than ever. He started to doubt this girl was in Mother's plan the whole time. He walked out of the room.

"See, no one is . . ." A short pause. "Did you close the door?"

Before Pyieng could answer, she heard the door shaking, with the sound of the chain rattling. She walked out of the room with the flashlight in her hand. There she saw Mee's angry and puzzled face. The mixture of his expression made his tired face almost broken. His lips pressed together even tighter. Then he turned his face back and shook the door again. In the dim light, she saw Mee's white breath came out from his mouth.

"We are locked in here!"

## SEVEN—Know Thyself and Thy Enemy

Souyuen returned home. The bag of mini fish she had with her when she left was still in her hand.

“What’s wrong?” Liongtan asked. Grandmother sat beside Liongtan in front of the hearth. Both were enjoying the warming residue of dinner. Jionsa was putting away the plates and bowls she just washed.

“Mee and Pyieng were already gone when I got there. The studio’s door was locked.” Souyuen said, peering at Grandmother, who dug another shovel of burning charcoal out of the hearth and shoved it into a *peileng*. “Ay. Running in vain.” Souyuen dropped the fish on the counter. “Who knew Mee finished repairing so fast? I’ll probably let Mee send these fish to Fuu Granny again sometime, maybe on New Year’s.”

“Right.” Liongtan took out his clip and started to trim his jaw.

Jionsa was filling a big round brass flask with hot water. It was oblate, like a fat short pumpkin. Lotus petals were engraved on the top around the cap. It was among the best metal utensils in the house. She screwed the cap back and went on to fill the second one.

“Fill the last one as well. I’ll take it to my room,” Liongtan said, and Jionsa obeyed. Before Mamao left home, Jionsa had hardly any housework to do. She was the princess in this poor castle, enjoying the boring life under the wings of her father,

brothers, and sisters. But while she was the only child that lived home, the whole burden of filial responsibilities fell upon her shoulders. These several months were hard for her. She lifted both flasks by the two rings attached to the cap, and left the kitchen with Father. Liongtan went straight to his room. He was a silent father and a common farmer, whose language was the sound of sweat dropping into the earth he worked on. Jiongsa respected him, a responsible provider and a caring father. His eyes always looked at the children's moralities rather than anything else. Jiongsa knew Father wasn't in Mother's secret project of forcing Mee to marry that girl. But she doubted whether he gave his approval yet. Mother wouldn't do things without Father's agreement. She knew it would be hard, if not impossible.

It was eight thirty, and Mee still hadn't come back. It was almost half an hour ago when Pyieng left with the key. How far was her home? Jiongsa tucked the flask into the bed of Grandma and her, then another one into Mee's narrow bed. She pulled the folded quilt and spread it over the bed. A piece of paper flew out of it and dropped on the floor. Jiongsa bowed down to pick it up. An address was written with tidy handwriting, Guangzhou Province. The thin pen lines flew smoothly with each turn, like the trace of a cat walking freely. There was no addressee, but Jiongsa was sure it was a girl's handwriting. She must have slim wrists and pink fingernails, Jiongsa imagined.

Everything seemed clear to her now. The thick envelope, the late night writings, and the reluctance of considering marriage, could simply be of one reason: there was another girl.

She went out of the room and walked toward the kitchen. The light was still on. It fell on the ground in front of the kitchen door, and distant talking drifted over. Father's light was on too. He was now in the room. Jionsa realized it was a chance to gain her brother's trust with some real intelligence. She closed the door slowly, lifting it slightly by the handle as she pushed it close. When the door was lifted, it turned silently on the hinge. Jionsa had practiced when she needed to go to toilet at night. Grandmother snored the loudest when she just fell asleep. She shouldn't be awakened. Jionsa tiptoed toward the kitchen, stood in the shade beside the door.

"Wait until the rice is cooked." That was Mother. "He'd be in no place to say no anymore."

"You should expect better of your son," Grandmother said with contempt.

A brief silence. "Right," Mother said, "What if so?"

Grandmother said nothing. The half broken conversation left Jionsa in a foggy mess. What cooked rice? Did they even drag Pyieng into this? What if Fuu family was in it also? Brother probably was being forced into Pyieng's bride chamber right now. It was too late. Jionsa took a step farther into the darkness. She had to stop them. This wasn't right.

"So blunt," Grandmother spoke again. Jionsa froze and listened. "You think Fuu Granny would sit there when her precious granddaughter isn't home all night? You just wait for her to come."

"I'm not stupid, Mother." Souyuen raised her tone. "I know how to deal with her."

“Right. How?”

“We keep this secret and get them married. Happiness for everyone,” Souyuen said.

Jionsa was more than confused. Pyieng wasn't home? Where could she be? The simple thing she knew she had to do now was to save Mee from this scheme. She knew, though vaguely, if she let this happen to Mee, she would probably follow his path and would have to marry a man who chewed with his mouth open. She took another step back, and tiptoed back to her room.

With the trick again, she closed the door, and opened it again, and let it creak as loud as she could. She marched across the hall while unzipping her coat and let loose her braided hair.

To argue with Mother and Grandmother was pointless. There was one left who would listen. The light of Father's room was still on. Jionsa went into Father's bedroom.

Father was sitting beside his desk reading a book. Father's reading was always dedicated to Chairman's different selections or some red books. Jionsa believed it was Father who planted the seed of book loving in her. “Father.” Jionsa closed the door behind.

“Still not in bed? What are you doing?”

“I'm worried about Brother.”

“Ten o'clock. Not so late, daughter. No worries.”

“But he went home with Pyieng, will he come back?” It was more like a

rhetorical question. She couldn't look into Father's eyes. At this crucial moment, she doubted her quality of doing this.

"What makes you think he won't be back?" Liongtan put down the book, his eyes blinking with a smile.

"Fuu family wanted him as a son-in-law," Jionsa said.

Liongtan laughed and slapped his knee. "You're a big girl. But your brother is a righteous man—and a soldier. Who could force him stay?"

"I know. I think he surely doesn't want to marry now."

"How come you know?" Father smiled even brighter. His straight teeth formed a perfect crescent. A friendly smile. It couldn't discourage Jionsa more, for it was distrust under the cover of parental love. It was the well-intended mind that hurt most. In their eyes Jionsa was still a kid, and a girl. There was nothing she could accomplish yet. She looked at the smile which expelled all her courage she had gathered up in front of Brother's sunken pillow.

"I . . . just know."

"Right. Jionsa, you are too young for this. See, your brother doesn't have to marry right now. Law regulates that men marry only after twenty-two. But that Pyieng Sister is a good girl. It's not a bad idea they know each other." He gave a tender pat on Jionsa's arm, and opened his book again. There was nothing more to say, the gesture was obvious enough. Jionsa left the room. When she closed the door, she saw Mother standing in the kitchen door with her arm crossed in front of her chest, leaning against the door frame. Her face was hidden in shadow.

“Still not in bed? Go to sleep, ghost girl.”

She obeyed silently and went to bed without taking off her coat. The sense of mission kept her awake. She took out the hand-copied book she hid under the mattress. Holding her fantasy, Jiongsa felt her broken courage slowly come back from the darkness, thick and heavy as feathers that wouldn't let her fly. She closed her eyes and thought of Weijia she met the other day, and the lingering smile and the puzzling words of his. Jiongsa thought of Xee Brother who had left the family for college in the city. And the neat envelopes he sent home every month with carefully smoothed cash in it. Maybe she could get away like Xee did, then earn her own life, and pick her husband by herself. Everything would work out just fine. She closed her eyes and touched the water flask with her feet. It was so hot that she flinched. Jiongsa turned around, facing the window. Nothing came inside through that. She fell asleep.

When Jiongsa was hanging in half dreaming half imaging, a blast of banging startled her up. The sense of urgency it conveyed was obvious and clear. She sat up. No one else was in the room. Vague light came in from the living room. She heard Mother calling out, “Coming!” There was rustling sounds of a chair, and then steps.

“As expected, but earlier,” Grandmother's voice passed by the door.

The pounding went on. Mother unlatched the door, “Coming! I said.”

The red door's hinge groaned. And an unfamiliar voice rushed in with chaotic footsteps. “Souyuen. Grandma.” It was an anxious voice with audible dryness. Jiongsa could see the chapped lips coming at her.

“Fuu Granny?” Mother's surprised voice. “What's wrong? It's already—”

“Pyieng girl here?” The old hoarse voice interrupted, panting.

Before any answer came, Jionsa heard Father’s door opened. “What’s this?”

“Aiya, Pyieng girl didn’t go home. She’s not here?” The worrying old voice again.

“Mee sent her back.”

“Send a ghost. I didn’t see anyone.” The old woman raised her tone.

“What?” Father raised his even higher.

Jionsa couldn’t sit tight anymore. She jumped out of the bed and went into the living room. The big gate was open; the porch lamp was on. Her family and the guests stood by the gate in a circle. Each one’s face looked like some summoning ritual went wrong. Father stood next to Mother, his coat draped around the shoulder. Coldness bent his back. He tried to stamp it away. His hands held the opposite sleeves that wrapped across each other in front of him. Mother and Grandmother wore the same face of surprise—rounder eyes, half opened mouth, and lifting eyebrows. Mother had a hand on Fuu’s arm, who was now a complicated mess of anger, fear, and suspicion. She had a wooden cane with her. The old witchy hand of hers swung the cane unconsciously. A young boy was with her, too, who was about the same age—maybe a little younger—as Jionsa. He stood there silently, head raised up and looking at Father, almost crying. He didn’t seem like a farmer’s kid. His light complexion and clean tender face was quiet. There seemed no strength in him.

Jionsa joined them, buttoning up her coat. Mother saw her and gave her an impatient look. Like a cat eyeing a dead mouse. She quickly turned her head back to



Fuu, while the old woman yelled, “They’re not back!”

“No need to yell,” Grandmother said, “Sit down and let them go find people.”

“Who’s gonna sit here? I’m going to find her myself.”

Jiongsa stood there, like the young boy, and had no chance to speak. It all seemed obvious to her. She glanced at the boy. He happened to look at her. He had soft eyes, almost teary.

“Who are you?” Jiongsa asked.

“Pyieng’s my sister,” he said, with a slightly trembling voice.

“They could be at the broadcast house,” Liongtan said, firmly, hoping inside his heart that his son hadn’t done anything unredeemable. It was time for him to take charge of the situation. “Jiongsa, you come with me. We’re going to find them. Grandma, wait here.” He looked at the boy, and asked, “How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“You afraid? No? Come with me.”

“No way.” Fuu grabbed the boy by the arm, and yanked him back farther from Liongtan. “This is my only grandson. He’s not going. I’m going with you.”

“You can walk O.K.?” Liongtan asked; and she nodded. “Good.” He turned to fetch the flashlight.

## **EIGHT—Rumor Kills**

“What?” Pyieng held the flashlight up to see the bolt. It was unlatched. She dragged the door inward. A seam opened in between. The chain was hanging outside, shining weakly under the light, with a peddle lock swaying side to side, making the chain click impatiently.

“We were locked inside. What ghost did that?” The anger of Mee finally burst out with his loud voice. He felt like an insect played by an incomprehensible hand. He pulled the door again. The seam was too thin; to lock it from inside was impossible. He let go of it. The door silenced after a faint creak. In anger, he yanked it again. The loud voice startled the girl standing aside. Her vague shadow flinched slightly in the darkness. She was inside the room the whole time. It couldn’t be her. Mee had his guess; one that himself didn’t want to think about. It was like an arrow that pierced him. Could it be Mother?

“What did you hear just now?” Mee commanded, like a lion demanding respect of its authority.

“I . . .” She steadied herself. “I didn’t do it. I don’t know who did it!”

True. She sounded genuine. What was good for her to be locked here with Mee? Ruining her own reputation might be the last thing a woman ever wanted. She’d never be able to marry above. Who would like to wear a suspicious used shoe, even if it was merely legendarily used?

Mee asked for the flashlight, and searched around the house. Every window was barred. The only other door that opened to a narrow yard between the house and the cliff was locked from outside too. Mee didn't think he'd needed it open in anyways, for behind there was the outdoor bathroom. Since no one lived here, the parts for daily life were abandoned. No wood or coal was inside. The electric lever was still disconnected. No lights, nor fire. The sweat in his rear collar started to feel cold.

"We can't wait like this," Mee said, mostly to himself.

Pyieng answered still, "Maybe we should wait for people to come. Your bike is still outside, isn't it?"

"Ye—" No way, Mee thought, and rushed to the equipment room. The panel window was closed. He groped for the latch and dragged it open. It was dark. The moonlight-veiled village was tranquilly sleeping. He shined the front gate with the flashlight. The bicycle was gone. "That pig-fucked!" He yelled. The darkness consumed the sound with Mee's anger. No one would hear them in this isolated house. From the living room came a slight sound of a shoe rubbing the coarse floor, once. He walked back to Pyieng. "Are you alright?"

"Em."

"Alright. Give me a hand. I'm gonna go up there and check out the roof."

He put a chair on the desk, and climbed it. Pyieng watched as Mee rose on the chair, trying to balance himself. The dim flashlight portrayed just the right portion of his braveness in a vague color. No hatred, no impatient look, no yelling. But he couldn't reach the beam. He looked down at her. She felt the warmth of caring

flowing down from above. His thin delicate lips were licked twice, which glowed in the spotlight.

“Now hold the chair tight.”

“What . . .” Before Pyieng could finish her words, a quiver passed from the chair to her hands. A grunt came, not a pretty sound, but full of strength. She looked up. Pyieng could see the muscle bulging with that sound. Mee was hanging on the beam with both his hands gripping the thick square wood. With another grunt, he swung one leg up. The happiness Pyieng felt during that moment was more than she would convey. It was like a rabbit jumping in her stomach, a fire torching her cheeks. She didn’t dare to let go the chair. With her waist leaning against the desk, her upper body unsupported, and hands on the chair to hold it, she felt happy—with this awkward post. She stood there still, for the happiness to linger a bit longer.

“Hold still, comrade.”

“Yes,” she said, almost giggled, when Mee fell on the chair from above. Only one foot targeted the chair, the other one brought him right down on the desk. He lost balance, and fell on the ground with a muffled cry.

“Ahya, stand up, here.” Pyieng dragged him up. Her hand touched the upper arm of Mee. Through the cotton stuffed coat, the firm touch of his meat was like static electricity discharge. As she hesitated, Mee got up himself.

“I’m alright.” Mee rubbed his knee. “No way up there. The roof was reinforced somehow.” They were now upside down turtles, waving their four feet in vain. Every possible way exhausted, Mee started to blame himself. He should have locked the

bicycle. Thinking twice, it wasn't possible—its key was with Father. He felt even worse. It was Father's favorite thing, allocated to him when he was assigned his current position. This couldn't be of Mother's hand. She knew enough how it would exasperate Father if his bicycle was missing.

Mother wasn't totally innocent, though. Mee's instinct wouldn't let it go. He couldn't stop wondering what this was all about, if Mother did it. To make him getting married? He wouldn't. Mee was in love. There was a girl waiting for him, young and worthy of protection, different from the one who sat in front of him in the darkness—much more tender and soft, understanding, polite than Pyieng. She had a deer's crystal innocent eyes and petal-touched blushing cheeks. She was so distant, yet so close—like the sixteen-year-old girl living next door, who one faithfully believed that to watch her come back from school with the twin-tails dancing on her shoulders would be the most delicious thing to do. He plugged his left hand into his pocket, searching for something. But it was empty.

“Are you alright?” Pyieng suddenly asked.

“Hmm.”

Mee felt guilty of thinking about the girl. The young woman sitting in front of him was suffering; that he could tell. Her pure presence irritated him simply because she was against his true love, though in a subtle way. Mee toasted the thing over again. Maybe if Mother knew there was a girl he liked, she would give up Pyieng.

He imagined introducing her to Mother, she would like her. She had a sweet tongue. Like a lark, she could sing and praise. Her insightful eyes were meant for

everyone's merits. There was one thing of her that was most attractive—her light aura of blue when she was sitting alone in the shadow. It was somehow familiar, as if Mee had known her for a long time. Mee couldn't figure out why she had chosen him. He was a grain of sand on the beach. She deserved the rising moon in-between the blue clouds, and the colorful coral near the shore, and also the amusing tiny soldier crabs. Yet she had chosen him, the one simple cook in the kitchen. She liked his food and the generosity plus friendliness he offered the art troupe she was in. Mee smiled and sighed.

Love made Mee's world bigger, yet smaller.

"What are you thinking?" Pyieng asked again.

"Nothing." Mee was brought back to the dark present. The cold feeling—so did the pain in his knee—invaded immediately after his colorful memories about that girl was driven out by Pyieng's rough voice. He was under her surveillance. Mee stopped smiling. The flashlight was already turned off to save batteries for emergency. But he felt naked, even in such darkness, as if Pyieng was enjoying his memories with him. He felt her eyeing him, criticizing him. "I'm not thinking anything."

"You are a fine comrade," she suddenly said. "I don't mind being locked here with you."

Mee didn't respond. He was reminded that she was also the potential victim of this case. If tomorrow morning some villager came by and spotted them inside, she was ruined for good. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Not your fault."

“If tomorrow, people other than our families come, don’t ask them for help,”

Mee said.

She thanked him and kept silent from then on. He felt she was satisfied by his apology. Was that what she wanted? She wasn’t asking much. It had to be midnight now. Who would come for us? Mee thought again about Mother. Wasn’t she worried that he was locked here?

“Mee, listen.” Pyieng raised her head up from her arms. “Someone’s coming.”

There were people talking, several footsteps approaching the house. Mee stood up, picking up the flashlight. The cold metal handle cleared his mind. “*Shhu*. Sit here,” he whispered, and walked toward the broadcast room. The window was closed to keep warm. He knelt down and peeped outside the window. The small group approaching was yet too far to see clear. They had flashlights in hand. He opened the window for a thin gap for a clearer view.

“Bike isn’t there.” It was Mother’s sound. Mee peeped again. There were four people. Who was Mother with?

“Almost there, don’t quarrel.” That was Father.

“Pyieng is my Granddaughter!” an old voice yelled back.

“It’s Grandma!” Pyieng’s voice came in from the living room. She stood up, the chair scraped against the floor.

“You sure?”

“It is.” She came to him and stood by the window. But neither did anything. Both had no idea what should they do to make things seem all right for the people coming

to rescue. The voice was closer. Mee heard Mother saying, "I told you the bike wasn't here. See."

"Not for sure," the old woman said, stamping her cane on the stone stair in front of the door.

"Grandma?"

The group was silenced by the female voice. The cane stopped in the air. The waning moon hung in the half sky. The winter night of the village was muted for the single line that follows, "Pyieng, you inside?"

Then a light shined from inside the window, beckoning the four people to it.

"Grandma, I'm here. Mee is here too. We were locked inside."

"You O.K.?" Fuu's voice sounded a little choked.

"We are fine. It's not so cold here. We had dinner."

"Father, here is the key." A hand stuck out. "The switch is off. Turn it back on."

"What? Why you turn off the switch, you rogue." The cane was raised and being thrust toward the window. Souyuen led out a short cry and tried to grab Fuu's hand. The cane hit the iron bar of the window.

"Oh, Grandma, please!" Liongtan called out as he put the electric lever back in place. The porch light flashed a while and came on, so did the living room light. He unlocked the door. The two poor prisoners were free and came out of the cage.

"Miengmieng, you came too." Pyieng reached her arm to the young boy who stood under the light.

"Emm, I rode the bike," he answered, smiling proudly, which wasn't worth



mentioning compared to the smile he had on his face after he heard Pyieng praised him “a man.”

The old grandmother trotted to them. “Pyieng, you alright?” She grabbed her granddaughter with both hands, looking at her like a recovered pearl. She turned Pyieng around, brushed her back with her trembling hand. “Good.”

“I’m good. Nothing happened.” Pyieng smiled bitterly at the meaningless motion of her grandma. She looked at Miengmieng apologetically.

“Nonsense!” Fuu looked at Mee. “You didn’t touch my girl?”

“Grandma!” Pyieng, embarrassed, pulled the old woman’s arm, trying to draw her away, only to be silenced by Fuu with an angry stare and a shake of shoulder that threw off her grip.

“My granddaughter was locked alone with you inside this place. I don’t care who—” a peer to Souyuen and Liongtan, “—did that. And I don’t care whether you—” a glare to Mee, “—did anything or not. My girl’s reputation can’t be stained,” she said with such strength that each word sounded like a nail hammered into a wood board. She was a furious dragon. The white hair that stuck out of her hat trembled like an antenna.

“Grandma,” Pyieng called again. She couldn’t even hear her own voice.

“To the side with your brother.” Fuu rolled her eyes again—she was an expert at this.

“Fuu Granny, don’t be so harsh. Everything is negotiable,” Liongtan ventured.

“No way. Nothing negotiated.” The old woman stamped her cane again. It was

like a wand that commanded people as the master wanted rather than a plain stick that support an old, trembling body. Everyone was silent.

“Alright, Fuu Granny, what do you want us to do?” Liongtan compromised, though still with a suppressed anger. His responsibility as a son of an old woman kept him patient with this hag. Maybe it was also because he saw her wipe her eyes when she learned Pyieng was O.K.—there was softness of a mother in this old woman. Liongtan didn’t hate the girl too. He had a natural favor for those who were diligent and honest.

“I know Pyieng likes your son. A good girl she is. A good match they would make.” The old woman started, looking at Liongtan right into his eyes, and leaned closer. The crochet flower aside the rim of her hat dangled loosely with each of her word. “You, son, should better let your boy marry my granddaughter. Or we’ll walk and see.”

“What . . .” The crease between Mee’s brows quickly moved to his forehead. He, mouth half opened, gasped at this old woman. “But I . . .”

“Shut up,” Liongtan commanded. “We can’t make this decision now. Our boy’s still under twenty-two. He can’t get married now.”

“Ghosts to the law. I don’t care when they get certified, the ceremony can go first.”

“Grandma, I like Pyieng. She’s a good girl. But it is my son who’s marrying, not me. He should decide who to marry. What do you say?”

Everyone looked at Mee. Anger and embarrassment filled him. He was now

merely a ridiculed child who no one was willing to rescue. The arteries in his temples jumped as if they were on fire. His quick white breath spread out in the air wave after wave. They were waiting for him. Souyuen tried to take his hand—what she always did when she tried to persuade him to obey whatever requests of hers. Father's knitted brows were expecting an answer that would save his pride, the family's reputation—not Mee's own. Pyieng, who stood outside the door in the freezing air, hugged her young brother in her arms, gently rubbing his back to keep him warm. She was all ears, waiting for the final judgment to be sentenced.

It was more than anger. Mee was wrapped inside the huge moral net of being a virtuous son and man. He saw his girl's face with an encouraging smile. Mee felt heroic. He was defending her, his true love, who had taught him that to do what he wanted was the happiness of life.

"I can't," he said eventually.

Under the dim lamp that hung under the beam, chaos broke out. "What did you say?" The old woman struck the young man's lap with her cane. Souyuen jumped in and tried to grab it, only this time it gave the target a heavy strike.

"You unfilial brat!" Souyuen turned her head, barely managing to hold the end of the cane, and saw Liongtan's angry face. She saw his lower eyelid twitch. Slap. He hit Mee in the face and yelled "You son of a—"

"No! No." Souyuen let go the cane. The old woman tumbled back but didn't fall. She saw Souyuen throw herself upon Mee like a ball bounced on the floor and wrapped Mee's shoulder with her arms. Like a huge tumor, she attached to him,

blocked Liongtan's rage. "Don't you hit my son, you old—"

"Stop, you all stop!" A tender voice yelled at its top volume, full of girly softness. The four people struggling together looked toward the door. Miengmieng stood in the light, his red face full of tears. The shadow of his eyelashes couldn't hide his anxiety. His left arm straightened, pointing at the road that went off the slope. "Pyieng Sister had run off!"

## NINE—The Arbitrary Match Making

Everything worked out just fine. Though Mee's left cheek was still red after being slapped by Liongtan, though the whole night was wasted on meaningless argument, though Fuu had saluted them with the most malicious words, it was still a great morning. Quiet and clear. The sun was yet to rise. Liongtan and Mee came back on the ragged bicycle.

It was found half a mile away in a ditch beside the road, the rear fender was crooked. Several spokes were broken. The chain dangled loosely on the gear beside the derailleur like the tail of a defeated animal. "Pig-fucked. I'm gonna kill him if I know who did this." Liongtan kicked a fist-sized rock off the road and lifted the bicycle out of the ditch bare-handed. When Mee offered to help, he snapped, "Hands off it."

Now that the bicycle was found—thanks to the red rear light under the seat—conjectures about a theft was made. He might have locked the two in the studio after he stole the bike in case they would chase him.

For Souyuen, it wasn't challenging to calm Liongtan's rage. Simply say that it was the wacko living beyond the northwest col that did all these. He wouldn't go after him. Liongtan pitied him. The lunatic was born insane, couldn't talk even when he was three. His father was killed in the war, his mother raised him singlehandedly. That poor woman was found dead naked below a blooming camellia tree. Each and every

flower was ripped off the tree and scattered on the ground, over her body. It was 1968. After that her son was like a horse without rein, kicking and trying to destroy every red object he could find. Liongtan wouldn't blame him for what happened to his bicycle.

When they found Pyieng after they got the bicycle, she was squatting beside the road not far from the village, crying. She fell on her knees and scraped her pants when she ran away. The cotton stuck out from it trembled with her sobs like the ears of a furious and frightened little prey. She raised her face at her brother, who sprinted to her as soon as they spotted her, and whined even louder, "I don't want to be sold like commodities."

"You!" Fuu trotted to her and squatted down. She murmured along Pyieng's ears and quieted her down.

They were sent home by Liongtan and Mee, though Fuu was still pulling a long donkey face. When Souyuen got back home, it was almost four o'clock. Grandmother was waiting in the living room with the stove at its usual place. The light was off, and the almost invisible red charcoal light shimmered on the bottom of Grandmother's shoes. Souyuen turned on the light. Grandmother was looking at her in the eyes like an eagle looking at its prey. "It's done?"

"It is," Souyuen answered, avoiding Grandmother's look.

"Nothing he did to her?"

"No."

"Told you. How's Fuu Granny taking it?"

“Not good. But the marriage is a sealed thing.”

“Good.” Having said that, Grandmother stood up and went into her room. Her back bent, she moved slowly like a snail, with a heavy burden on her shoulders. Her shaking hands waved slightly beside her as she moved. Souyuen looked at her, thinking of making her a cane. Finally the door was closed. Souyuen covered the stove and went into her room.

When Liongtan and Mee came home, it was six in the morning. Souyuen was awake already, and was cooking porridge in the kitchen. The pot on the briquette stove was boiling thick and sweet rice milk. Plus a plate of mini fish, and some pickled and spiced cowpea, it would be a fine breakfast.

“You’re back. Come sit here. I’m cooking porridge.” Two chairs were set there deliberately. Liongtan sat down without a word, and then Mee. For a while no one talked. Souyuen was thinking about what Pyieng said when she was found. The whole picture was easy to figure out with the young boy there. He was a canary, the tip of Fuu Granny’s heart. His fine fingers were free from heavy works—he wasn’t trained as a farmer. Fuu certainly had been planning for this prince’s school. Pyieng’s bride-price could settle it all. Fast and convenient. Girls were like disposable chopsticks.

“Hasn’t Fuu Granny another granddaughter?” Souyuen asked suddenly.

“I guess. Why?” Liongtan answered.

“Nothing.” She removed the lid of the build-in water tank. A cloud of mist rose up to her face. “Water’s good. Go wash up, both of you.”

Mee went. Liongtan stayed. He took out the bulldog clip, and played with it. The clicking sound made Souyuen nervous. Time to play this, she thought.

“What are you thinking?” Souyuen asked.

“Is this merely a coincidence?” Liongtan asked back. He looked at the clip, didn’t stop clicking its blades.

“I don’t know.” Souyuen sighed, managing a calm voice. “Do you think the thief saw them inside the house?”

“I hope not.”

“Who do you think did this?” she managed a careful tone.

“I don’t know.”

“That Pyieng girl, she is so nice. It’s a shame what happened yesterday.”

“I don’t like her grandma.” Liongtan put the clip away and got up to wash his face.

The porridge was ready. Souyuen bent over to a protruded round cap at the bottom of the range. It had three holes on it which let air into the stove. She turned it until the last hole was half covered, and took the porridge out to the living room. Grandma was sitting at her usual place.

“Mother, when did you get up?” The old woman didn’t answer her. Souyuen set down the pot and walked toward Grandmother. She didn’t button up her coat. The stove was cold with the lid on. “Mother, you would get cold. Come have some porridge.” She helped Grandmother up to the table.

“There’s something I must do,” the old woman said, but wouldn’t explain when



Souyuen asked what she meant.

Ten minutes later, everyone was at the dining table. The atmosphere was somewhat awkward, as if someone just farted and all were too polite to ask.

Grandmother and Souyuen exchanged several meaningful looks, each wanting the other one to start the conversation.

“What you doing?” Liongtan gulped down the porridge left in his bowl. The loud slurp announced his annoyance. Jionsa stood up and finished her food; she left her seat and sent her bowl and chopsticks to the kitchen.

“Come back, girl,” Liongtan commanded.

Jionsa came back silently. She hated this. It had to be followed by a conversation full of the smell of gun powder. She sat there anyways. She didn't know what had happened yesterday night. The whole family held their faces calm as if nothing had happened, that meant everything had happened.

“Mee, say, what do you want to do?” Liongtan asked calmly. Everyone at the table knew this question had only one answer. Liongtan wouldn't decide for his son. Yet to let Mee understand that doing the right thing for family honor was what he had to do.

“I can't marry Pyieng.” Mee knew what Father was asking for, thought he would never say it directly out. Before he met his girl, he might have obeyed—it was the reputation of this house and he had to protect it. But now he believed he should do the right thing for himself. Maybe not everything, only the big things, like the lifelong decision of whom to be with.

“Why?” Souyuen asked. She thought this game was checkmated. It suddenly seemed not so sure again. Mee dared to go against Liongtan, this was new to her. She looked at Grandmother who sat picking the cowpea beans out of the pod before she put it into her bowl. Why was she doing that? Souyuen stared while the old woman mixed the cowpea pod into her porridge.

“No why, I don’t like her,” Mee answered. To tell his family about his girl was harder than he imagined. Those words were toasted again and again on the tip of his tongue, but it was never hot enough to jump out.

“Then what about that girl? Eh? You just destroyed her reputation. And you want no responsibilities?” Liongtan asked.

“I didn’t touch her alright? How’s her reputation destroyed if no one talks.”

“You were locked together, son. That doesn’t need rumor, it was fact.”

“She likes you, Mee,” Souyuen added.

“She’s a good girl,” Liongtan added. “Her grandmother is too crafty, but not her fault.”

Jiongsa wasn’t happy. The secret she discovered yesterday was now useless. No chips for her in the game. She couldn’t reconcile to this situation. The feeling of power she just obtained was deprived without her acknowledgement. The slightly annoying sulkiness inside her opened her mouth for her. “Why don’t you ask if there is anyone Brother likes if you all wanted him to get married so fast?”

Mother and Father gulped. Grandmother was drinking her porridge. The bowl covered her face. Mee leaned his shoulder toward Jiongsa, full of unbelievable doubt.

“Is that true?” Souyuen asked.

Liongtan waved his wife silent, and said with his patriarchal authority, “Jiongsa, not now.” He put both wrists on the rim of the table. “Mee, you are responsible for this situation. This is not the case of who you like now.”

Grandmother put down her bowl. She always stirred the porridge until it cooled down, and added in whatever was the most salty thing on the table, then mixed them before she drank all in one drink. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve, and sniffed.

“Mother, what . . . Don’t cry Mother.” Liongtan got up from his chair quickly and went to attend Grandmother. His temper always could be melted with a woman’s weeping, especially Mother’s. Sitting between Liongtan and Mee, the old woman utilized her ultimate weapon, the weakness of a female, the softness of a mother, a grandmother, and the humble final wish of a dying elder.

“I just want to see you all grow up healthy and settle down in a marriage nicely. Don’t disappoint Grandma.”

Mee felt his heart stopped for that second. He was the beloved grandson of her. The wisdom she harbored was the nourishment of his childhood. Her lap was the playground for him and Xee. Her pocket was their snack sack. She was the stubborn nurse beside their sick beds that wouldn’t go to sleep. Mee heard of the sacrifices she made for the family, and knew to respect her and her wishes was the ultimate principle under this roof. He hesitated. The strength of doing the right thing seemed less strong in front of this powerful old woman.

“I do . . . have a girl that I like,” Mee confessed, thinking if this was all about

getting him married, then things were negotiable.

“What?” Liongtan glared at him.

“Father, let me finish. I like this girl. I don’t want to marry Pyieng.”

“Where is she?” Souyuen asked. Liongtan held his crossed arms on the table and pushed a disapproval humph out of his nose.

“She is in Guangdong. I’m waiting for her to write back. I can wait for her.”

“Wait? What are you talking about?” Souyuen asked.

“She . . . is seventeen now.”

“That is not going to happen, Son,” Liongtan yelled, pausing between each word.

“I’m going to propose for you to Pyieng right after New Year. And you have two weeks to say goodbye to that young chick.”

## TEN—The Turtle in the Bottle

Mee had sat there in front of the desk for the whole morning now. The screen door was left shut which veiled the vague shape that remained silent in the room. Jiongsa drew closer to the screen door, trying to see if he was writing again. The blackened dirty screen did her no favor. The light came in through the window before him. Like a Buddha, he was surrounded by lights. What was he meditating?

Jiongsa felt regretful. If it wasn't she who, in her unreasonable eagerness for that momentary gratification, gave out her brother's secret, Father might not rage like that. She dragged herself back to the fire, and sat beside Mother.

“What's he doing?”

Jiongsa shook her head slightly, not willing to speak. The reluctance of talking to Mother and the curiosity of craving for what happened yesterday night was tearing her apart.

“Mother,” knowing Jiongsa wouldn't talk, Souyuen turned to Grandmother, “Button your coat up. You'll be sick.”

It was cold today, Jiongsa thought. The house was cold too. Father went out to town for some trifles. The absence of his rage cooled things down, somehow. Jiongsa had never seen this house like this—as if the warm yellow tinged tone of the old photo disappeared under the lightening in a horrible rainy night. The eagerness to get away from this chilling place grew even stronger, however, the fire in front of her kept

her from leaving. It was obvious she wouldn't last long away from it.

“What on earth is Mee doing?” Souyuen asked, meaninglessly, not caring whether she was going to get answers or not. Grandmother still left her coat open, exposing her V-necked sweater, which had several tiny worm holes in front. The yarns were loose like an old bird's shabby feather.

“Where is your blanket, Mother?” Souyuen asked again. The old woman shook her head. It obviously irritated Souyuen. She dragged her legs away from Grandmother, and looked outside. No sunlight today, the sky was a dead pale. Liongtan went to town to get some presents for the Fuu family. As long as he was supporting this marriage—no matter what causes were his—Souyuen had what she wished.

The only thing she was confused about was the girl Jionsa mentioned. Since when did Mee start to have secrets? Between him and his sister rather than mother? When he was young, his childish but pure love dedicated to Souyuen was the sparkling charm on the rough chain of her life. The bamboo whistle he made her when he was seven could play out the singing of a summer bird. He gave it to her as a precious present. It was the best of his whistles. He made her smile blowing a camphor leaf—she never figured out where he learned that—it made such a resounding high-pitched sound, like a crane that cried out for joy soaring into the high sky. Because she could not keep her fingers unharmed on the cutting board, Mee picked up the wok and the ladle. It was all about her, Souyuen believed.

Yet the fact that the grown-up son now had secrets against her was torturous.

Souyuen stared at the stove. There was no other sound besides the popping charcoal. She leaned forward to Jionsa and kicked the girl's heel with her toe. She looked up at Souyuen with a typical annoyed face. That would be dealt with later, Souyuen thought, and pouted toward Mee's room. With a low voice she said to the daughter, "Go see what your brother's doing."

"Why me?"

"Go. He won't be angry with you."

Tutting her tongue, Jionsa stood up and went. That ghost girl. Souyuen could see that she wouldn't ever be like Lieng or Mamao. She was always the thorny rose, the overloaded *peileng*, the iced winter night tea—nothing close to pleasure.

The faint sound of the conversation leaking out of the room was too low, like a mosquito humming—annoying. It made Souyuen sleepy. She stood up and said to Grandmother carelessly, "Want some tea?"

"Sesame and pea, more ginger," the old woman answered quickly.

"Ginger?" That wasn't Grandmother's usual request. She despised strange spices other than hot chili pepper, and she made it clear. Ginger was evil, because it burned the throat instead of the tongue—such an insidious villain who avoided confronting the taste buds.

"Triple ginger," Grandmother added.

Souyuen gave her a puzzled look. "Too much ginger will make you sick, Mother." There on the old woman's face was a dead peace, a strange sacredness, the sense of mission knitted between her slightly frowned brows. Her coat was still unbuttoned.

She left it that way as if she was giving away something from that wide opening.

Souyuen went on to boil the water and ground ginger.

“Why can’t you just leave? I don’t like you marrying that woman either.”

At Jionsa’s serious questioning, Mee squeezed out a dry and complicated laugh.

“You’re such an adorable doll. You don’t know what is like out there.”

“Where.”

“Anywhere. Everywhere.”

“Don’t know what you are talking about.” Jionsa turned herself half away from Mee. She saw his bed squatted along the end of her and Grandmother’s bed, untouched since yesterday’s early night. The bronze hot water flask was still hidden under the quilt like a lump. A hurting fact disturbed Jionsa. The hot water was all wasted, she thought, yet there was no one to blame. No real justice to be announced, especially under this roof, where everything was submitted to family honor—which was built according to old rules that dated maybe back to the old feudal society. Wasn’t she living in a new China now? The stale, superstitious, and bureaucratic atmosphere filled the house, the village. Jionsa longed for fresher air.

“So you just gonna marry her, play the game along with Father and Mother?”

“I’m not.” Mee sounded weak. He licked his lips. His hair was greasy and stuck together. A stack of writing paper left untouched on the table between his elbows. The pen was nowhere to be found. He seemed crumpled on the big chair that belittled this grown-up soldier.



“Anyway, it is yours to decide,” Jionsga said. Her words immediately brought up a bitter yet scornful half-humph-half-laugh from Mee. She looked at him like a proud peacock, and added sulkily, “O.K. you no-guts, coward, just let them play you.”

“How dare you talk to your brother like that, ah?” a low but strong, sonorous voice called out from behind. Jionsga turned around and saw Father standing there like a giant—though he was scarcely one-hundred-sixty-seven centimeters—with paper packed goods hooked on his fingers with straws. No one talked for a moment. Souyuen walked in and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Say sorry to your brother, Jionsga.”

“Why, I’m not wrong.”

“You are being impolite, Jionsga. Say sorry!”

“Sorry,” reluctantly, she murmured. Justice was defeated again. She held her tears stubbornly with her lips pursed together thin. Her large round eyes seemed pretty with that watery shininess. But she dared not make any more sound. The desire of escaping soared up from her chest, suffocating her. This was unfair. She was being treated like a kid. A bad girl she was. No one needed her advice. If she could grow up a bit stronger, she could leave the house like Xee Brother did. And it would be another story.

“Now go out.”

Jionsga left the room under command. Now it was the arena of parents and son. Souyuen saw it clearly how it would play out. Now Mee had nowhere to escape.

“Mee, come with me to Fuu Granny’s house to apologize for yesterday.”

“Why, that wasn’t my fault.” Mee stood up from the chair and stood beside it. The padlock on the drawer touched his waist. She was inside the drawer—all the correspondences between Mee and his girl during the years he was in the camp. They were encouraging him. Mee was ready for this final battle. He stood straighter, and more confident.

“It was our—” Liongtan paused and gave Souyuen a heavy look, “—fault.”

“What was to look at me? I’ve nothing to do with it.” Souyuen stepped aside a bit. The look almost gave her a heart attack. Did he know? If he found out about the bicycle, Souyuen was more than sure she would be cooked. Yet she could not remember one single incident when Liongtan was angry enough to harm her. Her strength was built on his tolerance. She was the dodder that climbed up on the solid osmanthus tree parasitically.

“Don’t you think I forgot it was you who lured that old she wolf into our house.”

“Fuu Granny is relative of Mothers, not mine alright?”

No doubt Grandmother was the most solid shield against Liongtan’s spear. He turned again to Mee. “You come with me or not?”

“I’m not marrying her,” were Mee’s only words.

“Not fine enough.”

“I like this other girl. Why can’t I marry . . .”

“Yeah, seventeen and already hooking guys, very good for her.” Souyuen choked Mee’s words back.

“Mother, she is not a bad person.”

“Oh, now she’s seventeen. How old was she when she started to hook you, ha?”

“I . . .” Mee was out of bullet. He unconsciously reached out for the padlock as if it could refill his energy. He doubted. The girl was very young. What if she wasn’t mature enough to make the right decision? What if she would grow up realizing how stupid she was to be with a rustic man whose family was all feudal-minded. Then all these letters would be ridiculous mistakes. Maybe she already felt regret about her relationship with him. That’s maybe why she wan’t replying his mails. It had been two months now. Even if she sent her letters to the camp, Mee’s fellow comrades would have forward them here. Yet Mee hadn’t heard anything from her. The letters he wrote her were like stones sinking into the sea. His heart sank with them.

Souyuen could tell the good sign of defeat from Mee’s darkened face. The dropping corners of lips and down-cast eyes showed that he was unsettled in his heart. There her victory was. But suddenly, Mee looked up with a subtle curve of his lips.

Something was coming, Souyuen immediately recognized. The lights in Mee’s eyes weren’t usual. She leaned forward like a duck in a cage, stretching out its neck for more air. Her eyes narrowed as if it guaranteed her true vision into Mee’s head. She gripped the corner of her coat, and glimpsed Liongtan. He was rendering an aura of impatience and anger. The straw string sunk into his whitened palm. Souyuen recognized one paper pack as the fine brown paper of the sugar company. There surely were two kilograms of sugar here. He was really mad this time. It was a self-punishment to spend all that money on others, Souyuen believed. Then, she suddenly heard Mee say, “I am not of legal age, Mother.”

It gave her an involuntary laugh. She thought about what can drill a hole through Mee's hard elm head. Of legal age, did that even matter here? Mamao's husband's sister married with a fake name, probably a fake age also. Her mother just couldn't brag enough about it. The "elder sister" of Gueijie's, a neighbor, son was actually adopted as his future bride. She was merely ten, three years older than her husband-to-be. Gueijie told everyone that the girl was her cousin's daughter, and she was here only because it was near the school. However, rumors were all over the village soon as someone anonymous announced Gueijie had no cousin.

So the law said there should be neither human nor money trading in marriage. But who could deny that all brides' mothers had secretly in their heart a price for their daughter? Who could deny that in taking the betrothal gift the mother took her bribery as well? Fuu was selling Pyieng, was she not? What's the law to rule here? Souyuen roasted her laughter in her brain over and over again. With the curve lingering on her mouth, she looked at Liongtan, and saw him staring back at her with anger. The funny things she was thinking all went away at once.

"Don't look at me like that," Liongtan said.

"Oh."

"You are under-aged, son. We're not stupid." Liongtan turned again to the son.

"But this will be engagement, not marriage. We're not breaking the law."

"No, no engagement. I can apologize, but I don't have to marry her to apologize! I didn't touch her, alright?"

"No more of that, son. You left a stain on her reputation no matter what happened

inside there. You are gonna take that responsibility. And she is a good girl.”

“Father, that was old thoughts there. It is now a modern world, not some ancient old dynasty.”

“Shut up. What modern world. You young kids, just nothing rules you, ha? It is your responsibility!”

Jiongsa stepped away from the door. It was meaningless to listen to the repetitive argument which wouldn't take the family anywhere. Brother couldn't compromise; Father couldn't put down the family honor code; and mother pretended she had nothing to do with it.

She walked to the stove, and saw Grandmother dozing off in the chair. Her coat was wide open, an empty white enamel cup inside her hands, her head slightly nodding unconsciously. The loose skin of her chin trembled with a light snore. Jiongsa ventured to put her hand on Grandmother's shoulder. She seldom dared to since the complicated eyes of the old woman always gave her a chill. Grandmother liked the boys better, obviously. Her love was limited.

“Grandma, are you cold? I'll fetch you your blanket.”

She inhaled deeply as she heard Jiongsa and struggled to open her eyes. But her eye lids were stuck together by dry and yellow gum. She murmured “meh” and moved her bottom a bit. “Let me sleep.”

Jiongsa shuffled away to Souyuen's room. There was no blanket on the bed. She went on to pull out the quilt from Souyuen's bed. It was too heavy. Though unwilling, Jiongsa could only go to her own room to fetch Grandmother's blanket. It was made

by the old woman's skillful hands, cotton-stuffed, a little dirty. She always rolled it up to lean on it when she needed to sit up in bed.

Jiongsa opened Souyuen's bedroom door, and saw Grandmother lying on her left side on the ground. The chair fell down beside her, her head upon her left stretching arm, her right arm on her belly. Her palm half open, her hand trembling as if wind was playing with her fingers. She saw the white cup roll across the room, hit the threshold, and roll back slightly before stop inside a pit on the floor.

"Grandma?" Jiongsa sprinted to the old woman, held her shoulder and dragged her up from the floor. She was so heavy, an abnormal stiffness passed to Jiongsa's hands from under the cotton stuffed coat. "Father!" Jiongsa yelled. She tried to drag Grandmother up to the chair, but she slipped half out of the unbuttoned coat. A bad premonition hit her, as if Grandmother was falling down a cliff and Jiongsa could scarcely snatch her coat. She heard wind blowing up down the cliff into her eyes and vagued her vision. The room door opened. "Mother!" A heavy cry. She raised her head, watched as the three wild faces flying to her. The knitted eyebrows and the half opened mouths were like vengeful spirits'.

There was dust in the air. Jiongsa felt sweaty. The combination of the smell and the feeling disgusted her; it was the combination that belonged to summer afternoon's traveling road, and early autumn field working. Father knelt down beside Grandmother. His giant shadow blocked the light from the door. Summer and autumn were gone. Jiongsa heard yelling coming from all places. Before she could react, Mee yanked her aside to the door. The push was too fierce. She fell back like a ripe plum,

and dropped on the threshold. The black dog rushed toward her. Tail wagging like a fan. With a smart leap it got inside the house. The sparkling eyes looked up with care.

Jiongsa felt wronged. Tears circling inside her eyes, she watched as Father carried Grandmother into her room, followed by Mee and Mother.

Before the door was closed, Souyuen looked back and saw Jiongsa sat there, staring at her. She returned to her. Mother's half opened mouth gave her a stupefied face. "What happened?" Souyuen asked as she sat down.

"I, I don't know. I was getting Grandma a blanket. She fell asleep in the chair."

Souyuen said no more. The dog lay beside her feet. She kicked its belly and drove it outside the house. There, under the dog's tail, was the white enamel cup Grandmother used. She picked it up and walked to the end of the hall, and put it back to the tea shelf. The strong smell of ginger lingered in the air.

## **ELEVEN—Who Hasn't Been Young and Reckless**

It was a simple cold at first, then fever, then pneumonia. Grandmother's life was lingering on a string that tied to this world—in her own words, “grandchildren,” but for Jionsa “grandsons.” The increase of her sickness brought down the happiness of the precious New Year. No lucky coin in the dumpling anymore, lest Grandmother choked. No beef or lamb, nor dog meat, since these red meats were hot and would give patients inflammation and worsen the situation. Every dish was light and watery, which almost killed Jionsa who loved the spicy tastes in such a cold and wet winter. Spices were to expel the exceeded wetness from the body. Similarly ginger was to open the pores and let out the cold air from within. The triple ginger tea made Grandmother vulnerable. Ill aroma entered her through the opened pores.

Yet it was still a sacred New Year. The red candles and incenses that burned inside the bamboo tubes beside the door were doubled. Mother said it would please the ancestors and they would help Grandmother get better soon. The endless sound of the firecrackers on New Year's Day morning scared the black dog. It ran off from the slop east of the house beside the bamboo forests, up to the hills between the deep green pines and camphor trees. Father chased out and called it twice. Only more cracking fireworks answered him after some rustling sounds of the bushes and fallen leaves.

“Did you get it?” Jionsa said as she followed Liongtan out of the front yard.



He stood by the two wild pear trees, looking up to the top of the hill, and shook his head. "It'll be back. There were more people setting off firecrackers over there. Several aged ones buried on top and beyond the col. No worries." He walked with Jiongsa back to the house. "You haven't pasted the new couplet yet. Go on do it right now."

The couplet Jiongsa and Souyuen pasted four days ago was torn away, leaving only small pieces of triangular paper on the wall. When Liongtan mentioned the tombs beyond the col, it reminded Jiongsa immediately about the lunatic. Mother said the man had a thing for destroying red objects. It had to be him who torn the couplet. Father never dug further into these incidents.

Souyuen got some rice for Jiongsa to paste the couplet beside the door. A chore as easy as that didn't deserve more help from her. Because the boring atmosphere of this New Year, she was lazing away all the time. The ill Grandmother, the suspended marriage, the more than tasteless dishes—mostly the dog meat that was lifted from the New Year's feast menu, she was blue. "Forget it." Souyuen comforted herself. "It's hard to get anyways."

One thing that won her smile was that Xee was back from Jewdow—the big city where there were colleges and factories that made locomotives. Xee came back from the road that reached out from the chestnut and plum trees, on the west side of the house, exactly the same road where those *Zhiqings* came from years ago.

It was more than twenty years ago, on a sunny, early summer morning. The cool wind, the green woods, the blue firmament, the soft sunshine, everything was perfect.

Souyuen held Mee, who was just born, and was feeding him in front of the house, when the new secretary of the village led a party of five youngsters marching toward her.

“Souyuen!” Secretary Yang exclaimed, with an unusual ardent friendliness.

“Come to the meeting with your mother-in-law! We have guests!”

She promised to go and the secretary introduced the youngsters, but Souyuen heard nothing. Her senses were occupied by the unusual appearance of these people. One girl in white shirt among them had silky skin, shiny starry eyes. A tiny dark brown mole was under her left eye—a tear mole. A bad symbol, Souyuen thought. She would cry a lot in her life. Yet it made her delicate and adorable. A pair of silver bracelets was on each of her wrist.

Silver jewelry! Souyuen said to herself in awe. The round bracelets had a fine shimmer of metal, and were well-polished. Each bracelet had a tiny bell in the shape of lotus seed cup. They jingled as she moved toward her, like a pair of merry lark singing, like two innocent girls giggling about secrets.

Souyuen felt ashamed of her rough clothes and dirty plastic sandals that had a broken strap. The boy in her arms started to cry, as if feeling his mother’s uneasiness. As Souyuen cradled him, the girl with the bracelets stepped closer and said, “Cute baby.”

She didn’t venture to touch the boy, though she seemed want to. She jiggled her wrist slightly beside Mee. The tiny bell ringed like the spring water that tinkled, like pearls fell on a jade dish. Souyuen stared at the shining silver bracelet. It was in the

shape of a thing long fish that coiled around her slender wrist. The bell was connected to the fish's mouth. Mee's crying died down. The crowd stared at the white shirt girl with satisfying smiles as if they were to be praised for it too.

As they marched away, the young beautiful girl smiled and waved her hand at Souyuen. Souyuen's face blushed. She gave back a dry smile and slipped back into the house, in which she suddenly felt so grey and depressing.

That afternoon Souyuen and the family learned from the gathering that the five youngsters were *Zhiqings* sent down to their village under the command of the Party. The girl with the bracelets was Lin Jing.

"They need to be re-educated on the fruitful and passionate country land. Their knowledge made them weak in body, in will, in morality. They need our help," Secretary Yang repeated once again.

"These city people take our grain, they never plant anything, caterpillar," suddenly a woman in the crowd murmured. Souyuen was startled at the thought of the commenter. She had never considered the matter on such a deep level.

The two girls' face turned pale while they slowly stepped backward and stood behind the new secretary, who was assigned here after the escape of the former one. He cleared his throat and thus exclaimed, "Don't put the blame of natural disasters on them, comrades! And don't blame the people who are well-intended and ready to be re-education by us! To help them to understand the difficulties we experience every day, and the importance of our labor is an honorable mission! Our Leader, our Savior

had told us to enjoy spiritual happiness and discard materialism. We should help these people for their spiritual fulfillment!”

The crowds stopped complaining and listened to the propaganda carefully. When Secretary Yang mentioned their beloved great Chairman leader, they felt ashamed for their selfishness. The naive crowds were convinced by the new secretary, a more confident, reasonable, and honest man than Secretary Wong, who abandoned the village to starve. Besides, the production was growing these two years. At least they were not under the threat of famine anymore.

At last the meeting ended this way: the new family members of the community would live in the former secretary's abandoned house until the village came up with a better arrangement for them. And they should begin their work with preparing pig's food the next early morning.

These vague annoying memories made Souyuen bite her lips and peel at her nails. She scratched the back of her hand with the shortened nails. The rough rim left whiter lines on her white skin. “You look like you were going to kill someone,” Jiongsa interrupted suddenly. Souyuen pouted her thin lips and looked up to the road.

There Xee came, with a brown cross-body bag on his left side and a chicken in his right hand. His round eyes and double-fold eyelids were handsome. His lips were like Souyuen, with a little pout pocket in the upper center. His up-turned flat nose was the only disappointment on his face. When their eyes met, Xee gave Souyuen and Jiongsa a bright smile, revealing his straight short teeth. His smile had a nice arch

because of the thicker center part of his upper lip. "Mother!" His voice was as bright as sunflowers.

Led by Liongtan, Xee went inside to the sick bed after the brief reunion with the two women on the front porch. The first question Grandmother asked was, "You brought me back a granddaughter-in-law?"

"No kidding, Granny." The young lad smiled. "I've too much homework."

"Old woman like me won't have long time."

"No, you'll live longer than a hundred."

"You talk like I'm an old monster."

Everyone laughed. The air was cold. A subtle sadness was prying out from the dark corners of the room.

"Seeing you come back, Grandma's complexion seems much better, Son," Liongtan said.

"Right, Granny, what made you sick? Don't do too much work. Leave them to us."

"Who else than your brother," Souyuen interrupted, "That ghost whelp."

From the argument between Father and Mother, Xee picked up the plot during his absence. Mee stood by the closed door of Grandmother's room, head almost buried in his chest, and said nothing. Jionsa walked up and down behind Xee's chair until Father shouted her stop. It had been more than a week after the incident in the broadcast house. Liongtan still couldn't calm down. He blamed himself for this bad

luck, believing it was all caused by the bicycle. Yet it was necessary for him to see this family take up the responsibility to solve the matter without hurting the family's reputation. The poor crying girl alongside the dark road surely earned his sympathy—she was an innocent deer compare to old Fuu Granny—that she-wolf, tigress. She reminded Liongtan of his sister that was lost in the war. To save her was—deep down in Liongtan's mind—the only way to save his little sister.

Souyuen was upset for the impending marriage. Liongtan agreed to propose, but the marriage wasn't yet on schedule. She hadn't forgotten her initiation of this plot—to guarantee this house a male heir. Thus the two youngsters had to be united as soon as possible, lest there would be any new policies concerning birth control. Souyuen feared it as if fearing an approaching storm—it seemed definite that it could come sooner than she expected. It was waiting for her to be less vigilant, so it could cost her more.

“See, your brother just wouldn't take the responsibility,” Souyuen added her last urging. Both, during the argument, avoided mentioning the existence of the other girl.

“I'm sure he will.” Father stared at Mee, stressing his patriarchal power.

“Father, this isn't Brother's fault. It's an accident,” Xee said. His words were like chestnuts falling down from the branches hit all who were present hard on their heads.

“What do you know . . .” Souyuen said.

“As long as no one knows about this, it is not ruining the girl isn't it,” Xee added.

“Brother shouldn't be so harsh, too. Father Mother were considering for you.”

The argument went on and on. It bored Jionsa more than ever. The family was so full of gunpowder that it smelled as if a string of firecrackers had been set off in the living room. She went into the kitchen and checked the steam wok. It was a huge black wok two thirds of a meter in diameter. Mother used to tease Jionsa saying this was Jionsa's bath tub when she was a kid. She lifted the wooden lid, letting out a blast of steam. A pig's hind leg with skin was in a yellow enamel bowl. A small stack of dry cracked chili pepper and some black fermented beans were on top. The fat was still white. The thin layer of oil that just started to form on the surface of the soup seemed attractive. The dish and the boiling water were separated by a wooden board. Jionsa added half gourd ladle of water into the steamer, and put down the lid. She sat in front of the fire, added more wood into the hearth, and watched as the fire dance onto its new toy. The fire inside her grew fiercer with it, too. She heard Xee saying again, "It's an accident; not Brother's fault." She envied him. If she went to college, and earned her own life, her words would be listened to. However, she wasn't talented like Xee, who could solve math questions even the teacher had difficulties with. Jionsa rested her head on her hand, and tapped her chin with the fingers. Pieces of conversation flew into her reluctant ears.

"Why don't you try seeing this girl first? You might like her," Xee said.

"I don't like her," Mee answered.

"Not good enough, Mee. I didn't know much about your mother when we married."

Jiongsa took a bundle of twigs out from the bottom of the fuel pile, then searched out the hand-copied novel from inside the hole. She uncurled it and held it with both hands, like it was gold and jade. Mother probably wouldn't scold her for reading this now. She had more important things to do—she might not even realize her daughter was reading it. Yet to hide the book was to respect it. It deserved to be treated like this, as an approach of her rebellion and contrariness. Jiongsa opened it from where she folded the leaf. The first paragraph went, “The two spies dragged her out of the bath tub, and threw her on the floor ‘Let’s have some fun,’ the pockmark-faced one said. ‘You have nowhere to go,’ the other red-nosed one said next.” These two were useless spies from America; they didn’t even know the heroine was a Kuomintang agent under Communist camouflage. Their failure was that they always had too many talkings. If they would shut-up and get things done, villain of the year would be theirs, for they had the best tracking skills—where ever the heroine went, they could follow, no matter how well she disguised herself. Jiongsa read on. “At the right moment, Lijun broke in through the window. The cracked glass confused the pace of the spies. They pulled out their pistols, and fired at Lijun, but couldn’t hit the brave and wise comrade.”

Brave and wise. Jiongsa suddenly recalled the high blue sky she saw on the back seat of Weijia. The cold smell of that day’s air was more than fresh and enlightening. She imagined the pink crane he mentioned, not noticing her hand closing the book. Did it have a crimson head top like a red-crowned crane? What color were their claws? She wished they could be pink also. Black legs couldn’t match with pink feathers.



Like a *déjà vu*, the dream she had about a handsome spy the other day came back to her vividly—the unreachable back of that mandarin collared man. The close view of his back neck somehow overlapped Weijia's back she saw on the day of Mamao's wedding. It was him. Jionsa blushed at the thought of dreaming about a real man, in a fictional world she created in her own hand-copied spy novel. In the confused memories Jionsa couldn't even be sure whether she had put her hands on Weijia's waist when they rode together to Mamao's wedding. She smiled and curled the already fragile book up again, wringing it slightly.

“What are you doing?” A dry angry voice entered Jionsa. She turned her head—with that pink smile still on her cheeks—and saw Mother standing there, hands on her waist. Her double chin quivered slightly like a hen's wattle. For the first time Jionsa thought that Mother was getting old. Like a late winter pear she withered on the bare branch. Jionsa looked as a great fear seized her. She thought that she was disappointed with this house enough that she wouldn't care if Mother discovered the book, yet now it was burning like a taro she fished out bare-handed from the boiling water. Without thinking Jionsa looked back to the stove and threw the book into the fire.

“Nothing.” Jionsa thought she was surely betrayed by her quivering voice.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, just wood.”

“Don't add too much wood alright? That was wasteful.” Souyuen walked nearer.

Jiongsa's head was buzzing like a bee hive crashed onto her. She picked up the tongs like a robot, and stuck them into the hearth. Fire quickly invaded the edge of the book. A blast of light brightened the usually dark seams between the bricks inside the hearth. Involuntarily Jiongsa leaned back, a spark or two landed on her sleeve. In a panic she struck them off with a seizure of beating.

At the sudden violent movement of Jiongsa, Souyuen dropped the heavy wooden lid of the steaming wok she just lifted. "What's wrong with you! Scared the jump out of me." She looked down and saw the flaming hearth. "I told you not to play with the twigs. Don't put so much! You ghost kid." She rolled her eyes. Though small, they rolled vividly full of scorn and contempt. The deep brown irises went up and left swiftly—Souyuen's whole agility was attributed to her eyes and lips. When they came back to the right position, the tongs were in Souyuen's hand. Before Jiongsa could refuse, she was removed from the chair—Souyuen shook the seatback until she stood up with impatience. "Away to that side." Souyuen never forgot to add while she set herself down in the chair that was too narrow for her.

Jiongsa watched as Souyuen stuck the tongs into the hearth, and stirred a bit before she stopped. "What's this?"

"What?"

"What you burning?"

"Used notebook," Jiongsa answered.

"Really?"

"Ah. Really."

Jiongsa needed not to hear the “I don’t believe you.” It was written on Souyuen’s face. Souyuen stuck the tongs in again and retrieved a small pile of almost burnt brown papers, and threw them to the floor. She quickly stamped out the fire with her foot which destroyed almost half of her evidence. However, it efficiently frightened Jiongsa. The fire Souyuen stamped out was nothing compared to the fire inside this plummy woman. She bent over, with the light of the fire, scanned the first piece. Nothing readable. She kicked the pile of carbonized leaves. Vague words scattered on the dark brown floor, still nothing readable.

“That’s your diary?” She raised a skeptical brow. “Old man, come!”

“What?” Liongtan appeared with his two boys by the door.

“Your daughter is burning her diary here.”

“That’s not my diary!”

Liongtan checked the small pile of pieces; some writings in fountain pen were still there. He asked, “What was that?”

“Used notebook! It’s all used, no more places to write! Why not burn them.”

“How many times I told you to use a pencil so you can erase and reuse it?”

Jiongsa didn’t say anything. The guilt from lying, regret of burning the book, and the grievance from misunderstanding and unfair charges Father and Mother put on her mixed within her. There was no way she could argue for herself. Justice wasn’t standing with her, and didn’t stand with anyone in the room. Jiongsa wiped away her weak tears, hoping they would win her some sympathy.

“Mother, its New Year! Be happy, everyone, be happy,” finally Xee said. The words were followed by a dead silence. The greasy smell of the steamed pig leg had come up a long time ago. But in the nostrils of this family, there was only the smell of the burnt book. Jiongsa rushed out of the kitchen and Mee followed her, leaving the three to prepare the tasteless lunch.

Jiongsa stopped by the edge of the front yard beside the stone table for clothes washing. Down in front of Jiongsa was a short, sheer slope with China fir waving their spiky leaves and dry cones. She stared at the old well at the bottom of the slope. The water that flew out of the brick rim and was viewed as the blessing of this family—water would bring wealth. Overflowing well was even better. A strong feeling of destruction invaded Jiongsa, she kicked a stone off the slope, saw it bounce down, and hit the winding path that led to the well, and stopped there like a lost child. If she jumped and drowned there, would it be defiled? Maybe one day it would be destroyed somehow by an irresistible hand of god. Jiongsa comforted herself and leaned against the stone table.

“Feeling better?” Mee’s soothing voice flew to her.

“No.” Somehow she was irritated, unwilling to let Mee see her embarrassed face.

“Doesn’t matter. We can make a new copy of that book.”

Hearing him saying that, Jiongsa’s rigid face softened. She understood why Mee could not speak for her in that kitchen. This son who was unwilling to pick up his “responsibility as a man” had been deprived of his power of conversation in this house. It seemed a ridiculous reason, yet no one questioned it. Still he stood by her

side and kept her harmless secret. Jionsa felt sorry for him. But out of her stubbornness, she said, “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What do you prefer to do then?”

“I don’t know. I know what you should do. Why don’t get away from this place? You can make a living without Father and Mother. Chef.”

“No.”

It was weird to hear it. So simple and easy he let the word out like an obedient cattle, announcing that Father and Mother were his responsibility, no matter what additional burden came with them. It was too heavy for him. Would she one day understand Mee or become him? Her heart quivered with the mere thought of that.

“Well, you won’t, but I will.”

“We’ll see.”

## TWELVE—Full Bottle Doesn't Slosh

Soon after New Year was over, Xee went back to the city. Grandmother was still sick, if not sicker, and refused to sleep in the same bed with anyone, fearing that her sick aroma would infect others. She didn't eat anything the day Xee left, saying she was too sad. In the midnight, her body quivered like she was sitting in the last row of a running bus. The horrible shake stirred the old wooden bed and woke Jionsa up. She pulled on the lamp and called to Father. Souyuen rolled on the bed for a minute before she could open her eyes, which surely earned a white eye from Liongtan.

Everyone thought she would be gone that night. The yellow dim bulb seemed gloomy as it flashed when the voltage was unstable. Liongtan's heart twitched with the flashing. But finally Grandmother's seizure was relieved with a bowl of hot porridge. Mee cooked it as soon as he was woken up by Jionsa. "That's because she hasn't been eating, Father. Don't worry." In fact Mee wasn't so sure. He did what he could and thanked Bodhisattva who rewarded him with longer days with his beloved Grandmother.

The next morning the whole family went to town for the doctor. The old and pink-cheeked man in white spoke with irresistible authority, "The patient's condition is not optimistic, but redeemable. We'll hospitalize her. You can follow the procedure and pay your bill."

Souyuen wasn't happy with the outcome of this whole plot. She had a faint instinct

that this sickness was Grandmother's backup plan for Mee's marriage. Still she doubted it. To die and give up all the welfare one could enjoy after the children became grown-ups? The leisure of retired life, the children and grandchildren's filial devotion to her, the jealous look from the neighbors, why go suicidal and miss all the entertainment afterwards when a promising future was waiting? Souyuen was too selfish to do that. And she wasn't convinced Grandmother would do that.

The small town clinic had no lobby. A long hallway connected the gate, the doctor's office, the nurse's office, and the wards. To save money, the hallway lights were turned off during the day. Souyuen sat on the bench in the dim hallway, looking at the sunlights shed on the terrazzo floor and the white tiled wall. The window at the other end faced a brick wall full of withered leafless ivy vines. The crooking vines stuck to the brick wall with numerous sticky disks, as if the plant was sucking nutrition from the wall. Souyuen waited until Mee and Liongtan came back. It wasn't bad news they brought.

After a short conversation, Souyuen was to stay and look after Grandmother. She was reluctant, but didn't dare to go against Liongtan in public.

"Liongtan." The weak trembling voice came out from the half closed door of the ward.

The two hurried in. Souyuen followed. The room had two narrow beds; each had a round stool beside. Grandmother sat in the bed, staring at the precious sunny sky outside the window. The other bed was empty. Grandmother was, from what the nurse was gossiping about, the only patient in the hospital beside an old granny in the other

ward. During the New Year—though now it was the last two days of the festival—no one wanted anything to do with the hospitals. The negative aroma here brought people bad luck, which would last a yearlong if it caught you during such an important festival. The doctor cared not such a thing. However, the two young nurses had lots to complain about, especially when they heard Liongtan's wish to arrange his mother in a separate ward.

“Why? We can take better care of them if they are in the same room.” The taller one with a big and dark mole in her left brow stuck her head in the doctor's room when she heard what they were talking about.

“Yes, doctor. That isn't so convenient,” the other round-faced shorter one interrupted also.

“Nonsense, young lasses. Do your work.” The doctor threw them a pretended sullen look. “They're just naughty, lasses.”

Hearing the boys entering the room, Grandmother turned her head back and said, “I don't wanna stay here, let's go home.”

“No, Mother, you need treatment.”

“Ha. *Yama* wants you dead by midnight, who dares to keep you until morning?” Grandmother said. Souyuen was astonished—the old woman meant it. The look she cast to the outside blue sky was like a Buddha, as if she wasn't connected to this world anymore.

“Mother, don't be so superstitious.”

“I don't like the smell here.”



“Grandma, we’ll go home soon when you get better, alright?” Mee said.

“Silly boy, the money we saved for your marriage and the new house shouldn’t be wasted on this old useless body. Let’s go home.”

“Grandma!” It wasn’t until now that the thought of losing Grandmother truly bothered Mee. Perhaps the look on her face gave him the hint—it was more than distinct, even though Mee hadn’t seen many dying people. The inexpressible internal dismay silenced him. He turned away with two red eyes, unwilling to admit his softness.

“At least finish the drip, would you?” Liongtan said, “Please. Alright?”

“Alright,” the old woman answered, then leaned back on the cold iron bars. Mee grabbed the other bed’s pillow for Grandmother and put it behind her back.

Now that the men were gone, Souyuen suffered the silence in the cold room. She asked, twice, whether Grandmother felt cold, as if with mere conversation the room could be warmed up. Grandmother rather refused to talk. The jingling giggle of the nurses penetrated the walls and doors. Their footsteps approached and drew away with funny dancing rhythm. The vitality of the youngsters radiated with happiness which seemed so far from Souyuen she even doubted whether she had this kind of energy when she was young.

She stared at the empty bed beside the window. Sun shined on it, a perfect cross within a parallelogram shape. Souyuen imagined a patient on that bed, a young man wearing a pair of thick glasses. No, it was a boy. He was yet seventeen. The boy turned to her and smiled before he vanished in the thin air. Only the bed stood there, intact,

without joy or sorrow. That warming smile, pure as a kid, belonged to a diseased *Zhiqing* from Jewdow. Among the five *Zhiqings* who were assigned to their village to be re-educated, he was the youngest one. Souyuen hadn't shared a word with him. He was a silent kid, and always followed one of the *Zhiqing* girls around like a shadow. Three months after he came, he added a belt to his pants. Souyuen hardly recognized him when they met by the pond bank. When she did, she pitied the boy. And he returned her friendly reaction with a shy nod. The short encounter was the only one before a tile hit him in the head.

Despite the thing that happened on the first day, the *Zhiqings* soon found their neighbors friendly and welcoming. In the eyes of the villagers, the new comers were a group of happy birds. They were always energetic, optimistic, and laughing. The eldest one, Jianguo, was a tall and well-built young man, a natural leader. He had a high and clever forehead. Another boy was stout and humorous who had small but always smiling eyes. The youngest one, Yaobang, was a thin, pale, delight pal with a pair of glasses on his neat and straight nose. His upper lip was so thin that his face looked like—maybe it still would even in his forties—a baby.

As for the two girls, the one with short hair was always the happiest one. She was Feng, named after a legendary and elegant bird—phoenix. She had a quick tongue, like a sparrow. Her laughing was contagious. Though her face was covered with freckles, her smart, sparkling eyes were lovely. The other girl, Lin Jing, who won all the villagers favor with her gentle and quiet manner and her beauty, was so distant yet charming. Her vibe was different from others, like a lotus, which stood

high above the plain leaves that floated on the water. She had become the secret idol of many young men in the village. They bet on who would be the first one to have Jing's permission to touch her tear mole.

However, the happy time of *Zhiqings* didn't last long. Winter came soon, the former secretary's house—now the dorm—was an old and badly-maintained house. During the three years of famine, the villagers almost destroyed it with hatred. The youngsters had problems keeping the frigid wind from roaring in. The linen and paper covering the broken glasses in the window shook like sail in the strong wind.

The youngest boy soon caught cold and lost his ability of working. The group had lost a great deal of passion during the winter. On one common Sunday, the two girls were working on some needle work, while the other two boys went to the secretary asking him for some medicine.

That day Souyuen was going home from the fields carrying a sickle on her shoulder. As she walked by the dorm, screaming came out. Souyuen rushed inside, and saw the boy lying on the bed, head covered in grey tiles and blood. A long thin bare tree branch had dropped on the floor. She immediately threw away her sickle and took his pulse. The dim dusk light came in from a hole in the roof and illuminated his bloody twisty face. It was a horrible scene she never dared to recall again.

“He is still alive,” Souyuen said. The two *Zhiqing* girls were both crying. Jing sat against the wall. One of her bracelet's lotus seed cup bell fell on the floor beside her. Souyuen noticed that Jing never wore those bracelets after the accident.

Soon the secretary came with the other two *Zhiqing* boys. The injured one was sent to the town's clinic on a wheelbarrow. The next morning, he was removed to the city hospital. Neither saved his life. A week later, blood infection claimed his short life. Souyuen wondered if he had been in the same ward she was sitting in now.

Souyuen seemed to constantly recall things she didn't want to remember. This idle New Year vacation had given her too much leisure that her brain overworked itself when no physical labor was required.

"What you thinking?" Grandmother interrupted her flowing thoughts suddenly like a stealthy fox leaping at a bunny.

"You remember that dead boy of the five *Zhiqings*? He was in this clinic after the accident."

"You think it was an accident?" Grandmother curved her mouth but the laughter turned into a fit of cough. She adjusted her pillows, and sat back, sinking into them. "I talk too much. God doesn't like it," She added, turning her head away. She believed that gods would kill to guard the things that mortals shouldn't know. Souyuen looked at Grandmother, wondering if she would get better again.

"I do have something to tell you." Grandmother resumed the conversation.

"What?"

"Mee's date was writing to him."

"What?" Souyuen goggled in bewilderment. Was she too careless? She never ever thought the girl Mee mentioned was real. "How did you know?" As soon as she asked, she knew. Grandmother was the one who waited for the mail every morning. She hadn't

given up the chance that her third son was still alive in Taiwan and would write to her. Even in the hardest times, this old woman believed. Every piece of information she heard about the Kuomintang ruled area was on the tip of her heart. There were things that were respectable in her, even according to Souyuen. “You don’t . . .”

“I do. I got three letters, only, though.”

“He doesn’t know?”

“Ha. No. He thought he was dumped. He changed his address to the broadcast house, too. But I still got the third one.”

Thank heaven! The marriage was added an extra layer of security. Spicier was the elder ginger. For the first time Souyuen was in awe of this old woman. The nearer she got to death, the shinier she was.

“Wouldn’t he change the address again to his working place?”

“No, Liongtan is there and he wouldn’t dare. I have the thing stored safely.” The old woman searched inside her cotton-stuffed pants. There was a small black cloth sack sewed to the inside of the elastic waist. She retrieved a key with difficulty, and handed it to Souyuen, who took it immediately, smiling. It was warm. It was her legacy. Souyuen was suddenly proud of herself, for all the scolding and white eyes she endured all these years under this old woman. Now it was time she replace her, with the title of mother-in-law. Though she wasn’t so sure about the “thing” Grandmother was talking about, she was too happy to inquire.

“Don’t give me that face, Souyuen,” Grandmother said. “I doubt you could keep a full eye on Mee. Don’t mess me up.”

Souyuen didn't care. When Grandmother was gone, what Souyuen should do would no longer be hers to decide. She felt slightly guilty with what thought. However, the excitement given to her by the just inherited warm heirloom in her hand was so strong she barely noticed any negative emotion.

"I'm not telling you what that key opens before I'm really dying, Souyuen, not so fast." The old woman suddenly added. Then there was a knock on the door.

It was Jionsa, with the lunchboxes. The meal was simple, white radish and cabbage, with a bowl of minced pork porridge, and not of most satisfying temperature. A piece of steamed carp was the leftover of yesterday's tasteless dinner. No dried red pepper to cover up the fishy smell. And the fattest part of the belly meat went to Grandmother, and that left Souyuen only the bony part. The sticky fish skin wasn't her favorite too. However, these would be all over soon. She swallowed without complaint.

"Fuu Granny came to our house today," Jionsa said while she gathered up the lunch boxes.

"What? Why not tell us first?"

"I'll wash these first." The subtle reluctance of obeying rose in Jionsa. She again felt the small but distinct power of knowing what others didn't know. The moment she saw the expression of eagerness on the elder women's faces, the joy stirred within her.

"No, there's no hot water here. What did she come for?"

The persuasion hit right where Jionsa cared most. Comfort came first in her philosophy. She gathered the boxes and put them aside. "She said that the rumor about Pyieng girl is all over the place. Father was quite angry with her."

“Ha, that old ghost hag.” Grandma scorned.

It gave Souyuen a headache. Who wanted that girl if the entire world knew she was locked in a dark room with a man? Though nothing really happened, people would make up everything imaginable and spread it. Until then, nothing could be done, that girl would be ruined for good. Either Fuu was lying, or she was stupid.

“What did your father say, eh?” Grandmother asked. Another fit of cough followed.

“He made Brother apologize to her. I think that’s not fair,” Jiongsa answered. That old woman was the fly on the dining table and the mosquito in the sleeping tent. Her face grew uglier every time Jiongsa saw it. Greed had carved its toll in the corners of her eyes and mouth. She marched to the house like a proud horse and with contempt she said to Jiongsa, “Call your Father out.”

Yet she wasn’t so proud in front of Father. Like a chick she wept about how the rumor was spreading in her village. It was that sincerity of her expression that enraged Jiongsa so much that she didn’t make her tea even after Father asked for it twice. The sobbing was well-played, for real. Jiongsa now regretted that she didn’t made her triple-gingered tea. She wanted to smash the lunch boxes on the floor—while the scene rewound once again in her brain—simply to scare that witch away. She believed that could work perfectly because the old woman seemed really like her class advisor’s type, who put on a softened and suave face in front of a stronger one. The old woman was out of words at last and all she could squeeze out from between her shaky uneven teeth was, “My Pyieng was so poor everyone says she dare to date guys as she wished. Now

everyone think she's not a righteous woman. She's not an unrighteous woman. She's not an unrighteous woman. Eyhhh . . ." The prolonged crying was so grating that the dog went sleeping somewhere else.

Then Father said, "Grandma, ey. If you stop whining we might have a chance to talk about this."

The old woman paused with surprise. She gave Liongtan a glance to confirm whether he wore a serious face. "Good. Ahya, I thought—" an involuntary sob—"I thought we'd never be relatives by marriage." She ended the sentence with another great sob.

Jiongsa was more than sure "relatives by marriage" exasperated Father more than ever. The old man was still too polite to pour his anger out in front of a crying old woman. With great effort that controlled his temper, Liongtan said, "No crying, alright? I don't want to wake up tomorrow hearing my neighbors scolding me of bullying an old woman."

Hearing that, the Fuu's snot went back into her nose like it never been hanging there above her lips. She squeezed out an smile like she saw a remote relative right after she struggled herself back to her feet from a hilarious tumble that broke her front teeth.

Telling Mother and Grandmother all the details she caught, Jiongsa felt fulfilled. That made her forget she still had a hand-copied novel to make up before spring semester starts.

"What did your brother say?"

"He asked for some time," Jiongsa answered carelessly.



That unfilial brat still had some hope left for the chick. Souyuen exchanged a look with Grandmother. During the marathon of this rivalry they shared all these year, whether or not they admitted it, there was a precious mutual tacit understanding between the two women. Grandmother worried that the girl's letter would eventually reach Mee when Souyuen leaned back on her pillow and relaxed, thinking things were settled for good. The primary weakness of this wife was her shortsighted mind. No matter how well she polished her manipulating skills, that would always limit the accomplishment of her. Grandmother doubted whether she was right to pick this woman over the silent but emotional girl when she was hunting for Liongtan's wife. She gave up the other one for Souyuen because the latter was obviously easier to control.

Souyuen considered Mee's answer a victory. Her optimistic side foretold this a long time ago from mostly the outcome of the past things she decided for Mee. Yet the single one incident that had gone out of control was poking her back slightly now and then—that Mee had gone to the army camp instead of going to college. The mere comfort Souyuen could give to herself was that Liongtan didn't support it then, since Xee's grades were much more competitive and the family hadn't enough to provide two through high school. This time Souyuen was discreet enough to earn support from Liongtan first. Now that Xee had went to medical school and earned extra to support Jionsa through high school too, Souyuen regretted to be persuaded so easily. There would always be a way to squeeze more water out of a sponge.

In the middle of the silent meditation, the nurse suddenly rushed by the door and

yelled for the doctor. "The Grandma is losing it!"

Later, before night, the doctor came to visit Grandmother. The other old woman was gone by three past four. He was kind enough to comfort the frightened Chong family. The elder women already took this as a bad omen. The aroma of the death was spreading. Jionsa, out of her curiosity and her rebellious heart, snuck to the other old woman's ward. The door was closed. She stood on her tiptoe and peeped through a small window on the door. The light was off. The orange residue of the sunshine from outside the window dyed the room and printed the shadow of bare branches on the wall. In the dim light Jionsa saw a vague silhouette bent over the bed. She grabbed the rim of the window, and stood taller for a better view, when suddenly the lights of the hallway were on after a few flashes. The shadow beside the bed raised its head and looked over, which startled Jionsa. It was unmistakably a man. Half of his face was hidden in the shade, but Jionsa clearly saw his mouth and stubbly jaw. It was the mouth and jaw of a son who had lost his mother. In great fear, Jionsa fled from the door, lest that she would be infected by that sorrow.

### **THIRTEEN—Forcefully Plucked Melon Isn't Sweet**

Jiongsa never figured out who the old woman was that died the other day.

Grandmother got out of hospital the next day, but she never got better. The family was infected after all by the death in that other ward.

Mee grew thinner through the weeks though he had leisure and feasts during the New Year. Finally, the week after Jiongsa's winter break was over, Mee gathered the family and surrendered. He looked like a powdered death. His grey cheeks were sunken. The greasy forehead and nose tip looked dirty. The visible eclipse of Mee's eyes added several years to his face. His flaked lips couldn't be wetted no matter how many times he licked them. Jiongsa didn't understand why the family couldn't recognize it. This surrendered soldier lost his motivation of fighting, and thus dignity—his kingdom wasn't failed, his queen's title wasn't deprived. He was discarded by her. She never wrote back to him after all those letters he sent. There was as if no graver sadness in this world.

The simple phrase "I agree to marry her" was uttered.

After hearing the confession of this sinning son, Liongtan gave out a long and tired sigh, patted the soldier's shoulder and walked away. Grandmother, who was still in bed, wiped her eyes and praised heaven for enlightening her stubborn grandson.

"Good, good boy. Ay, finally, you come to your senses," Souyuen said. Though slower than she expected, this day had eventually come.

The things following were simple. Mee and Liongtan went to Fuu's home to propose. With one kilogram of brown sugar and two kilograms of white sugar, two tails of carps, a pile of cash the family managed to gather up, and a watch, all wrapped neatly by Souyuen's hand with dyed red paper.

The betrothal presents, according to tradition, were a way of helping the new couple get started with their new life—a modest business, or a set of new furniture, maybe a deposit preparing for their first child. Yet Souyuen knew at least the cash wouldn't come back with the bride. Fuu had a much more important purpose for it.

Pyieng was surprised by the visit. When she heard people coming, she was in the back yard. She stuck her head out from the door at the end of the living room. Then her bare red hand and rolled-up sleeve. She swallowed her gasp and made up a smile, hands rubbing on the side of her coat and then the back of her pants.

“Happy New Year.” She immediately felt it was too late for this after she said it. Yet this was the first time they had met after New Year. She was too shameful to visit with Grandma during the festival. She had a fight with Grandmother, before the old woman gave up and went on her own. “Come on in, Uncle, have a seat.”

“Who's that? Pyieng girl?” A familiar old voice came from the back of the house.

She hurried back to the door while Liongtan sat down in the chair. Mee followed inside and stood beside Father, eyeing the tea table. It was an old wooden narrow table, with a shelf that had a clean but worn towel hanging on. The porcelain tea pot had a blue orchid painted on. Its iron handles were wrapped tight with strips of cloth. The worn out rim of the cloth was brown, soaked with grease and sweat. Four white cups

were set upside down on an enamel round tray. Beside were two brightly colored thermoses with metal caps. The grey water incrustation on the cap looked old but the whole tea set and the table were clean and tidy. There was a poster of Chairman Mao above the tea table, exactly the same version in Mee's house, except cleaner, and the color was pigmented. Mee could imagine the tidy housework was done by Pyieng's hands. The easy ways of life were in front of him. Having a competent wife doing house work and taking care of Father, Mother, and maybe the children wasn't a bad idea after all. If there was no way for him to escape this marriage, he might as well learn to enjoy.

Fuu came out, then Miengmieng, then another girl, a timid youngster, who gave a quiet "Uncle" to Liongtan and a shy look to Mee before she ran away to the backyard. "I'll help. You take care of the guest, Sis." Mee heard the silvery voice came from the back yard, much softer and feminine compare to Pyieng's mezzo-soprano. Before long, Pyieng appeared with her sleeves neatly rolled down, though she couldn't conceal her red hands—she had been washing. Noticing Mee's observation, Pyieng responded with a friendly embarrassed smile. A rare but natural shyness occupied her. Nowhere to put her hands, she rubbed them on the back of her waist mechanically.

The old grandmother was more than happy to accept the proposal, which made her over-dramatic. She took both Mee and Pyieng's hands, and joined them. "You'll make a great couple. What a match." Pyieng withdrew her hands after a reluctant touch. The blushing reddened her ears. The shyness made her yellow face more vivid, like a painted rose. She stole a glance at Mee, and was disappointed by his expressionless face. That was charming to her too—the intangible emotion of this man, his temper, and his

tolerance toward Grandma.

Pyieng was curious enough about men. Her father had died young. There was no man in her girlhood life except an old teacher who taught every subject from first grade till nine. He was like a Grandfather, whose handwriting was the single thing that reminded people of his existence. Pyieng's mother abandoned the family and left three children to Grandma. Being the eldest among the siblings, she learned early that she had nobody to spoil her, till now. She stood by Grandmother, and imagined the life that waited ahead with too much longing. This blooming emotion toward Mee was still too fresh and beautiful to comprehend.

Fuu was extremely pleased with the present. Not to mention the watch, the cash only exceeded her expectation. Her smile wrinkled her face like a dehydrated orange. Out of politeness, she said, "You don't need to bring this many things. Oh, ha-ha, that's so generous." Then the brother gathered the pile of wrapped goods, and sent them into the room.

"So, this is settled?" Liongtan wanted to end the conversation fast.

"It is. It is." Fuu nodded like a pecking bird.

"When do you prefer the wedding date to be, Grandma? Any bad times for the sake of memorial date for the elder ones?"

"No. That you have nothing to worry for."

"Then I'll see the proper date chosen," Liongtan said. "You have Pyieng's birth date and time?"

"No. But, wait here." Fuu pushed her knees to stand up. "I'll write it down for you

right now.”

Before the silent awkwardness lasted too long, the old woman, holding a small red envelope, came out from the room which Miengmieng went in with the presents.

Liongtan looked down to the short round old woman who handed him the folded red paper. He smelled a sweet tone when he took it over with his chin raised. He observed closer and saw a flattened crease across the envelope. He immediately recognized. It was the gift wrapper. Liongtan frowned as he put it into his side pocket instead of his chest pocket. Mee was craving to leave this place. Father’s contempt was too obvious at the moment. And his volatile temper worried Mee. It was difficult to understand why Father still wanted him to marry this girl even when he disliked Fuu Granny so much.

When Mee proposed to leave, Pyieng seemed disappointed. Her hands dropped beside her like two wet wings of a butterfly. Mee pitied her for the moment, yet the thought that this girl broke his dream generated, still, hatred in him. He managed to keep a calm face when he trotted out of the door. The narrow road that wouldn’t let a car through turned right. Mee, from the corner of his eye, saw Pyieng leaning along the door frame and looking at him. The moment their eyes met, the girl escaped and disappeared into the house. The flat house stood there silently. The New Year’s couplet was still pasted neatly beside the door, symmetrically. Mee looked a while; no one ever emerged from the door again.

The date of Pyieng’s birth written on the red paper was home safe and sound. It secured this promising wedding. A Taoism master carefully analyzed the time of Mee and Pyieng’s birth to choose a wedding date.

“A lifelong couple they shall make, as long as the first six years are without distraction,” the long-nailed Taoism master said, after he moved his thumb nail up and down on the pads of his forefinger and middle finger. His words worried Souyuen gravely, though this master was merely a half educated farmer who was missing a pinky finger—legendarily because he was wrong about the fate of some significant character. He announced himself the last disciple who witnessed the death of his own teacher, the Baiyun Temple chief master. This bald middle-aged man avoided all who had a curiosity about his teacher’s death. Many hated the manufactured mystery of him, yet Souyuen believed it, for he foretold that Xee was going to make it into college, and would bring home more than fortune.

“What’s to be worried about? I don’t believe that fake.”

Souyuen didn’t answer Jionsa. She had no energy to spare on her. She was soaked in the contradiction of whether to believe, as if being disloyal to this master would cost Xee his promising future of fortune and more, as if this master was the one who granted her family its luck.

The master gave the family two dates to choose from, June fifth or August twenty-ninth. Liongtan wasn’t happy with it. He considered himself an upright member of the Party, and didn’t fancy the idea of breaking the marriage law. However, he again failed in front of his teary wife, and bedridden Mother. Like a camel in crisis his head had to be buried under the sand—self cheating had to be done. The date was chosen in consideration of Grandmother’s health condition.



June fifth was approaching. Souyuen watched the post man so close that not only Liongtan but also the post man himself had become suspicious of her intention.

“Since when you started caring about the mail?” Liongtan asked one day after Souyuen jumped up from the chair when she heard the post man’s careful bicycle bell.

Souyuen turned her head while she was trotting away. “Later, later.” She was surprised at what Liongtan was jealous about. When she came back with nothing, she whispered to Liongtan, like two spies exchanging their countersigns, “I’m looking for your Taiwan Brother’s letter for Mother. You know. She never really gave up on him.”

Liongtan lowered his eyelids immediately at the word “brother” and nodded. The same question was never raised between him and Souyuen again. Only that night, Liongtan rolled over in the bed for much longer than usual, after Souyuen fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Mee’s marriage was the utmost priority under this roof for the first half year. New furniture was prepared and old ones revamped. The matter of building a new house beside the old one was brought up on schedule.

Everyone seemed to forget about one important thing—Jionsa was graduating from high school this summer. Father wanted her to start working. Mother, obviously, wanted to marry her off like she had done with her sisters. Though secretly planning, Jionsa said nothing about her own desire, as if no such thing existed in this parent-decide-everything house.

Xee encouraged her to go to college, to follow his footsteps in medical study. Jionsa believed that wouldn’t work out, since she wasn’t raised up with attentive

nature for the needing. Pyieng instead—for the first time Jiongsa thought of this young rude woman spontaneously—might be a good nurse. She had two round observant eyes rather like the taller nurse in the town clinic. Jiongsa knew how much herself weighed. College required far cleverer and bigger minds than hers. She was but a small needle on a luxuriant branch of the fir, not to be appreciated, not even to be cared about—hence not to be chosen by the examiners. Her Chinese and English were just moderate. Chemistry and physics were never her best. History and politics gave her headaches—she never managed to remember when the Old Summer Palace was destroyed by foreign forces. Biology and geography were her best subjects. But what was the use of those? Jiongsa, wouldn't talk about the outcome of the burnt hand-copied novel, couldn't decide for herself, and no one was there to decide for her.

Until one day in April, she came back home from the monthly market, and told everyone she was going to work in a factory. At first the family was confused. “Where did you get the quota?” Souyuen asked, with serious worrisome look between her brows when she eyed Jiongsa up and down.

“Our class supervisor had some ways, and I asked him for it.”

“He just gave it to you?” Liongtan wouldn't believe it. He rushed into the kitchen and took the two large pieces of smoked meat, packed them, and demanded them being send to the supervisor immediately. No one noticed Jiongsa's pink petal face was more than happy. She was a different person when she left the house to buy soy sauce and lard.

The girl left reluctantly, leaving the whole family overjoyed. Jiongsa's decision

made everything easier. She was going to live in the factory's dorm and the tension of rooms under this roof was relieved—as long as Grandmother could sleep in Liongtan and Souyuen's bedroom, the future couple would have their own room. Once she started to earn a living, it meant the family would have more income, in cash, not ration stamps or working credits.

In Souyuen's mixed expectation for her life as mother-in-law and the fear of anything gone astray, the wedding soon came. It was a beautiful early summer day. Sun-touched air smelled like vapor and pine, and refreshing bamboo leaves. In the early morning Souyuen heard a magpie singing on a branch of the chestnut tree. Before it flew away, she yelled to tell everyone in the house. Grandmother was so pleased. She insisted to go outside and listen for a while.

“Alright, Mother, go on. Just five minutes.” Unable to dissuade, Liongtan helped Grandmother go across the threshold, and stood with her for a while on the front porch. She grew weaker by the second. Sometimes merely coughing cost her too much effort, and left her breathless for a while. She quivered like an old bare tree on which a bear was rubbing its back. Standing beside her, Liongtan thought of his sister. There might be a chance she survived the war, the revolution, the starvation, the life—if she wasn't given away by Mother. And then he thought of his brother, who for sure was always on Mother's mind, probably even at this moment. The old woman listened for a while. The bird, as if tired of entertaining the old woman, flapped its wings and went west into the thicker woods.

The busiest time of July harvesting-and-planting was yet to come. The chosen wedding date seemed even better now—Pyieng would considerably lighten the burden from the elders in the fields this year.

The bride was brought home with the repaired old bicycle. She arrived wearing a mandarin suit. The dark blue straight collar shortened her neck and made her face even squarer, and more spirited. Her handmade shoes matched the color of the clothes perfectly. A modest red cloth flower pinned to the left chest pocket. A thin red cloth hair band with its two ends hidden carefully behind her ears and in her hair was the simple brightening spot of her attire.

People gathered in front of the house, and waited until Secretary Yang came. Grandmother and Fuu Granny sat by the tea table. Liongtan and Souyuen stood beside. Xee came back for the wedding. Lieng, Mamao, and their husbands were all present. The excitement of the first son getting married was infused in the atmosphere. The portrait of Chairman Mao was replaced with a new, bigger one. The crowd stood along the hall, everyone stretched their neck. Secretary Yang stood beside the sitting parents, in his usual formal suit and military shoes, with hands behind his back—he never needed a note to remind him of what to say.

“The couple to their place!” Secretary Yang yelled. Pyieng and Mee walked across the threshold. The crowd applauded with cheer for the shy bride and handsome bridegroom. Someone whistled, which earned a frown from Liongtan, but Mee remained motionless after he and Pyieng stopped in front of the tea table. His face drooped. All the way from the gate to the table, he never raised his eyes to greet the

guests around. Instead, he stared at the floor like a kid that was in a wrong classroom.

Beside him, Pyieng covered her mouth with the back of her hand, but couldn't hold back her smile. She stopped with Mee, looking into Fuu Granny's eyes. The old woman wiped away her snot.

"Don't be shy, you two." Secretary Yang suddenly stepped toward the couple, and pushed them closer. Mee's shoulder touched Pyieng's. For the first time, he looked up, but with an annoying fling of eyes toward the ceiling and a half opened mouth. He immediately swung away from her. The guests who stood behind were cheering, laughing at Mee's shyness, except the closer relatives who stood in front and saw his long face. The three daughters looked at Liongtan, and Fuu Granny. The old woman pretended she didn't see anything. Pyieng was the daughter-in-law of this family now. It wasn't her place to intervene.

Liongtan stood up and yanked Mee's sleeve. Pyieng managed not to flinch at this. She was still somewhat afraid of her father-in-law. "Stand closer! Son!" Liongtan said, then whispered beside Mee's ear, "Too late for you to complain with that face, son. Cheer up, for your own sake." The reprimand Mee got at least pasted a smiling mask on his face, though the silence the new couple shared during the bicycle ride pretty much established the base of the atmosphere between them. The smile was necessary for the family honor. Like a show the ceremony was put on.

"Now, bow to the Chairman!" Secretary Yang continued. The two bowed. Then they read from the *Quotation of Chairman Mao* with respect, and bowed again to the two grandmothers, then to Liongtan and Souyuen.

“Eh, drink the intertwined wine,” someone in the back yelled. Jionsga delivered two small cups of white wine to the couple. Mee felt embarrassed. He held up the cup with his left hand, and looked as Pyieng changed the cup from right hand to left. He hooked his arm. While Pyieng was holding the cup through Mee’s arm, he already finished the wine.

“That doesn’t count. One more! One more!” someone yelled again.

But Mee stamped the cup on the tea table and wiped his lips with his sleeve.

“Eh.” Pyieng took out her handkerchief. “Don’t stain your clothes.” But her hand was ducked by Mee’s arm.

The awkwardness was spreading. The secretary turned around to the crowd and smiled. “Let’s sit down and eat! Enjoy the meal.”

Despite the dissatisfactory lack of harmony during the ceremony, Souyuen was more than happy to enjoy the tea Pyieng presented her respectfully, though it was only a thin and tepid cup. She felt great. A young woman was calling her Mother, as her daughter-in-law. Souyuen never imagined it would be such a great feeling, though in exchange she had to lose Lieng, Mamao, and in the future, Jionsga. She was more than flattered. Like a woman in love, Souyuen was planning her exciting future. She was going to teach this promising woman about midwifing—and her secret professional skill for delivering babies in malposition.

“Isn’t the bridegroom not twenty-two yet?” Souyuen heard somebody gossiping in the background.

“He’s what? Twenty?”

“Twenty-one, I think.”

“Ahya. A bride elder brings gold. Who cared about the odds? Look at that girl with the twin-tails over there. There, beside that gag-toothed wife. No, she’s not the sister. She’s going to marry the little boy in several years. That is thoughtful calculation, isn’t it?” another guest said with a meaningful laugh. Souyuen nodded with smile that lit up her full round cheeks. A pair of earrings she wouldn’t wear every day danced with her double chin.

Now Mee was bound with this woman, no doubt. Nothing would tear a couple apart reasonably in a village like this. Divorce was yet not an eligible way to solve marriage problems—it was no better than elopement. Though they were not able to be registered legally right away, the witnesses of the villagers and all the relatives were powerful enough to substitute for the law. The vow was sealed with the exchange of the rings and the tea that Liongtan and Fuu Granny—since Pyieng had no Father—drank.

After the guests dispersed, night soon fell upon the house. An ambiguous residue of the wedding lingered in the house. Souyuen, Liongtan, and Grandmother went to bed early. Yet all were awake in bed, with their ears searching for the faintest trace of sound that implied the consummation that virtually accomplished the marriage. Yet not a single creak of the bed was heard. Mee, with a simple rude stab, took away Pyieng’s virginity. There was nothing but pain and blood during the wedding night.

## **FOURTEEN—The Little Soul of Grass Waving, Couldn't Repay the Sun of Spring**

Grandmother's time had come. It was three months after Mee's wedding, a September afternoon. The late summer and early autumn monster, Autumn Tiger, that parents invented to keep kids inside the house during summer break was still radiating its power in the pale sky. The air was suffused with the smell of sweet osmanthus. Westward beyond the bamboo woods, the tip of a hill was covered with clusters of light yellow, as if sunlight lingered on the osmanthus trees for the indulging sweetness. It was supposed to be a golden time when the villagers enjoyed the final leisure before the second harvest season.

Yet under this dim roof, before the new house even started bricking, the old woman who devoted all her sweat and blood to this family, was dying. She drove out all except Liongtan after she gave Souyuen a wooden box with a rusty padlock—she had it hidden in the gap between her palm mattress and the bedframe the whole time. Before Souyuen left, Grandmother said, “Look for . . . the letters, Souyuen . . . letters. He . . . he'll find out.”

Souyuen didn't quite understand. Was it to provoke and warn her to stay sharp? Or was it a desperate prediction of Souyuen's careless failure that would break Mee's marriage the old woman saw in vision in her last minutes of life? She went out of the room. The stillness of the hall welcomed her. Pyieng stood up and offered her chair.



The cicadas were singing the prelude of the dirge that would soon come. The air was filled with suffocating sadness. All listened closely to the singing insects, as if once the song stopped; Grandmother would be gone with it.

The screen door suddenly opened, Liongtan stuck his head out and gave a quick order, "One of you, go get some osmanthus. Quickly."

The people that sat in the living room stared back at him with confusing eyes, as if Liongtan was talking gibberish.

"There are some trees on the west hill, go pick a twig. Your grandmother wants it." He went inside the room, and sat down beside the narrow bed of Grandmother. She was as thin as a match. One finger could destroy her weak frame. Her hair had all gone silver. Liongtan held his breath and observed the movement of Grandmother's chest—he dare not measure her breath with a finger under her nose. The fear of touching a cold body crept over him—though he knew it was scarcely a second he was away from Grandmother's bed. The old woman's hand rested on the rim of the bed. The forefinger's nail was half missing, and the first joint was swollen and twisted. Liongtan remembered her complaining about it, "I used to have nice fingers. Ay."

"Liongtan, eh . . ." The old woman stirred suddenly.

"Mother."

"Your father will blame me of being such a bad mother." Her whisper was low but clear. Liongtan's chest tightened. Her soberness now might be the last radiance of the setting sun. He drew the chair nearer, and held her hand, the hand that he hadn't caressed as a son for years. The distance between them wasn't malice; it was rather the

usual pattern of relations between son and mother of the era. It only made moments like this more precious. Grandmother's hand was stiff, like a wood model instead of flesh and bones. It was heavy, as if the burden she was carrying her whole life was all inside her palm.

"No, mother." Words of comfort rolled on the tip of Liongtan's tongue, except nothing came out. It all seemed meaningless.

"Liongtan, your Liongshu Brother will come back to see me, will he? He's coming."

"No . . ." Liongtan rested his forehead on the rim of the bed. His husky grunts answered Grandmother's question. The old woman looked at the hair whorl of her only left son, and called him again. The mid-aged man raised his head. His panda eyes seemed even more severe with the lights coming in from the window behind. His lips moved, still nothing came out.

"My mouth feels so bitter. Where are the flowers?" the old woman asked slowly.

"They are coming," Liongtan said, knowing that it might take hours for them to fetch the flowers. There was no road up to there. He even doubted whether anyone had ever been on the hill top before. Those osmanthus trees were always the goddesses that could only be admired from a distant.

"Liongtan. Your sister . . . She'll be waiting for me under there. I'm so . . ." A tear rolled out of the corner of her eye, and soaked into her deep crow's feet. A fit of coughing left her breathless. She looked at Liongtan. He wept without a sound. Hundreds of words, thousands of lines filled his heart, yet nothing could be said. He

wept, still holding the withered hand. Tears talked for him and wetted Grandmother's dry thick nails.

"She'll forgive you, Mother," he finally said for the mere purpose of comforting the old woman. But no reply was heard. He looked at his eyes-closed mother, like he used to do when she insisted on him having a noon nap with her in the boring summer afternoon, in the narrow bamboo bed that creaked with even the slightest move.

Liongton spent all the time looking at Mother, her tiny transparent hair above her lips, her quivering short eye lashes, her half opened mouth and the revealed small teeth. Her face was so peaceful, with the beauty of a mother.

Liongton reached out for a lock of disordered hair on Grandmother's forehead. He touched her wrinkled skin and paused. She was gone. With sadness soaring inside him like a tsunami, Liongton smoothed her hair, then her collar, and tucked her under the blanket neatly. He held Grandmother's hand. The room fell into silence. Only Liongton's depressed sobbing filled the damp and cooling air. At this moment he instead couldn't blame this old woman for anything she had done. As always, he observed his mother, though with teary eyes, to engrave this peaceful sleeping old face in his heart.

When finally the worrisome wives and daughters came in, Liongton had his head rested on the margin of Grandmother's bed, and fell asleep like a cub curling aside its mother's protective belly. The dirge was finally played. Liongton was woken up by his daughter's cries. He hugged the girls all in his arms, for the first time they were so close and understandable to him. The sun went down, the final ray of sunshine disappeared.

Mee and Xee came back from the pilgrimage with a huge bunch of sweet osmanthus. The tiny light yellow crowded flowers filled Grandmother's coffin. After seven days, she was buried on the hill where the osmanthus trees grew. Her gravestone faced east. In that direction, both Liongtan's brother and sister were lost, with lesser and lesser hope to be found as time went by.

## FIFTEEN—Sour Is a Boy, Spicy Is a Girl

Grandmother was gone. Souyuen wasn't quite convinced that once she obtained the title of mother-in-law, she lost her identity as daughter-in-law so quickly. The absence of this vital rival bored Souyuen so much that she started to invent new rivalry between her and Pyieng. Liongtan had blamed her for being too picky. But she never stopped trying to be more than that. Pyieng seldom complained or went against her, which made it intolerable. Souyuen often sat by the threshold and imagined what conversation would go on if Grandmother was still here.

“You now know how annoying you are of being my son's wife, eh?” she might say.

“Give back my box and key,” she surely would say. Whenever Souyuen thought of this, she would take a glance at the road where the post man would come.

“Fetch some tea. Don't just sit there,” she might say. Maybe salty ginger tea with sesame and yellow pea, or peanuts, if it was winter. Now Souyuen could command Pyieng to do the trifles. Maybe Grandmother would ask for Pyieng in the first place. Who would know?

Life became faster and shorter after Mee got married. There was nothing much between Pyieng and Mee, not like the feeling that Liongtan and Souyuen had after they married for about a year. They never picked food for each other on the dining table. Souyuen seldom heard anything naughty leaking out from their room, which

was always lit until late night.

Jiongsa moved out of the house two months after the wedding, and went to a sugar factory in Lyleen city, like she had planned. Souyuen was surprised that things worked alright, though no more presents were needed for securing anything in admission. Jiongsa seldom wrote, when she did, nine times out of ten was asking for money. Souyuen never predicted this happening. She couldn't believe Jiongsa would spend all her salary. She never sent money back. Sometimes the daughter would come back to visit, always with a small pack of sunflower seeds or candies. Souyuen saw Mee give Jiongsa some cash one time, and scolded both.

The house was usually empty during the day. Liongtan and Mee went to town for work. Pyieng was always doing extra work for the family—Souyuen guessed she was still supplying her siblings. Souyuen worked her assigned part, when times were not too hard. She never fancied more physical labor, which tired her body and wore out her spirit at the same time.

She now longed for a grandson badly—it was the central objective from the beginning. Lieng had birthed a girl, and was pregnant again. Mamao had a handsome boy. What the secretary said about birth control was now a mere sheet of paper. No one took it seriously since there was no consequence for those who broke the rules. Lieng's second pregnancy hadn't resulted in any tragedy. Yet the possibility of upcoming implement of rules that would strengthen the law left Souyuen in a sticky hot stew. Nightmares would torture her as long as the darkness lasted. The only hope was to have that grandson as soon as possible. Though Lieng and Mamao came to

visit with the babies sometimes, their children bore other family names after all. How the house would be lightened with a child, Souyuen could imagine. Their laughter and even cries would become the delight of the day, the sweet dreams of the night.

Pyieng's belly was silent for almost one year now. Souyuen started to doubt whether she was sterile.

Souyuen roasted the thought again one afternoon when Mamao came with Tien. The little boy was four months old. His distinct eyebrows and hair defined his round face as handsome. He looked like his uncle Xee very much, a good sign as Souyuen put it.

"Let Grandma hold you. Here." Mamao handed the baby to Souyuen. "There."

Pyieng came out from her room, with several pairs of little socks in her hand. "I made some things," she said to Mamao, "for the kid."

"Ahya, thank you, Sister." Mamao smiled shyly with her teeth biting her lower lips. "Let's try these on." The socks were nicely sewed together, with a lace that could tighten the plackets.

"A little big," Mamao said. "The stiches are so neat."

"Not good enough comparing to your sewing machine, sister. Kids grow so fast; these would be too small very soon." Pyieng sat down and played with the kid's tender hand. The baby seized her finger. "I did double stich lines when I sewed the pieces together. You can remove the inner stich line to make them bigger. Might last you a while longer."

Mamao praised Pyieng's consideration in admiration. Souyuen wasn't too happy

about that. Looking at her daughter-in-law playing with the baby, she pictured the adorable scene in which the three generations enjoyed the quiet and undisturbed afternoon together under the same roof. The house would be filled with the milky odor of her own grandson. Souyuen handed Pyieng the kid and said, "When will you make clothes for your own kid?" who remained silent at the question. Longing in vain for tenderness and care from Mee, the only future she looked forward to was a kid of her own to fill the gap between Mee and her. She wished a child didn't need a man to conceive. The rare times when Mee touched her during the night was far from enjoyable. His curtness and rough manner were her greatest humiliation. Pyieng turned her face away from Souyuen. The atmosphere got cold. The baby started crying.

"He wants his own mother." Pyieng gave Tien back to Mamao. The short family reunion ended with an awkward farewell after a staring-without-talking tea party.

Souyuen thought Mamao wouldn't visit in a while. However, she came the next morning after breakfast. The baby was wearing the socks she received yesterday from Pyieng, a flattering sign of friendliness, which comforted the confusion of both Mother and wife.

"What's wrong? I thought . . ."

"Tien boy took a green runny dump yesterday night," Mamao interrupted Mother.

"What?" Souyuen gave a weird glance to Pyieng, who stood with slightly opened



mouth and a blank face. She had no clue what was happening.

“We should take Pyieng to a test,” Mamao said.

“What’s wrong?” Liongtan asked. The two men stood beside the desk, wondering who was going to collect the dishes and wash them.

“Pyieng, you feel different lately?” Souyuen asked.

“No. Why?”

Mamao dragged her aside and whispered, “You had your period this month?”

“Not . . .” The shy new wife paused. “What’s wrong?”

Liongtan felt his authority violated, and tapped the table. “Who’s gonna wash the dishes?”

Souyuen walked to him tutting. “Tien shitted green yesterday after Pyieng held him for a while,” she said to Liongtan, whose face turned grave.

“No such thing!” he said.

“True,” Souyuen emphasized. Both stood waiting for Pyieng and Mamao to finish their public whisper. Mee remained silent; he wasn’t familiar with these female superstitious things. Mamao slapped her side lap, and said, “That’s it. You certainly have it.”

“Have what?” Mee asked in a mist.

“Stupid son,” Souyuen yanked him in his sleeve. “She’s pregnant.”

That was ridiculous and impossible. Since when the science had developed enough to tell a woman’s pregnancy from baby shit? Mee gave a sardonic grin. “And you can tell if the baby has the little chicken or not, huh?”

He was about to laugh, but the solemn face of Mamao shoved it back. These two women were serious. Mee stole a glance of Father. He wore a plain face as if it wasn't his business. The scene was as absurd as a cat talking to a cow. The ludicrousness amused Mee. He knew another laugh would irritate the whole house like a poke into the hornet's nest, so he stood silently, watching the three women counting the last time of Pyieng's period.

The family took Pyieng to the clinic. She had been pregnant for two months. Mee felt his intelligence was insulted.

The news was like an unexpected rain after a long drought, a cloud that brought a piece of cooling shadow for the farmers in the fields. Souyuen knew her prayers were heard; her pilgrimages to the Stone Temple beyond the hills were pitied. She immediately planned to send some votive offering to the Stone Temple.

The next day they got the test result; they took Pyieng and Mee to the marriage register and got their marriage certificate.

Mamao asked Pyieng to tie a red string on Tien's wrist, to free him from the bad influences he got being touched by another baby indirectly. Pyieng was more than happy with it, and tied a beautiful peace knot for him. No one ever mentioned the latter half of this superstitious belief—that the woman made the baby shit green was surely pregnant with a girl.

There were so many sayings about pregnancy that if one had leisure to make a collection, the book it made had to be as thick as a dictionary. And if there was a

collection, what Souyuen knew definitely covered half of it. As the midwife of the village, she took the whole burden of looking after Pyieng's first pregnancy. Pyieng wasn't allowed to sit in the chair that other pregnant women had sat on, or else her baby would exchange with theirs. She was banned from small kids too, lest that the baby in her belly would be jealous once the mother showed tenderness toward others. There would be no rabbit meat on table, because the baby would have harelip if Pyieng ate them. Souyuen regretted she didn't find out about it earlier. The day before the test, Pyieng had sewed with needle and prepared dinner with a knife. These sharp things should all be taboos during the pregnancy. And the work of the new house was suspended because turbulence around the pregnant would disturb the baby.

Pyieng—more precisely her belly—had become the priority of the house. The first few months, she built a crazy appetite for spicy dishes. The stir-fried cabbage, the radish stew, and even the rice soup became spicy, not to mention other dishes that were spicy in the first place. The whole family had to eat spice with her, because Souyuen said the baby would be unhappy if its mother couldn't have what she wanted to eat.

“So why can't we eat separately?” Mee questioned. He had had enough of over-spiced food for now. He would have more water than food in his stomach after meals, and grew hungry faster than he used to.

“Nonsense! The baby can take it, why can't you? What kind of father are you to eat separately with your kid? He'll be mad at you. And an angry kid won't be pretty.”

So the family had to bear with Pyieng, who was more than flattered. Yet she

dared not take advantage of this situation, the tension between her and Mee had just eased a little. Lots of times when she craved badly for something, she would just grab the jar of perilla flavored dry plum skin, and chew a few instead of asking for it.

There was an old man in the market near her village, who sold tofu, bean pudding, and bean curd his whole life. In good times, he always put his two load boxes and his bamboo carrying pole under the parasol tree near the east end of the market. His face was half white and half black. Pyieng used to be scared of it. But when she was older, the old man told her it was because he came to the market during sunrise, and went back during sunset—the light always shined on his left cheek. He had this pot of the most appetizing homemade spicy bean curd in the bottom of his load. Every ten pieces were tied together with thin cotton strings.

She mentioned it one day at dinner. “I could smell it now. It had the just right chewiness.”

One day the following week, Mee came back with a dozen of the bean curd bundles for Pyieng. It was true joy for her at that moment, though it might be because Souyuen mentioned some kid that was born with a round red birth mark on her face, since the mother couldn't get hawthorn when she longed for it during pregnancy. The atmosphere at dinner was unusually warming. That night, Pyieng wept silently in bed. Hope laid in front of her—a child, a fulfilled family, a caring husband. She felt her own belly. It was ballooning slowly. She fell asleep, her back resting closely on Mee's warm and sturdy back. He didn't move away from her. A sweet dream relaxed her tense nerve. A new day was yet to come.

## SIXTEEN—Sons and Daughters Are Both Good

It was a girl. Souyuen felt the bareness between the baby's legs. The tiny creature cried with all her strength, announcing her birth to the house. Her umbilical cord half twined around her hand. After Souyuen cut the cord, the baby still held it as if unwilling to be separate from her mother. Souyuen tied the cord, wiped off the blood and tissue off the baby, cleaned her hands, and wrapped the baby with a blanket. Many girls she had delivered before, never once she felt such regret for the girl's mother. This time, for herself too. She opened the room door. The cold fresh air diluted the stinky smell of blood and water.

“It's a girl,” she announced to the two men sitting in the hall. The sunshine filled the front porch, and leaked onto the dark floor from the cat's hole at the bottom of the threshold. It was so dazzling, not like a winter sun. Souyuen sat on the threshold and watched the light. The tiredness of delivering the baby caught her undefended. She put her hand under the sun. Her nails were grimed with blood. It hurt her eyes.

She heard someone calling, and turned around. The dimness of the hall took her a while for a clearer view. Liongtan had his hand on the door handle, “Never mind, we're going inside.”

“No,” Souyuen snapped at him, drawing back from her half-awake dream.

“Leave her alone. No wind goes in; no man goes in, too.” What she said she meant for

herself as well. She turned her head back to the light, seeking something that would relieve her.

In the brightness she saw Grandmother's wrinkled face. She was once going to murder Mamao. She understood her then, and even more now. The hatred for girls was a curse put on this land by heaven's hand. The fear and sorrow Souyuen had after she saw baby Mamao and Grandmother's face was engraved in her heart. She had made up her mind to fight Grandmother with her life for Mamao if the old woman dared to commit the crime single handedly.

Yet now she had become the murderer. Even though merely a sparkle of the idea of giving away the child occurred to her, she felt the full guilt of it. She couldn't imagine what Grandmother suffered from giving away her own daughter. Had the old woman cried? Did she intoxicate herself with her achievement of preserving a son? Souyuen wished the old woman was alive, since she would know what to do, and how to do it. She would take the blame heroically.

Souyuen knew that new rules concerning birth control were about to come. There in town a huge propagandistic portrait of a happy family surrounding a girl with apple cheeks in red jumper skirt emerged in the most conspicuous spot almost overnight. Posters and newspapers praising the greatness of open-minded mothers were everywhere. The happy and peaceful image before the storm couldn't conceal the smell of scheme and danger. Souyuen had to be prepared for the war at bay.

She collected herself and stood up, turning into the room. Her stomach was roaring for food, stars flying in her vision. She hadn't had food for a whole day. She

closed the door of the temporary delivery room, shutting out the men's inquiries, and sat down in the chair beside the bed. The sweetness of the blood filled her lungs; she looked at the sleeping baby, and the red-eyed Mother, and said, "We'll have a son next time."

In reminding the family of that beautiful propaganda painting, they named the girl Xingxing, hoping she could shine like a star, with faith in where the country was leading them to. Later the same year, Lieng bore a boy, from which Souyuen regained her confidence—there was hope, as long as the wife was fertile.

Pyieng was a great mother; she recovered quickly and was full of milk. Mee grew closer to his wife, too. No one could resist the charming smile of an innocent child, even from a baby girl. The child brought further hope to Pyieng, for she saw the thawing heart of Mee—it was tolerant, soft, and honest.

Time went even faster with a child under the roof. The work of the new house resumed also. Souyuen, though she craved for the second grandchild, took patience in looking after Xingxing.

In witness of her first birthday, Jionsa came home with a young handsome man.

"What is this?" Liongtan held his natural hostility like a spear, pointing right into this stranger's eyes, in defense of his naive daughter. At first sight, Liongtan definitely defined him as a city playboy.

Yet Souyuen recognized him immediately, and gave Liongtan's sleeve a slight pull. "Ahya, you look even more handsome, young man." Souyuen pulled a chair to put beside the door. She couldn't recall his name. "What wind blows you here?"

"Who's he?" Liongtan, embarrassed, whispered beside Souyuen's face.

"Xu Meydeh's cousin," Souyuen said, looking into the young man's face, as he sat down in the chair she offered. "He came to give Jiongsa a ride to Mamao's wedding, old man. Your memory's bad."

"My name is Xu Weijia."

Liongtan didn't answer. He hardly recognized him. The mere piece he could remember from Mamao's wedding was the portrait of Chairman Mao. It stared right into his eyes, as if questioning him whether he made the right decision of marrying Mamao to this fellow in such a hurry.

"Uncle, Aunt," the young man started, "I came to visit you today, formally. Because I have some important things to consult with you."

Liongtan, and the whole family, was amazed by the fancy talk of this lad. He was wearing a white shirt inside an olive wool sweater. White shirts always pluck out ancient memories from Souyuen. She stood observing his attire. The nice pair of black leather shoes, a bit dusty from walking through the country roads, though not extremely rare in recent years, didn't often step on floors like this. His pants, except by the bottom rim of the legs, were free of dust and dirt. His nicely trimmed hair left a handsome short swing above the forehead, finishing his fine look. The way he talked was full of courtesy and politeness. He had a bag with him, in which were two boxes



of colorful candies that were in separate transparent plastic wraps. This young lad was now officially Jiongsa's date.

Before Souyuen figured everything out, she learned from his ardent self-introduction that he graduated from college this year. Heavens, he was a college student! His father passed away years ago. His mother supported the family with great difficulties and determination. He had three sisters above, two were married, and a brother under, who was still in some engineer program which was impossible for Souyuen to tell its meaning by hearing the awkward name.

Finally he poured out elegantly the final proposal, “Jiongsa and I have talked about this already. In the name of free will, Uncle, please marry me your daughter.”

All the people at present, Liongtan, Souyuen, Mee, and Pyieng, were stunned like pieces of wood chunk. For a moment the house was in silence. It was easy to tell his reason of visiting. But no one could have foretold the proposal—at the first time of meeting the date's parents.

Souyuen still couldn't believe her daughter had the guts fishing from men in the city. Her opinion of the knowledgeable people in the city mostly came from propagandas during the Cultural Revolution. They were not to be compared even with cow dung on the legs of farmers, because of their sly and calculative nature, their weak body, which surely shortened their willpower, and their shameful immoral relationship between men and women. Plus the several real *Zhiqings* she saw during the sixties simply confirmed her bad impressions. Rumors about the eldest boy, Jianguo, was stepping on two boats at the same time was hovering above the village.

Jianguo visited Jing multiple times a week at Souyuen's house after she moved in to live with the family. Feng pestered the boy wherever he went. Souyuen didn't know whether Jianguo returned Feng's favor. But the stereotype of city people implanted in her brain wouldn't be easy to dispel.

Pyieng purely appreciated Weijia's nice look, and the shoes. If it was possible to save some money and get Mee a pair, that would please both Mee and Mother. Mee recognized this young man when he presented the candy box. They'd met in the market before. Trying to recall the scene back then, Mee eyed this lad with a skeptical attitude.

“Father, we truly have affections toward each other. And he is a nice man.”

“How long have you two been seeing each other?” Liongtan asked. The dandyish first image of this young man wasn't quite repaired by the nice conversation.

“Tw . . . one year. We met in the upper city. He is working at a place nearby.”

Jiongsa blushed. She was a big girl now. Only being away from home for less than two years, she had grown taller. Her legs were straighter. Her hair was thicker and blacker, in flattering length, flew down from her shoulders in a tail like a stream. Her double eyelids enlarged her eyes even more. Though her short eyelashes weren't complimenting, they were thick and enhancing. She was wearing a long grey sport coat that had two large pockets on both sides; the texture was of fine and thick khaki. Souyuen couldn't tell how it was different from the cotton coat she wore before. Jiongsa definitely seemed prettier with it.

Somehow Souyuen felt relieved. Jionsa was always the spiky flower that was hard to handle. Now that she was willing to marry someone—especially when he was a handsome well-educated young man with promising future—it might be a nice deal that could save the family some strength and time for better use. As for the proposal gifts, they could use some on the new house as well.

Souyuen looked at Liongtan, hoping he could say something to interrupt the embarrassing silence. The Father stared at the floor and rubbed his chin with his elbow supported on his knee. Alright, he needed more time. Souyuen smiled at the visitor, showing at least some friendliness.

“What're you doing?” Liongtan caught her with that cutesy smile.

“Nothing.” Souyuen sat straight. “Why you have to be so serious? He's a guest.”

“Right.” Liongtan turned back to the young man. “Have some more tea before you leave. We'll talk with Jionsa for a while.”

The young man kept his mild lips curved the whole time. At the exile order, he stood up and said, “I'll see myself out, please don't bother.” Souyuen noticed his fine hands, white and free of calluses. His fingers were straight and his nails were of healthy semitransparent pink. He gave Jionsa a confident smile, indeed charming, with that little dimple on his left cheek. She returned it before he walked across the threshold. The whole family gathered around the door, each with different and mixed feelings, and watched the young man walk away, leaving them a modest shadow.

At that moment, Souyuen thought, if he could marry into this family, and their babies could be named with this house's family name, then everything would be exactly fine.

## SEVENTEEN—Walls Have Ears

Surely the young man wouldn't marry into this family. The eldest son was preferred to be responsible for the parents' life after their retirement—to store grains for winter times, to raise a son for old ages. This land was soaked and infused in such wisdom and tradition that to change it seemed impossible. Souyuen always believed that Jionsa would cost her much more time and worry in her marriage. She appreciated this simple and big favor Jionsa did the family, and thus never looked close enough into Weijia and his family. Their wedding was a great success, pretty bride and handsome bridegroom. Both settled in the city—though no one ever mentioned that Jionsa went to the old factory beside a crematory, which gave her enough creeps and startles when she had to walk outside when there weren't so many people on the street.

Though Souyuen was happy that Jionsa could find a man easily, what surprised her more was that her daughter was soon promoted to the accounting position. Everything turned out smoothly for her. The sisters and brothers were, if not secretly jealous, saying that Jionsa's good luck had come at the right time, when she was at the turning point of her life.

Jionsa's chapter was closed in Souyuen's book of life. The center of her life soon went back to Pyieng's belly. She started to collect recipes of food and medical soup that would help with pregnancy. Like an old lady scout, she researched in all

who were pregnant in and around the village. As the only midwife among several villages, these tasks for Souyuen were like making a simple stir fried shredded potatoes for a five star chef. She soon served soymilk made of black bean, soft-shelled turtle ginger soup, and mugwort quail stew as special dishes that only Pyieng could enjoy. The common water Pyieng had every day was replaced by black sugar water.

“Mother, please.” Pyieng was rather overwhelmed. “I never had these before I had Xingxing. See, she is alright.” Not that Pyieng didn’t believe these, her own family benefited from superstitious belief as well. She was rather afraid that her father-in-law and Mee would think she instigated all these for her own comfort. Like a piece of paper, she struggled between the male authority that demanded moral righteousness and the female responsibility of being a productive mother.

What Pyieng said inspired Souyuen. Right, the problem wasn’t about a second child, it was about a son. A final trump she coaxed and pestered out from an old great-grandmother in the near village—the medical rooster stew.

She went to town during market, and sought the strongest and most beautiful rooster. The long shining deep green feather in its tail swung proudly. The crimson cockscomb and wattle around its eyes quivered in high spirit. At the first glance Souyuen was determined to buy it. She never even bargained with the vendor. “Be generous, woman.” The old grandmother who gave her the recipe advised at last with a solemn look. “If not, Buddha will not show his mercy.”

She went into the traditional medical store for the herbs. Astragalus, cistanche, and two more herbs she’d never heard of. The pharmacist immediately recognized the

prescription, and asked Souyuen where she got it with a meaningful smile.

“Mind your own business young man,” she snapped at him proudly. And went back to home with all she needed for a grandson.

Now was great timing—Souyuen hated that she couldn’t laugh out loud now—late July. The vibrant atmosphere was perfect for conceiving, for all the trees were bearing fruit and the crops were bowing down with heavy ears. If Pyieng got pregnant now, the baby would be born to enjoy the warm spring. Before it was winter, the baby would be strong enough for the coldness. Thinking of a healthy white fat kid, Souyuen hastened her step. The house was near.

“What did you say?” A roar delivered an ominous feeling to her.

Souyuen stretched her neck in vain. Sweat streamed down from under her straw hat. She tossed the hat back behind her neck. The grey cotton string that hung the hat on her neck was soaked wet. Souyuen licked her lips in short breath, and spat out the saltiness. There was one more turn of the road. She started trotting. The straw string that tied the wings of the rooster sunk into her fingers. She changed it to another hand. Soon the string was hurting her again. She murmured a curse, and ran a few steps.

“It’s him!” That was Liongtan’s cry. Souyuen couldn’t tell what was inside the short line. Anger, happiness? The scene she was yet to witness seized her heart like a hunter’s hairy hand seizing a fragile squirrel.

“Old man!” Souyuen managed a short cry between her ragged breathing. Soon there came a rustling from the direction of the house. She slowed down a bit, and exchanged the rooster with the medical pack once more. There, a black shadow

sprinted toward her like a bolt.

“Hey, it’s you.” Souyuen lifted the rooster higher away from the black dog that came to welcome her. He disappeared for two weeks after firecrackers frightened him away that year. After that, it had become a convention for him to disappear during the festival. Then Liongtan appeared between the bamboos. The lights shed on his raised eyebrows and large eyes. His lips slightly curved with a residue of smile. Souyuen was relieved.

“What’s going on?” Souyuen handed him the rooster. “Watch the dog,” she added, and took the hat in her hand to fan away the heat that was radiating from inside her body.

“We got some letters.”

“What?” Souyuen’s nerve suddenly tightened. “What letters?”

“You guess.”

“Just tell me. Ah. It’s so hot.” Souyuen fanned faster.

“From Liongshu.”

“Who?”

“My brother! From Taiwan!” Liongtan raised his tone. “Can you believe it?”

“I can’t.” Getting off from the roller-coaster of the guessing game, Souyuen flung back a weak response, thinking about who took yesterday’s mail, and who did today’s. There weren’t many letters these days, since the kids were all settled down with their own family. The last letter Souyuen took from the mail man was from Xee. He seemed in love with this city girl, who had been assigned to the medical institute a



year before Xee went there.

“Me neither,” Liongtan said. The excitement in his voice weakened; a sorrow he couldn’t hide leaked out like the overflowing water of an old well. “But it’s true,” he added. “I wish Mother was still here.” Souyuen caught sight of Liongtan’s hand stroke his face swiftly, before he walked out of the shadow of the bamboo woods.

Their house and the almost finished new house were in front of them. Mee sat on the threshold with legs splayed. Each knee had an elbow resting on it. His forehead buried in his hands. His hair stuck out between his fingers like grasses been trod by horse.

Souyuen’s head buzzed like a bee hive. Did he get what he shouldn’t get, after all these years? No, the letters stopped coming long since before Grandmother died. She asked, stepping onto the stairs of the porch, “What’s wrong?”

Mee raised his head. His eyes weren’t looking at her. “Nothing.” He stood up quickly, and took over the goods from Liongtan. Before he went inside kitchen, he added with a reluctant smile, “Just a little tired.”

Liongtan picked up a pile of unfolded paper from the threshold beside Mee, and handed them to Souyuen. The salutation, “Mother, Brother, and Sister,” was written with black ink. The clean and fluent handwriting was complimented by the neat punctuations. This was real. She checked the postmark; this letter was sent out from some unknown town. Souyuen and Liongtan exchanged a glance. She read on.

Lionshu was a translator of Kuomintang when the Communist Party gained the upper hand in the Civil War. He received, one day, an order from his supervisors

assigning him to a position that was responsible for transportation—transporting gold. He knew the army was retreating. Letter after letter he wrote to his family, asking them to come with him, knowing not how many of them could reach Mother at last. Four months later, he sent out a final letter from Xiamen, saluting his home and his family for the last time, and went on board to Taiwan.

He said he was doing well, and had married a widow who had a son with her late husband. She was from Suzhou, a place known for their beautiful and gentle women. The kid was four when they married. He knew his true father didn't make it to Taiwan. Still, out of respect, he changed his family name and called Liongshu father for years.

Liongshu didn't know whether this letter would reach Liongtan, since it was sent through confidential ways. His mere hope was to let the family know he was still alive, on the distant island, with a heart thinking of his motherland and his family day and night.

“The tension between the mainland and Taiwan has eased a lot during these years. I hope in the near future, we could write to each other without difficulties. Maybe one day, there will be ways for people who were once separated to be united again. I hope by then, I'm still alive, and so are you all.” By the end he left an address.

Souyuen looked at Liongtan, and saw his wet red eyes. She folded the letter and put it back into the husband's hand. “You never got the letter he wrote before he left?”

“We did,” Liongtan said with a low voice that was hardly audible. They both sat down on the threshold.

The letter they got from Liongshu was the last one he wrote. All was too late by

then. The letter was delivered secretly into Liongtan's own hand by the lunatic's mother, who was still young at the time—that was when her son wasn't as crazy. She put the crumpled envelope in Liongtan's hand, and urged once again, "Go home, quickly, to your Mother. Don't show anyone else this letter." The kid looked at the brown envelope and nodded. Leaving the shoes that were too big for him on the ridge of the paddy fields, Liongtan ran through the green crops, the winding country road, and the bamboo woods, until he couldn't breathe or talk, and handed the envelope that was stained with sweat to Mother. After reading it, she chiseled a hole in the wall behind the closet of the east room, and sealed the letter inside. When night came, she held Liongtan, who had vaguely encountered another crucial and brutal reality from the adult world, in her arms and cried until finally the irresistible sleepiness defeated her sorrow.

Souyuen wiped her eyes at the story. "I never heard you talk about this."

"This was treason, wife. I'm not getting us killed."

She chuckled, hoping she wasn't too old for it. Taking Liongtan's hand, she stood up and led him into their room.

It didn't take long before the old letter was in their hand. It was wrapped in a handkerchief that had embroidery of a creamy butterfly in one corner. Liongtan unfolded it and took out the letter. The faded fountain pen writing was barely readable.

"Hold on." Souyuen took out her keys from her secret pocket inside her pants and opened the closet. From the left drawer she took out a box as big as her

palm—the one that Grandmother gave her before she passed away. It was a plain hardwood box. Time had polished it nicely and left a soft glowing patina. Souyuen unlocked the box on the table. Inside, silver bracelet that had a tiny lotus seed cup shaped bell, a pair of earring, a crystal cube that had a diagonal hole were organized on a piece of soft red cloth.

Liongton gulped, “She gave these to you?”

“Hmm.” When Grandmother gave it to her, Souyuen thought the letters for Mee from the lady fox was surely inside this, but there was nothing except jewelry.

Liongton recognized them. They were Mother’s dowry. The crystal cube was the most cherished proposal gift Father gave her. The bracelet, though, didn’t ring a bell for him. The relationship between Souyuen and his mother wasn’t as bad as he thought after all. He stole a glance at Souyuen. She never mentioned the jewelry, let alone bragging about them. Her image was suddenly brighter in his sight. He folded the old letter and the handkerchief, and put it inside the box. When he was closing it, a piece of card fell out from the lid. “Eh?” Liongton reopened the lid and took it out. It was dark brown, like the color of the wood. He turned it around. Grandmother’s soft but sloppy handwriting reminded Liongton of her trembling hands.

“What is this?”

Souyuen stuck her nose closer. She thought the card was pasted inside the lid only to protect it from scratches. There was an address written on it, some place in Guangzhou Province. Souyuen straightened her back in alarm, and took a step back to shut and latched the wood door.

“Ahya,” Liongtan exclaimed. “Don’t be so jumpy.” He led out a long exhalation.

“*Shhu*,” Souyuen silenced Liongtan. She read the card once again; the name on it was Li Peier. This was the name she should be looking out on suspicious letters for Mee. She finally had it. Souyuen had never actually seen the letters Grandmother intercepted. It seemed that the old woman overrated Souyuen’s caution and insight by leaving this box to her. It was like trusting a lighter to a baby. The fear of Mee finding out the truth returned and struck Souyuen. She wondered what superficial peaceful appearance of life had concealed the crisis. What the Taoism master said about the first six years of Mee’s marriage being crucial was brought back by this address. Souyuen felt vulnerable.

“I haven’t told you about this before,” Souyuen whispered. “But this girl that Mee liked sent him letters after he left the army camp.”

“What?”

“*Shhu*! Not so loud, old man.” Souyuen lowered her head. “I didn’t know at first. Mother was taking those letters. She told me and gave this to me before she left.”

Liongtan had no idea this happened before. It wasn’t some serious thing. The impression that the girl started hooking his son at such a young age disgusted him. If any of his own daughters did this, he would have broken their legs. “And she never wrote again afterwards?”

“No, I didn’t get any. But Mee seemed off today. I fear . . .”

“He did seem worried,” Liongtan said, helping Souyuen locked the box and

stored it away. “You should talk with him.” Liongtan pouted his lower lips to the left, as he weighed the whole matter. “As for the letters, I won’t tell him anything.”

When Souyuen went into the kitchen, Mee was sitting aside the stove looking after the boiling water pot.

“You’re gonna kill the chicken now?”

Mee nodded. There was something unusual about him. He didn’t talk as much. Souyuen followed him to the back yard. There was no garden here. The back yard was only a narrow space between the house and the cliff of the hill. A grey tile awning sheltered the place from rain and wind. The old concrete floor was full of cracks that grew milk grass. On an old table was two plastic basins and a towel shelf. Toothbrushes and enamel cups lined up on the windowsill of the new house that haven’t yet finished. The pulley over the private water well was replaced by a new green-painted hand pump.

The proud rooster was sitting on the ground with its feet tied. The shiny feathers on its full breast moved slightly as it turned its head and fixed its beady eye on the two giants. Mee squatted beside the pump and washed his hands before he sat down on the low stool that was made from extra wood from the new house’s window panel. When he cut the throat of the rooster, he didn’t say “*Amitabha*” to the Buddha for the sake of the murdered creature. The desperate final flounder of the rooster brought out muscles and veins from Mee’s arms. He held its neck close above the white bowl, and waited as the blood drained.

“Ahya, so much blood.” Souyuen stepped back, avoiding the splashing blood. Yet there was no reply from Mee. Looking into his face, Souyuen couldn’t find the routine softness of her son. “What’s wrong?” Souyuen asked carefully, trying to pry into him.

“Nothing.”

“You fight with Pyieng again?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“I don’t know,” Mee said, lifting the chicken from the porcelain bowl that was filled with its blood, and threw the dead animal aside into an iron bucket.

“I’ll ask Pyieng when she comes back.”

“It’s none of her business,” Mee defended himself impatiently. He poured the whole pot of boiling water into the bucket, and started pulling off the feather.

“Careful, it’s hot,” Souyuen said, but didn’t get any reply. She stood bored, looking at the unenlightening process of the cleaning, when suddenly she heard Liongtan calling her name.

Souyuen went to her husband who sat in the chair on the front porch. A copy of newspaper that came with Liongshu’s letter spread out on the floor in front of him between his two feet. The bullock clip in his hand paused in the air. His other hand was scratching the back of his ear. Liongtan was reading through an article with great care. Souyuen could tell from that monkeyish post that her husband was upset and annoyed. Hearing his wife approaching, he moved one foot toward the chair and

offered a view. The headline reads, “Li Guangyao: IUD after the First Child, Tubal Ligation after the Second One.”

It was true, soon as the new leader of the Birth Control Committee was assigned, there came new policies. Once more Souyuen’s head buzzed as if she was hit by a brick. She looked closer, ensuring each word wasn’t mistaken. Still it said IUD and ligation. “Ah!” A strangled cry came out. “Why! Does our family name deserve to be extinct?”

Liongtan stopped Souyuen’s whines with a sulky wave of his clip. “Don’t be so dramatic. Listen,” he read slowly, “In rural areas, if the first child of a couple is female, they could choose to have a second one. The provinces that put on this trial implementation are Jiangxi, Anhui . . . Hmm, here, Hunan. See?”

Through her vague sight, what Souyuen saw was only ligation. There in Souyuen’s brain flashed by thousands of unsound ways of getting the family a grandson. In the worst situation, they might need abortion—abortions. No, there could be worse times too. If Pyieng couldn’t conceive anymore, Mee would need another wife. Souyuen peered at Mee’s room gloomily. The door was shut, Pyieng went back home with Xingxing for the weekend. Her brother seemed to be graduating from high school. If the couple failed to produce an heir after all, their hope was on Xee. Yet Souyuen wasn’t sure what kind of character was the miss that Xee was dating. Times were different, Souyuen sighed.

Suffering from the guilty feeling from her thoughts, Souyuen felt the obligation of being occupied by other chores. She walked through the hall into the kitchen like a



robot, leaving Liongtan with his newspapers. The empty kitchen was suffused with the stinky vapor of the water Mee used to remove the chicken feather. Souyuen lifted the cover of the stove in the center of the kitchen range. She picked out the two top beehive briquettes with tongs, and then the third one in the bottom. It was totally burnt and left only white limestone ashes that were still in the beehive shape. She placed it in the dustpan. The fragile leftovers cracked into pieces with the soft move. Souyuen's nose twitched. She threw the iron dustpan on the floor with a bang. Tears overflowed her eyes. She felt aggrieved. This new leader of the Birth Control Committee was spreading an epidemic of horror among women. If she could risk her own life and eliminate this villain, would the country be liberated? This daring idea brought simply self-sarcasm to Souyuen. Her life wasn't of legend, rather of a usual woman in a common family, facing her routine questions. She didn't deserve this. Grandmother who was used up like this bottom briquette didn't deserve this either. Souyuen knew she was heading to the road where the old woman had gone. She feared that the same fate would fall upon her. No, she feared even more that there wouldn't even be a grandson for her to sacrifice for. She snuffled and put the two briquettes back, then added a new one on top.

“What's the matter?” Hearing the bang and snuffle, Mee came in from the backyard with the bare white chicken in his left hand, and the porcelain bowl in the other. His hands and arms were stained with fresh blood. He looked like a professional executioner with his impatient drooping lips and the darkness between his brows.

“Nothing.” Souyuen bowed down to check the vent at the bottom of the range that allowed air into the stove, and wiped her face before she stood up. She picked up the gourd dipper and filled the biggest pot with water before she put it on the stove.

“You cleaned the inside?” Hands busy with unpacking the herbs, Souyuen pouted her lips with a slight tilt of her chin toward the rooster.

“Hmm.” He set down things, and went on to wash his hands by the pump.

“Good. Son.” She sighed in her heart, and said in a cheerful way, “This rooster and herb stew is for Pyieng and you. You’re going to make a boy tonight.”

**EIGHTEEN—Nostalgia Turned to Be A Graveyard: / “Here Am I / And  
Yonder . . . My Mother”**

After months of waiting, Souyuen gave up the rooster recipe. Nothing happened to Pyieng’s belly. What’s worse was that Mee grew distant again from Pyieng. No matter how Souyuen and Pyieng tried, the night they spent together during the whole year could be counted with her single hand.

The only thing she was happy with was that time was getting better. Three years ago, the commune of the village put on trial implementation of a new contract system. They distributed the paddy fields to each household, and agreed that if the grain output exceeded the quota they agreed on, the family could keep the extra grain for themselves. The new policy motivated the whole village. Every household, by the end of the year, had extra grain stored in their private barn, waiting for the government to purchase. Soon the commune system disintegrated. The official name of the village was Tengwei Village again. It was 1984.

The work of the new house was finished during these years, too. Souyuen witnessed the rise of this castle. It had two separate floors, and an attic. The big hall was secured with three pairs of wooden hinged door with glass panels in the upper part. In the hall, on each side of the gate, a door opened to bright, clean rooms. At the end of the hall, a door on the right side led to a modest living room that connected another two smaller bedrooms. On the left side, a wide stair led to the second floor.

The handrail wasn't installed yet. Beside the stairs was the corridor to the old house. Its dusty floor was concrete. The wall was of rough white paint. The family still cooked and ate in the old house. They moved the beds and desks to the new rooms; and the old rooms became storages.

Before Souyuen was desperate about Pyieng, there came good news from Xee. He was going to get married. Two days before New Year's Eve, he came home with a wooden box on his shoulder and a young woman by his side.

She had a wide square jaw, hidden under the blue scarf that was said to be knitted by herself. The deep green cotton coat seemed cozy enough for a blizzard, plus a crocheted hat, a pair of gloves, and the thick pants she had. She was wrapped in full defense against coldness like cotton candy. A pair of red leather heels was covered with the mud of the miry country roads. Stamping off the mud on the front porch of the new house, she greeted the family with a sweet smile that revealed her bright but uneven teeth. A notch in one of her upper central incisors immediately shortened the distance between this city dweller and the rural wives, for the notch undoubtedly came from cracking sunflower seeds and melon seeds. The sound those seeds made was a universal language between women.

"Welcome, welcome." Pyieng shook hands with the young woman while Mee took over the wooden box from Xee.

"Heavy! What is it?"

"A present we got for Father and Mother." Xee cast a smile at the young woman. She came to him immediately like a docile bird. "Father, Mother, this is Mei

Hongbo.”

It was a common family name, though her given name was somewhat muscular. Souyuen nodded and showed a friendly smile. They all sat down around the stove. Xingxing bounded to Mee, who picked her up and held her as he walked to the old house for a claw hammer to open the wood box. Liongtan seemed to like this future daughter-in-law very much, and asked, “Does she understand our dialect?”

“No, she . . .”

“I do. I can’t speak it, but I understand.” Unwrapping herself from the scarf, Hongbo spoke out.

“Ay, good.” Liongtan gave her a thumb up, and started talking with her with great interest. “Where is your hometown?” the old man asked in dialect.

“Huarong.” The young woman answered with Mandarin.

“Huarong? Where Kuan Yu let Cao Cao gets away in the *Three Kingdoms*?”

She smiled. “Right, but that’s in the novel, not history.”

“Right.” The old man laughed with a slight embarrassment.

The conversation about her family background and her job continued. They both spoke with a slower speed, in a louder volume, like two old people with hearing loss. Souyuen interrupted them impatiently at the question about a younger sister of Hongbo, and asked, “You decided the time for the wedding? You need a master to calculate it for you?”

“Ah. No.” She laughed. “We’ve scheduled it on April seventeenth. We have this almanac calendar that tells when the proper date of a wedding is.”

That was after New Year, they would be back to the city where they work. “I thought you were going to hold the wedding here, at the new house,” Souyuen said, eyeing the smiling woman who boldly returned a direct look.

“That was too troublesome. We are decorating an apartment the institute assigned to us. We’ll hold the wedding there,” Hongbo answered with kindled eyes, like a child who looked forward to the new clothes and delicious dishes of New Year—lamb stew with celery, steamed or baked rice cake, fried eels with cucumber, and many more. “Besides, it’s too impolite to disturb your place for that long.”

Souyuen’s smile was replaced by bewilderment. This house was indeed their place. But as long as this woman was married into the family, she was one of “their” as well. The apartment they were decorating was also Xee’s property, and should belong to this family. What was the point of being so complicated about politeness? Souyuen started to feel the distance she saw at first sight between her and Hongbo.

Seeing Souyuen’s brows knotted, Xee added at once, “Mother, Father, you should come to live with us for a while. We need you at the wedding, too.”

“Yes. Please come to visit. My mama would be very pleased to see you two. All the time she talks about what kind of parents taught such a son who had patience and softness toward elder people.”

Mama? Souyuen never heard her children call her with that. She asked in curiosity, “Where does your mother live?”

“In Changsha.”

That was the capital of the province, and the city in which Hongbo and Mee both

worked. The inequality of being more distant from Xee than Hongbo's mother made her jealous. Souyuen sat back in disappointment, picturing this lucky old woman who was enjoying the son she had raised with her own hands and heart. She flung Hongbo her last question, "So, how many kids are you planning for?"

Before Xee had a chance to speak, Hongbo answered directly with her innocent smile on the face, "We're both registered as city residences now, right?" She glanced at Xee for a confirmation. "We can only have one kid."

"What if it's a girl?"

"There's nothing wrong about a girl, Aunt. You're a female too," Hongbo said with a sincere yet serious smile. With no intention to continue this conversation, she stood up and walked to the wood box. At the moment, Souyuen saw the smile vanish from Hongbo's face. It gave her the creeps. "Let's open this, now, Xee." Like a weaver playing her shuttle with overwhelming elegance and ease, Hongbo took the claw hammer Mee placed on the box, and pried out the nails that sealed the lid. The sudden and seemingly violent power that burst out from this young woman astonished Souyuen. After she removed the lid, Xee helped her lift up the black box that had two antennas on top and two knobs beside the slightly bulging screen.

"A television!" the house exclaimed. This was the first TV in the village. Though everyone in the family had heard about it, no one had really seen it working before.

Xee drew the square dining table toward a plug socket, which was then the only socket in the hall. The legs of the table rubbed against the floor with an unpleasant noise. Hongbo offered a hand and they settled it by the side of Mee's bedroom door.

Inspired, Pyieng covered the stove with its lid and shoved it with her feet toward the table. Mee and Xingxing went on to help her. Liongtan and Souyuen started to move the chairs around. The living room was filled with the symphony of the harmonious cooperation of the family.

Within fifteen minutes, the plug was in the socket, the TV turned on. Everyone sat around the stove. A dish filled with salted watermelon seeds was put on the desk. Each one had a cup of ginger tea at the foot of the chair, staring into the flickering snow and listening to the static noise, waiting for Xee and Mee to set the outdoor antenna in the right place on the balcony of the second floor. When eventually, with a faint pop coming out from the speaker, the black and white screen was lightened with the image of a man with side parted hair.

“Ah, got it! We got it!” Liongtan turned his head and yelled, unwilling to move his eyes away from the screen. The man in the box was in a suit and tie. In the background the characters of “news” occupied half of the screen. The familiar voice which the family heard every day from the radio came out of the speaker, “Welcome back, it is simulcast news.”

The wide forehead of the man amused the family. Though Liongtan had seen once the presenter’s photo on newspaper, the brightness of his forehead was overwhelming in moving videos. Souyuen suggested adjusting the knob for louder voice, while Mee and Xee came down the stairs.

“Try the knob. See if we can get more channels,” Hongbo said to Xee. She sat the furthest from the TV and nearest from the stove. She felt cold after sitting down,



and had the scarf on again. Seeing Hongbo sitting there commanding, Souyuen couldn't bear thinking her son would be bossed by this finicky woman, she stood up and tried to get herself a clearer sound.

“You know how to use this, then why don't you do it yourself?” she murmured, stretching her hand toward the knob.

“Quit it, wife.” Liongtan gave Souyuen's arm a slight slap. “Listen.”

Xee turned up the volume. The presenter was summing up the last news. They surrounded the TV, putting all their attention on the screen—even Xingxing, who couldn't quite understand what was going on, was attracted by the shining box that had a little man inside.

“Taiwan Kuomintang has announced today that they will progressively open various and convenient ways for the citizens who long for family reunion. We hope in the near future, there will be reunion for not only families, but also Taiwan and its homeland. Today's simulcast news ends here. Thank you for watching. We'll see you tomorrow.” With the relaxing melody, the closing credits rolled across the screen. Liongtan stared glassily into the TV like a hypnotized zombie.

For the whole night, as long as Liongtan stayed silent, no one talked anything about the news, as if in mentioning the mere word of Taiwan, the launched tear-gas grenade inside the old man would be ignited, and his pride and authority would be shed off with his tears.

Four days later, Xee and Hongbo went back to the capital. Before she left,

Hongbo made sure that Souyuen learned with her heart how to adjust the volume and change the channel—of which they found three more after the news that night. They agreed that Souyuen should attend their wedding and live with them for a while, to enjoy the convenient life of the city.

Looking at the back of the leaving couple, Souyuen knew the way of getting an heir for the family wouldn't be easy, especially with this unpredictable city miss.

## **NINETEEN—Granny Liu Visited the Grand View Garden**

Souyuen got off the train with missions on her shoulders. She had two red envelopes in the inner pocket of her coat. They were the presents and best wishes from the family for Xee and Hongbo's wedding.

The train reeked of a mixture of cigarettes, urine, and sweat, as if it was alive with body odor. Even the wind that blew in from outside window was sickening. Souyuen never managed to eat any of the tea eggs Pyieng prepared for her the previous night. She dragged her plastic woven bag onto the platform, and swore she'd never travel by train again.

Xee spotted her right away by the exit of the station and called out. It took Souyuen a while searching for the familiar figure of her son. Finally, she found him in a short-sleeve white shirt, and a pair of jeans with two fat legs like bells. Hongbo stood beside him and smiled as she met Souyuen's eyes. Her hair was newly curled, with a yellow plastic hair band glazing on her fluffy head. Her eyebrows trimmed and penciled like two pieces of thin willow leaves. She had a pink sweater that was decorated with different colors of geometrical patterns. The white sneakers on her small feet had no spots on them.

Souyuen was amazed by the colorful attire of the young couple. She walked toward them in full doubt. Xee took her luggage while Hongbo had her hands in the back pocket of her pants. They walked through the crowd surrounding the exit. A

prosperous and busy square was presented to Souyuen with the golden soft sunlight from the sinking sun. People in colorful clothes stood by the bus stop sign, talking in a dialect Souyuen couldn't quite understand.

On the number four bus, Souyuen kept marveling at the cars and buses on the four-lane road. There wasn't even such a wide road in Lyleen—the nearest city beside her village where Jionsa was now living. The bicycle that ran along the sidewalk seemed as vulnerable as a rat competing with the iron rhinos and elephants. More amazing was the tall buildings that stood like forests. Souyuen turned back to the tower in the middle of the train station as the bus turned onto May First Avenue. The statue of the torch stood on top of the bell tower, enjoying an unusual panorama of the thriving city. The two thin red characters of Changsha in the center of the station was said to be Chairman Mao's hand writings. Souyuen felt the grandeur of the capital of the province and the historic atmosphere that engraved and overflowed the city.

Souyuen moved her simple luggage into the apartment that was fully decorated. It was on the second floor of a six-floor apartment. Unlike Souyuen's new house, the ceilings here were of modest height, allowing people to move around without a spooky echo pursuing even the lightest footsteps. In the living room, a nice tea table with a shining glass surface squatted in between the fourteen-inch black and white TV and the long mahogany sofa. The stove in the kitchen burned gas from a metal tank that only needed to be filled twice a month. The guest room had a single bed and a wooden dark purple closet, with a magnet that kept the door shut nicely with a

cheerful click. The beddings were all made recently with new cotton and cloth. The soft and fresh feeling provided an extra sense of security during the night.

“Aunt, everything seem comfortable here?” Hongbo came in, and stopped by the door, leaning against the frame.

This girl seemed more distant by now. If it was Pyieng, she would have walked straight in and sat beside her on the bed. “Good, everything is good,” Souyuen answered, wondering when Hongbo would correct herself and call mother instead of aunt. “Where’s Xee?”

“He went for groceries. Don't worry, he'll be back soon.”

“You didn't go with him?”

“Ay, no worries. He must have told you he's now the vice-chairman of our Labor Union here, and is doing a great job. So—” she chuckled, “—Aunt, you should see him with a different eye.”

Souyuen didn't answer. This girl talked exactly like Jiongsa's husband, only with a different dialect. She couldn't comprehend lots of Hongbo's big words precisely, yet she could read her tone. The pride in her voice grew stronger as they talked more, yet she maintained the superficial friendliness skillfully like an acrobat walking on a rope.

“Please rest a while. I still have some sewing to do.” Hongbo left her with the unpacked luggage, and went back to her dorm beside the research center. Souyuen unzipped her bag and spread her things on the bed, clothes for spring and summer, a spare pair of shoes, towels and toothbrush, and a sewing kit she always had with her. She organized them into place, and lay down on the bed for a short nap.

The wedding soon came. By now, more than half of Xee and Hongbo's colleagues got acquainted with Souyuen. Surprisingly, the city people were mostly very friendly. The greetings were more explicit than the friendly look and nod in the village. Still she felt lonely, mostly because of the absence of Liongtan, and also the absence of an equal character who could converse with her. Like the goldfish that was released into the pond from the water tank, Souyuen struggled to search for the glass wall when she explored her new world. Eventually she built her own glass wall and stayed inside the neighborhood most of the time. The single thing she enjoyed was the *Majiang* game on each Friday or Saturday night.

On the morning of the wedding day, friends, colleagues, and families gathered on the ground below the apartment's balcony. Souyuen heard someone yelling, "Xee! The sun almost shines upon your butt! How long are you gonna dawdle over your hair?" Souyuen walked toward the window and saw the crowd below, a loquacious and vigorous group of both young and old, from which a blast of contagious laughter burst out. She unlocked the sliding window. While she opened it, another voice shouted, "Ey, if you won't come now, I'm gonna go for you." Another wave of laughter swept inside with fresh air. Souyuen stuck out her head and said, with her yet unskilled Mandarin, "He'll be ready soon." Fearing her accent would bring Xee trouble, she said no more. The young people under there all started greeting her. "Hello, Aunt."

"Good morning, Aunt."

“Are you getting used to the life here?”

“If you need any help, just ask us.”

She smiled at all the questions and answered all she could with continuous nodding. They reminded her of the five *Zhiqings* that had lived in the village. They were at first warm hearted, solidary, and generous. They have few in their house but a lot to share.

Soon after the *Zhiqings* came, the villagers found out a great advantage of these city people. They could teach them to read, especially the quiet pretty girl with the bracelets. She would read letters for them, too. For exchange she only asked to record the address on the envelope—a rare habit that merely made her more mysterious and charming. Jing was extensively welcomed by the children, too. The kids were curious about the bell on her bracelets at first, and were overcome by her patient, caring nature afterwards. This added a great deal to her charm for young men around her. Not long after, under the help of the Women Community, the village built up their own reading school in the former secretary's house. The new-comers settled there. When the villagers didn't have work, they gathered in there and listened to the beautiful girl read the newspapers or whatever book they could find—though it was almost always the *Little Red Book*, the *Quotations of Chairman Mao*. Otherwise, they read letters for villagers which had been “a great burden” for the new Secretary Yang.

“Aya, *qinjia!*” A piercing sound yanked Souyuen back from her memories. She looked down there. A middle aged woman with curled short hair emerged from the corner of the building. Her face raised toward Souyuen, a pair of plain eyes smiled at

her. Her hand waved above her, a jade bracelet dangled on her slender wrist. There was a free and easy aroma around her. The whole crowd seemed knew her. A wave of greetings welcomed her elegant footsteps. The red coat and black heels were just right on her thin frame. “*Qinjia*, Aya, it’s so nice to see you.” It suddenly clicked that she was Hongbo’s mother. Souyuen waved her hand in front of her.

Xee appeared on the balcony. He stuck his head outside and yelled, “I’m coming,” and saw the old lady downstairs. “Ay, Mother, you’re here. Come up and sit with my Mother!”

“No, I’m going with you to fetch Hongbo.”

Xee unlocked his bicycle and pushed it out to the crowd. Souyuen followed. Hongbo’s mother greeted her again formally with a warm handshake. They exchanged their names. Surprisingly, she had the exact same name as her, Chen Shuyuan, meaning a gentle lady. But Hongbo’s mother pronounced it with perfect Mandarin. It sounded like she was the true gentle lady who deserved the name. They held and shook each other’s hands in delight; each fearing letting go first would show any impoliteness. Everyone was amused by this amazing coincidence.

It was only five-minute walk to Hongbo’s dorm. When the crowd arrived, Hongbo was standing outside on the corridor, all dressed up, staring into the sky with her shining eyes as if a bird longing for adventure.

“Why you standing there, Hongbo?” a close friend spoke first, “You’re supposed to be carried all the way to the new apartment from you room, no feet touching the ground, alright?”



She smiled at the tease with a careless toss of her hand.

“Yeah, Xee go up and give her a lift.” The crowd laughed.

Xee and Hongbo’s wedding attire were dark blue mandarin suits—which were from department store—with a simple red cloth flower pinned on the left chest. Hongbo matched her suit with a pair of shiny black leather heel boots. A silver brooch of lily was pinned beside her bride flower. Xee lifted Hongbo with a simple try which won him joyful cheers from the crowd. He carried her downstairs, and put her on the bicycle, then rode off with a hand waving in the air.

“I’ll see you guys there.” Xee laughed and disappeared at the turn of the road.

There were no vows said to Chairman Mao’s portrait. There was no such portrait in the apartment. The bride and bridegroom were united by the Party’s secretary of this institute. They bowed for sky and the land, together with their ancestors, then to Shuyuan and Souyuen, then to each other. They drank the wine with their arms intertwined. Finally, Hongbo offered Souyuen a cup of tea and called her mother. Enchanted by the atmosphere, Souyuen felt the bliss of being saluted like this. Setting down the china tea cup, she groped into her inner pocket and took out the two red envelopes, one for Xee and one for Hongbo, as the belated betrothal gift, and the best wishes from those who were not able to be here.

“Ha, Mother taught you to build your own secret money stash.” Hongbo laughed, slightly pouting her lips.

“What are you talking about?” Xee clasped the bride in his left arm, and gave her a firm squeeze on the shoulder. “Mine is yours. No more of this nonsense.”

Everyone was soaked in the joyful atmosphere of the wedding, everyone drank with generosity. Three round tables were set up in the crowded apartment. The guests were treated with a fine feast. Steamed meat balls covered with sticky rice, whole chicken and jujube stew, and assorted cold duck slices. Ten dishes that stood for perfection were presented and then consumed with gladness. Click of cups and chopsticks mixed with congratulations. The couple went through each table and proposed a toast to each guest. Souyuen drank a few cups with Shuyuan. They both were intoxicated by the delight of witnessing this vibrant wedding.

From then on the couple lived together in the apartment with Souyuen who believed now their next purpose should be a child.

“You two considered a child yet?” The question was brought up by Souyuen more often recently.

“Hmm, Mother. We’ve talked about this already,” Hongbo always answered with a calm look that went right into Souyuen’s eyes. “I want to wait until I transfer from the hospital to the research center. It’s really tiring working shifts in the wards.” She was a nurse of the hospital, and a very light sleeper. She said it was impossible to do the work while looking after a child.

“I’ll help. Your mother can help, too.”

“That. No way.” She gave a typical sarcastic raised tone. “She’ll only follow her grandson around. Just . . . definitely no way.”

No doubt she would think like that. Among the three children of Shuyuan, Hongbo was the least favored one. At the age of seven, she was sent to a sterile sister of her father to be adopted. She never called the old couple mother and father. Eventually under the pressure of her stubbornness, her younger sister, Shifang went to replace her. The first time the young but tactful sister met the old couple, she melted their hearts with two sweet “father, mother!”

Souyuen couldn't say for certain she would stay if the kid was a girl. The mere thought of having another granddaughter worried her sick. It might be the apocalypse of her life, who wouldn't say? However, to force this woman to give a second child seemed impossible. She was as stubborn as she was capricious. Besides, if they have a child outside the plan, Xee would definitely be kicked out of the Party. A hefty fine would be loaded on them. They might lose their jobs. Souyuen sat in front of the brown plastic tub, looking at the laundries she had to do.

A brown spot on Hongbo's jeans took her a while to brush away. She still had her period this month. Souyuen flung the brush aside in sulkiness. She rinsed and hung the clothes outside the balcony, and started to clean the house.

From within the dustbin of Xee's bedroom came out a stinky smell, as if something had gone stale for a long time. Holding her breath and wondering what good things were they eating in the bedroom without sharing with her, Souyuen poured out what was inside the dustbin into the bag she was going to carry downstairs when she went for grocery. A light yellow thing dropped out. Souyuen paused and looked at it. Though she wasn't so familiar with the modern world, this thing was of

her professional field. She immediately recognized, a condom, knotted with two knots, reeking like a spoiled egg. Souyuen felt ridiculed, and tossed the dustbin away. It bounced into the bathroom and landed in the squat toilet.

All along the way to the market, Souyuen felt disgusted. She picked the thing up with tissue paper before she came down with the garbage bag. Gulping at the fresh outdoor air, she couldn't help imagine the lust that was played out on Xee's bed. The idea of doing that thing with a man for pure joy and not for producing children was so explicitly presented to her in such a rude way that she felt ashamed. She paused by a tree. The rising July sun seemed dazzling. Yet more shameful was that she couldn't deny that she enjoyed the process of making children before. She was so plain a woman who couldn't help feeling the ecstasy of her beloved man inside her. She was sinful. She felt her brain grilled like a melon by the beaming sun.

The shame and anger mixed inside her was about to explode. The face of the pedestrians that passed around her looked twisted. Their concerning look was killing her. Souyuen ran back to the apartment without getting any grocery like a defeated soldier and threw herself on the sofa.

Finally she got up and went into her room. The drawer of her nightstand was opened by her steady hand. There lay her sewing kit. She took it and walked into the living room. It was almost ten. She still had plenty time before Xee and Hongbo come back for lunch.

Taking a deep breath, she entered Xee's dim room. The myrtle green velvet curtain was closed. She turned on the light and started search for the secret place where the condoms were stashed.

It was much easier than Souyuen imagined. They kept them inside a black cloth sack in the bottom drawer of the dresser. Finding it took her no more than five minutes. Feeling disappointed, Souyuen opened her sewing kit and took out the needle.

"No joy for you anymore," she murmured to herself, like a witch casting her evil spell. But she paused right before her needle touched the colorful plastic pack. She put away her own needle and went to the balcony. There from inside the drawer of the sewing machine Shuyuan bought for Hongbo, she found some needles. And with these needles, she pierced every condom that they had inside the sack.

## TWENTY—Salt Upon Wound, Frost Plus Snow

Of course Souyuen's scheme was successful. And of course it was exposed shortly after Hongbo found herself pregnant. Hongbo raged out from inside her bedroom, and flung the condoms left on the floor in front of Xee and Souyuen. "Look what your mother has done!" she roared.

"Calm down, please. For the sake of the baby." Xee took her arms and patted her back.

"I didn't say I'm not having child. I'm just not having it right now. Why do you do this to me?" Her yelling was piercing. Souyuen flinched at the step Hongbo took toward her.

"There, there. Don't talk to Mother like that. Alright?" Xee talked to Hongbo into her ears, softly, "Come, sit down."

"I'm not sitting beside her." She shook off Xee's arm, stepping aside.

"Don't behave like this," Xee sighed with sulkiness. "You're being disrespectful to Mother."

"How can I respect a person who doesn't do respectful things? Where is her position to force me into this? I have my own right to choose when and how I wanted to be a mother, alright?"

Souyuen sat there, had nothing to say. As long as Hongbo was pregnant, Souyuen could take all her fiery blame. Though she didn't think, in the least place, that her

daughter-in-law was right in not wanting a child.

“I’m not keeping this baby. It’s not of my choice. I don’t want it.” Feeling much aggrieved over this, Hongbo murmured with a crying tone, wiping away her tears.

“Ey! No way!” Souyuen yelled back. Xee echoed her anxiously. Souyuen panicked. She sprung up from the sofa, and grabbed Hongbo’s sleeve. “I’m wrong. My bad. You can blame me. Don’t hurt my grandson.”

Hongbo gave her a cold look at the word grandson. She moved her lips, nothing came out. Turning around, she went into the room and shut the two bewildered people in the living room. It occurred to Souyuen how easy it would be if a nurse wanted an abortion. In dread of this power the daughter-in-law had in her hand, she turned her tearful eyes to Mee. “You talk to the doctors, son. You tell them no surgery for Hongbo, ah. No surgery. You promise.”

“Mother. She was just being childish. Those words were just a moment of anger. Don’t worry.”

They called Hongbo’s mother. Three people knocked on the door and begged, utilizing all the sweet words they ever heard, promising everything they had. Eventually, after hours of tiresome persuading, Xee kicked the door open. The exhausted wife lay on the bed, quivering with each sob. She was disgraced by this uneducated hag. Yet she had no heart to hurt her own child. The baby was retained. But after that, she never called Souyuen mother again.

Eight months later, Hongbo gave birth to a girl. The infant had a dark blue birthmark on the back of her waist. All the doctors and nurses in the delivery room

said it was a mark of fortune and honor. Nothing saved Souyuen from disappointment. She looked after the wife and girl in deep boredom and fastidiousness, not even bothering to conceal her passiveness.

“The baby’s crying. Can you fetch me the milk powder tin?”

“I’m already washing diapers. Why can’t you go yourself?” Bickering like this had become a daily routine for Souyuen, along with lining up diapers outside the balcony, waking up in milky odor of the baby, and turned away in bed from the lit bulbs of the living room in late night and early morning. The wearisome responsibility of looking after Hongbo during her pregnancy that Souyuen endured seemed worthless now. She missed home more than before Hongbo was with the baby.

Until one day, a phone call from Liongtan reached Xee’s office.

That day Xee came back early. Souyuen was washing cabbage leaves with the baby tied on her back. She walked out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, and saw Xee kicking off his shoes while closing the door with a huge bang.

“What’s wrong? You are early today.”

Xee forced a smile at Souyuen, and gestured for the baby in eagerness. They gave her a nick name Dandan, hoping she always maintain a pure red heart of innocence. Souyuen untied the baby, and handed it to Xee. The baby twisted in discomfort at the disturbance, and puckered her lips, warning the adults that she was going to cry. They both sat down on the sofa in a grave atmosphere. Some unpleasant important thing was about to come. She could tell.

“So,” Xee started, gently rocking the baby and patting her back, “Father called



today.”

“What for?”

“He called to ask about Dandan.”

“What’d he say?”

“He told me Brother had some trouble.”

“What—” Souyuen’s ears pricked up.

“Listen to me.” Xee put his hand softly on Souyuen’s arm. “No big deal. Brother and Sister-in-law weren’t getting along very well. They had a fight a while back . . . several days ago. So she went back to her grandmother with Xingxing yesterday.”

“What!” Souyuen stood up, things flashing through her brain like a flood. “Why? Did he say why?”

“It was a short call. You know, the general store’s—”

“Can we call him now?” Souyuen asked.

Xee took Souyuen to the reception office at the front gate. They called Liongtan with the payphone. He told Souyuen that there had been small quarrels between Mee and Pyieng since she left. Recently Mee seemed to be getting aggressive. He started sleeping alone in the guest room. Until last week, he came back drunk and they had a big fight.

“Something about letters, I figured.” Liongtan’s hoarse voice was deepened by the static noise of the phone. “Could it be the letters that Mother had taken then? I asked Mee. He wouldn’t say. You know. He never talked against us. But he has been doing bad things lately, outside. I mean . . . with another woman. I don’t know what’s

wrong with him. I've locked him in, scolded him, and beat him. He just won't listen to me."

Mee started using the deaf-and-ignoring strategy. Though he was very obedient, there were times that even Liongtan was defeated by his stubbornness. Once on Mee's birthday, Liongtan gave away his favorite bamboo watergun to one of his visiting cousins. It took the kid a week to make it. Souyuen admired his patience and craft skill in trifles like that. With that watergun, Mee beat every single kid in the village. He was crowned General Invincible that summer. Yet he was generous enough to teach all of his friends the secret of making themselves a better watergun. Together in the woods, they looked for a bamboo stem that was straight and of suitable thickness. The laughter and cheerful yelling when someone found good material was the embellishment of the long scorching afternoon. After finding out his favorite toy was gone without his acknowledgement, Mee asked Liongtan to get it back.

"I didn't know you liked it that much, son. Just make a new one."

"No! Nothing can compare with that one. That was the best bamboo I found this year. Why Father can give away my things? I made it. I should be giving it away."

"Be good. Just make a new one." Liongtan was in no interest to argue with a kid.

"No! No!" The boy who was merely nine believed firmly that Father had done the wrong thing, especially since it was his birthday. He refused to eat dinner. Liongtan slapped him in embarrassment. He eventually ate, though only rice from his own bowl. He refused to talk to Liongtan. The next day, he would run away from home to ask for the toy back himself. Liongtan didn't know whether to laugh or cry

about this. Finally, the father made a new watergun with his own hands and swapped the old one back from Mee's cousin.

Mee was still doing the same thing. Only this time, there was nothing about doing right or wrong. He had grown up and knew there were times—often a lot of times—that absolute black and white wasn't always the case. Souyuen decided to go back to the village. Though a difficult situation waited there, but to stay with Hongbo and Dandan wasn't any better. She was defeated by the city, by the law, the rules, and the big words of her daughter-in-law. She was retreating back to her lair, where she could be powerful and influential again. There was no shame about it; Souyuen comforted herself.

The last outrageous thing Souyuen experienced in city was when she hung up the receiver, the bald man asked for eight *jiao* as the fee for the call.

## **TWENTY-ONE—Sow Melon and You Get Melon, Sow Beans and You Get Beans**

More outrageous was that Liongtan told Souyuen, after she got back from Changsha, that the general store's proprietress asked five *jiao* for the call as well. But she had no heart to argue with that Guijie, for she had more important things to deal with.

When she got home, Pyieng and Xingxing were gone. It wasn't until now that Souyuen felt she had such affections toward her granddaughter—she missed her childish toned "Gran." Liongtan demanded Mee to bring the wife and daughter back. Eventually when he did, with Liongtan, Pyieng refused to see her and locked herself and Xingxing in her room.

"Go away." She wouldn't say another word. The calmness in her voice was freezing cold.

It was Mee, her own son who brought the mistress to her, in front of the gorgeous brick house they built beside the old one. On a Saturday afternoon, Souyuen and Liongtan were sitting in their own wooden chair on the front porch, faces clouded in gloom, wasting the whole afternoon without doing anything. Secretly, Souyuen rolled all the possible ways of getting Piyeng back home in her mind. She couldn't talk to Liongtan about it. She could feel her husband's silent blaming. She stopped her palm fan because she could feel the cooling atmosphere swirling around her.

That young woman walked beside Mee toward the house, in her white shirt, flared jeans, and black, shining leather, high-heeled shoes. Liongtan stood up first, mouth half open. His wondering eyes stared at the young woman. Souyuen remained on her chair. It was a disaster to see the young woman and her straight legs, delicate ears, and white, silky skin. She set her eyes upon this face. A beautiful creature, she thought to herself, and so familiar. The uncanny eyes glowed tawny under the sunlight. Souyuen's memories flushed out from the corner of her brain where all the discarded trash went.

“Father, Mother,” she greeted them elegantly bowing.

Amid the unwanted memories of her, Souyuen heard the young woman calling them with a natural intimacy. It drew out more bad feelings from deep down inside her brain's dumping site. Admiration or jealousy it was? She turned her eyes away from the young woman, whose beauty was too much for her to bear.

“What is this?” Liongtan asked.

The girl smiled at the question, but said nothing. She leered at Mee, who immediately took a heroic step forward and stood in front of her, saying, “She's Peier. I want to marry her. She should be my wife, your daughter-in-law.”

Marry, he said. How he tried everything not to spend nights together with Piyeng happened like yesterday. Suddenly he wanted a woman? And this woman? She looked just like the city ladies who cared about fashion too much, and diet, couldn't lift a half-loaded grocery basket, and didn't even know chestnut grew on tree. Souyuen knew she couldn't let this happen. She made her son's marriage with Piyeng. What

would her position be if Mee ditched his real wife to marry a fox like this? Souyuen would become a laughingstock in the village, an after-dinner joke at the table.

“What are you talking about?” Liongtan paced back and forth; eyes wandered on the ground as his mind searched his memories. He couldn’t tell when his son started seeing this woman. He made sure he had seen all the letters that were sent to this house, after Souyuen told him about what Grandmother did before she died. He didn’t see any suspicious letter. This was a disaster that had no omen. He dropped himself back to the chair, forehead in hands, elbows on knees. For a moment, no one talked; all waited as the father’s meditation post continued, until Liongtan suddenly lifted his face and turned to Souyuen. “What are you doing? Say something.”

Without a word, she stood up and walked into the west room where Mee and Piyeng used to share. She headed to the closet. Under the lowest left drawer, under the clothes, there was a big envelope that contained all the important documents of the couple. Among which should be the household register booklet of them both, and the kid. Mee would need his household register and his marriage certificates to divorce Piyeng before he could do anything with his pretty witch. Souyuen and Liongtan had one same rufous booklet too. Every time a child was born, the happiest thing that followed was to put the newly registered page into the booklet with her own hand. And every time a child was married, she took out the same page she had put there and handed it sacredly to the officers at the marriage registration. Happiness and reluctance weaved together as she watched the paperwork being done.

“Souyuen!” Her husband’s frustrated, husky call drew her back to reality. She

didn't answer.

Souyuen opened the drawer. All the clothes of Piyeng were gone, but the envelope lay in the corner silently, waiting for her. She put her hand on it; strange, it was too thin. An ominous presentiment crept over her. She could hear her own heart beating quickly inside her. She picked the envelope up, and opened it with trembling hands, then dumped whatever was inside on the well-made bed which hadn't been touched for almost two months. Mee had been sleeping in the east guest room since Piyeng and the child left. Five rectangular palm-sized black-and-white photos landed on the bed. They were taken when Mee and Piyeng went to register. Thunder-struck, she looked back into the envelope. Empty. Too late. She stood stunned as a stump. Why hadn't she thought of looking into it before?

When she finally walked back to the front porch, Mee was hand in hand with the young woman, who smiled slightly with earnest and friendly eyes at Souyuen. Liongtan was holding the tall bamboo broom under his armpit like a spear.

"Father, Mother," Mee said, "We were going to have our marriage license issued as soon as I'm free. It was Peier, she insisted to ask for your agreement first."

"Nonsense, nonsense! You son of a rabbit!" Liongtan thumped his lap with his fist clenched, knuckles white as if bones were about to burst out from under the skin.

"Where's our granddaughter? Eh? Where's Piyeng?"

"That's not the point right now, Father."

"Where are they? Answer my question, you ghost!" Liongtan roared like a tiger. His hair stood even straighter on his head. His face flushed with wrath; his temple and

side of the neck throbbing.

“I don’t care about that.” Mee looked at Peier, eyes full of self-indulgence, as if looking for approval and encouragement. Peier replied with her unusually light-colored eyes.

“Bastard!” Souyuen suddenly yowled out, dashing toward the loving pair, flinging her arm in the air. Before anyone had time to figure out what the high-pitched fury sound was, Souyuen had dragged her son away from Peier, who tried to hold his arm, but was pinched on the back of her hand. Flinching, Peier let out a soft cry.

“What. . .” A sharp and heavy slap fell on his face before Mee could say a second word.

“Say it!” she screamed, one hand still gripping Mee’s back collar.

“Say what, Mother.”

“Say it! Tell us the truth about Piyeng”

“I don’t know what you. . .”

“Tell us you didn’t divorce her!”

Dead silence. The sun was still beaming. Cicadas on the tree applauded loudly a wave after another for the show below. Mee’s olive, short-sleeved shirt was soaked with sweat. With his left hand holding his face, Mee gave his mother an astonished look. He slowly lowered his hand. His puzzled look was overtaken by shame and fear, the red print of Souyuen’s hand glowing on his dark cheek.

“It’s true,” Mee said, like a mosquito humming.

“How dare you!” Liongtan raised his broom spear, growling. “You, kneel!” And



before Mee actually bent his knees, a heavy whip struck him in the back of his knee and knocked him down to the ground. It was followed by several more heavier ones. His arms, supporting his body, quivered with each strike. He suffered it without a sound. The thin, pliable bamboo twigs soon tore his shirt open. Within the first few strikes, his back already bled. The sweat seeped into his wounds; he hissed in a breath.

The two stunned women finally came back to their senses and flew to their men with full speed. Souyuen held the broom tightly; Peier knelt beside Mee stretching her arms around him, eyes like an innocent puppy, full of tears. Souyuen heard the familiar sound of a jingling bell.

“Crazy, you are crazy. We borrowed money to build this house for you.”

Liong tan threw the broom aside and flung his hand fiercely at the open door. Inside, it was a flat concrete floor, such an improvement compared to the rammed earth floor in the old house's hall. A huge clear mirror covered the wall opposite to the door. Above it was a brand new, framed portrait of Chairman Mao whose head was surrounded by a circle of holy light. They had built this house with their own hands. Now and then in the evening, after a quick simple dinner, Liong tan would light a kerosene lamp and go on bricking with Mee until the light went out. He slept the least in that long year, but he was surely the happiest, tireless father. Piyeng's effort wasn't to be neglected also. She worked like a dog in the field, cultivating hybrid paddy seeds, and paid a generous portion of the bill. “This house!” he pointed fiercely, “Piyeng worked with us together to pay its bills. And she gave you a kid!”

“Father, Xingxing is still your granddaughter; our divorce does not change that.”

“Yes, Father,” Peier looked at Liongtan and Souyuen with the same puppy eyes, imploring, “I love kids. I swear I’ll treat her like the pearl on my palm.”

“I’m not your father. And keep saying that and I’ll roast you alive.” He paced along the porch back and forth, and turned to his wife, “Why are you so quiet today? Talk your son out of this.”

Souyuen said nothing. It was too much for her, not only her son’s hidden divorce, but also her familiar feeling toward Peier. When Peier stretched her arms to protect Mee, a silver bracelet slid out from her left sleeve. A lotus seed cup shaped tiny bell ringed like a morning alarm at Souyuen, waking her up from a chaotic dream. It was one of that pair of bracelets! She couldn’t believe herself and she looked closer. The bell was attached to the fin of the thin, long tail of the silver carp. The figure of a girl from Guangzhou who lived in her house in 1964—a hot summer—appeared in Souyuen’s brain. When that girl arrived, she was wearing a white shirt too. She looked like a harmless lamb, timid, but willing to show her friendly face as soon as you offered the same. Soon after, women in the village were all talking about her natural charm over men, ardent youngsters, especially. She was a story no one would bring up again. Her face became more and more clear as Peier’s every movement revealed more of herself, the innocent appearance, the natural intimacy and friendliness, and the enchanting power over man like a beast tamer. Peier resembled all of what that girl had. A conjecture swirled in her mind like a monstrous leech feeding on her memory.

“What is your name?” Souyuen finally asked, with a vacant expression on her pale round face.

“Li Peier,” she answered softly, eyes still earnest, longing for attention.

“It’s no use asking, wife. Get off my land, you. You will never be his wife!”

“Father, be reasonable. We can have Xingxing sent back. It’s best she be back to the family. Must be hard for Piyeng to raise her alone.”

“Family, eh? And difficulty? What’s your position to say so?”

Figuring his mother just showed a friendly sign, Mee turned to Souyuen.

“Mother, please, say something.”

“What is your mother’s name?” Souyuen went on her meaningless questions.

Peier tilted her chin with a confident smile, as if knew the answer would give Souyuen a shock. She said quickly, “Lin Jing.”

She couldn’t be. Souyuen stood up. She shouldn’t be. Liongtan bent over to pick up the bamboo broom, and saw his wife walked slowly into the hall, mumbling, then into their bedroom door at the end of the hall. It was a quiet and warm room with a wide four-poster bed. A black painted wooden closet guarded the window. Its doors had colorful paintings of orchids and narcissuses. An old copper padlock secured its content, the rim and corner lustering with a gentle, quiet golden light. She opened it.

“What are you doing, wife?” Liongtan rushed in, broom still in hand, “who’s that woman?”

“You never had a good look of that girl, are you? Remember Lin Jing?”

The name rang a dull, gloomy bell. Liongtan gaped at his wife, gripping the

broom even tighter.

Souyuen drew a drawer; there was a tin box in it, filled with envelopes. Liongtan knew that was the place she kept all her important mail. The letter Xee sent to her telling her he was marrying his girl, the letter from Mamao about her second pregnancy, and the first letter he wrote to Souyuen, his wife, all lay silently in the box. She carefully removed all the things on top and held out an old, small, but thick envelope from the bottom of the box.

Fingers shivering slightly, Liongtan took the envelope. Sender: Jing, a single name and a name that had too much story. He turned the envelope around. The top of it was cut open with scissors—Souyuen's habit. He warned her thousands of times it might cut the papers inside, but she used scissors anyways.

He pulled the letter out and opened it, which read,

*Souyuen Sister,*

*How are you? It's been a long time since I left Tengwei, is everything good? Are Lieng, Mamao, and Mee, all grown up? Is Granny healthy?*

*I was married five years ago. Now I am the mother of three children. My daughter is four. The boys are twins. Their father treats them like the pearls upon his hands. My husband is a strict and old man. I respect him. He keeps telling me how he loves my tear mole, like people in the village used to. It is a long story of my marriage; I prefer not to bore you with it.*

*I was too young and ignorant. But looking back, you were my only friend during the worst time. The other students who went to Tengwei only truly concerned about*

*themselves. We didn't have the heart to appreciate rural life. It was a waste, if the bad things didn't happen. Yaobang's death wasn't an accident, I always believed it. His family was so poor; they had only this son. When his father came to the village to collect what he'd left, I was so afraid. The horror of dying in such a place alone, away from home was too much for me. I wanted to go back to my family.*

*That was a bad excuse. I could have done better. I could have refused to reconcile with the demon. I was so ignorant to let him take advantage of me. I blamed you for betraying me. I hated you, and wanted revenge. Now I understand, being a mother myself, I could do everything to protect my kids, my family, and its reputation.*

*It is a relief to know it has ended. I never heard from Jianguo again. The last piece of message about him is that he went to a labor camp in the far northwest. And I dare not ask anything about him.*

*I wish I could have a chance to visit you and your family again. How was your husband? He is a great man. You are lucky to have him. And the children are lucky, too. Have you had any other child now?*

*Good Souyuen, hope you and your family healthy and happy.*

*Salute,*

*Jing*

The letter was dated more than twenty years ago, finished in a hurried way. And in the lower margin there were round tear stains.

Something was attached to the final page, Liongtan turned the paper around. It was a family portrait. A couple sat on a bench in the middle, each one held a baby boy

on their lap. The babies were wearing the same knitted scarf. Jing's tear mole seemed a little bigger. The father is a middle aged man, probably in his late thirties, maybe forties? He had a restrained expression, pursing his lips as thin as paper. Jing sat beside him, thinner and paler, though her certain elegance still remained. It was her eyes that rusted, they were lifeless. She was no more than twenty-five then. Two girls were beside them. The taller one had small eyes, sunken cheeks, and a turned-up nose, which opened two tiny awkward black holes on her face. Then there was the younger daughter standing beside Jing. She was the only one smiling, and stared at whoever looked at the picture, with her eyes that resembled her mother's too much. The beautiful and pure puppy eyes' outer corners dropped lower than the inner corners; and the irises slightly larger than the rest of people in the picture. It made her eyes seem even bigger. Her straight black hair was long and thick, but unlike her sister, it wasn't braided. It flew down freely around her shoulders, like waterfall. She had on her hand a silver bracelet that resembled a thing, long carp. A bell that attached to the fin of its tail was rested on the back of her hand, glowing with the white skin of hers even in this black and white picture.

Liongtan put down the letter, and looked at his wife. The question why she didn't tell him anything about the letter when she got it wasn't important to him right now. The only thing he could squeeze out from between his lips was, "She's Lin Jing's daughter."

## TWENTY-TWO—Take Root in Countryside, Build Home in Frontier

They managed to coax Mee into his room, and locked him there. Peier was shut outside. Both doors of the new and old house were latched. “You, go back to your own place and leave Mee alone,” Liongtan shouted to Peier from inside of the locked door. Mee’s pounding and yelling from the side room echoed his command. The young woman smiled at him. Her lips moved but Liongtan couldn’t hear what she said. She sat down on the stair. The sun was sinking. “You, go now. Stop pestering us.” Liongtan added. Except it didn’t disturb her even a bit.

Liongtan gave up and went to the kitchen where he wouldn’t hear Mee’s voice anymore. Souyuen sat by the hearth. The light coming from the only window of the kitchen grew weaker with every minute. A bowl of white porridge had been sitting on the range for almost a quarter hour. She couldn’t eat it. Liongtan settled himself next to Souyuen, and put a hand upon hers. They were both silent.

Why Peier was here, Souyuen couldn’t say. The whole thing seemed a scheme too complicated for her. The letter and the picture from Jing dusted her ancient memories. Looking back to years ago, she still clearly remembered that special day.

It was more than two decades back, when the *Zhiqings* came to the village during Down to the Countryside Movement. They were all well-educated youngsters—which Souyuen found out afterwards maybe education wasn’t really good for them. The

eldest one was barely twenty. Three boys, two girls. Their appearance stirred the tranquility of the village, and of her family.

It was a happy start after a small bicker at the introducing meeting. However, tragedy soon fell upon the *Zhiqings* during winter, Yaobang was killed in an accident. The village was deeply depressed by the death of the boy. The conclusion the secretary made after hearing the witness of the women was that the tree branch dropped on the roof and the tile fell on the poor boy. Since the house was considered dangerous, the four frightened youngsters moved out and lived separately in villager's houses.

Liongtan felt quite awkward with a young beautiful guest in his house. It was Jing herself who asked to live here. This annoyed the villagers so much that the visitor of Liongtan's house tripled the first day she moved in. Some of them came to ask Jing to read random letters—she would record the addresses on the envelope—and newspapers. Some came to comfort her. Suspicion about the boy's death occupied their major conversation. Souyuen repeatedly answered, in detail, everyone's question about the branch that killed Yaobang. "It was a thin branch." "Maybe as thick as my thumb." The villagers were still not satisfied. They talked about the position of the tree. Wasn't it still a little far away from the house? Someone checked it; the tree was huge enough to reach the boy's room.

At last, near the end of the day, the other three *Zhiqings* came. They walked Jing out of the house, and had a long private talk in the bamboo woods. The darkness of the night slowly crept over the sky. Pieces of words came out from the rustling



bamboo leaves in the winter wind until finally Souyuen heard the “goodbyes” and the fading footsteps. Silence lasted a while. Jing didn’t come out.

“Jing, are you there?” When she was asking, the dried foliage over the ground suddenly rustled heavily.

“I am.”

“Come back to the hearth, girl! Cold will catch you.”

“I’m coming!” she answered while the rustling of the foliage gradually faded away.

“What was that?” Souyuen waited until she came back. Her chin pressed on her chest. Souyuen could see her eyes as red as rabbit’s.

“A dog. I guess,” was the only answer.

Spring soon came. The soft and moistening rain resurrected the land from winter. When the breeze brought warm air from the south, the villagers believed it had exiled the blue and gloomy cloud that hung over the village, too. Though, in the corners of the village, rumors about the dorm being haunted were spreading.

Tiny white wild flowers spread over the ridges in the paddy fields. They delivered a feeble but pleasant fragrance, a fragrance of spring, of vitality. Greenness covered the land. Sunshine became increasingly bright, warm, and delightful. Almost suddenly, swallows were flying busily between the pond and eaves building their nests. This spring, engraved in Souyuen’s memories, was among the prettiest one she saw in her life. People soon started to work in the fields all day long. The lunch would

be eaten in the fields with others. People sat together, talked and laughed. This friendly atmosphere encouraged young men and women to imagine a possible lovely future with one another. People were secretly gossiping about new relationships between young people. The freshness of green love could always draw admiration, even from elder and married people. But that was the time when these conversations were forbidden. If it was heard by some frantic revolutionist, the accusation of insulting woman comrades, destroying solidarity of the revolution would be flung onto your head like a tall, iron hat too heavy to wear.

Souyuen believed Jing was dating someone. She saw her go out to the bamboo woods several times. Jing hadn't worn her bracelets since Yaobang died. Now she moved without sound. Souyuen wondered whether Jing lingered in the woods or actually went through it to where most of the villagers lived. She heard the girl cry one time, in the night.

"What's wrong?" Souyuen was awake by the sobbing, which was muted by the question immediately. Souyuen asked again.

"Nothing." The voice was hoarse. The crying tone was depressed, yet audible.

Souyuen asked once again. Jing said, "I'm only homesick."

Jing was hiding something. That young beautiful and fragile girl always put her white long fingers on her lips as if it could stop her secrets from flowing out. When she sat alone, dark clouds lingered between her brows. Souyuen knew the girl was annoyed by the wooers in the village. However, she never thought that Jing might suffer from her own secret emotions. She could be in love. Yes, they would make a

perfect match, she and Jianguo. It was so obvious that Souyuen found herself ridiculous not seeing it earlier.

The two women who were also near the dorm when Yaobang was injured came to Souyuen's house one day to work with Souyuen on some trifles. Without melon seeds to stop their mouths, the two brought up the topic about the dorm again.

"That house was haunted," the elder woman said secretly, lowering her head.

"Nonsense," Souyuen interrupted. "Don't speak like a feudal woman. So superstitious."

"It's true! We saw it!" added the younger woman.

"What was it?"

"Last Saturday we went home from your house, you remember?" Souyuen nodded. The elder woman continued, "That day, I saw lights from the window of the room where he died."

"But he died in the hospital, not there."

"Ghosts travel to where they have been before to pick up their footprints. He must have come back!"

"Then he must have gone back to the city now," said Souyuen. She was frightened by this. When the superstition was frightening, she comforted herself with "no such thing." When it associated with her own and the family's fortune, she believed it firmer than any other. It seemed something secret was going on in this village, whether it was committed by men or by spirit.

When the boy died there had been suspicion too. But no one tried to dig the truth seriously; life was too busy for detective games.

During the second year, the village gradually lost its interest in *Zhiqing*. The only two guests who kept coming to Liongtan's house were Jianguo and Secretary Yang. Souyuen was almost sure that Jianguo and Jing were virtually a couple. The position of the secretary was suspicious. They never came together. If they met accidentally, the two wouldn't talk. The silent rivalry between the two men added perplexity to the play. Souyuen enjoyed watching their petty game with Grandmother.

One autumn day when the sun disappeared after the green hills, Liongtan came back with a dog. It was an injured pregnant dog. That night the house witnessed the birth of nine puppies, which were of various colors. Among them, there was one with black fur and white paws, nearly like its mother. It was the last born. However, it was the first one that opened its eyes to see the world. Its tiny pink paws excitedly explored everything around it.

However, for the injured mother, situation wasn't optimistic. Its wound was infected. Within a month it was gone. On the very day, puppies were sent to other villager's homes. Unfortunately, only four of the nine weak new-borns survived the loss of the mother—including the black one which grew up to be the house guard of the Chong family. They gave it a common name, Black Dog, but Jing preferred Xiao Hei which she said was "a common name for pets in the city."

“If the dog is yellow, its name will be Xiao Huang. And for white, it’s Xiao Bai. Sometimes girls name their dog Hua,” she told the children one day after dinner when they sat on the front porch playing with their new friend.

“Why do you name dogs with flowers?” asked Lieng.

“Hua means colorful sometimes,” the other intelligent young sister answered.

The sun was sinking. An orange cloud in the west sky turned red and then crimson. A bright star appeared in the east sky. Souyuen walked out, with Mee in her arms, and said, “Come in children, it’s getting dark.”

“Can’t we sit a while longer, Sister? It’s nice here. Sit with us,” Jing answered while the other two girls held the struggling puppy and looked at their mother with eyes full of expectation.

She sat down on the stone threshold.

“Don’t hurry. We can enjoy the star for a while. It’s quite warm now. And it’s too early for the mosquitoes. A nice day.” Jing smiled.

“You are happy today. You heard from your parents?”

“No, but I think I am going back to them,” she answered with a significant smile.

**TWENTY-THREE—Seek No End in Revenge**

Jing was going back to the city. There was a factory that opened several quotas for new workers. She was confident she could get one. It was a good thing, Liongtan believed. She belonged to the city, not the village where she kept creating some unrealistic, frantic fantasy for the boys. She was too good for them. Rumors about two boys fighting over her were on every house's dinner table. In this sense she was too bad for the village's youngsters too. Souyuen scorned this when Liongtan told her. She was surprised there were still people who didn't believe Jing was with Jianguo. Liongtan lay on the single bed that was set in the hall beside the kitchen door, thinking. Souyuen and the Jing were in the west room, Grandmother and the children were in the east room. That was how they arranged the bedroom since Jing came.

Soon the tide of weariness swept over him and he fell into dreams. Until he was awakened again by the puppy's unskilled barking. He opened his eyes; it was dark and humid. A certain laziness was spreading with heat through the thick air. They were expecting a thunderstorm to relieve this mugginess. Was it the cat coming back? Grandmother always said cats had nine lives, and was the reincarnation of nine infant girls who were drowned in spittoons. Obviously the old woman believed the cat in their house was the king of this area. The cat king didn't get along with the new member of the house. Liongtan heard the back door of the kitchen creak on its hinges. Lieng had forgotten to lock it again. The vague dream about someone crying behind a

bush was still in his brain. Right, it wasn't a dream. It was the puzzle Souyuen told him, that Jing was crying the other day, but not behind a bush, it was the bamboos. Liongtan lay there for a while before he could get up and went into the kitchen. Yes, the back door was open. He locked it and went to bed.

Souyuen was woken by the barking too. It was already midnight. Jing slept silently between Souyuen and the wall. She went to bed tonight abnormally early after she came back with a sad face during dusk. She didn't even eat dinner. Souyuen rolled around and fell asleep again. Until one tough big hand suddenly grabbed her breast and squeezed it madly. It was a vengeful thing to do with such a desperate, destroying hand. Souyuen let out a half muffled cry as she flinched, hanging between dream and reality. She felt another hand searching down from her stomach, and heard someone murmuring, "Whore, you filthy whore."

In half bewilderment and half amazement, Souyuen sat up and waved her hands with a sharp shriek. She hit something. What was it? In the darkness she wasn't so sure about what just happened. "Don't you sleep with Secretary Yang!" The voice continued with an unfamiliar dialect. It was a man.

"No! What are you doing! Who are you!" Souyuen screamed at this unknown accuser. The accusation didn't make any sense to her. The hands on her pursued as Souyuen drew farther from the edge of the bed.

There was a black figure in the room, the one from the city! It was the ghost! The dead boy! He was back! The sight of the poor boy lying in blood while Souyuen took

his pulse suddenly jumped at her. Souyuen was too scared to move. She kept repeating "I didn't kill you. Boy, I didn't!"

Mee, who was still a baby then, had waken up in the other room and was crying. The black figure paused and then rushed out suddenly. Liongtan's voice came in from the hall. "You, stop!" There was a chaos before the light was on and all the people in the house stood before the man kneeling on the floor with his head deep down into his chest.

"Why are you doing this, Jianguo?" Liongtan crossed his arms and peered at the guilty figure that was responsible for his sobbing wife and scared children sitting on the bed he had just slept in. He got no response. The man knelt there like a samurai ready to have his harakiri. "Lieng, go and get a rope." Liongtan thrust his finger at the man's head and said, "Before I'm back with the Secretary Yang, no one gets out of here!"

He peered at Jing who was filled with tears. Her tear mole glowed with her watery eyes, such two innocent eyes. After hearing this, she took several frantic steps, wanting to stand in front of the kneeling man and protect him. But she paused there, and pleaded desperately, "No! Don't tell the secretary."

Jianguo squeezed out a sneer. "Don't tell him, right. You are too good to do that. Everyone believes you, an angel, how pure. You filthy whore. I was coming at you, not her."

"No . . ." Jing choked with a sob, and fell on a chair with her face in her hands, tears streaming down between her slender fingers. Grandmother started to hush the



children into the room. Lieng came back with some thin ropes. Before Liongtan took them, Jing threw herself onto the ground and stalled Liongtan by his legs. The two silver bracelets, which, surprisingly, she both wore on the left hand today, clattered. "Please, Brother." She cried louder. Even now she was so beautiful and elegant. Liongtan exhaled a quick and heavy breath with a fierce "fine." He dragged the girl back on her feet.

Jing walked toward Souyuen and knelt down beside her. Her eyes were so pitiful, Souyuen thought, so beautiful. But they were misused, wasted. Jing cried and apologized with a submissive look. "Sister, forgive him." Still those eyes seemed shamefully pure. All Souyuen could hear was Jing's fragile trembling voice repeating, "Jianguo is still so young, he will be ruined. He is still so young!"

"I don't need your pathetic compassion," Jianguo said coldly.

"And you don't deserve it." Liongtan turned and went to the unknown darkness beyond that door. Jing fixed her anxious eyes on him, fearing her lover would be dragged away from her, to that door. Liongtan paced back and continued, "You don't deserve to be a man. Coward, a rat you are! Ghosts curse you! To put hand on a harmless girl."

"She is not a—"

Before Jianguo had a chance to finish, Souyuen screamed madly at all of them, "Enough!" It quivered even the house and no one dared to make a sound to interrupt its echo. The dog's breath and movement ceased. It lay motionless beside Souyuen's feet with its eyes innocently wide open. "Go away!"

“Get off! Rat!” Liongtan opened the front door, it was absolute dark outside. “I won’t deal with you to dirty my hands.”

The man stood up, with his defeated head upon his chest. He lifted his heavy legs one after another over the threshold, and merged like a shadow into the darkness of the night.

## **TWENTY-FOUR—Always the Beauty Suffered Plenty**

Peier was raised by her grandparents. She lived with them since her mother died when she was nine.

Her mother, Lin Jing, was the only child of her grandparents, who dedicated all their heart to the daughter. At the age of fifteen, Jing was the renowned beauty of the neighborhood.

Unfortunately, Lin Jing was sent to a remote village in Hunan by thin paper of command for re-education when she was just seventeen. She was thus separated from her parents by mountains and rivers, for three springs and winters.

During the turbulence of Cultural Revolution, Jing came back like a deserter, with nothing except her ragged body and mind. One of the twin silver bracelets she had with her was missing. She got married right after she came back, to a widower who had a daughter. He was an officer in some important institute, always bearing a solemn face. He was like a factory that emitted too much gloomy atmosphere that blotted out the sun—his weather was forever cloudy. Lin Jing suffered major bleeding when she gave birth to Peier. It took four years before she became pregnant again. Nine months later, Peier had two brothers.

In Peier's vague childhood memories Mother was a distant woman. She wept in silence a lot. The picture of Mother hanging clothes outside the balcony was somehow engraved in Peier's mind. The young woman limped from this window to the next one,

closing one panel before opening the other one. Finally she finished the chore and remained there, with a slender silhouette that leaned forward on the windowsill, like a canary in the cage.

Mother died, leaving the family four small children. Peier was sent to live with Grandpa and Grandma with a box of sundries Mother left her. The old lady's eyes went bad quickly after her daughter died. The old couple treated Peier like the pearl upon their hands. Though the times were difficult, Peier was never short of clothes or food. Grandpa had a hand for beautiful stylish calligraphy, and taught Peier all about it. Grandma could play lots of instruments, Peier had no heart for them except *xiao*—a vertical bamboo flute. Peier was deeply attracted by its tone, which was like a woman weeping, mixed with her agreeable voice telling the moving loving story about a young scholar and a courtesan.

As a motherless child, Peier grew up in other people's unfriendly conjectures and cold eyes. She understood that the friendliness of the adults around her wasn't to be trusted, for they smiled at her in the day, and told their children to stay away from her in the night. She was bullied because her mother was dead, and more often, because her father never came to visit. Peier learned how to fight with her fists, though eating some dirt was unavoidable when her opponents were too many.

She gradually realized what people were talking about behind her back. She wasn't her father's child, only her brothers were. From the box of Mother's left things, Peier found a thick diary with green plastic cover. Mother wrote down pieces of her life in this book, a flower she saw, a song she heard. She always recorded the address

of where she had been and those she saw on different letters. There were times of anger and upset. There also were times she made mistakes and was dreaded of the consequences in helplessness. But who was her real father; Peier never found out between Mother's lines. The diary was the window through which she spied on Mother's life from a different time dimension.

Peier was more mature than the kid of her same age. She had become the perfect combination of strong mind and soft heart in her puberty. She never cried in front of Grandpa and Grandma, lest they would be heart broken. The sorrow she suffered these years was let out through the whimper of her *xiao*. In front of friends, she was the optimistic and dependable big sister, and a reliable one to tell all the secrets to—she never leaked a single word.

In 1979, Father suddenly sent her the opportunity to join the army. She went on her journey with Lin Jing's diary and her favorite *xiao* that had a nice red tassel attached at the end. It was made of mottled bamboo. The dark brown dot on the surface was said to be stains of tears from the two wives of Dayu who legendarily tamed the flood of Yangtze River. The two women's tears were shed for the ruthless husband they share, who was too busy with his responsibility of saving people that he refused to enter his house three times even when he passed by. Peier pitied the two wives. They must have dull eyes like Grandma. For Peier, the eligible husband should dare to admit and be loyal to love. He should be honest to himself, know the weakness of himself but not afraid of it.

With all these wild and romantic ideas, Peier went to Guangdong's army camp. With her skill in writing and music, she served in the art troupe for four years. Though the training of dancing and performing was heavy, it was considered a luxurious leisure compared to the military drills. There was also gossip behind her saying her powerful father was behind all her achievement. Peier never cared, and never asked.

It was her second year when she met Mee in Hainan, in an ordinary evening. The members of the troupe were having dinner. All were complaining about the spiciness of the food. The water pot soon went empty. Someone mentioned the new chef was from a rural place in east Hunan. Hunan was under the command of Guangdong Military Region. It should be common for people from anywhere in that province to be in any camp in this region. But the name of the place brought Peier some vague conjectures. She ate in an unusual silence.

After leaving the dinner early, Peier climbed up to the upper bunk bed and checked her mother's diary. Mother was in the small village belonging to the area which the comrades mentioned at dinner table. Her heart tightened. Mother's memories suddenly seemed so close and alive. She saw a portal that could send her to the distant place. The light from that era was shining and everything else around grew faint.

The next day the chef came to her during dinner, and apologized for the spicy dinner that upset her yesterday. "I'm from Hunan, Lyleen. So, ha-ha, when I hold the pepper jar my hand shakes itself." It seemed someone had been gossipy about her capricious behavior of leaving the table alone early the previous night. Taking

advantages of the chance, Peier asked closely where he came from, and got an answer that matched exactly the same with the address Mother wrote down on a summer day in 1963. Following the address was, “We met a mother feeding her baby today when we arrived. I miss Mama.”

Peier’s heartbeat quickened. From the diary, she could tell Mother’s life fell from clouds to dirt after this day. She was overworked, abused, corrupted, disgraced, and betrayed. In curiosity, she deepened the acquaintance with Mee, and confirmed he was the son of the family in which Mother lived with for more than a year. The hostess of the house was who forced Mother to escape back to the city.

It was hard to say what that woman did was wrong. Mother at least got away from the pit where her friend was killed, her lover was destroyed, and her purity was spoiled. The hatred that loaded between the pages after she came back to the city was contagious—they were written with tears and blood.

She stayed close to Mee, and sought to pry into his head, while wondering what to do with him. Soon, Peier found out this young man had fallen for her. He had mistaken her curiosity as a special signal. The awkwardness of this situation embarrassed yet amused her. Deep down in her heart, Peier knew this young man had nothing to do with her mother’s unfortunate life. And to take revenge on him was no better than smashing a vase with a childish rage one got from an unworthy bicker. Soon she left the Hainan camp and returned to her own base in Guangzhou, with a disturbed heart.

Soon she received a letter from Mee. The childish, careful handwriting tickled her. She never wrote back, until the next winter, when Peier went to Hainan again for the New Year show. As soon as she arrived, a comrade snuck her a long package from Mee. Before opening it, Peier already had her guess. She tore the paper off. A bamboo *xiao* with a soft shine of patina was lying in her hand. It was as long as her arm. The thin and straight stem was finely polished. One of the six finger holes was arranged on the opposite side of the rest ones, which made it easier for her small hands to play. The nodes of the bamboo stem were farther apart near the blowing end. The distal end was thicker. The rare fine shape of this *xiao* gained Peier's favor immediately.

Peier had seen lots of *xiao*, especially after she came into the art troupe, but this one was special. The patina that covered it was alone a rare attractive trait. A patina on the surface of wooden things came from long term usage; it was a precious deposition of time. But the patina on this *xiao* was man-made. With the fingerprints and the natural grease on hands, rubbing the surface of this *xiao* every day with great care and patience was time consuming. It wasn't hard to imagine which part of his own time a soldier like Mee sacrificed for this precious present. Peier was moved.

The following story was as common as all the first-love story that happened in reality. The two secretly betrothed lovers were discharged from the army successively during two years, and went back to society. Life and time diluted the spiciness of the ardent admiration. Distance gave the vulnerable hearts suspicions. Each became cold-hearted with the fickleness of time.



Peier's Grandpa died in the last year of her service, and Grandma soon followed. At first Mee would write to her talking about random things. He never comforted her. The sorrowful letters she sent to Mee seeking for comfort were stones thrown into the sea. She stored away all the memories they shared, the *xiao*, and Mother's diary. Years had passed away, no other date treated her with respect and patience like Mee did. Men's shallow desire over her body and her beauty drew the period for each relationship she started with a bunny's palpitate heart and ended like an exhausted prey that survived the hunter's knife with a broken rib.

In desperation she sent out a letter to Mee after seven years of separation. The fire was rekindled. Yet he was already a husband and father. Peier thought it would end there, and she was going to live like a nun in the dead apartment for the rest of her life, mourning for her and Mother's unfortunate life.

It was Mee who insisted on resuming the relationship. His life was unhappy. Rather than wasting his whole life with a woman he wasn't connected to, he preferred a daring though disapproved rebellion that he had longed for years ago. Thus they joined hands and came here. That was how her life was fulfilled.

Mee's Father and Mother obviously didn't like her. But with the support of Mee, she had the confidence she could eventually gain their favor.

The day they met was a tragic scene. Each whip that fell on Mee fell on her heart many times heavier. She begged and cried. His father finally stopped hurting him. Peier could tell Souyuen was a loving mother. She would wish the best for Mee—that was for him to be united with her.

Hours had gone by. Peier was still sitting on the stairs. She had checked the closed window of the west room. It was a study. Mee was locked behind that wooden rufous door beside the deep green couch. “Don’t hurt yourself, Mee. Sit down and wait,” she shouted. The quiver of the padlock stopped. Before coming here, they decided together not to use any form of violence. The guilt of breaking a marriage should be punished somehow. The sun went down the hills. Peier stared at the shadowy bamboo woods that rose from the ground and fused into the darkening sky. No wonder Mee was so handy with carving knives. She smiled at the idea that, in the near future, she would have the chance to learn all the things that accompanied her lover’s life.

## **TWENTY-FIVE—There Are No Forgotten Debts**

Late in the night, before Souyuen and Liongtan went to bed, they checked the door. Peier moved to the brick wall that sealed the gap between the cliff of the hill and the house. The top of it was covered with sharp cullet. There was no way she could climb over.

The old couple lay on the bed. Pieces of conversation were exchanged. Liongtan blamed Souyuen for meddling with Mee's marriage. Souyuen returned, "You got the betrothal presents. You forced him to propose." Feeling himself unjustifiable, Liongtan turned to the wall and pretended to be asleep.

In fact both knew the other remained awake, since no one was snoring. Peier's high-pitched voice leaked in through the seam of the window. Every other ten minutes or so, Mee would ask if she was still feeling O.K., and she would say something to comfort him. They were like two dying fish in a dry pond, which wet each other with the liquid under their own scales.

Souyuen's guilty conscience grew stronger as the night thickened. The incident that happened that night more than twenty years ago was tormenting her. Souyuen remembered how Jing begged the family to keep what Jianguo did to Souyuen in secret. But Souyuen wouldn't agree, the shame of being touched by a strange man couldn't be vented so easily. After Jianguo escaped, Souyuen demanded Jing to tell

her all that happened between Jing and Jianguo in exchange for not informing against Jianguo.

Jing confessed eventually. She and Jianguo were together soon after they met. They agreed to work their best trying to go back to the city. Soon came the news about a factory that was recruiting.

Jing wanted the chance to go back to the city, so did the other three *Zhiqings*. Secretary Yang only had one quota. The game was simple. Jing gave him her body in exchange for the quota. Secretary Yang craved for her beauty for so long that he happily accepted Jing's offer.

Jing could have done better than that. But not long before, she found out Feng was in love with Jianguo, too. She intoxicated him, and slept with him. Unable to bear the betrayal of Jianguo, Jing went to Secretary Yang. She lied to him, saying she never had any man before him. Feeling flattered, Secretary Yang confessed that Feng had a deal with him about the quota too. She had been sleeping around for benefits for a while.

The secrets Jing and the Secretary shared kept their ugly relationship—Souyuen still remembered how Jing rubbed her hands repeatedly while she told the story. She must felt herself so dirty. Somehow Jianguo found out where she and the secretary met, and caught them right in the act.

Souyuen was stunned by the story. Jing was indeed a filthy whore. She couldn't believe all the time the house harbored a woman without any sense of moral

righteousness. She pretended to comfort her, and assured her she would not tell anyone.

Jing knelt before Souyuen, and took off her twin silver bracelets from her wrist. It was the first time Souyuen looked at both of them closely and clearly. They were both in the shape of fish. The fins and scales were engraved vividly. One had its bell attached to the mouth. The other that had used to be linked to the fin of its tail was broken. The head of the two fish curved toward different side. They seemed alive and were swimming in this thick night. With a determined look, she put the unbroken one into Souyuen's hand, and went back to her room. Souyuen, in disgust, stayed with Grandmother and children in the east room, and waited until the house became silent again.

With anger and hatred, she went directly to Secretary Yang's house and told him about what happened during the night. "He came in and was about to rape Jing, because she was breaking up with her. I thus know they kept that kind of relationship for a long time."

She knew the secretary had long held a grudge against Jianguo, and would deal with him in the fiercest way. While telling the story, Souyuen left out the part about Secretary Yang, and herself. The secretary, pretending to be outraged by this incredible crime, assured Souyuen that Jianguo and Jing would be put on trial, and left the house to gather people.

When Souyuen got home, the moon was hanging low alone in the western sky. The dawn was approaching. Unwilling to let the rest of the family know what she had

done, Souyuen snuck back into Grandmother's room through the kitchen door, waiting for the upcoming news.

The whole family woke in a blast of banging on the door. When the door was opened, Secretary Yang rushed in with a few strong men. They knocked on Jing's door, it was latched. The secretary stepped back and gave a wave to the men that followed him. They immediately broke the door.

The room was empty. Jing was nowhere to be found.

This searching squad got Jianguo eventually. But Jing was never found. Rumors said she went back home. The only chance of going to the factory was handed to Feng. Jianguo was put to labor camp under the sentence of anti-revolutionary hooliganism. The black history of this house was buried deep inside Souyuen's heart, she never told anyone about her betrayal.

The last word Jing said to Souyuen was, "Sister, I believe you," before she went back to her room and latched it. Her swinging silhouette seemed, at that time, so coquettish. Yet looking back from today, it was so lonely and painful. The rage at last went away from Souyuen, and left her with unredeemable regret.

The sweet voice of Peier outside the window had died down already. With the burdensome memories swirling in her brain like a haunting ghost, Souyuen fell asleep.

The next early morning, Souyuen was woken up by the creaking of the bed. She looked outside the window. It was still dark. "Has she left?" she asked Liongtan.

“Hard to say.” Liongtan turned around in bed.

She was still out there. Hearing the echoing footsteps in the living room, Peier moved back to the door. The light was turned on. It cast a twisted shadow on the glass panels.

“Why are you still here?” Liongtan asked, with impatience and weariness in his tone. Souyuen stood by the side, knowing her husband’s flaming anger had died down and his hard heart was softened by this persistent girl. It seemed a joke that Jing’s daughter was craving to marry her son. She felt the deep inferiority she always had in front of Jing again, vividly.

“I’m not leaving, Mother.”

She was still disgusted being called mother by this woman—she suddenly thought of Hongbo—and went into the side room, leaving Liongtan behind. “Miss, your condition is good enough for better and younger men out there, in city. Why bother yourself with us?” Souyuen heard Liongtan saying behind her, but never caught Peier’s answer.

She turned on the light. “Mother?” Mee’s voice immediately came from behind the door. “Mother, open the door.”

“I open the door. You get her to leave. Otherwise, no way,” Souyuen said.

Mee remained silent.

“Why won’t you listen? She’s the daughter of a very bad—”

“I know,” Mee said calmly.

Peier said at the beginning that her mother was in Tengwei during sixty-three to sixty-six. Mee vaguely remembered the time when there was a nice aunt in the house. It wasn't until recently, she told him all about Lin Jing's diary. He was stunned. His mother was a betrayer, a liar. The regret of not trying harder in reaching Peier during her hardest time, plus the guilt he felt from what Mother had done to the poor woman thickened his already overflowing affection toward Peier.

"So, you know," Souyuen said quietly.

"I know. I also know you and Grandmother took away Peier's letter. I heard you with father that day."

They both stood in silence. Though the door was locked in between them, Souyuen felt she had no place to hide her guilty self. The crime she had committed then was presented in front of her own son nakedly. Despite the fact that Jing had forgiven her, Souyuen felt the guilt of being part of the cause of Jing and her family's miserable life. It all suddenly clicked at this moment when she finally put down her defense and admitted the wrong she did that day. She looked up to the ceiling with vague eyes. All these years, she forced herself to be responsible for all the things that she couldn't control, and thus produced these many wronged stories, yet she never had the guts to admit this single crime she had committed at first. She walked outside of the room. The talking that had been there stopped at her footsteps. She saw Liongtan sitting on the wooden chair playing with his clip impatiently. Peier, whose hands were on the glass panel of the door, looked at her with appealing eyes—exact same eyes as Jing. Liongtan raised his head with a questioning look, inquiring what



had happened just now in the room. Souyuen didn't say a word. She went straight into her bedroom, from the same place where she retrieved Jing's letter, she took out the wooden box Grandmother gave her. With the letter, she took the box out to the hall.

She went straight to the door and opened it. Liongtan stood up as she turned the knob, trying to stop her. Peier lowered her hands in surprise, and stole a quick glance at Liongtan.

It seemed the talking in the living room wasn't ineffective as well, though Souyuen wasn't interested enough to ask. Peier walked in. Her heels clicked on the floor like two curious cats that were just adopted by the new house. Mee was freed from Pyieng and his bedroom by Liongtan. He rushed out of the room to Peier, and seized her hands like a kid. Liongtan had seen that face before, when he swapped Mee's old watergun back.

Souyuen opened the old wooden box upon Mee's palm, and took out the sacred silver bracelet Jing gave her as a bribe nearly thirty years ago. A crimson stain she had hidden inside her for more than twenty years. Jing put it on. The twin bracelets were reunited again.

This was her payback, her punishment for ruining Jing, Pyieng, and her own family. Souyuen imagined the guilt upon her would be as heavy as fallen sky. However, she stood in front of her family, straight, not trembling, not falling to her knees. Instead she was calm. Peace came in at this moment. That young part of herself was freed. The darkness in the sky outside the glass panel faded away. A vigorous crow from some corner of the village announced the break of dawn. The light shined on the winding

country road that witnessed the fall and the rise of this house. The road flew through the bamboo woods, by the pond and the great camphor tree, and between the ripening paddies, waiting for those who belonged to this house to return someday.