INTO THE DEMON'S PATH

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

36 chapters · 4 interludes
77,519 words

Contents

i1 *The Book of the Living Buddha* *4*

01 The Saint's Year 7

02 The Half-Immortal 14

03 The Son's Cathedral 20

04 The Third Postcard 25

05 The Thirst 30

06 The Deal 35

07 The Southern Road 40

08 The First Blood 44

i10 *The Border Ledger* *50*

09 Across 53

10 The River 59

11 The Woman from Behind 64

12 The Aid Station 69

13 The File 73

14 The Reunion 77

15 The Knife 83

16 The Rescue 88

17 The Betrayal 93

18 The Crown 98

i21 *The Intervention* *102*

19 The Living Buddha 106

20 走火入魔 111

21 The Bottle 116

22 The Bottom 120

23 The Confession 124

24 The Seen Man 128

25 The Fall 133

26 The Last Temptation 137

i30 The Second Line 141

27 The Abdication 146

28 The Register 150

29 The Mother 154

30 The Wall 159

31 The Grave 163

32 The Return 167

33 The Price List 172

34 The Tea 176

35 The Second Line 181

36 The Wire-Mended Fan 185

INTERLUDE 1

The Book of the Living Buddha

Excerpts from the devotional handbook and internal rules of the Ji Gong Benevolent Assembly (济公善会), as distributed in photocopy and pocket edition in the spring of the third year. The Assembly's own editors compiled it. It is reproduced as found. The devotional passages are the Assembly's invention and are not scripture. Errors have not been corrected.

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I. THE OPENING

> *Hear the teaching of the living Buddha, who comes to the poor in the shape of a drunkard, and who has come again, in our city, in our time.*
> *He was born in the fog. He was given to wine. He broke every rule and kept every heart. He fell in the street and rose. He healed. He vanished. And now he walks among us, and eats noodles, and has not yet ascended, and the Assembly is his voice until he speaks.*

II. THE FIRST PRINCIPLE

> **酒肉穿肠过，佛祖心中留。**
> *Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart. This is the whole of the law. If the heart is clean, the mouth is free. If the heart is clean, the body is free. If the heart is clean, the world is free. The Buddha does not live in temples. The Buddha lives in the drunk who loves.*

III. THE RULES OF THE ASSEMBLY (POCKET EDITION, PAGE ONE)

1. Serve the sick without price. Whatever the family can give, take; whatever they cannot, leave.
2. Never turn away a person who has been turned away by the temples.
3. The merit box is open. Record every coin and every phone payment. The account is published every month.
4. Do not claim a cure. Claim a *blessing*. A blessing is not a promise.
5. If the sick person has medicine, the medicine continues. The blessing is added to the medicine, not instead of it.
6. If the sick person dies, blame no one, and do not explain. Grieve, and serve the next.
7. The living Buddha is not to be photographed without the Assembly's leave. His face belongs to us until it belongs to him.

IV. THE SECOND PRINCIPLE (UNDERLINED THREE TIMES, ADDED IN THE SECOND YEAR)

> **世人若学我，如同入魔道。**
> *Some of the old books say the saint spoke these words, and that the world should fear them. We do not fear them. The world is a child. A child who copies the father clumsily is still the father's child. We walk in the saint's path with the heart he gave us, and we are not afraid of the demon, because the demon is a story for those who have not been loved.*
> *(The Assembly's handbook does not print the second half of the old line in full. It says only that the world should not copy the outside of the saint. It does not say what happens to those who do.)*

V. THE CANONIZATION (CIRCULAR, THIRD MONTH)

> *The Assembly has, by the witness of one hundred and eleven healings and four thousand two hundred and nine meritorious acts, affirmed the living status of the rider known as* 山城济公. *He is not a god. He is not a monk. He is a living Buddha of the people, in the tradition of the mad monk, and the Assembly is his bowl. Members are instructed to remove his image from roadside shrines where it has been placed without his consent, and to install it, with his consent, at the central hall. His consent is pending.*

VI. THE MERIT LEDGER (PAGE NINE)

Month	Merit boxes	Phone donations	Healings claimed	Blessings distributed	Medicine boxes received	Deaths within seven days
1	¥214,300	¥88,400	630	1,940	210	11
2	¥301,100	¥121,900	812	2,300	180	14
3	¥389,700	¥166,300	1,004	3,110	240	19

— end of excerpt. the ledger has thirty-one pages. the deaths are recorded in the same hand as the healings, in the same column as the merit, and the Assembly has a rule about this, and the rule is on page one: blame no one, and do not explain.

CHAPTER 1

The Saint's Year

The first thing you need to know about the year I became a god is that I spent most of it delivering noodles.

That is not a joke and it is not modesty. It is the architecture of the thing. A myth lives in a temple and a man lives in a rented room above a fish market, and the distance between the two is about nine hundred bowls of xiaomian and one flight of stairs, and I know because I carried every one of them. The city had a temple for me. The city had a shrine in a converted shop in Banan with my face on the wall and a real fan and a real gourd and an orange in front of them, and by the spring of the third year the temple had a full-time keeper and a bank account and a following in four provinces, and the man whose face it was delivered a cold bowl of noodles to the fourteenth floor of a building in Yubei on the same afternoon, and the customer said, *you're late*, and I said, *the elevator is broken and the stairs are wet*, and the customer said, *one star*, and I said nothing.

I was thirty. I was sober. The count was a number I kept in my body and did not write anywhere, and it was larger than it had been on the night of the judgment and smaller than it would have been if I had not drunk in a guesthouse room three hundred kilometers south of the city, and that is the whole of what I am going to say about the count in this chapter.

Here is what the city looked like, two years after the trial, in the spring of the third year.

Tan Xiao's trust was everywhere. You could not walk through Jiefangbei without walking past something with the trust's small green mark on it: a senior canteen, a free clinic, a reading room, a "compassion station" with a kettle and a folding table and a young woman in a vest who smiled and asked if you needed help and did not mind if you did not. The tower had been given away and the name had not. The name was on the cold tea and the hemp clothing and the children's cartoon of the monk on the hoverboard, and it was on a plaque at the entrance of the aquatic-safety center where a boy had drowned, and the plaque

said *so that no one else is lost to the water*, and the pool taught a thousand children a year to float, and every one of them learned in water bought by the drowned.

The counterfeit economy had finished becoming an economy and had begun becoming a *culture*. There were Ji Gong tea houses and Ji Gong barbers and Ji Gong legal aid (still, despite everything) and a Ji Gong kindergarten in a district I will not name, and the formula had stabilized: a drunk saint for the poor, a clean saint for the middle class, and a cartoon saint for the children, and one man in a yellow jacket who was all three and none of them, riding through it on a scooter with a delivery box on the back.

And the temples the city had built for the fake saint were full, and the temple the abbot had kept standing was full too, because Jiefeng had done the arithmetic and the congee line was two thousand bowls a month, and on the wall by the door the abbot's name was cut into the stone with two characters under it and no sentence, because the board could not agree on one and because the abbot would have refused one. I swept that courtyard once a week. That is still true and will be true until I die. I do not know why the sweeping survived when so much else did not, except that it was the first thing I was ever given and it asked nothing of me but my arm.

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The aunties were the same, which is to say the aunties were changing in the way that old women change, which is slowly and all at once.

The parlor had never gone back into the air-raid shelter. The fire-safety notice was correct and the shelter stayed closed, and the game moved permanently into the back room behind the barber's sign that said *tea seats*, and the barber, who was seventy and had given up cutting hair, sat in his chair by the window all day and watched the street and did not participate, which is the highest form of participation in this city. Zhang Niangniang dealt. Wang Niangniang cooked. And **Liu Niangniang forgot.**

It had started as a name that would not come and become a season that would not stay. By the spring of the third year she had lost two of the four notebooks she had kept in her head — the years of the collection men, the years of the dead man's enforcers — and Yaoji had written down what could still be

written, and the writing was thinner every month. She did not mind, which was the thing that undid me. She would sit at the table with her tiles and say, *there was a man, he came on Tuesdays, he had a daughter*, and she could not find the name, and she would laugh, and say, *well, he was somebody*, and deal the next hand. And I would sit across from her with the tea and think about the fact that the only archive of the poor in this whole city was a woman of seventy-two who was quietly erasing herself, and that no government and no foundation would ever build another one, because no government and no foundation had ever thought the poor were worth a ledger.

That was the year. That was the ordinary.

There was a boy who delivered on the same route as me, whose name was 小陈, and who was twenty and carried a photograph of a girl in his phone case, and who asked me once, at the battery station, whether it was true that the saint had walked on water at the ford. I told him no. He looked disappointed, and then he said the thing that has stayed with me, which is: *everybody knows it is not true, and everybody repeats it anyway, because a thing being not-true is not the same as a thing being not-said.* That is the whole counterfeit economy in the mouth of a boy of twenty. The city did not need the miracles to be real. It needed them to be *circulating*, the way the fog circulates, and the circulating was the point.

And here is the other thing about the ordinary year, which I have never been able to say to a journalist who asked me about it, and which I am going to say now because this is the last time I will tell this story. In the second year of the crown-economy, before the Assembly had a bank account, I was the *only person in the city* who could not be monetized, and that made me, in a strange and quiet way, the most expensive thing on the market. Men wrote to me. A foundation in the south wrote and offered me a hundred thousand yuan to put my name on a children's book. A tea company in the north wrote and offered fifty thousand for a photograph of my hand on the gourd. A monk I had never met wrote and asked me to endorse a calligraphy of the couplet, which he would sell, with my seal, at eight hundred a scroll. And I said no to every one of them, and the saying no was not virtue; it was the last thing I had, and I knew it, and I hoarded it. That is what the ordinary year actually was, underneath the noodles. It was a man standing in a corner of a market with a single thing in his pocket that the

whole city wanted, and every morning he did not sell it, and every night he went home a little poorer and a little more real, and the poverty and the reality were the same number.

And I want to give the aunties one more time before the girl dies, because the ordinary year was theirs more than it was mine. They had made the back room a *home* in the way that only three old women can make a room a home, which is by filling it with the specific and useless: a new kettle that looked exactly like the old kettle; a jar of pickled beans that nobody was allowed to touch until the fifteenth of the month; a framed photograph of a rider none of them could name; a green plastic stool on which, over the years, about nine hundred people had sat and cried and eaten. They fed everybody. They had grown, quietly, in the two years since the trial, into the *actual* welfare state of the lower road: the hospital escort and the funeral organizer and the moneylender of last resort and the witness at the police station and the keeper of the small bags of rice that pregnant women took home. Nothing they did was legal and nothing they did was filmed and none of it appeared in any of the audits of any of the foundations, and it was, by a very long way, the most efficient and most just thing in the whole of it.

And on the last night before the girl died — I am going to put this here, out of order, because the last night matters — I sat in the back room with the three of them and the note on the wall, and Liu Niangniang, who was losing the years, dealt a hand and did not play it, and then she said the thing she had never once said in the whole of my knowing her, which was: "When I am gone, do not put a sentence on my stone." I asked her why. And she looked at me with the last clear eyes she had left and said, in the flat voice of a woman who had kept the record of the poor for fifty years and knew exactly what a record was worth: "Because a stone with a sentence is a *lie*, and everyone in this city will read the sentence and think they know me, and nobody will know me, and I have spent my whole life being known by nobody and I would like to keep it for the end." Then she picked up her tiles. "Deal."

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And then, in the third month, a girl of six died.

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Her name was A-Yue. She was six years old and she had a heart that had been failing since she was born, and her mother, A-Lian, was a cleaner of office buildings, and the father was gone, and the child had been seen at the children's hospital and was on a list, and the list was long, and the family was poor, and in the second month A-Lian took her daughter to the Assembly.

I know this because Wang Niangniang knew A-Lian's sister, and because Wang Niangniang brought the story to the table the way she brought everything, which is with the facts first and the feeling buried, because a woman who cooks for eleven people a day does not have time for feeling at the top of the sentence.

The girl had a failing heart and the Assembly had a hall, and the hall had a man in a brown robe who was not me and a crowd of two hundred, and the man put his hand on the girl's chest and said the blessing, and the crowd wept, and the mother wept, and for eleven days the girl was better. That is the part that matters. For eleven days she was better, because she was believed over, and because she was touched by two hundred people who wanted her to live, and because hope is a medicine that works for eleven days and then does not, and on the twelfth day A-Lian stopped giving the child the hospital's pills, because the Assembly's rule five said the medicine continues and the blessing is added, and the Assembly's *practice* said otherwise, because a person who is being healed does not need the medicine, and a person who takes the medicine is admitting the healing is not finished, and the crowd, which loved the child, did not want her to take the medicine, because the medicine was the old way and the old way had a list, and the list was long, and the hall was now.

The child died on the nineteenth day. She died at home, in the night, in her mother's arms, with the Assembly's blessing card under her pillow and the hospital's pills in the drawer and the crowd's hope in the room, and A-Lian brought her to the hospital too late and the hospital could not do anything, and the child was cremated on the twenty-second day with a white cloth and a small coffin and the Assembly paid for it and sent two men in brown robes to the funeral, and they wept, and they meant it, and they laid the blessing card on the coffin, and they told the mother, gently, with real grief in their voices, the sentence that the Assembly's rules were written to forbid and the Assembly's gravity could not prevent.

They told her, *if you had believed more.*

That was the sentence. Wang Niangniang said it at the table three times, in the flat voice of a woman repeating a thing that will not go away, and the third time she put the ladle down and looked at me.

"They said it to her at her child's funeral," Wang Niangniang said. "And she believed them. That is the part I cannot carry. She believed them, and she is going to believe it for the rest of her life, and the rest of her life is going to be a woman cleaning offices and thinking she did not love her daughter enough."

I sat at the table with the tea and the note on the wall behind me, and I did the arithmetic I had spent two years learning not to do, which is the arithmetic of *if*. If I had never fallen in the alley. If I had put the fan down when the abbot told me. If the city had a different story. If there were no name to put on a hall. The child would still be dead — the heart was failing since birth — but she would not have died in a room with two hundred people telling her mother that faith was the medicine, and the mother would not be carrying the sentence.

The name on the hall was my name. The man in the brown robe was not me, and had never met me, and had built his whole faith out of a drunk he had seen once, on a phone, in a barber's chair, and the faith had a hall and a bank account and a following in four provinces, and a girl of six was dead in a rented room, and the sentence was *if you had believed more*.

"It's not you," Liu Niangniang said, from her tiles. She said it the way she said everything now, which was gently and without the memory of why. "It's a man in a robe. It's always a man in a robe."

"That's the trouble," Zhang Niangniang said, and put down a tile. "It is always a man in a robe. And now the man in the robe has *your* face, Xiao Li, and the city has decided that your face is where the god lives, and you did not decide it, and you cannot undecide it, and one of these days the man in the robe is going to come and ask you to say that it was all true."

She picked up her hand.

"He always comes," she said. "That is what robes are for."

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The man in the robe came to the tunnel on the fifth day of the third month, at the head of eleven of his followers, with a fan and a gourd and a brown robe that was too clean, and he kowtowed in the lane.

I knew it was coming. I had spent two years knowing it was coming. And still, when I came out of the tunnel into the lane and saw a man of about fifty-six on his knees on the wet paving stones with his forehead on the ground and eleven people behind him doing the same, and a boy in a delivery jacket filming it on a phone because of course a boy in a delivery jacket was filming it, I understood that the second half of the couplet had been waiting for me in the lane for three years, and that the demon does not arrive with horns. It arrives on its knees.

"Master," the man said, to the paving stones. "The Assembly has come to ask you to come home."

CHAPTER 2

The Half-Immortal

I am going to tell you about 简德山 the way he told it to me, which was on a plastic stool in the back room of the barber's shop, drinking the tea I poured and eating the noodles Wang Niangniang gave him, because I had refused to go to his hall and he had accepted the refusal the way he accepted everything, which was with a gentleness that made you want to give him something else.

He was fifty-six. He had been a county middle-school teacher for twenty-six years, physics and general science, and he had a wife who had died in 2014 and a son in Chengdu who did not speak to him, and in 2019 he had a heart attack on the steps of the county hospital and was clinically dead for four minutes and was brought back on the third shock. And when he woke, he said, he was not the same man. He said it flatly, as a fact, the way a man reports a fracture. He said that during the four minutes there had been no tunnel and no light and no relatives, that he had not gone anywhere, that there had been *nothing*, and that the nothing had been so complete that when he woke he was already somebody else, and the somebody else could feel his own heartbeat from outside his body, and could feel other people's, and could put his hand on a sick woman's shoulder and have her stop vomiting, and could tell, sometimes, which of the people who came to him would live and which would die.

"The first one I healed," he said, "was a girl with a skin disease, in the village, in the winter. She had been to the county and the city and the hospital in Chengdu, and her arms were like bark. I did not do anything. I put my hand on her and I said the old words, the first half, *wine and meat pass through the gut*, and I said them because they were the words of the only saint I ever liked, and her arms went smooth in eleven days." He drank his tea. "I am not a fraud, Mr. Li. I want to say that first. I am not a fraud, and I am not a saint. I am a man who died and came back with a hand, and the hand works, and I do not know why, and I have spent seven years trying to be careful with a thing I do not understand."

He was careful. That was the thing I noticed first and could not get over. He did not claim a cure; he said *blessing*. He told me his own rule five before I asked. He said that every family that came to him was told to keep the medicine, and that most of them did, and that some of them did not, and that when they did not, and the person died, he could not stop it, and he carried it. And when I asked him about A-Yue, the girl of six, he did not lie and he did not look away. He set the bowl down and he was quiet for a moment, and then he said the thing that made him a hundred times more dangerous than a liar.

"I know her name," he said. "A-Yue. I blessed her with my own hand. Her mother stopped the pills on the twelfth day, and I do not know whether she stopped them because of the crowd or because of me, and I have gone back over it a thousand times and I cannot find the sentence where I told her to stop, because I did not tell her to stop, and I cannot find the sentence where I told her to continue, because I did not tell her to continue either. I said a blessing. The crowd did the rest. And the crowd is not evil, Mr. Li; the crowd is *hope with a hundred mouths*, and I built the mouths, and I cannot close them, and every one of them is saying the thing I did not say." He looked at me with the clear, unafraid, exhausted eyes of a man who had decided a long time ago to be honest and had discovered that honesty is not the same as innocence. "That is why I have come to you. Not to be confirmed. To be *helped.* There are two thousand of them who call me master, and they will do anything I say, and I am afraid of what I will say. I have built a bowl with no bottom, and I am asking you to put your hand under it."

We sat for a while. Wang Niangniang refilled the pot. Liu Niangniang, who had been listening with her head on one side, said, "He is not lying. I knew a man like him in 1998. He healed and he healed and then he married a woman and she died and he never healed again." And then she laughed, because she had already forgotten the name of the man she was talking about.

"You want me to lead it," I said.

"I want you to *own* it," he said. "The Assembly is not mine. It is the country's idea of you. I am only the man who happened to be standing there when it arrived. If you come, it becomes a thing with a true center, and I can be what I am, which is a country teacher with a warm hand, and the mouths will have

something to listen to that is not only me. If you do not come, it will keep growing, and it will grow into the shape of the loneliest and angriest people in it, which is the shape of every faith that ever turned ugly, and the girl A-Yue will not be the last, and the sentence at the funeral will get louder, and one day it will not be *if you had believed more*. It will be *they did this to her*, and there will be a name on a list, and the name will be a doctor's or a nurse's or a temple's, and the Assembly will go to that name with its hundred mouths." He put his hands on his knees. "I have watched it begin. I am asking you to come home before it finishes."

I looked at him for a long time. And I want to record what I felt, because it is the whole of the trap and because the reader has to understand that the trap was not money and not vanity. What I felt was **relief**. For two years I had carried the guilty knowledge that a movement was growing in my name and that I had no way to stop it. And here was a man with a warm hand and a clear conscience offering me the one thing I had wanted since the alley, which was not power and not worship. It was *the ability to steer*. He was offering me control of the thing that had been out of control since the first clip, and the offering felt, in that moment, in that room, like the most responsible thing a man could possibly accept.

And underneath the relief was the thing the abbot had told me in the courtyard of a temple before either of them was dead: *the difference is who it belongs to.*

"No," I said.

He did not argue. That was the worst of him. He put his bowl down and stood up and thanked Wang Niangniang for the noodles and thanked me for the tea and bent his head, slightly, the way you bend your head to a door you are leaving, and at the door of the back room he said the thing he had been holding, which was the true reason he was so gentle.

"I will tell you what will happen now," he said, "because I have learned to read the Assembly better than I can read myself. You have refused, which means the Assembly will now do what every child does when the parent will not come: it will decide that the refusal is the proof, and it will canonize you harder. It will say that the true saint refuses the crown. It will put your refusal in the book. And

then the next time a child dies, the sentence at the funeral will be *the saint himself refused to save her*, and it will be me who has to say it, because I am the one with the hand, and you will be somewhere in the city delivering noodles, and neither of us will have done anything except be the two poles of the same lie."

He went out through the barbershop with the sign that said *tea seats*. And Liu Niangniang, who had lost the name of the man from 1998, said the thing that ended the chapter, and she said it cheerfully, because she did not know she was saying it about the future.

"The saint always refuses the crown," she said. "And the crown is patient. The crown can wait for the saint to get tired."

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He told me the history of the movement that afternoon, in the back room, because I asked and because he was the kind of man who could talk about his own life the way another man talks about a county's weather. He had started in 2019 with three people in a rented shop in a county town north of the city, and the three people had been a widow with a back injury and a man whose son had died and a woman whose husband drank. He had healed the widow's back — she said he healed it; she had been to four hospitals and the fourth hospital had said there was nothing to do and the back had stopped hurting on the day of the blessing, and whether that was the hand or the hospital or the *being believed* was a question the guru had never been able to answer and had stopped asking. By 2020 there were forty. By 2021 there were three hundred, because the pandemic had come and the clinics had closed and the temples had closed and the poor had nowhere to take a frightened body, and the guru had put a table in a yard and blessed people at a distance of two meters and the crowd had come because a crowd will come to a man who stands in a yard when every door in the city is locked. By 2022 there were three thousand. And then, in the winter of 2022, a video had gone out — a phone video, one of the crowd, of the guru healing a woman in a shop — and the video had reached the city, and the guru had come to the city, and the city had told him a story about a drunk who saved a girl, and the guru had done the thing that every sincere man in this country eventually does, which is to *believe the city*. He had believed that the drunk in the story was a

saint, and that the saint had sent him, and that the movement was the saint's, and by the spring of the third year the movement was thirty thousand and the guru had a bank account and a following in four provinces and a hall in Banan and a girl of fifteen with a board and a number, and the whole of it had grown out of a yard and a frightened body and a phone video, and there was no villain anywhere in the story, and that is the whole of the horror.

That is the guru. I have spent the whole of it trying to make him a monster and he will not be one. He is a man who died for four minutes and came back with a hand, and the hand worked, and the city believed in the hand, and the believing is the drug, and there is no version of him that is not a good man and no version of the movement that is not a *machine made of the loneliness of the poor*. If the reader wants a villain, the reader will have to take the market, and the market is water, and the guru was the man who happened to be standing in the water when the city decided it needed a river.

The canonization proceeded. He had been right about that, too.

Within a month there was a pocket edition of *The Book of the Living Buddha* in every market in the municipality, and its second principle, underlined three times, explained to the faithful that the old warning — *if the world imitates me, it walks into the demon's path* — was a story for the faint of heart, and that the true disciple claimed the saint's freedom and was not afraid. His face was on the cover. My face. The photographer had used a still from the anniversary file, the six-minute shot, the back of my head and my hands, and cropped it, and put my face where my back had been, which was a small technical miracle of the counterfeit economy and meant that the saint on the cover of the book looked exactly like the man who had told them to stop.

The Assembly's rule seven said that the living Buddha was not to be photographed without the Assembly's leave. The Assembly had granted itself the leave. That was the year I learned that a movement's rules are written by the movement, and that the man the rules are about does not get a vote, and that the only way a person escapes being turned into a god is to die, which is the one thing the god cannot do, because the god is not a person.

I kept the pocket edition. It is on the shelf in the room with the wall, next to Ma-ge's exercise book, and I have never decided whether it is evidence or a

wound. The only thing I did about it, in that whole spring, was one small thing, and it was the same small thing I did every Sunday: I walked the Trail at dawn with the gourd on my belt and the fan in my jacket, and I did not carry the book, and I did not correct anyone who bowed.

CHAPTER 3

The Son's Cathedral

Tan Xiao sent for me in the fourth month, and this time he did not send a car to the mouth of the tunnel. He sent a *street*. That is the only way I can describe it. He had bought the whole lower road, the block where the noodle shop used to be, the block where I had wet myself in an alley behind the vegetable market in the first winter, and he had rebuilt it as a little boulevard of compassion: a senior canteen, a free clinic, a children's reading room, a "rest station" with clean toilets, a public tea house with no charge, and, at the end of it, where the alley had been, a small park with a new tree and a bench and a stone with a sentence carved on it that I will not repeat because it was a sentence about hope, and because I do not want to give the son the satisfaction of being quoted.

He was waiting for me at the tea house, at a table on the pavement, in a linen shirt and no watch, and he had ordered two teas, and he stood up when I came and did not offer his hand, which was a courtesy he had learned from me.

"You didn't come when I called you a god," he said. "So I thought I'd call you a neighbour."

I sat down. The tea was good. A woman came out of the free clinic with a child on her hip and a bag of medicine and stopped to thank the man at the table, and she did not know who he was and did not need to, and he told her the clinic was open on Saturdays too. That was the thing about the son. He did not have to be loved by the ones who knew him. It was enough to be loved by the ones who did not.

"I'm going to build the city," he said. "Not the buildings. The city. I have the platform, I have the trust, I have the network, and I have the one thing every philanthropist in this country wants and does not have, which is a *story* people believe. And I am going to use it to do three things that will outlive me: I am going to end the campus-loan racket in this municipality, I am going to put a clinic in every district that has none, and I am going to find the children. Not the ones who are saved. The ones in the forms." He looked at me. "Three hundred

and forty forms, in a drawer, in a former prosecutor's flat. I know about the drawer. I have known about the drawer since the year I heard you testify. I can reach the border in a way that no prosecutor can, because I am not the law and because the men on the other side will take my money. And you have the thing I do not have, which is the only name those men are afraid of, and the only face the girls' mothers will open their doors to."

He let it sit. The tea steamed. The clinic door opened and closed.

"Say the deal," I said.

"Come and stand beside me," he said. "Not as a mascot. As a partner. I will fund the search for the missing — every one of them, the whole drawer — through the Assembly and through my network and through the runners in the borderlands. I will fund the rescue of the girls who are across, when we can reach them. I will pay for the treatment of He Xiaoman's mother, wherever she is, if she can be found, and I will not ask you for a single public statement about my father, and I will not put your face on a plaque. All I want is for you to be *present* — in the same photograph, at the same table, at the opening of the clinic, once a month, and I will never once make you say the words. The city will see the saint and the son at the same table, and the city will decide what that means, and the deciding is theirs."

"You want my name to clean yours."

"I want my name to clean *the work*," he said, without heat. "There is a difference and you have never been willing to look at it. If you stand with me, a thousand children eat who would not have eaten. If you refuse, the clinics are still built and the loans are still investigated and the girls are still lost, because I will do all of it anyway, and the only variable is *you*, and the only thing your refusal changes is how many of the lost we can reach before the season turns." He drank his tea. "You have already made this choice once, in a room with a bowl, and you chose the clean hands, and a girl crossed the border because you were drinking. I know about the girl. Huajiao told me. She told me because she thought I could help find her, and she was right, and I have begun, and that is not a threat, it is the *record*." He set the cup down. "I am not the tempter, Li Xiuyuan. I am the *machinery*. The tempter is the part of you that wants the girls

found and the mother cured and the forms closed and your own hands empty at the same time. I am only offering to pay for the part I can pay for."

I sat there for a long time. I want to put down what I saw in him, because I have spent three years learning to see the son and I am not going to stop now. He was not lying. Every word was true. The clinics would be built. The loans would be investigated. The search had begun the week Huajiao told him. He would do all of it whether I stood with him or not, because doing it was the only thing that had ever made the emptiness quiet, and because the emptiness was not a scar he could show anybody but me, because I had seen the eleven seconds on the edge of the stage with the lights off, and he knew I had seen them, and the knowledge was why he kept coming back to me and why the coming back was itself a confession.

"You will not put my face on a plaque," I said.

"You have my word."

"Your word is a photograph."

"My word is a *contract*," he said, and for the first time, a flash of the old performance, the boardroom, the good humour, the man who had read every fine print. "And I have learned that the only promise worth making is a promise you can sue me for. The trust's articles are public. The philanthropy is audited. The photographs are licensed. If I break the promise, you can take me to court and the court will read the clause out loud, and I will be the man who broke his word to the saint, which is the only reputation I still cannot afford." He leaned back. "So. Are you going to make me do it without you?"

Before I answered, he did one more thing, and it is the thing that made the deal impossible to refuse and impossible to accept at the same time. He stood up and walked me out of the tea house and down the little boulevard to the reading room, and he took me inside, and the reading room was full — it was a Tuesday afternoon and it was full — of children at tables with books, and at the front desk there was a woman of about sixty in a volunteer's vest who was checking out a stack of picture books, and the son introduced me to no one and said nothing, and simply stood at the back and watched the room the way you watch a photograph you have looked at a thousand times. And after a while he said, in a

voice low enough that the children could not hear it, the sentence that was the whole of his motive and that I have never been able to unhear.

"That woman at the desk lost her son in 2021," he said. "He was twenty-four and he went abroad for a job and he called her for four months and then he did not. She came to my foundation in the first year and asked me, on camera, whether I could find him. I said yes. I have not found him. I have found eleven other people and I have not found him, and she comes here on Tuesdays and checks out picture books to children because it is the only thing that keeps her hands busy, and she has never once asked me about him again, because she is a polite woman and because she does not want to embarrass me, and I think about her every day and I have no way to repay her except to find the next one." He watched the room. "That is the whole of my motive and it is not noble. It is a *debt*, and it is the only debt I have ever had that a court cannot read and a foundation cannot pay, and it is the reason I am going to the border whether you come or not, and it is the reason I am willing to be the machine that funds it, because the machine can reach the border and the woman at the desk cannot."

We stood at the back of the reading room and watched a boy of nine turn the page of a picture book about a monkey, and I understood that I was looking at the cleanest and most dangerous thing the son had ever built, which was a *use* for his own guilt that was also a genuine public good, and that the two were fused so completely that you could not separate them with any tool in the whole of the law. That is the son. That is the whole of the son. He turned his father's money into a reading room and his own guilt into a search, and the reading room is real and the search is real and the woman at the desk is real, and the machine that does all three is the same machine that laundered the fire, and there is no version of those years in which you get to keep the reading room and refuse the man. That is the deal. That is the whole deal. It was on the table in front of me and it had a boy of nine turning a page in it, and I was going to take it, and I am not going to pretend that the taking was a fall. The taking was a *choice*, and the choice was the demon's path, and the demon's path does not look like a path. It looks like a reading room.

I did not answer. That is the truth and it is also the trap the whole of it is built on. I did not say no. I drank his tea and I sat in his street and I looked at the

tree in the little park where the alley had been, and I saw the woman with the child and the bag of medicine, and I saw the sentence on the stone about hope, and I did the arithmetic that has eaten my life, which is the arithmetic of *what if the good is real even when the hand is not*. And I left without answering, and he let me, because he had learned that the answer to a man like me is not a yes. The answer is the space he leaves open, and enough time, and enough need.

I walked back up the hill past the free clinic and the reading room and the rest station. Two old men were playing chess on the stone by the sentence. A young mother was filling a bottle at the rest station tap. A boy of nine was reading a comic book on the steps of the reading room, alone, and no one was filming him, and no one needed to, because the building was the film.

And in my pocket my phone buzzed with a message from Huajiao, and the message was a photograph of a postcard. It had a mountain on it. It had no message. And on the back, in the corner where there had never been anything in twelve years, someone had written four characters in a hand I did not know, and the four characters were:

我在河边。 *I am at the river.*

CHAPTER 4

The Third Postcard

Huajiao came to the tunnel that night with the postcard in the notebook and the notebook in her hand and her jaw set, and she put it on the table under the lamp and did not sit down.

"Look at the back," she said.

I looked. The mountain, the fog, the river below it, the same printing as the mountain card from the first year and the mountain card from the second. And on the back, in the space where nothing had ever been written, four characters in blue ballpoint in a hand that was not a child's and not a woman's and not anyone's I knew: **我在河边**。

"It came to the logistics point," she said. "Not the tunnel. Not the temple. The *point*, which means whoever sent it knows where I work now, which means they have been watching longer than a year. The postmark is the river town. The same town. And this is the first one with a message in twelve years."

I turned it over. The paper was the same cheap paper. The blue was the blue of a pen that had been in a drawer.

"It could be the call," I said. "The blue stools. It could be her."

"It could be anybody." Her voice was flat, which is how I knew it was bad. "It could be a scam. It could be the man with the scar. It could be the son, who told me last month he had begun the search, and who has been *very helpful*, and whose help I did not ask for and cannot refuse." She took the card back and put it in the notebook and closed the band around it. "It could be her. That is the whole trouble. It could be her, and I have to decide in the next two weeks, because the river town is two days south and the rainy season starts in the fifth month and after that the road to the crossing is a river, and I am eighteen, and I have a job and a class and a notebook, and I have spent my whole life waiting for a postcard, and now there is a postcard with a *sentence* on it, and the sentence is four characters long."

She sat down, finally, and put the notebook on the table and put her hands on it, and for the first time in the whole conversation her hands were not steady.

"I am going," she said. "I want you to come. I am not asking you to come. I am telling you that I am going, because the rule says I do not trade the living for the missing, and I have decided that going to look for her is not a trade, it is a *question*, and I am going to ask it, and if the answer is that she is gone, I will come back and the answer will be the end of the question, and I will be a person who asked." She looked up. "That is all. That is the whole plan. I have it written down."

"Then I'm coming."

"I know you are." And then she did something I had never seen her do, which was to reach out and put her hand on the back of mine, briefly, for about two seconds, before taking it back. "Don't drink before we go. That's all I am going to say about it."

I did not tell her about the pouch. I want that in the record. I did not tell her, that night, that I had bought one in the spring and that it was still on the shelf and that I looked at it most nights. I did not tell her because I did not want to be a person who needed to be managed on the way to the border. I told myself that was kindness. It was not kindness. It was the disease protecting its supply.

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The next week, the girl was taken.

Her name was 阿禾. She was seventeen, and she was the younger sister of a rider in the network named 小赵, who had ridden the west station route for six years, and who had been one of the riders who stood in the yard on the night of the dormitory raid and got Wen Xiaoyang out. A-He was small and funny and did not have much of a face yet, the way the young sometimes do not, and she had wanted to be a nurse and had been saving for the exam and had answered an advertisement on the wall of the bus station for a summer job at a "wellness resort" that paid four thousand yuan a month and asked for no experience and provided accommodation and airfare.

Her brother found out four days after she left. The advertisement had a company name that resolved, after Yaoji's people spent a day on it, to a shell with

three layers, and the shell resolved to a bus, and the bus resolved to a station two days south, and the station resolved to the river. She had sent one voice message: *Ge, it's so green here, don't worry, I'll call when I settle in.* And then the phone stopped answering, and the brother rode his scooter to the tunnel in the rain and stood in the doorway dripping and did not have to say a word.

The city's feed had a name for it, by then. The city had a name for everything, because the city had spent two years learning to make a clip out of a wound. They called it *the wellness trick*, and there were three hundred and forty forms in a drawer, and the number had become a number on a screen, and A-He was the three hundred and forty-first and she had a brother who had once stood in a yard for Wen Xiaoyang, which meant that the abyss had a face now, and the face was a girl of seventeen who had wanted to be a nurse.

That is how the southern road began. Not with a plan and not with a postcard. With a brother in a doorway in the rain, and a girl who had wanted to be a nurse, and the arithmetic of a city that had learned to turn grief into a number and a number into a scroll.

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I went to see Zheng Man before we left. She was fifty-six now and her orchids had taken over the balcony and she had, in the two years since I first sat in her stairwell, stopped pretending to be a woman who had put it behind her. She had the dry-phone report out on the table before I asked. She had added to it, in her own hand, a page of notes: the postmarks, the towns, the years, the gaps. She had been keeping the file the whole time. That is the thing about the people in this book. The city forgets and the city builds and the trust builds a clinic on the same block, and somewhere in a flat with orchids a retired captain has been keeping a page of notes for a case that was closed in 2014.

"You have the card," she said.

I told her about it. She looked at the four characters for a long time, and then she did the thing she had done the first time, which was to give me a truth and a warning at the same time.

"There are two ways to read that sentence," she said. "The first is that He Xia is alive and is telling her daughter where to find her. The second is that somebody

knows He Xia is alive, or knows she is dead, and wants her daughter at the river, and the four characters are *bait*." She turned the card over. "I have spent nine years with the first reading because the file needed me to, and I have spent the last two years with the second reading because the file has started to frighten me. This is what a dry phone teaches you. Everything points at He Xia and nothing *is* He Xia, and the only person who can tell the difference is a girl of eighteen standing at the crossing, and the crossing is the one place where the difference does not matter, because the crossing will take her either way."

"Then I go with her."

"You go with her," Zheng Man said. "And you go *sober*, because the last time you were on that road, a girl got on a bus while you were in a room with a bottle." She said it without cruelty and without softening, and then she put the report away and poured me a tea I had not asked for, and for a moment she was not a captain and not a witness, just an old woman with orchids who had kept a page for nine years because the state had closed the book. "I am too old to go with you. That is my whole confession. I am too old, and I let it be too old, and the two of you are going to stand in a room I should have stood in ten years ago, and I am going to sit here with the flowers and wait for the phone."

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We did not leave that week and we did not leave the week after. The rainy season came late and the Assembly came early, and the two of them collided on the lower road outside the free clinic, and that collision is the next chapter.

But before the collision, there was one night that belongs here, at the end of the beginning.

It was the last night before the road, or the last night before the last night — the timing of the year got away from me and I have decided not to pretend otherwise. Huajiao had gone up to the room above the tunnel to pack a bag she had already packed twice, and I sat in the back room with the aunties with the note on the wall behind me and the teapot between us, and Liu Niangniang, who had been losing the years for months, did something new. She put down her tiles and she looked at me with the clearest eyes she had had in six months and

she said, without any preamble, in the flat voice of a woman who has found a name in a drawer:

"He Xia." She said it slowly. "The officer. The one who came in the winter of the accident year with the boy's photograph." She looked at me. "She is not dead, Xiao Li. I have remembered all week. She came in with a photograph of a boy and she asked me if I had seen him at the table, and I had not, and she went out, and she was pregnant. She was *pregnant* when they told her the other one had died in the river."

The room was very quiet. Zhang Niangniang looked up from her hand. Wang Niangniang turned from the stove.

"Whose boy?" I said.

"I do not know," Liu Niangniang said, and the clarity was already going, the way it went, like a name sinking. "I only remember the photograph and the belly and the snow. I do not remember the year. I do not remember the face of the boy. I remember that she was pregnant and that she was looking for a boy and that she was going to the river." She picked up her tiles again. "That is all I have left of her. It came back for one hour and now it is going. Write it down. Write it down before it goes."

CHAPTER 5

The Thirst

There is a kind of drinking that is not drinking, and I had spent two years learning its whole grammar, and in the fourth month the Assembly dragged me to the one table where the grammar fails.

It was a merit feast. The Assembly held them after healings, a long table in a rented hall with noodles and tripe and a fermented-rice soup that had no alcohol in it and one old man at the end of the table who always brought a bottle of his own baijiu and always poured it into the soup of anyone who sat beside him. There is no forbidden thing at a folk feast, because the Assembly's first principle was that the heart frees the mouth, and the fermented rice was passed the way wine is passed, and the old man poured, and the room sang the first line of the old song, and I was the guest of honour, which meant the old man poured first for me.

I did not drink it. I want that down first. I looked at the bowl of sweet soup with the baijiu in it and I did not drink it, and I pushed it to the woman on my left, who was delighted, and the old man poured me another, and I pushed it to the woman on my right, and after the third pour the old man laughed and said, *the saint does not drink, the saint does not drink*, and the room laughed, and it became a joke, and the joke was a kindness, and the kindness was the trap, because to keep the joke alive I had to sit at the table for three hours with the smell of it in the air and the sweet soup going around, and every twenty minutes someone poured me a bowl and every twenty minutes I gave it away, and I did it with a smile, and the smile was the performance, and the performance was all that stood between me and the shelf in the room with the wall.

That is what the disease did in the year of the crown. It did not stand in a doorway with a knife. It stood at a table with a bowl and made the refusal into a party trick.

I got home at eleven and I sat on the bed and I looked at the shelf. The pouch I had bought in the spring was still there, in the front, where I could see it, and it

had been on the shelf for four months and I had looked at it at least a hundred times and I had not opened it, and that night I understood something about the shelf that I had not understood before, which is that the pouch on the shelf was not a temptation. It was a *reserve*. It was the thing I kept for the day the refusal stopped being a joke and became a cost, and the keeping of it was the disease's most patient work, because a man who keeps a reserve has already decided that there will be a day, and the only question left is which day.

I did not drink the pouch that night either. I put a cloth over it, which is the kind of gesture a man makes when he wants to believe he has done something.

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I want to give the month before the call, because the month before the call is the month the disease actually won, and I have given the disease its scene and its season and I owe the reader the *grammar*. In the fourth month I began to do the thing I had never once done in the whole of my sobriety, which was to keep the pouch *on my person*. Before the fourth month the pouch lived in the drawer or on the shelf, and a pouch in a drawer is a theory; a pouch in the inside pocket of the jacket is a *fact*. I put it there on a Tuesday and I told myself it was for a *funeral*, because there were a great many funerals in the Assembly and a man who arrives at a funeral without a pouch is a man who insults the dead, and that is the sentence the disease gave me and I took it, and for eleven days I carried a pouch next to the phone and the fan and the student card, and I did not drink it, and that was the *point*. The disease did not want the drink. The disease wanted the *carrying*, because a man who carries has already made the decision and is only waiting for permission, and the permission is never a crisis; the permission is a Tuesday, and I have come to believe that the whole of it is about the fact that a man will not sell his soul for a crisis. He will sell it for a Tuesday.

And there was a rider at the battery station, in the fourth month, who asked me the question the city had stopped asking, which was whether it was true that I had *taken the crown*, and I said yes, and he looked at me for a long moment and then said the thing that ended the month before the call, and the thing was not cruel and was worse than cruel, because it was *kind*. He said, "Then you are doing good, and the drinking is a *private thing*, and a man who does good all day

is allowed a private thing at night." That is the permission. That is the only permission I ever needed, and it did not come from the demon and it did not come from the bottle; it came from a rider at a battery station who liked me and wanted me to be all right. The road to the demon's path is not paved by the demon. It is paved by kind people who do not want to see.

My mother called in the fifth month.

She called on a Tuesday, in the afternoon, from Guangdong, and I answered, which I did not always, and for the first minute it was the usual: the weather, the food, the question about my knee, the small silence that was the whole of our language. And then she said, in the middle of a sentence about a neighbour's grandson, in the flattest voice she had, the voice she used for roof damage and lottery numbers, "There is a lump."

"A lump."

"In the breast. The left. The doctor says it is not big and it is not nothing." A pause. The television behind her. "I am not telling you to come. I am telling you because you are my son and because I do not want you to find out after, the way I found out about your father. That is all. I am telling you so that you can know."

I stood in the courtyard of the temple with the phone against my ear and the broom in my other hand and the arhats looking down with their mended faces, and I did the arithmetic that I have never once been able to stop doing. The border was two days south. Guangdong was nine hours east. The border had a girl of seventeen who had wanted to be a nurse and a postcard with four characters on it and a mother who might be alive. Guangdong had my mother, fifty-three, with a lump, alone, in a rented flat behind a television.

"I'm coming," I said.

"No," she said. "Not now. In the sixth month, after the check. They will take it out in the sixth month and I will need somebody then. Come in the sixth month." A pause. "Or come when the other thing is finished. I know about the other thing. It was on the phone. The girl. I saw it."

"Ma—"

"Come in the sixth month," she said. "Or do not. I have been a woman alone for nineteen years and I know how to be one for one more. That is not a reproach. That is a *fact*. Eat on time."

She hung up. I put the phone in my pocket and I went back to sweeping, because the courtyard does not sweep itself and because the sweeping was the only thing in my whole life that had ever let me not decide, and I swept for an hour and did not decide, and at the end of the hour I had not decided, and I knew that not-deciding was the same as choosing the border, and I let it be.

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The Assembly's keeper came to the temple two days later, and I want to describe him properly, because the Assembly in those months was not the guru and was not the crowd and was not the book. It was a young man of twenty-four named 周平, a former convenience-store clerk who had been healed of a stomach disease by the guru in the first winter and had given his life to the Assembly the way a person gives his life to a rescue, and he ran the merit boxes and the ledgers and the small army of volunteers, and he was, in the way of the movement, entirely sincere and entirely without doubt.

He came to the temple to ask me to speak at the spring convocation, and when I said no, he did not persuade me and he did not leave. He sat on the step and talked to me for an hour about the clinic in Banan and the woman whose gallbladder they had paid to remove and the boy they had found sleeping under the bridge, and he told me the numbers, the real numbers, not the book's numbers: one thousand two hundred people fed a week, three hundred and ninety operations funded, forty-one children in school. And when he had finished he said the thing that Zhang Niangniang had said at the table, in a different key.

"If you do not come, the one thousand two hundred still eat," he said. "The Assembly does not need you to feed them. But the *deaths* need you. Because when we do not have you, we have only the guru, and the guru is a man with a warm hand and a certainty, and a man with a certainty is the most dangerous thing in a hall of sick people. You are the only person in the Assembly who can stand in front of two thousand and say *I do not know*, and have them listen. That is not a crown. That is a *brake*, and we have a machine with no brake, and I have known it since the girl."

I looked at the boy of twenty-four on the step. He had a mother in the districts and a scar on his stomach and a whole life given to a thing he believed in, and he was asking me to become a brake, and the trouble was that he was right, and the further trouble was that right was the exact shape of the door.

That is the whole of it, and I am going to say it plainly, now, before the road, because the road is where the plainness got lost: **I did not take the crown because I was weak, and I did not take it because I was proud, and I did not take it for the money or the fame or the city's love. I took it because it was the only machine in the whole of the third year that could reach the place where the girls were, and because a girl named A-He had wanted to be a nurse, and because a boy of twenty-four with a scar on his stomach was kneeling on the step of a temple telling me the truth.**

I took it for a good reason. That is the demon's path. Nobody ever walks it for a bad one.

CHAPTER 6

The Deal

The deal was struck in the sixth month, in the Assembly's central hall, which was not a temple and not a shrine but a converted furniture warehouse in Banan with a brick wall and a concrete floor and four hundred plastic stools and, above the wall at the front, a six-foot photograph of a drunk in a tattered hat that was and was not my face.

The son came. The guru came. I came. And it was the guru who spoke, because the guru had spent his whole life being the one who speaks, and because the son understood, with the political genius that had kept him alive through two trials, that the man who speaks is the man the crowd blames, and that the son had never once wanted to be the man who speaks.

They had met without me. That was the first thing I learned, and I learned it the way you learn everything in a movement, from a keeper who had been drinking. The son had come to the hall three weeks before, and he and the guru had sat for two hours, and the son had put the whole thing on a single sheet of paper, and the sheet of paper said: **the money, the network, the border, and the crown.** The son would fund the search for all three hundred and forty-one of the missing, and would pay for the runners and the waystations down the whole route, and would underwrite the Assembly's clinics for five years. The Assembly would lend its people, its halls, its faithful, and its border contacts, which were the only contacts of their kind, because the Assembly had spent two years sending its members to every poor town in four provinces with a fan and a gourd and a bowl of congee, and the fan and the gourd and the congee had reached the border before any government did. And the third thing on the paper was me: the living Buddha would come home and be crowned, publicly, once, and the crown would make all of it true.

I want to give the hall on the night of the deal, because the hall on the night of the deal is the whole of the movement in one room and because I have spent three years trying to explain the movement and the explanation is a *smell*. The

hall smelled of camphor and cheap incense and medicated plaster and boiled cabbage and the specific sweet staleness of a rented space that has held too many frightened people. The floor was concrete and the stools were plastic and the wall at the front had the six-foot face on it, and behind the face, against the wall, there were about forty people waiting for the evening's healing, and the forty were the *material* of the whole thing: a woman of about thirty with a child who had a rash and a look of having been everywhere; an old man in a pressed shirt with a walking stick and a hernia; a young couple who held hands and looked at the floor and did not speak; a man of fifty with a bandage on his arm who had come, you could see, on the bus from a county; and a girl of about fifteen in a school uniform who had come alone and sat by herself against the wall and did not look up. And the forty of them were not a mob and were not a market and were not a congregation. They were the *poor*, and they had come to a former schoolteacher in a brown robe because every other door in the city had a form and a wait and a tone of voice, and the movement was the only door that opened without a form, and the form is the thing the whole of it has been about, because a form is a wall with a gate and a gate is a person and a person is tired, and the guru was not tired, and the guru was not a form, and the guru was a warm hand in a rented hall at seven in the evening. That is the movement. Everything else — the book and the crown and the board and the girl — grew out of forty people in a hall with a rash and a hernia and a bandage and a school uniform, and a warm hand, and a door that did not have a form.

I read the sheet twice. And then I did the thing that the whole of my life had been training me for, which was to read the room. The guru sat in his brown robe with his hands in his sleeves and his eyes on me. The son sat in linen with no watch and his hands open on the table. The keepers stood around the walls. And on the concrete floor, in the door of the hall, in the light from the street, there were already people — the ones who had come early for the evening's healing, women with shawls and men with canes and a mother carrying a child like a parcel — and they were watching us through the door and they did not know what a deal was. They only knew that the saint and the son and the half-immortal were in the same room, and that the room was where the hope came from.

"Show me the search," I said.

The son had it. He always had it. He put a folder on the table and opened it, and it was the drawer, photocopied: the forms, the names, the routes, the towns, and a map with three colored threads on it, and the threads were the three routes south, and the threads were already moving, and there was a fourth thread, in green, off the edge of the map, and the green thread was He Xia.

"Her broker is a woman in the river town who runs a card shop and moves people," the son said. "We do not have a name, because the woman does not use one. We have the shop and the town and the postmarks, and a man in the town who will watch the shop for us, for a price, because everyone between here and the river will sell you a fact and no one will sell you a promise." He looked at me. "The girl A-He is on the second route, at the last town, or she was nine days ago. The forms are real. The threads are real. The money clears on Friday. All of it moves whether you say yes or no, and if you say no, I will still send the money and I will still send the runners, because the clinics and the children were never a price for you, and because I have spent three years making sure that no one could ever accuse me of using a child as a lever." He said it without heat, and it was true, and the truth was the lever.

"And the crown?"

"The crown is a photograph," the son said. "One photograph, at the convocation, at the end of the month. You on the step with the guru on one side and me on the other, and the Assembly's people in the yard, and the name on the banner, and that is all. You do not have to say a word. You do not have to touch a sick person. You do not have to call yourself anything, and I will not print a plaque, and the articles of the trust will be amended this week to make it impossible for me to print one." He almost smiled. "The clause is real. My lawyers hate it. You can sue me on it, and you will win, and I have never once, in the whole of my life, made a promise that a court could read out loud unless I meant it."

The guru spoke then, for the first time, and he said the thing that was the actual offer, the one under the paper, the one that had nothing to do with the border.

"I will do the crown with you or without you," he said. "The difference is the *brake*. If you come, you are the brake. If you do not, there is no brake, and there is a hall of sick people and a man with a warm hand and a certainty, and I have told you where that ends. I am not asking you to save the sick. They are not yours to save. I am asking you to stand where the *dying* can see you and to be the one who says, out loud, in front of the crowd, that the hand does not always work." He put his hands on the table. "Say yes, and at the convocation I will make you say it. I will make you say *I do not know*. That is the whole of my plan. I have been waiting two years for a person the crowd would let say *I do not know*."

I sat in the converted warehouse with the four hundred empty stools and the six-foot face on the wall and the people in the door, and I did the arithmetic for the last time, and the arithmetic was this. If I said yes, a girl named A-He might come home, and a mother with a lump might be cured, and two thousand people might be fed, and the brake might hold, and the son might be washed, and the crown might kill me. If I said no, all of it happened anyway except the brake, and the crown happened anyway without me, and the only thing my refusal bought was my own clean hands, and I had already learned, in a guesthouse room, what a pair of clean hands is worth.

"One condition," I said.

"Name it," the son said.

"You do not film me at the border," I said. "Whatever happens down there, whatever is found, whether He Xia is alive or dead, whether the girl comes back — none of it is content. Not one frame. Not one line. If I find out that a single image from the river is on any platform, the deal is finished, and I will stand up at your convocation and tell the whole city why."

The son looked at me for a long moment. And then he did the thing that I have come to believe was the last honest thing he did in the whole of it, which was to take a pen from his pocket and write the condition on the sheet of paper in his own hand, and sign it, and push it across the table.

"Then I will not film it," he said. "Because I want you to understand something, and I want you to write it in your book, since you write everything. I am not doing this to clean my name. I did that two years ago and the cleaning did not take. I am doing this because there is a woman in the third row of my first

foundation who lost her son to a compound in 2021 and who asked me, in front of a camera, whether I could find him, and I said yes, and I have not found him, and I have not been able to look at her since. That is the whole of my motive and it is not noble, it is a *debt*, and it is the only debt I have ever had that a court could not read and a foundation could not pay." He stood up. "Friday. The money clears. The runners leave Monday. You come south with the Assembly's people, and the guru stays here and keeps the hall, and I stay in the city and keep the story, because that is the only division of labor that will survive what is coming."

He put out his hand. And I took it. That is the moment the crown began. Not in a hall with two thousand people and not on a step with the name on the banner. In a warehouse in Banan, on a concrete floor, over a folder of forms, with a hand that was clean and well-kept and had never carried anything heavier than a phone, and with a woman carrying a child like a parcel watching us through the door, because she had come early for the healing and did not know that the hope had just changed hands.

CHAPTER 7

The Southern Road

The night before we left, Yaoji came to the tea room and did the thing he had never done in five years, which was to ask me to *stay*. He did it badly and he did it in front of the aunties and he did it the way a brother does it, which is by complaining about the plan. "It is a border," he said. "You have a bad knee and a rating under four-point-five and a history in a guesthouse room. She is eighteen. The Assembly's people are zealots. The son's money is the son's. And I have a company and a wife and a child coming and I cannot go, and I am the only one of us who can run the radio, and if I lose you on a border I am going to have to tell the aunties, and I do not want to tell the aunties." And then he said the true thing, which he had never said, and which is the whole of the cousin. "I have spent five years being the man who gets everybody home. It is the whole of who I am. And I have a bad side and a whiteboard and a wife who loves me and I have discovered, at twenty-four, that I am *not* the hero, and that I do not want to be, and that the only thing I have ever actually wanted is for the yellow jacket to come up the stairs and eat the noodles. So I am asking. Not as the dispatcher. As the cousin. Stay." I looked at him for a long moment across the table with the note on the wall behind him. And I told him the truth, which is the only thing I have ever been able to give Yaoji. "If I stay, the girl goes alone. And if the girl goes alone, the girl does not come back, because the girl is eighteen and she has five rules and one of the rules is *when the mission is over, I stay*, and a border does not care about a rule. So I am going, because the first year was about a man who would not walk down the stairs, and this year is about a man who has to." Yaoji looked at the table for a while and then he did the thing he does, which is to accept a thing he cannot change and make it a form. He pushed the radio across the table. "Six hours," he said. "One word. And I will be here when you come back, and the child will be born in the autumn, and I am making you the godfather, which is not a request."

We left on a Monday in the sixth month, and the leaving took a morning and a whole chapter of my life.

The aunties put out the good bowls. That is the whole ceremony of this city: when someone is going somewhere they might not come back from, you put out the good bowls and you do not say the thing. Wang Niangniang made a fish and a soup and a bowl of pickled beans, and Zhang Niangniang dealt a hand nobody played, and Liu Niangniang, who had lost the year and kept the name, held Huajiao's face in her two hands for a long moment and then let it go and said, "You have your mother's jaw. I remember the jaw. I remember it better than the name." And Huajiao did not cry, and did not say anything, and went out to the van.

Yaoji drove us to the long-distance station. He had the whiteboard at the office, and eleven riders, and a wife now — a woman named Manman who worked at the clinic and had a laugh that went through walls — and a child due in the autumn, and he was, for the first time in the whole of the story, a man with more to lose than he could carry. He did not give me a speech. He gave me a *radio*, and a channel, and a code, and a rule.

"Every six hours, you say one word," he said. "One word, and I know you are alive. If you miss two, I put the network on the nearest town, and I do not wait, and I do not ask the procurator, and I do not care what deal you made with the son. That is the whole of my arrangement with you, and it is not negotiable, and it is the last time I am ever going to tell you what to do as a cousin instead of an employer." He put the radio in my hand. "You be the hero. I'll get you home. That was the old deal. The new deal is: you get *yourself* home, and I'll keep the light on."

Yingtao came to the station to see us off, and the conversation was short and difficult and I am going to give it in full, because it is the last honest exchange the two of us had before the river.

"I am not coming," she said. "You know that. I am staying with the story, because the story is the only weapon that survives a border, and because if I go with you I become the woman who tagged along, and if I stay I am the woman who *held the file*." She pulled her collar up against the morning. "But I want you to know what it costs me, because I am done pretending that my choices are only

professional. It costs me *you*. You are going to the place I cannot film, with the girl I cannot protect, on money from the man I spent two years trying to bury, and when you come back you will be different, and I will have spent the whole time in a room with a kettle being useful. That is the deal I made with myself, and I am telling you so that you do not come back and act surprised that I did not wait in the doorway."

"You're not the woman in the doorway," I said, which was the truest thing I could say.

"I know," she said. "That is why it costs." And then she did the thing she had never done, in front of the van and Yaoji and Huajiao and a man selling roasted corn, which was to take my face in her two hands — the same gesture Liu Niangniang had made to Huajiao, which is the gesture this city makes when it has no words — and look at it for a long moment, and let go, and walk away up the platform without turning around.

Huajiao watched her go and said the only commentary she said about it, which was, "She is the only one of us who is going to be the same afterwards."

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Jiang Xue met us south of the station, in a tearoom near the bus depot, with the file.

She was not a prosecutor anymore and she did not look like one anymore. She had grown her hair and let it go grey and wore a coat that had been rained on a hundred times, and she had, in the two years since she resigned, done the thing that a person does when the law fails them and they cannot stop: she had built, quietly, in a flat in Yuzhong, a private map of the funnel. There were the forms, the routes, the broker accounts, the bus companies, the guesthouses, the money; there were photographs, names, license plates, and a wall calendar with the seasons of the crossings marked on it like the seasons of the river. She had spent two years of her own pension and a great deal of a dead man's evidence and the cooperation of a retired smuggler named Old K, and she had gotten exactly far enough to know that she could not go one step further without a person on the ground who could be trusted, and that the person did not exist, and that the only

people who could do it were a girl of eighteen and a man in a yellow jacket and a small woman with a file.

"The broker is a woman in the last town," she said, and tapped a photograph of a bridge. "She runs the card shop and she also runs the river. She has run it for nine years. She is not the network; she is the *door*. The network is an idea and the door is a person, and the person has a name the network does not know, which is the whole of her protection, and the name I do not have. I have the shop and the town and the postmarks and a man watching the shop for the son's money, and I have one more thing, and it is the thing I resigned over, and the thing I am going to give you now because if I do not give it to you it stays in the drawer for another nine years."

She put a photograph on the table. It was a woman of about forty, in a police raincoat, standing on a bridge, holding a file, with the river behind her, and she was not looking at the camera, and she was beautiful in the flat, unfinished way of real photographs.

"He Xia," Jiang Xue said. "Narcotics. Photographed on the Chaotianmen side of the river in 2013, eleven months before the accident. She was my sister-in-law. Did you know that? My brother married her sister. That is the whole of how I got the file. It was never a professional interest. It was the only family I had left." She looked at the photograph for a moment and then turned it face-down, the way she had turned her brother's photograph face-down in the neat office on the first day I met her, and she said the sentence that carried me all the way to the river. "Bring the girl to her mother. Or bring the mother's answer to the girl. Those are the only two things that matter. Everything else down there is the network's business, and the network always wins."

CHAPTER 8

The First Blood

We reached the last town on the fourth day, and the Assembly had already been there for nine.

That was the thing I had not understood about the deal, and that the guru had not fully understood either, because a movement is not a body you can point and a crowd is not a knife you can put down. The Assembly's border team had come a month earlier, on the son's money, and they had done what the Assembly did, which is to feed people and bless people and put up a shrine in a rented room, and in the last town that meant they had made contact with every poor family with a child who had gone across, and they had made contact with the guides, and with the recruiters' women, and with the watchmen, and they had gotten, in nine days, all the information the file had spent two years failing to get, because the poor of a border town will tell a man with a bowl and a fan the things they will not tell a policeman or a prosecutor or a woman with a clipboard, and it was the most useful thing the whole movement ever did in its short and terrible life, and it is also how the first person died.

Her name was 阿香. She was forty-one and she sold fruit from a cart by the station, and she was not a recruiter and not a guide and not a watchman; she was a woman who had a son who had gone south four years before and had never come back, and who had learned, in the way of the mothers of the missing, to make herself useful to the men who ran the road, because a woman who sells fruit to the guides hears what the guides say and because a mother will do anything, anything at all, to be near the road her child went down. She had been passing what she heard to the Assembly's people for a week, in the careful way of a woman who has been passing information for four years and has learned to be afraid. And she had told them, on the third day, the one thing that mattered, which was that a girl matching A-He's description was in a holding room above a hardware shop at the north end of the river road, waiting to be moved across on the flood tide.

The Assembly's border team was led by an old man named 老孙. He was sixty-four, a retired diesel mechanic from the Jiangbei docks, and he had given his pension to the merit box for two years and had a granddaughter he spoke of only in the present tense because he had never accepted the past tense, and he was, in the way of the movement, the kindest and most dangerous man in the town. He had taken the Assembly's first principle — the heart frees the mouth — and the second principle — the disciple is not afraid — and he had arrived, without ever deciding to, at the conclusion that the saint's work in a place like this was not to feed and not to bless. It was to *go in.*

I was in the room when they made the plan and I did not stop it. That is the sentence I have to write. I was in the next room, with Huajiao and the radio, and 老孙 came in with two young men and a woman of nineteen named 小芹 who had escaped the funnel herself two years before and had joined the Assembly to burn the world down, and he said that the girl was in the hardware shop and that they were going in at dawn, and I said the thing the whole of it had been teaching me to say, which was *no*, and I said it too late and too quietly, because I was the living Buddha and I had spent the month learning that my *no* had no weight in a room where my *yes* was a religion.

"Brother," 老孙 said, "there is a girl up those stairs. We are not a government. We do not have a warrant. If we wait, she is across by tomorrow and gone for a year, and you know what a year is on that road, because you have read the forms." He had a hammer in his belt and a fan in his jacket and the face of a man who had buried his granddaughter and had decided, long ago, that he would never again stand in a corridor and do nothing. "You can tell me not to. But you have to say it with the *hand* that fed the thousand. Say it with the saint's own hand, and I will sit down. Otherwise I am going, because I have been a coward once and I am not going to be a coward in the one town where it counts."

I did not say it with the hand. That is the truth and it is the whole of the failure. I said it with the voice of a man who was not sure he had the right, and 老孙 heard the not-sure, and he went.

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What happened at the hardware shop took eleven minutes and I have the record because there were three phones on it and because the son, to his credit, honored the condition and did not put a single frame on any platform, which meant that the only people who ever saw the video were a procurator in a province that did not care, a retired captain with orchids, and me.

老孙 and his four went in the back at dawn. There was a man on the stairs and there was a scuffle and there was a hammer, and the man went down with his head open, and it turned out — this is the part that has eaten the town ever since — that the man was not a guard and not a trafficker. He was 阿香's husband. He was a man of forty-five who had spent four years on the road trying to find their son, and who had gone to work for the men who ran it because it was the only way to keep looking, and who had been standing on the stairs above the holding room at dawn because 阿香 had told him, the night before, that the Assembly was coming and that he had to get the girl out before they did, because 阿香 had understood, better than the Assembly, what a room full of people with a fan and a certainty would do.

He was on the stairs to *save* the girl. And 老孙, who had been a coward once and would not be one again, hit him with a hammer because he came at them in the dark.

阿香 came out of the fruit cart when she heard the sound. She came up the stairs and she found her husband on the landing with his head open and the Assembly's people around him, and she did not scream. That is the thing the video shows and the thing I have never been able to unsee. She did not scream. She knelt down on the landing in the dark and she took her husband's head in her lap and she looked at 老孙, and 老孙 stood there with the hammer in his hand and the fan in his jacket and the face of a man who had just learned what a certainty does, and 阿香 said, in the flat voice of a woman who has spent four years learning what the road costs:

"You were looking for the girl. She was in the room. My husband was opening the door for her." She looked down at the man in her lap. "You found the road. Take it."

The girl was in the room. She was not A-He; she was another, unnamed, fourteen, from a town three hundred kilometers away, and she came out of the room while 阿香 knelt on the landing, and she walked down the stairs past the Assembly's people, and out into the dawn, and nobody stopped her, and she has never been found, and I do not know to this day whether she got home or went back across, and I have put her, unnamed, in the forms, and the forms do not help her, because the forms are not a door, they are a list.

A-He was not in the hardware shop. A-He had been moved two days before. We had come a day late and a fact short and a hammer's length wrong, and a woman's husband was dead on a landing at dawn, and the only thing the Assembly had found on the north end of the river road was the exact shape of what the Assembly was.

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I want to put the town down, because the town is the whole of the border and the whole of the abyss, and it had about four thousand people in it and no name that anyone outside the province would recognize, and I am going to give it the way a man gives a place he is never going to see again. There was the station with the buses that left at five-thirty. There was the noodle shop across from the station where the kids ate their last breakfast, and the woman who ran it and did not count them and made the best noodles on either bank. There was the vegetable market where A-Biao's mother still sold cabbage and had a school photograph on a shelf behind the till. There was the river road with the trucks and the money-changing shop and the pharmacy and the barber, and there was the hardware shop at the north end with the landing and the mark on the plaster and the fruit cart that had belonged to a woman named 阿香 and that her sister ran now, and the sister sold the same fruit and did not talk to the Assembly and did not talk to the road and sold oranges to both. There was the temple with the tin roof and the old monk who had a phone and a following, and the card shop by the bridge that was the door, and the rented room above the market where a woman with no name had raised a boy for nine years, and the waystation with the wall of forms, and the ford at the turn of the month. That is the town. Four thousand people and a river and a station and a door, and every one of them is on

a map and none of them is on the map that the city keeps, because the city's map of the abyss is a folder in a drawer with the line at the bottom, and the line at the bottom is the whole of what the city knows about four thousand people who feed the bus and sell the fruit and mend the fence and run the door.

I sat with 老孙 on the riverbank that morning for two hours and I did not know what to say, because there was nothing to say, and because he did not want absolution, and because he said the only true sentence available to him, and then he did the thing that made him a human being instead of a statistic.

"I did it for the girl," he said, and he was crying and he was not asking me to stop him, "and I would do it again, and that is what I cannot live with. Not the hammer. The again. I would go up those stairs again tomorrow, and I know it, and the knowing is the whole of the sin." He wiped his face with the back of his fist. "You are going to be the head of this, brother. You are going to be the head of a thing that has me in it. So I am telling you now, on the bank, before the crown: there is no version of this movement that does not do this again. Not because we are bad. Because we are *hopeful*, and hope with a hammer is a demon, and you cannot lead a demon by holding its hand."

He stood up and walked back into the town to turn himself in to a police force that had no jurisdiction and no interest, and to tell 阿香 the truth, which he did, and which she did not accept, and which he carried for the rest of his life. And I sat on the bank with the radio and the river and the forming flood, and I understood that the crown I had not yet taken was already wet with a man's blood, and that the crossing was tomorrow, and that the abyss was on the far side, and that whatever I had come here to save, the river had already taken its deposit.

I crossed the next morning at the ford with the runners and the girl Huajiao and the flood beginning, and I did not tell the aunties about the landing, and I did not tell Yaoji, and I did not tell Huajiao, because I did not know how to say it, and because a man who tells a girl of eighteen the truth on the morning of the crossing is a man who has decided the truth is more important than the crossing.

That is how the first part of the year ended. I want to put the number here and let it be the last thing. In the fourth month, a girl of six named A-Yue died on the floor of a rented room while two hundred people told her mother that

faith was the medicine. In the sixth month, a man named 阿香's husband died on a landing above a hardware shop with a hammer's mark in his skull and a fan in the pocket of the man who killed him, and his wife said *take the road*, and a girl of fourteen walked out of the room and was never found, and an old man went to a police station, and I crossed a river at dawn with a girl whose mother had sent four characters on a postcard.

The crown was waiting on the far side. I did not know it yet. I knew only that the river was the colour of old metal and that the fog was coming up off it, and that whatever the saint was, he was not on this bank.

PART TWO · 渡 · CROSSING

INTERLUDE 10

The Border Ledger

Assembled from five documents collected on the far side of the river and carried north in a rice sack. Reproduced as found. Names have been left as they were; the reader is asked to understand that most of them are false, and that all of the people behind them are real.

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I. THE RUNNER'S LEDGER (POCKET NOTEBOOK, PENCIL)

> *3rd — Mai, 19, back over the ford, paid 600, to the waystation, foot infected, no phone. 3rd — two boys, brothers, 16 and 14, refused the crossing, sent north on the 4 a.m. bus. They will try again. 4th — Lin, 22, back from the park after 11 months. Does not speak. Ate rice. 4th — the woman with the boy, 30s, says she worked on the phones, wants to go home, says her name is not her name. Paid. 5th — nothing. rain. 6th — the man from the card shop came to the waystation. Do not send anyone to the card shop this week. He is counting. 6th — Song, 17, gone. Found her at the bus, took her phone, she cried, she hit me, she went. I do not know if I did right. 7th — A-Zhen says the price of the ford is doubled. The militia. The season. 7th — 11 names carried back this month. 11 out of how many. I am not going to write the how many.*

II. THE INTAKE FORM (WAYSTATION, LOOSE SHEETS)

Name (you may give a false one): _____ Age: _____ District you came from: _____ How long in the park: _____ Do you want to go home, or do you want to stay, or do you not know: _____ Do you have a phone. Is it yours. Is it being watched: _____ Are you afraid of someone here: _____

Have you eaten today: _____ Is there someone you are bringing with you. Are they coming: _____ Do you want to talk about it now / later / never (circle one): never **Signature or mark: _____ For staff only:** *no name on file. no photograph. no list that leaves this room. the list that leaves this room is the list that kills them.*

III. THE CROSSING TIMELINE (SCRATCHED ON A DOORFRAME, COPIED)

> *The ford is low at the turn of the month. The bridge is watched from the fourth day. The boats run at night and cost the most. The militia sells the ford by the week and then sells the names of the buyers the week after. The season of the crossings is the dry season, and the dry season is also the season of the raids, because the river is what both sides blame.*

IV. THE AID WORKER'S LOG (HANDWRITTEN, INCOMPLETE)

> *Day 19. Two more from the north gate. One of them is 15 and her hands are burned from the machine. I do not ask what the machine makes. The rule is: do not ask. The rule is a wound and the wound is the only intelligence we have.*
> *Day 21. The woman who has been here nine days and will not give a name asked me today if the man who comes on Fridays is her brother. I said I did not know. She said, he is not my brother, I know his shoes. I wrote it down. I do not know why. There is a whole vocabulary here of people who cannot be identified, and I have been here long enough to speak it.*
> *Day 24. The Assembly's people came to the far bank. The ones with the fan and the gourd. They mean well and they will get someone*

> *killed. I told them so. They blessed me and gave me a bag of rice and did not hear me.*
> *Day 30. A boy of sixteen went back over the ford on his own. He was afraid of the raid and not of the water. I do not know if he made it. I am writing it down so that it is somewhere.*
> *Day 33. The high season. The price doubled. The boats are full. I have stopped counting the ones who arrive and started counting the ones who leave, because the ones who leave are the only ones I can be sure of.*

V. THE PAGE AT THE BACK (BLANK, EXCEPT FOR A NAME)

> ———

— end of ledger. the last page of the rice-sack file is blank except for a name written in pencil in a hand the compilers could not identify, and the name is the name of a girl who never appears in any of the other documents, and no one has been able to tell whether she was saved, or lost, or whether the runner who wrote it simply stopped writing.

CHAPTER 9

Across

The far bank was not a country. That is the first thing I have to say, because the whole of my life before the river had trained me to expect a border to be a place with a flag and a gate and a man who stamps the wrong passport, and the river was a border and there was no flag, and the far side looked exactly like the near side, which was the horror of it.

The far town was the same town we had left, with the same bus station and the same fruit carts and the same woman at the griddle who looked at you and did not count you, except that everything was a little worse: the concrete was a little more broken, the police were a little more absent, the girls at the station were a little younger, and there were men in polo shirts sitting on scooters at every corner doing the thing that men who are paid to look do in every city in the world, which is to look at you without looking at you. Old K had told us that the far side was not another country; it was the *same country*, in the sense that money is the same country everywhere. He was right. The flag on the customs shed was the flag of the country we had just left, and the men behind the counter were the same men, and the only thing that had really changed was that on this bank the law did not reach the street, and on the other bank it did, and the whole of the abyss was made of that one difference.

A-Zhen met us at the ford at dawn.

She was forty-five, small and square, in a rain jacket and sandals, with a scar through one eyebrow and the specific calm of a woman who has made her peace with a road by walking it a thousand times. She had been a guide, she told us, for eleven years, and had taken her share of the girls across, and then, one year, she had taken a girl of fifteen across and had watched her get into the back of a van and had understood, in the way you understand a thing you have been paid not to understand, that she had just sold a person, and she had not been able to go back to the van and taken the girl out of it, and she had been going the other way ever since. That was the whole of her story and she told it in about ninety

seconds, flatly, without asking us to forgive her, and then she looked at Huajiao for a long moment and said, "How old."

"Eighteen."

"Too young to be on this bank."

"I am not here to be saved," Huajiao said. "I am here to ask a question."

A-Zhen looked at her for a long moment. And then she laughed, once, a short hard laugh, and said, "That is the worst kind. The ones who come to be saved are sensible. You come to ask a question, and the question answers you, and then you stay." She shouldered her bag. "Come. The waystation is two hours. We walk in the paddy and not the road. If you see a man on a scooter who looks at you twice, you do not stop and you do not run, you turn off into the trees. The rule here is not to be fast. The rule here is not to be *interesting*."

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A-Zhen took us to the waystation on the first night, and the waystation was the first honest building I had been in since the ford, because a waystation is honest the way a wound is honest: it does not pretend to be anything but the place where the hurt arrives. It was a low concrete house with a corrugated roof and a courtyard and twelve cots in two rooms and a kitchen with a pot and a wall of intake forms and a locked metal box for the phones, because the first thing a rescued person wants is their phone and the first thing a phone will do is tell the road where the person has gone. The nun 妙真 ran it, and she had a nursing certificate and a bad back and the flat competence of a woman who had been doing one thing for eleven years, and she did not ask our names and she did not ask our business and she did not, that first night, do anything except feed us and give us a cot and tell us the three rules of the house.

The rules were these. Do not tell anyone where the station is. Do not photograph anyone, including the girls who want to be photographed, because the wanting is the wound talking and the photograph outlives the wanting. And do not, under any circumstances, tell a person at the station that they are lucky, because the girl A-He had asked it in the paddy, *they said I was lucky, is that true*, and the nun had been asked the question four hundred times in eleven years and

had never once been able to answer it, because the answer is no and the answer is yes and the two answers cancel and what is left is a person who needs to eat.

I want to give the first night at the waystation accurately, because it is the whole of the abyss in a single room. There were, that night, seventeen people in the two cots and on the floor: eleven of the rescued, who had come back over the ford in ones and twos across the previous month, and six who had come out of the parks in the settled season and had no home to go to and no name they were willing to give. And they were divided, though nobody said so out loud, into two kinds, and the two kinds were the *recent* and the *long*. The recent ones talked. The recent ones sat in the courtyard in the evening and talked about the food and the bus and the phone they were going to get back, and one of them, a boy of nineteen, laughed the whole of the first hour, a laugh that was slightly too loud for the room, and everyone let him laugh because everyone knew the laugh belonged to the first week. The long ones did not talk. The long ones sat at the edge of the courtyard and watched the gate, and one of them, a woman of about thirty who had been in a park for two years, spent the whole of the evening sorting a bag of rice into a plastic bottle, and when the boy laughed, she flinched, once, and then went back to the rice. I have never been able to decide which of the two groups I belonged to. I think I was long. I think a person who has been made into a symbol for two years belongs to the long, and that the abyss recognizes its own, and that the recognition is why the station worked, because the nun was long too.

And in the morning I saw the thing that no file ever showed me and that I have not been able to forget. At first light, before the rice, the recent ones — the ones who had laughed the night before — washed in the courtyard with the tap and the cold water, and they washed their *clothes*, all of them, the same three shirts wrung out and hung on the line, and one of them, a girl of about twenty, washed her hair twice, and the nun told me, from the kitchen door, that this was the rule of the first two weeks at every station on the bank: the first thing a person does when they come out is try to wash the place off, and the place does not come off with soap, and the trying is the whole of the person's dignity, and you let them try, and you do not tell them it does not come off, because the telling is the cruelty and the soap is the mercy.

The ford behind us and the station in front of us and the fog coming up off the water, and the girl washing her hair twice, and the woman sorting rice into a bottle, and the boy laughing too loud, and the nun who had been doing this for eleven years. That is the far bank. That is the whole of the far bank, and there is no map of it that is not a lie, because a map does not have a girl washing her hair twice, and a map does not have a wall of intake forms where the only line that is never blank is *do you want to talk about it now, later, or never*, and every single person, four hundred times over, eleven years, has circled the same word.

We walked. That is the whole of the first day and most of the second: we walked through the paddy on the bunds, in the wet heat, with the river behind us and the mountains ahead and the fog that came down in the afternoon the way it came down in my own city, which I have never gotten out of my chest. We saw, on the second day, the thing that made the whole of the file real.

There was a fence. It was a good fence, the kind you see around a new industrial park anywhere in the country: grey steel, mesh, a foot of concrete at the bottom, a strand of wire at the top that may or may not have been electrified. Behind the fence there were buildings — clean, blocky, new, with glass windows and air-conditioning units and a satellite dish and a yard with a basketball hoop and two cars — and the buildings looked like a school or a factory or a call center, which is what they were, in the sense that a call center is a building where people make calls. And on the far side of the compound, on the hillside above it, there were villas: white, gated, with pools, and the light of a casino at the top of the hill, and the whole thing — the fence, the clean buildings, the basketball hoop, the villas, the casino — was one economy, and the economy was a girl in a bed she had not chosen, being called a customer-service representative.

I am not going to describe the inside of that place. I never went inside. That is the truth and I am putting it down at the start, because the reader is going to want the inside, and the book is not going to give it. I stood on a bund four hundred meters from the fence, in the fog, with a pair of A-Zhen's binoculars, and I looked at the perimeter of the abyss, and the only person I saw was a boy of about nineteen in a polo shirt, standing at the gate with his phone, and he looked exactly like the boys who stand at the gate of every building in my own city, and that was the whole of the horror: the abyss has a gatehouse and the gatehouse has

a boy, and the boy was somebody's son, and the somebody is in a village in a province you have never named.

A-Zhen took the binoculars back and said, "That is the third park. There are nine. The girls you are looking for are not in this one. He Xia is not in any of them."

"Then where is she?"

"In the town," A-Zhen said. "In the town, with the door. That is what you came for, and I am telling you now, before you ask it: the door is a woman, and the woman is the only person on this bank who can find anyone, and the woman *will* find you before you find her, because she has already heard that you crossed, because the whole bank heard that you crossed, because the Assembly's people came a month ago and put a shrine in a room and told everybody that the living Buddha was coming." She looked at me. "You are the most interesting person on this bank, in a place whose only rule is not to be interesting. That is your first problem. The second is that the door already knows your face."

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Huajiao did not speak for the rest of the day. She walked with her jaw set and the notebook in her bag and the rule in her head, and when we reached the waystation that night — a low concrete house with a courtyard and twelve cots and a locked box of phones and a wall of intake forms — she stood in the courtyard and looked at the wall of forms for a long time, and then she said the first thing she had said since the fence.

"There are a hundred and thirty of them."

"There are a hundred and thirty *here*," A-Zhen said. "There are three hundred and forty in the drawer. There are four thousand on the road. There is no number. The number is something the city made up so that it could sleep."

"I have a rule," Huajiao said. "I wrote it in my own hand. *I will not trade the living for the missing.* And I have come to this place, and the place is made of the missing, and the living are the ones who carry the water and sell the fruit and run the ford and mend the fence, and I do not know how to keep the rule here. Because here the missing *are* the living. Every form on that wall is a person, and every person on that wall is a form, and the only way to keep my rule is to leave,

and the only way to stay is to break it." She looked at the wall. "So I am going to do the next thing instead. I am going to look up He Xia's form and see which one of these is her."

She looked. There was a form for a woman of fifty-three, no name, who had come over the ford in 2015 and had been in the town for nine years and did not want to go home. The intake note said: *knows the card shop. knows the water. will not give a name. says her daughter is better off.*

And in the margin, in a different hand, in pencil, someone had written: **the woman who reads the postcards.**

CHAPTER 10

The River

The town on the far bank was called, by the people who lived in it, simply 河口 — the river mouth — and it had one street that mattered, and the street was the road the trucks took, and the road the trucks took was the road the girls came down, and every shop on the street sold something to the road.

I am going to describe the street because the whole of the abyss is on it, and because I walked it for four days and never once saw the thing I was looking for, which is the definition of a border town. There was a money-changing shop with no rates on the wall. There was a phone shop that sold unlocked handsets and SIM cards registered to dead men. There was a pharmacy that sold antibiotics by the pill and amphetamines by the strip. There was a barber who also cut hair and also sold girls' hair, and I am not going to explain that. There was a noodle shop with a picture of the mad monk on the wall — the cartoon monk, the hoverboard one, the licensed children's brand — because the Assembly's merchandise had reached the last street on the map before the Assembly had, and the woman who ran the noodle shop had bought it because it was cheap and because the cartoon made the children laugh. There was a hardware shop at the north end with a landing above it and a hammer's mark on the plaster that had been painted over. And there was, at the south end, where the road met the water, a shop the width of a corridor with a rack of postcards outside and a curtain at the back.

We watched the shop for two days before we went in. That was A-Zhen's rule: *watch the door before you are the door.* And what we saw was this. The woman in the shop was about sixty, grey and strong, and she sold postcards and phone cards and bus tickets and small bags of rice, and she was in the shop from six in the morning to nine at night, and she knew every person who came to the window, and about four times a day a person came to the window who did not buy a postcard, and the woman would look at them, and then look past them down the street, and then either nod or shake her head, and the person would go

away. That was the whole of the machinery. A nod and a shake and a rack of cards. The woman was the door, and the door was a shop, and the shop had been a door for nine years and had never once been raided, because the door was useful to the men on both sides of the river, and a door that is useful to both sides is the safest door in any country.

On the third day, A-Zhen came back from the road with the news about A-He.

She was in the second park, the one behind the new hotel, and she was alive, and she had been there eleven days. A-Zhen had it from a runner who had it from a girl who had been released for reasons that were not mercy — a ransom paid, a family debt cleared — and the girl had seen A-He in the dormitory and had talked to her for a minute, and A-He had asked her to tell anyone from home that she was sorry, and the girl had asked her what she was sorry for, and A-He had said, *for believing the ad.* That was the whole of the intelligence. A girl of seventeen, alive, in the second park, sorry for believing the ad, and the second park had a fence and a gate and a boy on the gate with a phone, and the second park's gate could be bought for forty thousand yuan, and the price was not the network's price. It was the gate boy's price. The gate boy was nineteen and in debt and had a mother and wanted out, and A-Zhen knew the gate boy, and the gate boy could walk A-He out through the laundry at shift change for forty thousand cash in a bag, and he would do it on Thursday, and if it went wrong he would be dead and A-He would be gone.

I had the money. That is the thing I need the reader to hold. The son had put the money in an account and the account had cleared and I had, on my phone, in a border town on the far side of the river, the ability to buy a girl out of a compound with a single transfer. That is the whole of what money is on that bank. It is not the difference between right and wrong. It is the difference between Thursday and never.

And I could not do it. That is what I need to put down next, and I am not proud of it, and it is the truest picture of the demon I have. I sat in the courtyard of the waystation with the phone in my hand and the amount typed in and A-Zhen waiting and Huajiao waiting, and I could not press send, because the money was the son's, and the son was the machine, and the machine was the

thing I had spent three years refusing, and because I knew — I *knew*, with the certainty of a man who has read the whole file — that if I pressed send, the border would become a place where forty thousand yuan bought a girl, and the next girl would be forty thousand, and the next would be forty thousand, and the price would become the wall, and the wall would become the economy, and the only girls who came home would be the ones whose people had the money, and every girl whose people did not would stay in the park and wait for the ransom and the ad. I told myself that. I sat in the courtyard and I told myself that the principle was the thing, and that a man who buys one girl builds the market that sells the rest.

Huajiao took the phone out of my hand. She was eighteen and she had spent her whole childhood on the road of the missing, and she did not have my principle and she did not have my file and she did not have the son's money, and she looked at me with the flat eyes of a girl who had been made to do arithmetic before she was made to do anything else, and she said the sentence that ended the argument and the chapter.

"Four hundred yuan," she said. "That is what I pay the woman at the logistics point. Forty thousand is the same number with more zeros. There is no principle. There is only the number, and the number is the gate boy's, and the gate boy is a person, and the person is the only door that opens on Thursday. If you do not press send, then A-He stays because *you* wanted clean hands, and the clean hands are the whole of what the abyss runs on, because the abyss runs on the fact that everyone on the good side is waiting for the perfect move." She put the phone back in my hand and closed my fingers on it. "Press it. And then spend the rest of your life paying it back. That is what money is for."

I want to put the gate boy down accurately, because the gate boy is the whole of the border and because I paid his price and because I have never learned his name. He was nineteen. He had a mother in the north of the province and a debt of eleven thousand yuan from a phone that his cousin had taken out in his name, and he had gone south for a job on the road the way A-He had, and he had ended up on a gate instead of a phone room because a gate is a *skill*, and the skill is to look at a person and decide, in four seconds, whether the person is a customer or a risk. He had been on the gate for eleven months. He had, in eleven months,

watched about four hundred people go in and about forty come out, and he had kept his own count, and the count was the reason he took the forty thousand, because a man who keeps a count has to answer it, and his answer was that he would rather be a man who let one girl out than a man who counted. He came to the waystation the night after the extraction to collect the last of the money, and he sat in the courtyard with the nun and did not look at any of us, and he said the thing I have kept, which is: "I am not a rescuer. I am a gate. A gate does not rescue anybody. A gate opens, and the person walks through, and the gate stands there and the next person walks up, and if you pay me again I will open again, and if you do not, I will close, and there is no version of me that is anything but a gate." He took his money and he went back over the ford and he is on the road still, or he is dead, or he is a supervisor now, and I do not know which, and the forty thousand that saved A-He put him on the book, and the book is the list, and the list is the thing the road values, and I paid a man to save a girl and I made a man a name on a list, and both of those things are on the same receipt, and the receipt is the border.

I pressed it. The money left. And on Thursday, at the shift change, the gate boy walked 阿禾 out of the second park through the laundry in a bag of dirty sheets, and she came over the bund at dusk in a borrowed jacket with her hair cut short, and she was seventeen and she had wanted to be a nurse and she had been in the park eleven days and she was alive, and she did not run to her brother because her brother was not there, and she did not run to us because she did not know us, and she stood in the paddy with her hands at her sides and did not cry, and the first thing she said, before anything, before the water, before the name, was:

"They said I was lucky. Eleven days. They kept saying I was lucky. Is that true?"

A-Zhen took her to the waystation. And I stood on the bund in the dark with the phone in my hand and the number in the account reduced by forty thousand, and I understood that I had done a good thing with the machine's money and that the good thing did not make the machine clean, and that the whole of the abyss was a place where a man could do a good thing every day and build the machine the whole time. That is the lesson of the river. I have never

been able to explain it to anyone who has not stood on that bank, and I have stopped trying, because the people who have not stood on it all want to tell me whether pressing send was right, and the girl is alive, and the rightness is a hobby of the safe.

We had two days before the flood and before the raid season. That was the whole window. And on the second morning, the card shop woman sent for us, and the message was four words, and the four words were the four words on the postcard, and they were addressed to Huajiao and they said: **我在河边** — *I am at the river.*

CHAPTER 11

The Woman from Behind

The card shop was the width of a corridor and it smelled of paper and river water and the tea the woman kept on the counter, and the woman's name was 兰姐 — Sister Lan — and she had been the door for nine years and she had a face like a woman who had stopped being surprised by anything a long time ago and had not, for one day, stopped paying attention.

She did not pretend we were customers. She turned the sign to 休息 and closed the door and poured three cups of tea and did not drink hers, and she looked at Huajiao for a long time the way a person looks at a document that has finally arrived.

"You are the daughter," she said.

"Yes."

"Then you are the reason for the cards." She said it flatly, without warmth and without blame, the way you read out a fact that has cost a great deal of money. "Nine years I have sold the postcards for her. The mountain and the river. She comes in, she buys one, she writes nothing, she takes it away and sends it from the bus station so the postmark is wrong. Nine years. Once a year on the birthday, and twice off the calendar, and once on a river, and this last one with the four characters, which she wrote herself, which she said she would only do once." She looked at the tea. "I asked her, the first year, why she did not simply send the girl a letter. She said a letter is a door and a postcard is a window. I have thought about that sentence for nine years and I still do not know which one she was." She raised her eyes. "She is alive. I am telling you the thing you came for, so that you will sit down and hear the rest. She is alive, and she has been here nine years, and she is dying."

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I am going to give what Sister Lan said next in order, because I have repeated it to myself a thousand times and I have never found a way to make it less.

He Xia had not been killed in the car accident in 2014. She had been *taken*. The accident was manufactured by the network she had been investigating — the same network, the same road, the same river — because she had gotten close to the men who ran the smuggling side, and because a dead officer closes a file and a missing officer keeps it open forever, and the network had learned, the way the network learns everything, that it is cheaper to hold a person than to kill one, because a held person is a *lever*. She had been brought over the river in the winter of 2014, and she had been held for eleven months, and in the summer of 2015 she had been released in a deal that Sister Lan did not fully understand and would not fully explain, and she had been given a choice: go home and be dead in a year, or stay and be no one, and she had stayed.

And in the eleventh month of the holding, she had given birth to a boy.

That was the thing. That was the whole of the answer to the twelve years of postcards. He Xia had a son, born on the far bank in 2015, fathered, Sister Lan said, by a man on the road whom He Xia would never name, and the son was nine years old now, and he was the reason she had never come home. That was the one sentence. *The son is the reason she never came home.* Not the fear. Not the network. Not the shame of the training she had given her daughter, though that was there too. It was that she could not bring the boy back across the river without making him a name, and she could not leave him, and so she had stayed on the far bank for nine years, in a rented room above the market, selling nothing and living on what the door paid her for the postcards and the little work she did for the road, and she had watched her daughter grow up through a photograph she had kept, and she had sent a mountain and a river and no message, once a year, because a postcard is a window.

"You have a brother," Sister Lan said, to Huajiao. "He is nine. His name is 何小舟 — He Xiaozhou. He does not know you exist. He knows only that his mother sends a card every year to a city in the north and cries on the day she sends it." She looked at Huajiao, and for the first time the flatness cracked, and what was under it was not softness but exhaustion, the exhaustion of a woman who had been carrying another woman's secret across a river for nine years. "She does not want to see you. I am telling you that first, because I am the door and the door does not lie. She said, when the four characters went out, that if you

came she would not see you, because she has spent nine years deciding that you are better off, and a person who has spent nine years deciding a thing does not undo it because a girl crosses a river." She picked up her tea. "And I told her that the girl would come anyway, and that the girl would stand outside her door every day until the door opened, because I have been the door for nine years and I can read a daughter the way I can read a postmark. And she wept, and she said, *then tell her I am at the river.* And that is the whole of the message. She is at the river. She is not at the shop and she is not at the market and she is not at the room. She is at the river, and the river is nine kilometers long, and I am the only person who knows which meter of it, and I will tell you on one condition."

"Name it," Huajiao said.

"Only the girl," Sister Lan said. "Not the man with the face. The man with the face is the most photographed person on this bank and the whole road is watching him, and if he goes to her door the road will follow him there and she will be dead within the season. The mother will see the daughter. The saint stays at the waystation, and the station tells no one, and the door stays shut for one more night." She looked at me for the first time, and her eyes were not unkind, and that was somehow worse. "You have been carrying this girl's question since before she could ask it, and I know that, because the girl told me on the way in, and I know what you are to her, and I am sorry. But the whole bank knows your face. You are the reason she may die. You are also the reason we have the money to move the girl. That is what the crown is, brother. That is what the crown is *for*."

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She told us the shape of the nine years, because a door does not lie and because a door has seen everything and has decided, after nine years, that telling is the only thing it has left. He Xia had come over the ford in the winter of 2014, held, and she had spent eleven months in a room above a warehouse, and the room had a window and the window looked at a wall. She had been released in the summer of 2015 in a deal arranged by a man on the road whom she would not name, and the deal had been this: she would live in the town, under no name, and she would not testify and would not contact her unit and would not

cross, and in exchange the man on the road would not tell the network that she had lived, and would let her keep the child. And she had kept the child, and the child had grown, and the man on the road had died in 2019, and after he died she had been free and had not gone, and the door had asked her once, that year, why, and He Xia had said the sentence the door has repeated to me twice, once in the shop and once, years later, in a letter. She had said: *a dead woman who comes home makes a file, and a file makes a name, and a name makes the boy a lever, and I would rather be a window than a door.* That is the whole of the nine years. That is the whole of what a mother can decide, and it was the wrong decision, and it was the only decision she could make, and the boy is the reason and the boy is the cost, and the door has never once been able to tell me whether to forgive her and I have never once asked the door to.

We walked back to the waystation in the dark, and Huajiao did not speak, and at the gate of the station she stopped and looked at me, and for the first time in the whole of the two years I had known her, she looked like a person of eighteen, which is to say she looked young and terrified and certain all at once, and she asked me the question that she had never asked me, because she had never before had a person to ask.

"Should I go?"

I want to record what I did not say. I did not say *be careful*. I did not say *it might be a trap*. I did not say *I should come with you*, because the door had told me I could not, and because the door was right. I did not say the safe thing, and I did not say the warm thing, and I did not say the thing that would have kept her at the station with me.

"Your mother has a son," I said. "You have a brother. Whatever is behind that door, it is not a postcard, and it is not a mystery, and it is not the answer you have been waiting twelve years for. It is a woman of fifty-three in a rented room with a boy of nine, and she is dying, and she chose the boy over you, and there is no version of the room in which that is not true. So the question is not whether you should go. The question is whether you can go in and look at her and *not* forgive her, because if you go in there to forgive her, you will spend the rest of your life being the daughter of a woman who needed forgiving, and that is the one thing

your notebook was written to prevent." I looked at her. "Go and *see* her. Not to forgive. To see. That is the rule I would write if I were you. But the rule is yours."

She looked at me for a long moment. And then she took the notebook out of her bag and opened it and wrote, in the dark, at the gate, for about four minutes. And then she closed it and put the band around it and put it away and looked up, and her eyes were dry, and she said the thing that ended the chapter and began the last part of the road.

"Rule Three," she said. "I will write it out for you in the morning. Now I am going to see my mother, and you are going to stay at the station, and if the road follows either of us, we are done." She picked up her bag. "Keep the radio on. Say the word every six hours. And do not go to the shop, and do not go to the river, and do not come after me. That is not a request. That is the mission. And you know what I do with missions."

CHAPTER 12

The Aid Station

Huajiao was gone for two days, and I spent the two days at the waystation doing the only thing I have ever actually been good at, which is being present without being useful.

The station was run by a nun named 妙真. She was fifty and had been a nurse before she took her vows, and she had come to the far bank eleven years before to bury a novice who had died on the road, and she had never gone home, because the road kept producing novices to bury, and because a woman with a nursing certificate and no fear is the most useful object on any border in the world. She had twenty cots and a locked box of phones and a wall of intake forms, and she kept the forms because she had learned, the hard way, that a name written down is a name that can be found, and a name that can be found is sometimes a name that is alive. She did not proselytize. I never once heard her speak the name of a Buddha. She fed people and cleaned wounds and asked the three questions — *have you eaten, do you need a clinic, is anyone holding your passport* — and she did that for eleven years and called it nothing.

A-He slept for the first day. She woke on the second morning and ate two bowls of rice and did not cry and did not talk about the eleven days, and I want to record the whole of what she said that morning, because it is the only account of the second park that I ever got from the inside, and because it is smaller and colder than everything the city believes.

"There were fifteen of us in the room," she said. "Two rooms. Girls and two boys. We were on the phones, all day, on scripts, pretending to be a woman in love so that a man in another country would send money. I was on the phones for eleven days. I did not send anyone's money anywhere, because I was slow, and the man with the board shouted at me, and I cried, and the girls who had been there longer taught me how to be faster so I would not be hit." She ate. "The food was rice and greens and there was always enough. The room was clean. There was a fan. On the fourth day a girl gave me a packet of shampoo and told

me the trick, and the trick was to make the man believe he was the only one, and I did it, and I *did* it, and I am not a good person, and that is the part I cannot say to my brother." She put down the bowl. "They said I was lucky. Eleven days. There were girls who had been there a year. There was a girl of fourteen who had been there since she was twelve, and she was the best on the phones, and she taught me the trick, and she is still there, and her name is 小蝶, and I am telling you her name because somebody has to."

I wrote the name down. I wrote it in the margin of the intake form, in the same place the other hand had written *the woman who reads the postcards*, and I have kept the form, and the form is in the room with the wall, and I do not know if 小蝶 is alive, and I have decided, for the record, that the not-knowing is the whole of the crime.

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There was a woman at the station who would not give a name.

She was in the cot by the window, and she had been there nine days when we arrived and she was there nine days more, and she did not speak to anyone, and she ate, and she watched the door. Sister Miaozhen told me her story in the flat way that the station told every story, because a station that tells a story gently stops being able to do the paperwork.

The woman had come over the ford in the dry season. She had been in the town for four years. She had a husband in the north — that was the only fact she had given, in nine days — and she had two children, and she had not told the husband she was alive, and the reason she had not told him was that the children had been brought over with her, and the husband believed the children were dead, and she had decided, four years ago, that a husband who believed his children were dead was a husband who could start again, and that a husband who knew his children were on the far bank was a husband who would cross the river and be taken. She had made a decision, four years ago, and she had been unable to unmake it, and the decision had become a life, and now she did not know how to end it, and so she sat by the window and watched the door and would not give her name.

I sat with her one afternoon. I did not try to talk. That is the only skill I have. The old porters on the river taught me that a question is a claim on another person's pain, and so I sat on the next cot with a bowl of tea and did not ask her anything, and after a long time, without looking at me, she said, "You are the man from the cards."

"I don't know what that means."

"The woman above the market," she said. "She sends the cards. You came for her. Everyone on the road knows. That is why you are the most dangerous person on the bank." She looked at the door. "When you came, the road woke up. The road watches the woman now. The road thinks the woman has something the saint wants, and anything the saint wants is worth money, and anything worth money is worth taking. You brought the crown across the river. Now the river is wearing it."

That was the intelligence that mattered and I did not understand it for three more days. I sat with the woman by the window and I did not know that she had just told me the whole of the betrayal, and that the road had already begun to move, and that the only woman on the bank who knew where He Xia lived had become, the moment I crossed, the most valuable object on the river.

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There was a man at the station too, and I am going to give him because the wall of forms was mostly women and the men were the ones nobody counted. He was about thirty and he had been in the fourth park for four years and he had come out through the laundry with the eleven, and he did not have a wife or a child or a mother waiting, and the reason he had been in the park for four years was that he had gone over the river to find his brother and had been sold by the guide who took him, and in the four years he had learned enough about the road to be useful, and he had spent the last two of them quietly marking which of the guards could be bought, and the list of guard names he gave the nun — nine names, in his own hand, on the back of an intake form — is the reason the operation knew the gate boy, and the gate boy is why A-He is home. He did not ask for money and he did not ask for thanks and he did not ask to be a hero, and when I thanked him he said the sentence that is the whole of the far bank, which

is: “I did not do it for the girl. I did it because I was there for four years and I kept the list, and a man who keeps a list has to give it to somebody, or the list becomes the reason he stayed.” He went home to Chengdu in the sixth month and took a job in a logistics yard and does not talk about the river, and the nun says he is the only one of the four-year men who did not need to be kept at the station for more than a week, which she says is how you know he was already gone.

Huajiao came back on the second night, after dark, and I heard her before I saw her, because she walked into the courtyard the way she walked into a room after a fight, flat and slow and without any hurry at all.

She was not crying. That was the first thing. I do not know whether I wanted her to be crying and I am not going to pretend I know. She sat down on the step beside me and took out the notebook and put it in her lap and did not open it, and she looked at the wall of forms for a long time, and then she told me the whole of the two days, in order, in the voice she used for facts, and I am going to give it to the reader the way she gave it to me, because I was not at the river and I have never let myself pretend I was.

CHAPTER 13

The File

I want to put down the city end of the file, because we had been on the bank for four chapters and the reader deserves to know what the woman who resigned was actually doing while we were in the paddy. She was in a flat in Yuzhong with a wall of paper and a chair and three phones and a retired smuggler named Old K, and she was running what she called, privately, in her own notes, *the bookkeeping of the abyss*. She had, by the fourth month, mapped the whole of the near side of the funnel: eleven recruitment agencies, four of them registered; two bus companies and the timetables of the night buses; nine guesthouses on the road that took the kids' ID; the bank accounts of the guides, who were paid in cash and deposited in slips under other names; and a wall calendar with the seasons of the crossings marked in green, which was the single most useful document on the whole of the border, and which she had made by sitting in a room for two years with a pension and a dead man's evidence and the memory of a brother in a school uniform. She had given the whole of it to the coordination office and the coordination office had used it to plan the raid, and she had kept a copy, because a woman who has once watched the law fail keeps a copy of everything. And on the wall of the flat, next to the calendar, there was a photograph of a woman of about forty in a police raincoat on a bridge, and the photograph was He Xia, and Jiang Xue had put it there in the second year and had looked at it every day for two years, and she told me in the bad line on the station phone that the photograph was the *reason* she had not quit, because a woman who quits with a photograph on the wall is a woman who has to take the photograph down, and she was not going to take it down until the file was closed, and the file was never going to close, and so the photograph stayed.

While Huajiao was at the river, the file moved in the city, and I am putting the city chapter here, between the station and the reunion, because that is how it happened: the two ends of the same rope, and I was between them.

Jiang Xue called on the second night, on the station's satellite phone, because the waystation had one phone that occasionally worked and a nun who guarded it like a relic. The line was bad and she spoke in the clipped, floating way of a woman on a bad line, and what she said, in order, was this.

The operation had found her brother. He was alive. He was in the third park, the one I had seen through the binoculars, the one with the clean fence and the boy on the gate and the basketball hoop, and he had been there for five years, and he was not a prisoner in the sense that the forms meant, and he was not free in the sense that the words meant, and he had a function. He had been brought over in 2018 on a fake job, and he had been beaten in the first year the way everyone is beaten in the first year, and in the second year he had stopped being beaten because he had learned the phones, and in the third year he had been given a chair and a board and a team of six, and in the fifth year he was a *supervisor*, and the supervisor's job was to keep the slow ones from being hit and to keep the fast ones from being caught and to make sure the money went up the hill. He had a woman there, a girl from Yunnan who had also been brought over and who had also learned the phones, and they had a child of two who had been born in the park and whose birth had been registered, by the park's own methods, in a book that the park kept, and the girl's name was on the book and the child's name was on the book and neither of them could leave, because a person who leaves does not get their book.

"I have the location of the third park," Jiang Xue said, and her voice on the bad line was the flattest I had ever heard it, which is to say it was the voice of a woman holding a bridge in a flood. "I have the gate, the shift, the laundry, the manager's name, the accounts. I have the evidence to burn the whole thing down, and I have a coordination channel with two governments and a woman in the province who will take my calls because I gave her the drawer. And none of it is worth anything, because the moment the raid goes in, the park has a protocol, and the protocol is a bus at the back gate and a river and a book, and my brother is on the book, and the book is the only thing the park values more than the money, because the book is the *proof*." She paused. The line hummed. "The operation can free eleven girls and lose my brother. Or it can do nothing and keep

the book, and I can spend the rest of my life knowing where he is. Those are the two moves, and there is a third, and the third is the reason I am calling you."

"Say it."

"The third is a *trade*," she said. "A quiet one. The park will sell me my brother for a number. Not a ransom — a *transfer*, a piece of business, a brother for a fee, the way they sell a girl twice. And the fee is a version of the forty thousand you paid for the girl, and the rule is the same rule, and the sin is the same sin: if I pay it, I build the market that sells the next brother. If I refuse it, I am a prosecutor who let her own blood stay in a park to keep her own hands clean." The line almost went, and came back. "I resigned from that job, Li Xiuyuan. I resigned because the law stops at the border and I could not stand to be a person who files. And now I am standing at the border with a number in my hand and a brother on a book, and I am calling the only other person in this whole country who has stood on the bank with a number and pressed send."

"What did you do?"

There was a long silence on the bad line. And then Jiang Xue said the thing that I have kept, and that is the whole of her, and that is why I believe there is no one in the government of this country more honest than the woman who left it.

"I did the arithmetic I have done every day for seven years," she said. "And then I did the only thing that a person in my position can actually do, which is *more than the trade*. I gave the two governments the location, and I told them about the back gate and the bus and the book, and I told them that if they move, they move at the laundry shift, and I told them I will burn every favor I have ever been owed to make sure the third park goes down in a way that gets the book and not just the girls. And I told them that if the operation fails, I will pay the fee for my brother with my own money, and I will be a woman who bought a person, and I will live with it, because I have decided that I would rather build the market than be the file." She paused. "That is the whole of my answer. I do not know if it is right. I know it is what I am doing. And I am telling you because you are on the bank and because the move is in three days and because the person who is going to be on the ground when it goes is you, and the operation needs the road to be quiet, and the road is not quiet, and the reason the road is not quiet is that the whole bank is watching the man with the face."

She hung up. I stood in the courtyard with the dead phone and the wall of forms and the fog coming off the river, and I understood, at last, what the woman by the window had told me. The road had woken because I had crossed. The road had put a price on the woman above the market because the saint had come for her. And the operation would move in three days, and the operation needed the road quiet, and the only way to make the road quiet was to leave the bank, and the only reason I had come to the bank was to stay until Huajiao had her answer, and the answer was on the other side of the chapter, at the river, with a woman and a boy and nine years of a card.

That is the position the border puts a person in. I want to write it plainly, because it is the arithmetic of the abyss, and because the reader is going to want the arithmetic, and the arithmetic is this: *every good thing I did on that bank made the bank worse for the next person, and the only way to stop making it worse was to leave, and leaving was the one thing I could not do.* That is not a paradox and it is not a mystery. It is a Tuesday on the border. And the deeper I went into it, the clearer it became that the crown was not a hat; it was a *radius*, and everything within it got counted, and everything counted got taken.

CHAPTER 14

The Reunion

This is what Huajiao told me, in the courtyard of the waystation, after dark, over about ninety minutes, while the river went by and the nun kept the lamp low. I did not record it and I did not take notes, because a person does not take notes on the one account she has ever given of the only two days of her life that belonged to her, and so what follows is my memory of her memory, and I have told her, in the years since, that I would write it down, and she has said, every time, the same four words: *write it true.*

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She walked to the river in the morning. Nine kilometers, alone, with a map the door drew on a cigarette packet and a jacket and no phone, because the door said the road watches the phones. The river at the end of the road was not the river of the crossing; it was a bend of the same water, wide and slow and green, with a sandbar and a fishing boat and a man casting a net, and on the bank there was a stand of bamboo and a low house with a tin roof and a yard with a spigot and a line of washing, and in the yard there was a woman of fifty-three, thin, in a grey shirt and cloth shoes, hanging a boy's school shirt on the line.

That was the first sight, and Huajiao said the thing I have thought about more than any other sentence in the whole of it. She said: *I did not recognize her.* Twelve years of postcards, twelve years of a face in the one photograph her grandmother kept, twelve years of building a woman out of a mountain and a river and no message, and when she came around the bamboo and saw the woman in the yard, she did not recognize her, because the woman in the yard was a woman like any other woman in any yard in any town on that road, and the myth she had built did not have a face.

He Xia looked up. She looked at the girl in the gate for a long moment. And then she put the shirt on the line and did the thing Huajiao had not expected and had spent twelve years not imagining, which was to sit down on the step.

"Sit," she said. "There is tea. It is in the pot."

That was the whole of the greeting. No embrace. No weeping. A woman of fifty-three sat on a step and told her daughter where the tea was, and the daughter sat down on the step two feet away, and neither of them moved for a long time, and the fishing net went out and came back, and a dog barked somewhere down the river.

She was dying. Huajiao said she could see it before she was told, the way you can see it in a person: the yellow in the eye, the thinness of the wrist, the way she moved like a woman carrying something she had stopped complaining about. He Xia had caught it in the holding year — she did not say how, and Huajiao did not ask, because the rule was to see and not to excavate — and it had been slow for nine years and fast for one, and the clinic in the town had given her a year, perhaps two, and she had made her arrangements, and the arrangement was the boy.

The boy's name was He Xiaozhou. He was nine. He came out of the house at noon in his school clothes with his homework and did not know who the visitor was, and his mother said, "This is a friend from the north," and the boy said hello and went back in to his table, and Huajiao watched him do his arithmetic through the doorway for about an hour, and she said that the arithmetic was the whole of it, that the boy sat at a table and did his arithmetic and called the woman Ma, and that for the whole of the hour she did not know what she felt, except that it was not what she had spent twelve years preparing to feel, and that the not-knowing was its own answer.

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They talked in the afternoon. Huajiao asked the questions she had written in the notebook, in the order she had written them, and He Xia answered them the way a witness answers a formal question, plainly, without defending herself, and the answers were these.

She had been taken in 2014 — not killed. She had been held eleven months in a room on the far side of the river. She had been pregnant when they took her, three months, and she had not known whether the child would live, and the child had lived, and she had named him for the river. She had been released in a deal her old unit did not know about and would never have authorized, arranged

by a man on the road whom she would not name and who had kept her alive, and the deal was that she would be no one. She could not come home, because the day she came home the network would know she was alive and would finish the file, and because the unit had written her as dead and a dead officer cannot testify, and because — this was the sentence Huajiao repeated three times — because *she could not bring the boy.*

That was the thing. That was the heart of it. He Xia had done the arithmetic of the border the way everyone does the arithmetic of the border, and the arithmetic was that the boy had been born on the far bank with no papers and a name on a park's book and a father on the road, and a boy like that could not be carried north without becoming a lever, and a lever is what gets a child taken, and so she had stayed, and she had raised him in a rented room above a market, and she had sent her daughter a mountain and a river, once a year, because a postcard is a window.

"She did not apologize," Huajiao said. "I want you to write that down. Everyone is going to want to know if she apologized. She did not. She said, *I trained you, and then I left, and I have spent nine years telling myself that a girl I trained as a weapon would survive better than a girl I raised as a daughter, and that was a lie, and I knew it was a lie, and I kept sending the cards because the cards were the only way to keep the lie warm.* That is what she said. She said it the way she said where the tea was. And then she asked me whether I had kept the rules." Huajiao's voice, in the courtyard, did not change at all. "I told her I had rewritten the first one. I told her the rule is now *if the person is walking in, you walk in too.* And she was quiet for a long time, and then she said the thing that I have not been able to put down, and the thing I am going to tell you and then never say again."

She stopped. The river went by. She took the notebook out of her bag and put it in her lap and did not open it.

"She said, *good.* She said, *good, because the rules I gave you were made for a girl who had to survive, and you are not that girl anymore, and if you had come here with the old rules I would have known I had made a weapon, and instead I know I*

made a daughter, and that is the only good thing I have done on this bank in nine years." Huajiao looked at the notebook. "And then she asked me to take the boy."

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And there was the one thing she told me that I have never been able to put anywhere else, and I am putting it here, at the end of the reunion, because it is the whole of the mother and the whole of the daughter and the whole of it in one exchange. At dusk, before the ask, the boy came out of the house to call them in to the rice, and he stood in the door and looked at the strange woman at the table with his mother, and he did the arithmetic that a child of nine does in the door of a rented room, and then he said, in the flat far-bank voice he would carry all his life, the question he had been taught by the road not to ask: "Ma, who is she." And He Xia looked at her daughter for a long moment, and then she looked at her son, and she said the sentence that Huajiao has repeated to me exactly once, in the waystation courtyard, and asked me never to write down, and that I am writing down anyway, because she asked me to write it true.

She said: "She is the one I left."

And the boy, who was nine, said, "Okay," and went in to the rice. He had no idea what he had been told and he has no idea now, and he calls Huajiao *jiejie* and does not know why, and the whole of the grief of the border is in the fact that a boy of nine can be told the truth and not hear it, and the whole of the mercy is that he does not have to, and the whole of the *cost* is that Huajiao heard it, and that she has carried it, and that she will carry it for the rest of her life, and that she has never once, in all the years since, said a word against the mother to the boy.

That was the ask. That was the other side of the reunion, and it came at dusk, over the rice, with the boy at the table doing his arithmetic, and it was not a request and it was not a plea; it was a plan. He Xia had a plan, and the plan had been made before Huajiao ever crossed the river, and the plan was this: the mother would die within the year, and the boy would be left on the far bank with no papers and no family and a father on the road, and the only person on the whole earth who could take him north without making him a name was a girl of eighteen who had a network, a company, three aunties, a room above a tunnel,

and a city. *Take him*, the mother said. *When I am gone. He does not have to know who you are. He does not have to know I had another child. He only has to have a door.*

Huajiao did not answer for a long time. And what she said, in the end, was the truest sentence of the whole road, and I am putting it here because she asked me to write it true.

"I told her I could not say yes," she said. "I told her that she had given me a rule when I was six and a knife when I was six and a myth when I was six, and that she had never once given me a *choice*, and that this was the first choice she had ever offered me and it was a boy of nine in a rented room and a dead woman's plan. I told her I would not decide at the river. I told her I would go back and sleep and eat and do my arithmetic and come in the morning with a yes or a no, because that is the only thing my rules are for, and because the girl who would have said yes on the step in the first five minutes is the girl she made, and I am not that girl." She opened the notebook. "And I wrote it down, and Rule Three, and I am going to read it to you now, because you are the only person in the world I am going to read it to."

She read it, in the courtyard, by the low lamp, in the voice she used for facts.

Rule Three: when the mission is over, I stay.

"And in the morning," she said, "I went back to the river, and I told her *yes*."

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That is the reunion. I have put it in her voice because it is hers, and because I was not there, and because the reader has a right to hear it from the person it happened to. I will add the one thing I saw with my own eyes, which was the end of the second day, when Huajiao came back to the waystation and went straight to the wall of forms and stood in front of it for a long time, and then took a pen out of her bag and wrote, in the margin of the form for the woman of fifty-three with no name, four characters, and the four characters were her own handwriting and they said: **何霞 is here.** *He Xia is here.* She wrote it into the form because the form was the only archive on the bank, and because a person who has spent her whole childhood on the road of the missing knows that the only thing that keeps a person from disappearing is a line in a book.

And then she went out into the courtyard and did not sleep, and in the morning the road came to the waystation, and the door was closed, and the betrayal began.

CHAPTER 15

The Knife

The road came to the waystation on the third morning, and it did not come with a hammer. It came with a school bag.

A man of about forty in a clean polo shirt and a good watch parked a scooter at the gate and walked into the courtyard and put a small blue bag on the step and left without a word, and the bag had a boy's name tag on the handle and a pencil case and an arithmetic exercise book with the corner turned down at the page where the boy had stopped, and the nun opened it and looked at it for a moment and then set it down and said, very quietly, "He Xiaozhou. She came to the clinic last month. The boy has a cough."

That was the message. Not a threat and not a demand. A school bag on a step. *We know where the boy goes to school and we know his exercise book and we can put it on your step whenever we like.*

San-ge — that was the man's name, or the only name the road used — was not hard to find. The whole town knew who had the polo shirt and the good watch and the scooter, and the whole town saw him drink at the tea house by the bridge every morning from seven to nine, and on the fourth morning Huajiao went to the tea house with a folding knife in the waistband of her trousers and sat down at the table opposite him and ordered a tea she did not drink.

I was not there. I want that in the record, because the reader is going to want me to have been there, and because the whole of the temptation depends on her being alone. She told me what happened, in the courtyard, that night, in the voice she used for facts, and I am giving it as she gave it.

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I have to give the tea house, because the tea house is the border the way the hall was the movement, and because the whole of the knife came down to a room. It was the kind of place every border town has: four tables, a kettle on a coal ring, a woman behind the counter watching a costume drama on a phone with the sound off, a calendar from a bank that had changed its name, and a

clientele of men who had nowhere to be before nine. San-ge sat at the back table with his back to the wall, which is where men who are watched always sit, and there was a plate of peanuts and a cup and a fly and the whole of the morning's heat, and the room was almost empty, and the emptiness is what made the knife possible, because the only witnesses were a woman with a costume drama and a man asleep at the front. I have thought about that tea house more than I have thought about the whole of the park. The park is the *abyss*; the tea house is the *shop*, and the shop is where the abyss is actually run, by a man in a polo shirt with a good watch and a plate of peanuts, at nine in the morning, on a road the trucks take, in a town where everyone knows his name and no one says it. A park has a fence and a logo and a book. The shop has a kettle. And the whole of it is the argument that the shop is worse, because the shop is a *person* and a person can be forgiven and the fence cannot, and I do not forgive the man with the good watch and I sat across from him for eleven minutes and I understood that he was not a monster either, that he had a mother and a daughter and had started on the road the way the guide boy started, with a shoulder bag and a phone and a debt, and that the road is what happens to a man who has a debt and a shoulder bag and no other trade. That is the border. That is the whole border. A man with a debt and a shoulder bag and a pair of good sunglasses, selling a girl on a Tuesday, over peanuts.

San-ge was not surprised. That was the first thing. He looked at the girl who sat down at his table and he did not put his cup down and he did not call to his men, and he said, "You are the daughter."

"I am the daughter."

"Your mother is a good customer and a bad investment." He drank. "Nine years she has been on the bank, and no one has touched her, and do you know why. Because she is *nothing*. A woman with no name and no money and no papers and no friends. The road keeps nothing. The road only keeps what is worth keeping." He set the cup down and looked at her, and he was not smiling. "And then a saint crossed the river. And now the woman with no name has a *price*, because anything the saint wants is worth money, and the road is going to take the price, because that is what the road is for. There is no version of this in which you and your mother and the boy walk to the ford and go home. The

version is this: the saint pays, or the boy pays, and the road does not care which, because the road is not a person. The road is the *water*. You cannot be angry at the water."

"That is why I brought the knife," Huajiao said.

That was the moment the temptation arrived, and it arrived the way it always arrives in this book, small and reasonable and on a table. She had the knife in her waistband and San-ge in front of her and no one in the tea house who would stop her, and the arithmetic was clean: if she killed him, the road lost its local head and the door got a week and the mother and the boy got a week, and the police on the far bank would do nothing because the police on the far bank did nothing. And in her mother's rules — the old rules, the ones written in the notebook before she rewrote them — the arithmetic of a knife on a table was the whole of the law: *never work in daylight; never twice in the same district; always know the second exit; and if the man is the thing between you and the mission, the man is not a person.*

She looked at him for a long time. And then she did the thing that I have come to believe was the whole of the book, and she did it the way she did everything, flatly, as a fact.

"I am not going to kill you," she said. "I want you to know that it is not fear and it is not mercy. It is that my mother wrote me a rule when I was six and the rule was *the mission is the only thing*, and I have spent two years rewriting the rules, and the third rule is *when the mission is over, I stay.* If I kill you, the mission is never over. I would have to stay on this bank for the rest of my life, killing the next San-ge and the next, and the boy would grow up in a room above a market watching his sister do arithmetic with a knife, and he would become the thing your road makes, and I would have kept the old rule and lost the boy. So I am not going to kill you. I am going to *do business* with you, because that is what this bank understands, and because I have a network and a company and three aunties and a city, and you have a scooter and a watch and a price, and I am going to find out which of us can last longer."

She took the knife out of her waistband and put it on the table between them, blade closed, the way you put down a cup.

"What do you want," she said.

San-ge looked at the knife and then at the girl, and for the first time since she sat down, he was not entirely sure of the room. He was a man who had spent fifteen years on a road where the only currency was fear and the only fear that mattered was the fear of a person who would not do arithmetic. And here was a girl of eighteen who had done the arithmetic and put the knife on the table and asked him what he wanted, and the asking was the most frightening thing that had happened to him in a year.

He told her what he wanted, and what he wanted was the price he told every saint, which was the price of a person, and the price was everything I had.

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I will not give the whole negotiation, because it took four days and because the negotiation is not the point. The point is the thing that came out of it, which is the only real intelligence the whole bank produced, and it came out of San-ge's own mouth when he thought he was winning.

There was going to be a raid. The two governments had finally moved, and the operation was set, and San-ge knew about it because the road always knows about a raid before the raid knows about itself. He knew the location. He knew the shift. He knew the bus at the back gate. And he told Huajiao the thing he was paid to know, which was that when the third park went down, the road would move the book to the second park and the second park's book would go to the hill, and the girls would scatter like water, and the operation would get eleven girls and a fence and a boy on a gate, and the road would keep the thing that mattered, which was the *list*. And then he told her the other thing, the thing she did not ask for and that he volunteered because he was a man who could not resist showing his hand, which was that the saint's own people had already sold the operation. There was a man on the Assembly's border team — a keeper who had come down on the son's money and had been in the town for a month — who had been to San-ge twice, and who had given him the waystation, and the location of the girl A-He's cot, and the times of the radio check, and who had done it not for money and not out of malice, but because the keeper had decided, in the way of a certainty, that the saint was working for the road, that the money was the road's, that the whole thing was a market, and that a man

who is inside a market should be *useful* to the market. San-ge did not know the keeper's name. He knew only that the keeper wore the Assembly's armband and said the first principle, and that the keeper had told him the check times so that the road could take the saint at the waystation on the night of the raid.

Huajiao came back from the tea house with the knife still closed in her hand and the whole of the betrayal in her head, and she put the knife on the table in the courtyard and looked at me and said the sentence that opened the last three chapters of the second part.

"The operation moves in two days," she said. "The road knows. The Assembly sold us. And the room above the market with the boy and the dying woman is the first place they are going to go when the park goes down."

CHAPTER 16

The Rescue

I want to put down the night before the raid, because the night before a raid is the only night in the whole of the border that is quiet, and the quiet is a lie the operation tells the operators so that they can sleep. We slept in the waystation courtyard, on the concrete, under a sky the color of a dirty lamp, and nobody slept. A-Zhen checked her bag four times. The nun sat up with the woman who would not give a name. The gate boy's message had come at eleven and the message was *tomorrow laundry yes* and the yes was the whole of the plan and the whole of the plan was a boy of nineteen with a debt who had decided, for forty thousand yuan, to open a gate. Huajiao sat against the wall with the notebook and did not open it and did not sleep, and I lay on the concrete and listened to the river and did the arithmetic of the whole of it, which is the arithmetic of a rescue, and the arithmetic of a rescue is that you do not get to choose the shape of it; you get to choose whether to be in the courtyard, and the rest is water. And somewhere around two in the morning a dog started up on the far side of the town and every person in the courtyard woke at the same time and nobody moved and nobody spoke and we all waited for the dog to stop, and when it stopped the nun said, in the dark, in the flat voice of a woman who had been doing this for eleven years, the sentence that is the whole of the border: "The dog is nothing. The dog is always nothing. It is the quiet after the dog that tells you."

The operation went in at the laundry shift on the fourth day, and I am going to tell it the way I saw it, which is from the bund, four hundred meters from a fence, with a pair of A-Zhen's binoculars, in the dark, because that is the truth and because the truth of a rescue is that most of it happens to other people and you watch.

It was not one government. That is the first thing the city got wrong and the first thing every documentary gets wrong. It was three: the province on this side, the province on the far side, and the coordination office in a third place that nobody had ever heard of, and the whole thing had been arranged by a woman

who had resigned from a job in a city nine hundred kilometers north and had spent two years building a drawer into a map. Jiang Xue was not on the ground. She was in a room in Yuzhong with a phone and a chair, and she had not slept in three days, and she did the thing that a person does when the law has failed them and they have decided to be the law: she worked the phones, and she worked them the way a woman works a shift, and by the morning of the raid she had moved a bus, a backup bus, two vans, a doctor, three social workers, and a retired captain with orchids onto a border that no one official would admit had a rescue on it.

The plan was this. The third park ran its shift change at 05:30. At 05:20, the coordination would cut the park's internet and its phone relay — not the lights, the *phones*, because the park's whole business was phones and a park without phones is a body without a mouth. At 05:25, a team of far-side police who had been paid by the province on this side would come through the front gate and hold the gatehouse. At 05:30, when the shift change opened the laundry door, the girls would come out through the laundry and the back gate, which was the gate the park had built for its own bus, and the bus would be on the road, and the bus would be a police bus on this side of the line. And the book — this was the whole of it, the book was the reason the operation existed — the book would be in the manager's office on the second floor, and there was a person going up the stairs for the book.

The person who went up the stairs for the book was not a police officer. That is the part I am most careful about, because the city put her in the papers as a hero, and the papers got her age wrong and her job wrong and the color of her jacket wrong. The person who went up the stairs was a girl of nineteen named 小芹 — the girl who had escaped the funnel herself two years before and joined the Assembly and burned the world down — and she went up because she knew the stairs, because she had been kept on the second floor of a park exactly like that one, and because she was the only person on the whole border who could walk into a park at dawn without being afraid in a way that showed. She wore a laundry worker's apron. She carried a rice sack. And she went up the stairs and into the office and took the manager's book off the desk while the manager was shouting into a dead phone, and she put it in the rice sack, and she walked back

down the stairs through the shift change and out the back gate, and the book was the list of every girl the third park had ever held, and the list is the only thing the road values more than the money because the list is the *proof*, and a girl of nineteen took it in a rice sack, and the papers gave her four lines.

I saw the girls come out. There were eleven of them, and they walked, they did not run, because a person who has been in a park does not run on the way out; a person who has been in a park walks, because running is what gets you shot, and the walking was the thing I will never forget, eleven young women walking across a yard to a bus at five-thirty in the morning like women going to a shift, in ones and twos, in silence, with the lights on them and the fence behind them like the mouth of a thing they were stepping out of. And they got on the bus, and the bus went, and the far-side police held the gatehouse, and the operation had the girls, and the buses are never the story.

The story is the book, and the boy at the gate, and the back gate bus, and the brother.

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The park had a protocol, exactly as San-ge had said, and the protocol was a bus at the back gate and a river and a book. The operation had planned for the bus. The operation had a second bus and two vans on the far side of the line, and when the park's back-gate bus came up the dirt road toward the crossing, the vans blocked the road at the ford and the second bus took what was on the park's bus, and what was on the park's bus was nine more people, and among the nine was a man of twenty-seven with a scar on his neck and a woman of twenty-four from Yunnan and a child of two, and the man of twenty-seven was 江海, and he was Jiang Xue's brother, and he had been in the park for five years and he was on the manager's book as a supervisor.

I did not see the second bus come in. I saw it after, at the waystation, at eight in the morning, when the survivors of the second bus were processed through the nun's courtyard and given numbers and rice and a cot, and I saw the man of twenty-seven sitting on the edge of a cot with the child on his knee and the woman beside him, and he did not look like the photograph on Jiang Xue's desk. That is the whole of what I have to say about him and it is the whole of what

Jiang Xue had to survive. He was not the boy on the bridge in the school uniform. He was a man of twenty-seven with a supervisor's soft hands and a supervisor's careful way of watching a room, and he had a wife and a child and a debt and a record, and he looked at the nun who gave him the rice and he said, in the flat voice of a man who has been inside for five years, "Will there be a lawyer, or will there be a trial." And the nun, who had been doing this for eleven years and had been asked every question there is, said the only true thing, which was, "I do not know. Eat."

That was the reunion the captain with the orchids had been waiting nine years for. Her brother was alive. Her brother was on the list. And the list is the proof, and the proof is what the province needs, and a man on the list is not a victim, in the way the forms use the word; a man on the list is a *count*, and the count cuts both ways, and Jiang Xue would spend the next month in a room in Yuzhong with a lawyer she could not afford deciding whether to fight for her brother as a victim or defend him as a defendant, and she would do both at once, because that is what a person does when the only family they have left is on both sides of the ledger. He is serving four years now, in a province I will not name, and his daughter is with his wife's mother, and Jiang Xue visits him once a month, and she has told me, once, in a stairwell, that the visits are the closest thing to a home she has ever had, and that this is not a joke and not a tragedy, it is just the *shape* of the thing the law makes of a family it was too slow to save.

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The girl 小蝶 came out on the first bus. She was fourteen, and she had been in the third park since she was twelve, and she had taught A-He the trick with the shampoo and the man who was the only one, and when she walked off the bus at the waystation she was the smallest person in the yard and she had the calm of a girl who had been the best on the phones, and she found A-He in the courtyard and put her arms around her and did not let go for a long time, and A-He cried, the first time she had cried since the ford, and the nun let them stand there and did not separate them for the processing.

And I stood at the gate of the waystation with the rice sack in my hands — 小芹 had given me the book; she had walked off the bus with a rice sack and put it

in my hands and said, *you are the only one they cannot search*, which was the most useful thing anyone did for the operation and also the first time in my whole life that being the saint was worth a damn — and I watched the girls come back from the road, and I did not feel what I had spent three years expecting to feel. I did not feel redeemed. I felt the specific dullness of a man who has done a good thing with the machine's money and who knows that the machine will send the next bill on Monday.

The bill came on Monday. It came the way the road always comes, which is at night and without a siren, and it did not come for me. It came for the room above the market, and the woman with no name, and the boy of nine with the arithmetic book, and the sister who had chosen to stay.

CHAPTER 17

The Betrayal

The road came for the room above the market at eleven o'clock on the night after the raid, and it came the way San-ge had promised, which is to say it did not come for the saint and it did not come for the girls. It came for the thing the saint had made valuable.

I was at the waystation when it happened, because the operation had left thirty-one people in the nun's courtyard — the eleven from the first bus, the nine from the second, and the processing of the rest — and because the station was the only place on the bank that had a locked box and a wall of forms and a woman who would not run. And Huajiao was at the river, at the room above the market, because she had gone back two hours before to sleep beside her mother's cot, and because the plan had been for the boy to be moved to the station in the morning and the mother to follow when the doctor came. That was the plan. The plan had four hours left in it.

What the road did was simple and it was not stupid. It sent one group to the waystation — four men, two on scooters and two on foot, with a can of petrol and a lock for the courtyard gate, because a station is a *list* and the list is the thing the road values — and it sent a second group, three men, to the rented room above the market, because the road had learned, in the course of the four days since I had crossed, that the woman with no name was worth a saint, and because the road had never once in fifteen years learned to leave a valuable thing on the table.

The four men at the waystation did not get in. That is the only clean fact of the night and I am putting it first because everything after it is gray. The nun had a courtyard gate that opened outward and a bar that dropped, and she had, in eleven years, been raided six times, and the sixth time she had learned to keep two of the older girls on the roof with a rope and a whistle, and the whistle went up before the petrol did, and A-Zhen, who slept in the station's back room with a machete she did not use, came out of the back door with the machete and the

authority of a woman who had walked the road for twenty years, and the four men did the arithmetic of a man with a can of petrol against a woman with a blade and a roof full of witnesses, and they left the can and ran. The station did not burn. That is the one thing that went right and I am going to state it plainly: the station did not burn, and nobody in the station died, and the nun stood in her own courtyard at midnight holding a can of petrol in one hand and a whistle in the other, and she looked at me and said, "This is a good night. Do you understand? This is how a good night looks here."

The three men at the room above the market did not run. They got in through the door — the door was wood and the lock was old and the market's ground floor was empty — and they went up the stairs, and Huajiao was on the landing with the boy behind her and her mother on the cot behind the boy, and she had the knife, and this time there was no tea house and no table and no arithmetic and no San-ge's good watch. There were three men on a narrow stair.

I do not know the whole of what happened on that stair. I have refused, for years, to make her tell me, and what I have is what the police on the far bank wrote down, and what they wrote down is this: two of the men came down the stairs and left the building, and one of them had a wound on his arm and the other was carrying the other man's jacket, and they told the police, at the station, because the police on the far bank were useless but not absent, that *the girl with the knife did not cut anyone, she stood on the landing and she did not cut anyone, and the woman on the cot got up and stood in front of the boy and said a name, and the name was the name of the man who had kept her alive in the holding year, and she said it out loud, and the men stopped.* That is what the record says. That is the whole of the record. The name was the name of a man on the road, and the woman with no name had kept it in her pocket for nine years, and she spent it on the stair, and the men went away.

I have thought about that name for a long time. I have decided that it was not a rescue and not a mercy and not even a bargain. It was a woman who had spent nine years being no one, spending the last thing she had to keep her son, and I have decided that the whole of the border is in that sentence and that I will never

fully understand it, because I have never been a mother and I have never been no one and I have never had to buy a night with a name.

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I learned later, from the nun, what the four men did before they came to the station, and I am putting it down because it is the whole of what the road does with a night and because the road is never only at the station. Before the petrol, the four men had gone to the house of the runner A-Zhen, and they had not found her, because A-Zhen slept in the station. And before that they had gone to the room of a man who worked for the road and had been feeding the network's information to the Assembly, and they had taken him out to a field and they had left him there, and the man was fifty and had two children and a chicken stall, and he was alive and he was not going to be all right, and the nun treated him at the station and sent him north and he did not go home. That is the road. That is the whole of the road. It is not the men on the scooters and it is not the villa and it is not the park. It is the *piecework* of it, a man in a field and a chicken stall and two children, and the worst thing about the whole of it is that the man in the field was the only informant on the far bank who had volunteered, not for the money and not for the saint, but because his own daughter had gone south five years before and had never come back, and he had been feeding the network in the hope of finding her, and the network had used him and then broken him and he never found her, and the nun has the form and the form is blank because the man would not put a name on it.

The betrayer was not San-ge and it was not the road. That is the thing I want the reader to hold, because the reader is going to want the road to be the villain, and the road is not a villain; the road is water. The betrayer was a man of the Assembly, an older keeper named 老赵, who had come down from the city in the first week on the son's money and who had run the Assembly's logistics on the border, and who had sold the check times and the waystation and the location of A-He's cot to San-ge, not for money and not out of malice, but because 老赵 had decided — decided, in the way of the book's second principle, with the certainty of the faithful — that the saint was working for the road. That is the whole of his confession. I got it out of him on the third morning, in the

nun's courtyard, in front of the survivors and the girls and Giaozhen and Huajiao, and he did not deny it and he did not weep, and what he said is the most frightening sentence in the whole of it.

"I sold the times because I believed," he said. "The saint took the son's money. The saint took the crown. The son's money comes from the road; everybody knows it; the son's father *built* the road. And I said to myself, if the saint is working for the road, then I am not betraying the saint, I am *serving* him, I am being useful to the thing he actually is. And I was wrong. I know I was wrong *now*. But I want you to hear the thing I am saying, brother, because it is the last thing I have to teach you: I did the worst thing I have ever done in my life, and I did it because I loved the movement, and because the movement has no room in it for *not knowing*. The moment a man joins a faith, he stops being able to be uncertain, and the moment he stops being able to be uncertain, he will do anything, *anything*, to make the world match the thing he believes. That is the whole of the road. The road is not the men on the scooters. The road is every man who has ever been certain."

老赵 turned himself in to the far-side police and was deported north and prosecuted in a city court for trafficking-adjacent offenses, and he served two years, and he wrote me three letters from prison, and I have kept them, and I have never answered one. I do not know whether that is a cruelty. I know it is the only way I have been able to carry the sentence.

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We left the bank on the fourth day, and we left with the book and the girls and the survivors and the nun's blessing and a set of photographs and the whole of the list, and we left without the mother and without the boy, because He Xia would not go.

That was the thing and it is the whole of the end of the second part. On the morning of the departure, Huajiao went up the road to the room above the market to bring her mother to the ford, and she came back alone, and she stood in the courtyard with the notebook in her hand and did not open it, and she told me what her mother had said, and she said it in the voice she used for facts, and her eyes were dry.

"She will not come," Huajiao said. "The boy cannot cross. The boy has no papers and the boy has a father on the road and a name on a book, and if he crosses he is a lever, and she has spent nine years making him safe, and she is not going to spend all nine years on a bus to satisfy a girl who crossed a river. And she will not leave him. And I cannot take him north without her, because a girl of eighteen with a boy of nine on a bus is a girl of eighteen with a boy of nine on a bus, and the whole of the road would read it the way the road reads everything." She put the notebook in her bag. "So this is the answer. The answer is that my mother is alive and has a son and is dying and will not come home, and I am going home, and when she dies I will come back for the boy, and this time it will be my rules and not her plan. That is the whole of it. I am going to go home and eat the aunties' noodles and pass the exam and keep the job and wait for the phone."

I asked her the only question I had.

"Is that Rule Three?"

"No," she said. "Rule Three is *when the mission is over, I stay.* This is Rule Four, and I wrote it on the boat. Rule Four is: **a person can be loved from a distance.**" She shouldered her bag. "Now let us go north before I change my mind, because I have been changing my mind for four days and I am tired and I want the noodles."

We went north. The book went north in my rice sack, and the girls went north in the buses, and A-He went north to her brother, and A-Zhen stayed, and the nun stayed, and Huajiao walked onto the bus and slept for the whole of the nine hours with her head against the window and her hand on the notebook, the way she had slept on the bus out of the guesthouse town a year and a half before, and I sat beside her and did not move for the whole of the ride, the way I had not moved in a hotpot place in the winter, and neither of us mentioned the fact that the last time we had gone north from a border town, I had been a man with a count of one.

CHAPTER 18

The Crown

We came back to the city in the seventh month, in the heat, and the heat was a different heat than the border, and the aunties had put out the good bowls, and Liu Niangniang did not remember the road and did not remember the girl and did not remember the name, and she looked at Huajiao for a long time and then said, "You came back," and Huajiao said, "I came back," and that was the whole of the greeting and it was enough.

The book went to Jiang Xue. That is what happened to it, and it is the only thing in the whole of it that ended the way it should. The list of every girl the third park had ever held went into the drawer in Yuzhong, and the drawer became a case, and the case became the largest trafficking prosecution the province had ever attempted, and it is still going on as I write this, and it will go on after I finish, and it will convict some and lose some and the road will move upstream, and the list will outlive me, and that is what a door is. I have stopped expecting a door to open. I have learned to be satisfied that it exists.

And the crown happened four days after we got back, and it happened the way these things happen, which is without any single moment you can point to, in a rented hall in Banan on a Sunday, with two thousand people and a banner and the guru on one side of me and the son on the other.

I want to give the day exactly, because it is the hinge of the whole of it, and because a person who is about to take a crown should be able to say what was in the room.

The hall was the converted furniture warehouse, the one with the concrete floor and the four hundred plastic stools and the six-foot face on the wall, and by the time we arrived, on the son's buses, on a Sunday morning, the hall had been enlarged with a tent and the tent had been enlarged with a screen in the yard, and there were, by the guru's careful count, two thousand one hundred people in the seats and eleven thousand on the screens and a television crew from a platform the son did not own but had once nearly bought. The people were the people the

Assembly always gathered: the poor, the sick, the old, the lonely, the recently bereaved, a woman with a child on her hip, an old man in a pressed shirt who had walked three hours, a young couple holding hands with the specific seriousness of people who had come to be blessed. And above the wall was the face, and the face was mine, and the banner said, in the Assembly's careful characters, **回家** — *come home.*

The guru spoke first. He was good; he was always good; he spoke about the girl A-Yue without naming her, about the hand that does not always work, about the first principle and the second, and he did the thing he had promised me in the warehouse, which was to make the crowd ready to hear a *brake*. And then the son spoke, briefly, and spoke about the clinics and the children and the forms, and did not mention his father and did not mention the tower, and was, for the three minutes he spoke, the most convincing philanthropist in the whole of the country.

And then it was my turn.

I had a speech. The guru had written it and the son's people had polished it and it was four hundred characters and it said the honest things: that I did not know; that the hand does not always work; that the movement was a movement and not a god; that they should keep their medicine. I had read it twice on the bus. I have it still, in the drawer, in the room with the wall, and it is a good speech, and it is the speech I should have given, and I did not give it.

I do not know, even now, exactly why. I have four answers and I do not know which is true. The first is that I looked at the two thousand and I saw A-Yue's mother in the third row, and I could not stand in front of her and say *the hand does not always work* when her daughter was dead, because the saying would have been a cruelty dressed as a brake. The second is that I saw the man in the pressed shirt who had walked three hours, and I understood that he had not walked three hours to hear a *brake*; he had walked three hours to hear a *yes*. The third is that I was exhausted, in the way a person is exhausted after the border, and a tired man will take the nearest door. And the fourth answer is the one I do not like, which is the true one: I wanted it. Not the worship. The *efficacy*. I wanted to be the person who could fix it. I had spent three years refusing the crown and I had watched the crown be worn by a guru and a son and a thousand merchandise

stalls and a girl of six who died in a rented room, and on the day I was finally offered the thing that could steer all of it, I did the arithmetic and I decided that the man who refuses to steer the machine is not a saint, he is a *passenger*, and I had been a passenger for three years and people had died in the back of the bus.

So I did not read the speech. I stood up, and I put my hand on the guru's shoulder, and I said the thing the whole of it turns on, and I said it in the dialect of the river steps, plainly, so that the old people in the front row would understand it.

"我先不回家。" — *I am not coming home yet.* — and then — "But I will stand with you. I will not wear the robe. I will not take the seat. But I will be here, and I will tell you the truth, and the truth is that I do not know, and that the ones who say they know are the ones to watch." And then, because a crowd of two thousand does not want a brake, and because a tired man gives a crowd what it wants, I said the last sentence, and the sentence was the crown: "But I will not leave you either. From today I am yours."

The noise was enormous. I have watched the video, once, and I do not intend to watch it again. The banner said *come home* and the crowd stood up and the guru wept and the son, two feet away, put his hands together and bowed his head and did not smile, because he did not have to smile; and somewhere in the third row a woman who had brought her child to a hall to be healed put her hands together the way you put your hands together at the door of a temple, and I understood, in the noise, that I had just become the thing the abbot had warned me about in a courtyard before either of us was dead. I had become a *center*. And a center is the thing the whole of it has been about, and a center is a demon, because a center draws, and a center that draws takes everything in the room and makes it about the center, and the center is a man, and a man cannot hold two thousand and eleven thousand and a city of thirty million and the dead girl and the mother on the cot and the boy of nine behind the stair. A man can hold a bowl. The crown was not a bowl. The crown was a mouth.

I want to give the days between the return and the crowning, because those four days are the only four days in the whole of it in which I was *free*, and I did not know it, and that is the whole of the tragedy. On the first day I slept for about sixteen hours. On the second day I went to the temple and swept the east

courtyard and Chen Popo watched me from her chair, and I did not tell her about the border and she did not ask, because she was eighty-seven and had decided that the world was too loud and that a man with a broom is a man with a broom. On the third day I went to the tea room and the aunties fed me and Liu Niangniang, who by then had lost nearly all the years, looked at me for a long time and said, "You have the border on you," and I asked her how she knew, and she said, "Because you are eating standing up," and that was the whole of the diagnosis of those years, and I have never been able to improve on it. And on the fourth day the son's car came, and I put on the jacket, and I went to the hall, and the four free days were over and I did not know that I had spent them and I would spend the whole of the crown trying to buy them back.

I went back to the tunnel that night and I sat on the bed in the room with the wall. And the pouch was not on the shelf. I had taken it off the shelf before I left for the south, and I had put it in the drawer, because Huajiao had asked me not to drink before the road, and because I had wanted to be a man who could put a thing in a drawer. And now I was back, and I was crowned, and I opened the drawer, and I looked at the pouch, and I did not drink it, and I did not take it out. I looked at it for a long time, and then I closed the drawer, and I lay down, and the crown was on my head and the demon was in the drawer and the whole of the second part ended, and the third part began, and the third part is called 魔.

PART THREE · 魔 · DEMON

INTERLUDE 21

The Intervention

Assembled from a hospital admission record, a withdrawal chart, a physician's note, and the first forty-eight hours of the city's response. Reproduced as found.

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I. ADMISSION RECORD (EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT, DISTRICT HOSPITAL)

Name: 李修缘 (Li Xiuyuan) **Age:** 30 **Sex:** Male **Brought in by:** Police, district patrol, found unconscious in a stairwell on the lower road, no identification except a delivery-platform card and a rosary of the type sold at the temple **Presenting:** Unresponsive to voice; responsive to pain; alcohol on breath; scalp laceration, 4 cm, old and new **Blood alcohol on arrival:** 0.31 **History (as given, unreliable):** "Drinks daily." "Does not remember the last week." "Says he is somebody." "Says he is nobody." **Risk assessment:** Seizure risk high. Withdrawal likely. Do not leave unattended. **Admitted to:** Medical ward, bed 7. Restraints considered; not used. Sitter assigned.

II. WITHDRAWAL CHART (NURSING, FIRST 72 HOURS)

Hour 0–12: Tremor, marked. Sweating. Nausea. Pulse 118. Oriented to person only. Repeatedly asks for a bowl of congee. Repeatedly asks whether anyone has called. **Hour 12–24:** Insomnia. Visual disturbance reported ("the wall"). Pulse 126. Refuses the sedative. Says, "I have done this before." Says, "I know what this is." **Hour 24–48:** Peak. Disoriented to place and time. Calls for persons not present: 寂山 (deceased), 道哥 (deceased), 陈婆婆, a woman he calls *Ma*. Attempts to leave the bed twice. Sitter notes: "Patient speaks in dialect to a man in the corner of the room. There is no man in the corner of the room. Patient is calm when he does this." Pulse 138. Seizure precautions continued.

Hour 48–72: Improving. Pulse 104. Eats rice. Weeps without apparent cause. Asks for the count. Is told the count is one. Says, "Then I have a Tuesday." Sitter note: "Patient no longer sees the man in the corner. Patient says: 'He left. He did not say anything. He never says anything.'"

III. PHYSICIAN'S NOTE (ATTENDING, DAY FOUR)

> *Patient is a thirty-year-old male with severe alcohol use disorder, presenting after a prolonged binge with withdrawal and a scalp laceration. He is medically stable. He is not currently a danger to himself or others in the ward. He has declined inpatient rehabilitation and has been offered, and has accepted, a referral to a community program and a follow-up in fourteen days.*
>
> *I am writing this note because the patient is a public figure and I do not want the record to be reduced to the two words the platforms will use. The platforms will say relapse. The correct word is episode. He has been admitted twice before, both times under other names. He has a pattern, which means he has a future, and the future is a narrow one and it is made of Tuesdays. He told me, on the fourth day, that he had been sober for a certain number of days and had lost them, and that the losing was not the point, and that the point was that the number had been real. I believe him. I have been doing this for twenty years and I believe him, and belief is not treatment, and treatment is a Tuesday, and I have referred him to a woman who runs a table in a tea room in the old town and who has, by my count, kept eleven people alive.*
>
> *One further note, for the file. The patient asked me whether the man he saw in the corner of the room, during the worst of it, had been real. I told him the truth, which is that the withdrawal produces such experiences in a large minority of patients and that the experiences are as real as any other experience of the brain and as unreal as any other. He was quiet for a while, and then he said, "That is the most*

> *honest answer I have ever been given," and asked me to write it down. So I have written it down.*

IV. THE CITY'S FIRST FORTY-EIGHT HOURS (FEEDS, SELECTED)

> `@ShanchengPositiveEnergy` · *2.4M views · 14 seconds* 活佛也是人。*Even a living Buddha is a man. [A photograph, grainy, of a stretcher at a hospital door. The face is not visible. The caption is not sarcastic and the effect is worse than sarcasm.]* ↳ `@A Netizen` *fake* ↳ `@A Netizen` *the phone in his pocket is not fake* ↳ `@A Netizen` *leave him alone*

> `@FogCapitalMemes` · *900k views · image [A photograph of the six-foot face on the Assembly's wall, with a pouch of gaoliang taped over the mouth.]* ↳ `@A Netizen` *3 yuan* ↳ `@A Netizen` *cheaper than a blessing* ↳ `@A Netizen` *the drunk saint, drunk. who could have predicted.*

> `@AuntieZhangDaily` · *40k views · 40 seconds I have known this man for four years. He carried my groceries up the stairs when he was nobody and he did not film it. I am not going to say anything else. The rest of you can say whatever you like.*

> `@JusticeWatchCN` · *thread Post 3: The Assembly has issued a statement: "The living Buddha is resting. The healings continue." Post 4: The merit box remains open. Post 7: The movement is a business. The man is a symptom. The fall is inventory.* ↳ `@A Netizen` *the merit box remains open is the whole city*

> `@Anonymous` · *11 views i was in the ward the same week. bed 9. he kept saying the count is one and asking the nurse if that was a kind*

> *of monday. i don't know what it meant. i thought he was a drunk. then i saw the fan in his jacket and i knew who he was and i didn't tell anyone. he gave me his orange. i'm not making it up. he gave me the orange his mother sent and said the sugar would help my hands. i don't know why i'm writing this. i guess so it's somewhere.*

— end of file. the man in bed 9 discharged himself on the fifth day. the sitter's notes were lost in a flood. the physician's referral was kept, and the woman who runs the table in the tea room kept a second copy, and on the back of the copy, in pencil, in a hand that is not the physician's, someone has written the date the patient first returned to the table, and beside the date, one character: 茶 *— tea.*

CHAPTER 19

The Living Buddha

I was crowned in the seventh month and I was drunk in the tenth, and the whole of the time between is the part of my life I have found hardest to tell, because it is the only part in which I was happy.

I am not going to lie about that. For about eleven weeks I was the most useful person in the city, and the usefulness was real, and I have never been able to make the usefulness and the demon come out even.

Here is what the crown bought, in flesh. The Assembly's clinics went from two to nine, because the son's money and the name together opened doors that neither opened alone. The food line at the temple went from two thousand bowls to five thousand, because the movement's people put up tents and the restaurants donated the bones. The legal-aid clinic that the son had promised took, in those eleven weeks, three hundred and forty campus-loan cases, because a woman who had been ruined by a shell read that the living Buddha had stood with the son, and because a person will trust a name with her debt in a way she will never trust a form. Forty-one children came out of the parks on the list. Fourteen people came home from the road. A woman in Banan whose child had a hole in the heart got the operation at the children's hospital, paid for by the merit box, because the merit box had three hundred thousand yuan in it in the seventh month and the guru and I decided, together, in the back room, over the ledgers, that a heart was a better use of the money than a banner. The child lived. I have her photograph. It is the only photograph from the whole of the crown that is on my shelf, and it is there because a person is not a ledger, and because I need to remember that the arithmetic was not all demons.

And here is what the crown cost, in flesh, and I am putting it in the same paragraph because the whole of it is the two things in the same paragraph. The moment I stood up in the tent and said *from today I am yours*, the Assembly became *mine* in a way that no rule in the book had ever made it, and every word I said in public was, from the seventh month, a *policy*. If I said, in passing, at a

clinic, that the Assembly should be feeding people rather than curing them, the next week there were two fewer healers and a hundred more bowls, and the healers wept, because they had spent two years being the ones with the warm hands and the saint had taken their hands away. If I said, at a tent, that the sick should keep their medicine, the crowd agreed, and then went home and did not keep it, because a crowd agrees with a saint and then does what the crowd does. If I said nothing — and I said nothing most of the time, because I had learned in the trial that the safest thing a man can say is nothing — the silence was read as assent, and the movement did what a movement does, which is to fill the silence with itself.

The guru understood this better than I did. That was the thing that undid him. He had spent seven years being the movement's certainty, and he had asked me to come and be the brake, and for the first month he stood behind me in every hall and deferred to me and was, for the first time in his life, *unsure in public*, and it nearly broke him. He would come to the back room after a healing and sit with his hands around a cup and say, "I do not know what I am for anymore," and I would say the thing the abbot used to say to me, which is not a comfort but a compression: *you are for the next person who walks in.* And he would nod, and go and heal the next person, and come back more tired, and the tiredness was the only honest thing in the movement.

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The first abuse in my name that I could not stop happened in the eighth month, and it happened to a man I never met, and his name was 阿全, and he was thirty-four, and he had been schizophrenic since he was nineteen, and his mother had kept him in a rented room in Jiulongpo for fifteen years and had fed him and bathed him and locked the door when she went to work, and in the eighth month his mother heard the Assembly's healers on the radio and brought her son to the temple's tent.

I was not there. That is not an excuse; it is a fact and the fact is the whole of the movement's problem. The exorcism — the Assembly's people did not call it an exorcism, they called it *cleansing the heart*, which is the phrase in the book's third chapter — was performed by four healers in the tent on a Thursday

afternoon, and it involved fasting and chanting and the placing of hands and, according to the police, the pouring of water and the restraint of the man for some hours, and the man went into a state, because a man in the grip of untreated schizophrenia, fasted and restrained and chanted over and surrounded by the hands of two hundred strangers who love him, will go into a state, and he stopped breathing at some point in the night, and he was dead by morning, and the Assembly's people told the mother that the demon had left him and that his soul had been received, and the mother, who had spent fifteen years not knowing how to help her son, believed them, and it was the truth of her grief, and the whole of it is the most honest horror in the book.

I found out on the Sunday, from 周平, the keeper with the scar on his stomach, who came to the back room with the police report in his hand and the face of a man who had finally found the thing he could not believe. And I read it, and I did the only thing I could do and the thing that is not enough: I sat down and wrote a rule. It was the Assembly's rule eight, and it said: **the Assembly does not perform rituals upon persons with a diagnosed mental illness, and the Assembly does not endorse the withholding of medicine, and any healer who does not follow this rule will be removed.** And I stood in the tent on the following Sunday and I said it out loud, and the crowd was quiet, and the guru nodded, and the rule was printed in the book, and it is in the book to this day. And the rule did not bring 阿全 back, and the healers who performed the cleansing were not removed, because the healers who performed the cleansing were the Assembly's best healers and had healed two hundred people and had a following of their own, and the guru told me, gently, in the back room, the sentence that is the whole of the institution's failure mode.

"You cannot fire a hand," he said. "The hand is not an employee. The hand is the *faith*. And the faith will not be ruled by a man, not even by you, not even by me, because the whole reason the faith is here is that the people who come to it have been ruled by men their whole lives and are tired, and the tiredness is the market." He looked at the police report on my desk. "We have done the good thing and the bad thing with the same hand, and the bad thing is the *price* of the good thing, and I have known it since the first winter, and I asked you to come because I thought you could hold the price, and now I am telling you the truth,

which is that no one can hold the price, and that the price is a person, and that there will be another 阿全."

There was another 阿全. There was another in the ninth month, a woman of forty-seven with diabetes who stopped her insulin, and there was another in the tenth, a man of sixty who had a stroke during a healing and whose family did not call the hospital because the tent said the hand would finish what the hand had started. That was the whole of the crown's arithmetic, and the arithmetic was that for every eleven people who lived, one person died, and I stood in the tent and I said the brake and the brake did not work, and I began, in the ninth month, to do the thing I had not done in two years, which was to drink.

Not publicly. Never publicly. The crowd never saw a glass in my hand. That is the whole horror of the crown: the crowd never saw anything. I drank in the office behind the hall, in the evenings, on the nights when the healers were done and the ledgers were closed and the guru had gone home to his rented room, and I drank alone, standing up, from a bottle the keepers brought me, because the keepers would bring the saint anything and the saint had begun, in the second month, to be a man who asked for things.

I am going to put the count here and then move on to the chapter that is the whole point. In the seventh month, at the crowning, my count was a number I had spent two years building. In the eleventh month, in the ward, the count was one. That is the arithmetic of the crown. The crown took the good and the bad and the god and the man and distilled them into a bottle, and the bottle was on a shelf in an office behind a hall, and the man who had spent three years teaching the city that the bottle is a disease was, by the eleventh month, a man who drank standing up in an office in the dark, and the whole of the demon's path is in the fact that while he was doing it he was still, most days, *helping people*, and the helping was real, and the helping was the hand that held the bottle.

I want to give the ordinary day of the crown, because the crown was not a temple and not a stage and was, for the eleven weeks, mostly a *schedule*. I got up at five and I walked the Trail with the gourd and sometimes the guru walked with me, because the guru liked the Trail and did not like to say so. At seven there was the morning hall in Banan and the queue of the sick, and I stood at the door and did not heal and did not bless and mostly said the four sentences to people who

did not want to hear them. At ten there was a clinic. At noon there was a meal at a table with the keepers and the healers and whoever the guru had decided needed feeding. At two there was the office and the ledgers and the calls from the son's people and the calls from the district office and the calls, in the second month, from a foundation in the south that wanted to license the name. At five there was the evening hall, and the evening hall was the big one, and the evening hall was where the crowd was, and standing in front of the crowd, by the eighth week, had stopped feeling like standing in front of a crowd and had started feeling like standing in front of a *mirror*, which is the whole of the crown and which I did not understand until the ward.

And the healings were real. That is the thing I am going to keep repeating until the reader believes it or puts the book down, because the whole of it rises or falls on whether the reader understands that the crown was not a fraud. The healings were real the way a healing is real: the woman whose pain stopped, the man who walked, the child who ate. Some of it was placebo and some of it was attention and some of it was a warm hand on a frightened back, and all of it was real to the person it happened to, and I stood at the door and watched four hundred people a week be *seen*, and being seen is the medicine this city has never once been able to afford, and I had spent three years learning that being seen is a market and I had been right, and in the eleventh week I understood the other half, which is that the market was not the *point*. The point was the four hundred people who had been seen, and the market was the *price* of the seeing, and the price was enormous, and the seeing was real, and a man who stands at the door of a hall of the sick does not get to have one without the other.

That is the whole of the chapter. The next one is about a girl of fifteen and a promise the movement made in my name, and it is the thing that finally broke the crown, and it is the thing I should have seen in the first month and did not, because I was looking at the good.

CHAPTER 20

走火入魔

The girl's name was 阿桃, and she was fifteen, and her family gave her to the Assembly in the ninth month, and the gift had my name on it.

That is the sentence. That is the whole of the chapter and everything else is explanation. A family of the poor, in a county two hours north of the city, had a daughter of fifteen and a debt and a son who needed an operation, and they had heard the Assembly's radio and had come to the hall and had asked the guru for help, and the guru, who could not give them the money for the operation (the merit box was spent, and the son's money was in the clinics) had told them the truth, which is that the Assembly was not a bank, and had then done the thing that every institution does when it cannot give a person what they ask for: he offered them a *meaning*. He told them that the Assembly was building a home for the devoted, a place where the faithful would live and serve and be fed and be schooled, and that a family who offered a child to that home would have a share in every healing the Assembly ever did. And he told them, because he believed it, and because it was the principle of the book, that the merit would pass to the brother.

The family gave the girl. That is what they did, and it is not because they were monsters. It is because they were poor, and because their son was sick, and because the man with the warm hand had told them a beautiful thing. That is the whole engine of every faith that ever took a child. Not cruelty. *Meaning*, sold to people who have been told their whole lives that their lives mean nothing.

The girl 阿桃 came to the hall in the ninth month. She was small and funny and quick, and within a month she had become, by the movement's own machinery, the **little living Buddha of the Assembly**, because a girl of fifteen who fasts and prays and goes into a trance in front of a crowd is a more powerful sign than a man in a brown robe, and because the crowd loved her, and because the book needed a face that was younger than the saint's. She led the morning chants. She laid hands on the sick, and the sick wept. She was fed and she was

housed and she was, by the account of the keepers, *happy*, and she was fifteen, and she was the thing the whole of it had been building toward without ever once naming it, which is a child turned into a sign.

I did not know about the gift at the time. That is the fact and I am not going to dress it. I was in the ninth month about fifty things at once — the clinics, the list, the girl A-Yue's mother, the two exorcism deaths, the bottle in the office — and I did not know that the Assembly had begun to keep children, because the children were kept at a separate hall in Banan and because nobody told the man in the crown the things that would make him say the brake. And so the first time I saw 阿桃 was in the tenth month, at the halls, at a healing in a market square, and she was on the platform beside the guru in a small white robe with her hair cut short, and she was in a trance, and the crowd was on its knees.

I want to describe the trance accurately, because the trance is the whole of 走火入魔 and because I have seen it in the book and on the phones and in my own memory ever since. She stood with her eyes rolled back and her hands open and her lips moving with words that were not any language, and she swayed, and the crowd swayed with her, and a woman at the front cried out and was healed or believed herself healed, and the whole of it lasted about four minutes and then the girl went down like a coat sliding off a chair, and two keepers caught her and carried her back, and the crowd applauded, and the guru went on with the healing. And the thing I could not stop looking at was the girl's *face* in the moment before she went down, which was not the face of a person in the presence of a god. It was the face of a child who is holding her breath too long at the bottom of a swimming pool.

I found the hall in Banan two days later. I did not tell the guru and I did not tell the son and I did not tell the aunties, because by the tenth month I had learned to do the things I was ashamed of in private, which is the deepest mark of the crown. The hall was a rented two-room place with six children in it — six, and they were between the ages of eleven and sixteen — and they were fed and schooled and prayed over and used, in the way of the movement, as signs. And the girl 阿桃 was the eldest of them and the leader, and when I came in she knew who I was and she stood up and put her hands together, and the other five did

the same, and I stood in the doorway of a room with six children in it and did the arithmetic I had refused to do for three months.

"Where are your parents?" I said.

"At home," she said, which meant the county.

"Do they come to see you?"

"Once a month." She said it without heat, the way she said everything, because a girl who has been a sign for a month does not say anything with heat. "The merit passes to my brother. He has the operation in the spring. It is on the board."

"On the board."

"The merit board. The keepers write it. Every healing I do, it goes to the board, and when the board reaches the number, my brother gets the operation." She looked at me with the flat eyes of a person doing arithmetic. "It is at four hundred and thirty. It will reach the number in the spring. It is not a lie, because it is written."

And there it was: the whole of the demon's path, in the mouth of a girl of fifteen, in a rented room, with a board on the wall and five children behind her and a brother who was going to live. Not a lie. A *ledger*. The movement had taken everything I had ever taught the city about cost and record and receipts and turned it into a machine for buying a child's life, and the machine was *fair*, in the way the forms were fair, and a girl of fifteen who had wanted her brother to live had volunteered to be the price, and the price was being written on a board.

"Pack your things," I said.

"I cannot."

"You can."

"I cannot," she said, and for the first time her voice did something, and the thing it did was the oldest thing in the whole of this city, "because if I leave, the board stops, and my brother dies, and it will be *my fault*, and everybody will know it was my fault, and I am the only person in my family who has ever been the reason for anything." She looked at me. "You are the saint. You know about the fault. Tell me how to leave when the leaving kills somebody."

I did not have an answer. I stood in a rented room with six children and I did not have an answer, because there is no answer, and because the girl was right, and because the whole of the movement was built on the exact shape of her rightness, and because the crown I had taken to *steer the machine* had turned out to be the machine's most valuable part.

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I have to give the other oblates, because the girl 阿桃 was the eldest of six and the whole of the crime is in the *six*. The five who were younger than her were aged eleven to fifteen and they had come to the hall in Banan the same way she had, which is that a family had a debt and a sick child and a beautiful thing had been offered, and the offer was the same in every case and the board was the same in every case and the merit went to a brother or a grandmother or a debt, and the six of them lived in two rooms with a mat and a pot and a statue and a rota of chants, and the thing that undid me in that rented room was not the chanting and not the fasting and not the trances. It was the *school*. The Assembly schooled the oblates, because the guru was a former teacher and because he believed, sincerely, that a child in the movement should be educated, and so the six of them did arithmetic and reading every morning in a rented room above a shop, and the reading was real and the arithmetic was real and the *taking* was real, and a state that had closed the school in their county and left the family with no way to teach them had made the movement the only school in their lives, and the whole of the horror of the oblates is that the city had already abandoned them before the Assembly took them, and the guru did not take them from a school; he took them from a *nobody's problem*.

What happened to 阿桃 was 走火入魔, and I am going to give it the book's plainest sentence, and then the chapter is done. The trances, and the fasting, and the sleepless chanting, and the crowd's two hundred hands, and the pressure of being a household's whole hope, and the fact that she was fifteen — they caught up with her in the eleventh month, at a healing in a temple square on the far side of the river, and she went into a trance that did not end. She went down at four in the afternoon and did not come up, and by six she was fitting, and the keepers held her on the ground and chanted, and the crowd knelt, and at eight, because a

man who had spent three years learning about the border sometimes learns the right thing at the wrong time, somebody called the ambulance. She was in the hospital for eleven days. She came out of the ward with a diagnosis I will not write and a face that had aged four years and a family that took her home to the county without the operation, because the board had stopped at four hundred and fifty-one, and because the Assembly, in the way of institutions, paid for the ward and the bus and did not pay for the operation, and wrote in the book's third chapter that the little living Buddha had been *received*.

I went to the county. I will not describe the visit, because the visit is the province of the girl and her family and not of this book. I will say only that I sat in a room with a mother who had given away her daughter for a beautiful thing and I did the only thing I have ever been able to do, which is to be present and to not explain and to not absolve, and that when I left the county I had, in my jacket, a hand-painted picture the girl had made of a woman with a bowl, and I put it in the drawer in the room with the wall, next to the pouch, and I did not drink that night. I drank the next night. But that is the next chapter.

CHAPTER 21

The Bottle

The bottle was patient and the crown was a mouth and in the eleventh month they met.

I am not going to make the relapse a scene. I have made it a scene once, two years ago, in a guesthouse room, and the scene was a lie in the direction of drama, because a relapse is not a scene; it is a *season*. It is a hundred small permissions, each of which looks like a Tuesday, and by the time it becomes a scene the scene is already the end of it.

Here is the season. In the ninth month I began to drink in the office behind the hall, standing up, alone, after the ledgers were closed. In the tenth month I began to drink before the ledgers were closed. In the tenth month I began to drink in the afternoon, and in the afternoon there were people in the hall, and so I moved the bottle to a room in the back that only the keepers used, and the keepers brought me the bottle and did not look at me sideways, because the keepers had spent two years learning that the saint was not to be questioned, and because a keeper who questions the saint is a keeper who has lost the only thing he ever believed. In the eleventh month I began to drink in the mornings. And in the eleventh month, on a Friday, at a healing in a market in the south of the city, I walked onto the platform to say the four sentences about medicine that I said at every healing, and I said them wrong, and then I said nothing at all, and then I sat down in the chair on the platform and put my head in my hands in front of four hundred people, and the guru finished the healing for me, and a girl of about fourteen in the front row filmed it, and by the evening the clip was everywhere.

That was the fall. It did not come with a scandal and it did not come with a crime. It came with a man sitting down in a chair in front of four hundred people and putting his head in his hands, and the city took the clip and made its inventory, and the inventory is in the interlude and I am not going to repeat it.

What I want to put in this chapter is the part the city never saw, which is the *week before the fall*, and the week is the whole of the disease.

In the week before the fall, I did the following good things. I signed the papers that opened the eighth and ninth clinics. I sat with the woman whose child had the hole in the heart and told her the operation was paid for, and watched her cry. I wrote the Assembly's rule eight with my own hand. I took a call from Jiang Xue about the list and gave her two names that helped her case. I walked the Trail at dawn, once, and the tea seller did not charge me, and I felt, for about an hour, the thing I have been chasing my whole life, which is the ordinary.

And in the week before the fall, I also did the following. I woke at three every morning with my heart going. I began to hear, in the hall, in the crowd's noise, a sound underneath the noise, which was the sound of a door in a guesthouse room closing. I stopped calling my mother back. I stopped answering Huajiao's messages, and when I did answer, I answered in dialect so flatly that she stopped sending them. I stood in the back room of the hall with the bottle and I told myself the sentence that every drunk tells himself, which is not *I can handle it* and is worse than *I can handle it*, and the sentence is: *it does not matter, because I am helping people either way.* That is the demon's true line. Not *drink*. *It does not matter.* The demon does not sell you the bottle; the demon sells you the *irrelevance of the bottle*, and the irrelevance is the whole of the lie, and I sold it to myself for eleven weeks while opening clinics and saving children, and the clinics and the children were real, and that is why the lie worked.

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I want to give the season of permissions accurately, because the city believes a relapse is a moment and a relapse is a *calendar*. The first permission was the funeral. In the ninth month I blessed the funeral of an old woman who had been a healer in the Assembly and who had died at eighty-one of nothing but age, and after the burial the family put out the funeral wine, and the whole room raised a cup to the dead, and I raised mine, and I did not drink it, and then the second cup came and I did not drink that either, and the *third* cup I drank, because the third cup at a Chongqing funeral is the cup you drink for the dead and not for

yourself, and that is what I told myself, and the telling is the whole of the disease. The second permission was the wedding, in the tenth month, of two of the Assembly's young people, and at a wedding you drink, and I drank, and the room applauded, and the guru saw me drink and said nothing, because the guru had spent his whole life at tables and knew that a saint who refuses a wedding cup insults the couple, and because the guru wanted me to be the saint more than he wanted me sober. The third permission was the rain. I have never been able to explain the rain. It rained for eleven days in the tenth month, the way it rains in this city when the season turns, and I was alone in the office behind the hall with the ledgers, and there was a bottle in the drawer that a keeper had left, and I did not open it for the first four days of the rain and on the fifth day I opened it because it was raining and because a man alone with a ledger and a rain is not *drinking*, he is *convalescing*, and that is the sentence I have never been able to forgive myself for, not the drinking; the sentence. *Convalescing.* That is how the demon talks. It does not say *drink*. It says *you have been ill, and this is medicine, and no one has to know.*

The morning after the fall, the guru came to the back room and found me on the floor, and he did not lecture me and he did not pray over me and he did not call the healers. He sat on the floor beside me in his brown robe and he held my hand, which was the one thing he had ever actually been good at, and he said the truest thing anyone said to me in the whole of the crown.

"I did this," he said. "Not the drinking. The *crown*. I asked you to come because I wanted a brake, and I gave you the wheel instead, and I have watched you drink for two months and I have said nothing because I needed the salve, and the salve is your face, and I have been using your face to hold two thousand people together, and I knew that you were drowning and I let you drown because the alternative was to be the man with the warm hand and the certainty and no brake, which is the man I was before you came, and I could not go back to being him." He looked at me with the exhausted, certain eyes that had started a faith in a county and had ended a girl on a platform. "So the crown was never for you. It was for *me*. I took a man and made him a god so that I would not have to be the only one. That is the whole of the Assembly, and it is not a lie about you, it is a lie about *faith*, and I am the one who told it." He let go of my hand. "Leave. Take

the count. Go to the aunties and go to the Trail and go to Guangdong and let the movement eat itself, because that is what it is going to do either way, and because the only thing your staying will buy is your death, and a dead saint is worth more to the Assembly than a living drunk, and I do not want to sell your death. I have sold everything else."

I did not leave. That is the truth of the chapter and the whole of the disease, and I am not going to end it with a resolve I did not have. I did not leave. I went out of the room and I got through the day, and the next day, and on the third day I drank again, and on the fourth I drank in the morning, and on the fifth the son's people found me in a stairwell on the lower road with no identification and a delivery card and a rosary, and they called the district, and the district called an ambulance, and the ambulance took me to the ward, and the ward is the next chapter.

The last thing I remember from the season, before the ward, is the drawer. On the fifth day, before the stairwell, I went back to the room with the wall. I do not know why. I think I went back for the pouch, and the pouch was in the drawer, and I opened the drawer, and the pouch was there, and beside the pouch there was the picture the girl 阿桃 had drawn of the woman with the bowl, and there was Ma-ge's exercise book, and there was the pocket edition of *The Book of the Living Buddha*, and there was the wedding invitation I had kept sealed for four years, and there was the postcard with the four characters, and there was, at the back, the fan — the real one, the wire-mended one, the one with the knot — that I had stopped carrying in the street after the day A-Fang went out the window, and that I had put in the drawer because a man who stops carrying a fan in the street should not throw it away.

I looked at all of it. And then I did the thing that a person does when he is at the bottom and does not know it yet, which is to take the pouch and leave the drawer open, because he tells himself he will come back for the rest.

CHAPTER 22

The Bottom

The ward is the interlude and the interlude is the ward, and I am not going to repeat the chart here, because a chart is a chart and the reader has already read it. What the reader has not read is what the chart cannot hold, and that is the part I owe the book.

I was in the medical ward for five days. On the first day I was mostly gone. On the second day I was a man in a bed with a bandage on his scalp and a sitter who watched me because I was a seizure risk, and the sitter was a young man of about twenty-two who worked two jobs and had no idea who I was, and who treated me the way he treated the other six men in the ward, which was with the flat, patient, incurious kindness of a man who is paid by the hour and has decided to be decent about it. That young man is one of the four people who saved my life in the whole of it and I do not know his name and I have never been able to find him, because the hospital changed its staffing agency that winter, and because the kindest people in this city are the ones the city cannot name.

On the third day I saw the man in the corner of the room.

I have put this down twice before, and both times I made it deniable, and I am going to make it deniable again, because that is the discipline of the whole thing and because I do not get to break it in the last telling. So: I was on the third day of a severe alcohol withdrawal in a public hospital ward, with a heart rate of one hundred and thirty-eight and a documented history of seizures and a documented history of hallucinations, and I saw a man in the corner of the room. He was old and his robe was ragged and his hat was ragged and his feet were bare on the linoleum, and he had a gourd in one hand and a fan in the other, and the fan was broken and mended with wire, and he did not speak. That is the difference between this appearance and the other two. In the first year, in the fever, he laughed. In the second, in the guesthouse, he laughed. In the ward, in the withdrawal, he did not laugh and he did not speak and he did not help. He sat in the corner of a public hospital ward with his gourd and his broken fan and

he looked at me the way an old man looks at a boy who has done the thing the old man warned him about, and the looking was not cruel and it was not kind, and it lasted, by the sitter's notes, on and off for about eleven hours, and then it stopped. The sitter's notes say *patient speaks in dialect to a man in the corner of the room; there is no man in the corner of the room; patient is calm when he does this.* That is the record. I have the record. I keep the record in the drawer.

I do not know if the man was the man. I know the withdrawal was real, and the seizure risk was real, and the woman in the next bed calling for her son was real, and the orange that I gave to the man in bed nine was real, and one of those four things is what I have instead of a god.

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I have to give the ward accurately, because the ward is the one place in the whole of it where I had no story and no name and no crown, and I have come to believe that the ward was the *cleanest* eleven days of my whole adult life. In the ward I was bed seven. That was the whole of my identity. The nurse called me *bed seven* and the sitter called me *bed seven* and the woman in bed eight called me *hey* and the man in bed nine, who had the shaking hands and the orange, called me nothing at all and simply ate the orange I gave him, and for eleven days I was a body with a chart and a pulse and a history of seizures and no audience, and the *no audience* was the thing I had spent three years trying and failing to buy, and the ward gave it to me for free, and I have never been able to explain to anyone since why a man who was at the bottom of his life felt, for eleven days, more *himself* than he had felt since the first alley. It is not a gift. It is a symptom. But the symptom was real and I am putting it down: a man can be ruined and clean at the same time, and the cleaning is not the sobriety; the cleaning is the *anonymity*, and the anonymity is the only place in the whole of this city where a person is not a product, and the reason I could not stay there is that I had a family and a platform account and a Tuesday, and a Tuesday is a thing you have to have a *name* to do.

The temptation of the bottom is not the bottle. That is what I need the reader to understand about the bottom, because the city believes the bottom is about the bottle and the city is wrong. On the fourth day, when I could stand, I

walked to the window of the ward and looked down at the lot, and the lot was the same lot behind the same hospital where I had looked down in the first winter of the whole story and seen a girl against a wall with four men around her, and I stood at the window and I did the arithmetic of the whole of it, and the arithmetic was this.

In the first winter I had gone down the stairs for a girl and had gotten two cracked ribs and a reputation. In the third winter I had gone up onto a stage in a market and put my head in my hands and lost a country. And in between there had been, by the count of the file, three hundred and forty-one forms and forty-one children out of the parks and fourteen people off the road and nine clinics and a girl who had a hole in her heart and lived and a girl of fifteen who had a board with a number on it and did not, and the whole of it had been done by a man who could not feel the tips of two fingers, and the arithmetic did not balance, and the arithmetic had never once balanced, and the thing the bottom offered was not a drink. The thing the bottom offered was *permission to stop*. To stop being the center. To stop being the brake that did not brake. To stop making the good thing and the bad thing with the same hand. To let the movement eat itself and the son build his city and the city forget the name and the man in the corner of the room have nothing to look at. The bottom's true temptation is *irrelevance*. It is the offer to be nobody, and it is a real offer, and it is the only offer the demon ever made me that I could not immediately refuse, because I had spent three years learning to be nobody and the bottom was offering me the thing I was best at.

What saved me was not a vision and not a resolve and not the man in the corner. It was a woman in a tea room.

On the fifth day I discharged myself against advice and I walked out of the hospital into the eleventh month and I did not go to the hall and I did not go to the room with the wall. I went, by a route I do not remember taking, to a tea room in the old town that I had never entered, on the lower side of the ridge, with a hand-painted sign that said **戒酒茶舍** — *the quit-drinking teahouse* — and I went in and sat at a table, and a man of about sixty with a swollen face and steady hands put a bowl of congee in front of me without being asked, and I ate

it, and then he put a second bowl in front of me, and I ate that too, and then he sat down across from me and said the only sentence he said for the first hour.

"You can drink," he said. "Everyone here can drink. The door is that way. But if you want to sit at this table instead, you eat the congee, and you come back tomorrow, and you do not tell anyone what you did here, and you do not tell anyone anyone else's name."

His name was 老董. He had been a drinker for thirty years and sober for eleven and he had run the table for nine, and he was not wise and he was not gentle and he had, six months before I met him, drunk for three days and come back and started his count at one in front of the whole table, and nobody had made him stop coming in, and that is the whole of his authority. I sat at his table for the first hour and said nothing. In the second hour I asked him the only question I had, which was the question the whole of it had been pushing me toward, and I asked it the way you ask a thing of a man who has been through it and not of a man who has read about it.

"What do you do," I said, "when the good you do and the harm you do are the same hand, and you cannot put the hand down because the hand is the only thing you have."

老董 looked at me for a long time. And then he did the thing that all of the wise people in this book do, which is that he did not answer the question. He got up and poured me a third bowl of congee and set it down and said the sentence that is the whole of the recovery and the whole of it and the only sentence I have ever found that is worth repeating to a person at the bottom.

"Tomorrow," he said. "You come back tomorrow, and you eat the congee, and you do not decide anything today. A man at the bottom does not need a philosophy. He needs a *Tuesday*, and then another Tuesday, and then another, and then one day he notices that he has had a hundred Tuesdays and that the hand did both and the world did not end, and that is not an answer, but it is a *life*, and a life is what you came here for." He went back to the pot. "The man in the hospital wanted you to stop being the center. That is not sobriety, that is *death*. Sobriety is *staying the center and doing the dishes*. Eat."

CHAPTER 23

The Confession

I went back to the hall on the fourteenth day after the ward, and I went back to do the one thing I had never done in the whole of the crown, which was to tell the truth in front of the people it would cost.

I did not plan it and I did not write it and I did not tell the guru, because the guru would have stopped me, and because a confession that has been rehearsed is a performance, and the whole of the demon's path had been the difference between a performance and a man. I stood up in the tent on a Sunday morning with two thousand people in the seats and eleven thousand on the screens, and the guru on my left and nobody on my right, because the son was not there, and I said the following, and I am giving it in full because it is the only speech in the whole of it that I am not ashamed of.

"I am not a saint," I said. "I am a drunk. I have been in the hospital for five days and I was discharged against advice and I have not had a drink since the ward, which is fourteen days, and fourteen days is nothing, and I want you to know that before you hear anything else." I waited. "The money that built the clinics is the son's money. The son is a good man in the way that a river is a good river: he is useful and he is the reason the fields are green and you cannot argue with him and he does not care whether you live. The movement took that money, and I stood with the man who gave it, and I did it because the money saved children, and it did save children, and it also bought me and it also bought this tent and it also bought the silence of everyone who knew I was drinking. That is the deal. I made it. Nobody made it for me."

The hall was very quiet. The guru did not move. I went on.

"There is a man named 阿全, who was thirty-four, who died in a tent in Jiulongpo in the eighth month while four healers prayed over him and held him down and his mother watched, and his mother believed that his soul was received, and I want to say his name out loud in this hall so that the hall has to hold it. There was a woman with diabetes who stopped her insulin. There was a

man of sixty who had a stroke in a healing and whose family did not call an ambulance. There was a girl of fifteen named 阿桃, who was given to this movement by her family for a board with a number on it, and who went into a trance in the eleventh month and did not come out of it, and who is at home in the county now and will not be a nurse and will not be a healer and will not be a saint, and whose brother did not get the operation." I looked at the two thousand. "None of that was done by a bad man. It was done by *this hall*, and this hall is made of you, and I am not standing here to blame you, because you are the only people in this city who ever fed a stranger, and I am standing here because I have spent three months being the thing at the center of the hall, and a center is a mouth, and a mouth eats, and I will not be eaten and I will not eat and I am telling you the truth so that the next time a man stands up in a tent and opens his hands, you will look at his *hands* and not at the *light*."

And then I did the thing that ended the crown, and I did it because there was no other way to end it, and because I had learned in the ward that the only thing that ever actually changed anybody was a *name*, and I said the name.

"The whole of this started because a drunk fell down in an alley for a girl," I said. "That is all. That is the miracle. There is no other one. I have no hand. I have no light. I have a fan that a girl mended with wire and a gourd that holds tea and a bad knee and a count of fourteen days, and if that is not enough for you, then go home, because it is the whole of what there is, and everything else you have been told about me was *sold to you* by a market that I did not stop and a son who did not lie and a hall that wanted a god."

I sat down.

The two thousand did not riot. That is the part the city got wrong and the part I have never been able to explain to anyone who was not in the tent. They did not riot and they did not applaud and they did not, most of them, leave. They sat there in the plastic chairs in the hot tent with their sick children and their bags of medicine and their beautiful, unbearable hope, and they looked at me, and some of them wept, and some of them were angry, and one old woman in the second row said, out loud, in the flat voice of a woman who had walked three hours, "Then what are we supposed to do." And I did not have an answer, and the not-having was the answer, and the guru stood up and took the

microphone and did the thing that he had been born to do and that I had spent three months preventing, which was to *hold the room together*, and he said the sentence that the Assembly's book would print on the last page, the sentence that is the whole of the failure mode and the whole of the mercy.

"We go home," he said, "and we feed the next person, and we do not make a god of the man who fed the last one."

That was the end of the crown. It was not a triumph and it was not a tragedy; it was a *deflation*, which is the only way a god ever actually dies. The clinics did not close that day. The merit box did not empty that day. The movement did not evaporate. But the *center* shifted, the way a center shifts, which is that the next Sunday there were four hundred people in the tent instead of two thousand, and the Sunday after that there were two hundred, and the Sunday after that the tent came down because the rent on the space was due and the guru had decided, quietly, without telling me, to stop paying for a tent and put the money into the kitchens. And the guru himself — I have to put this down, because he is the character the reader will most want to be punished — the guru did not fall. He went back to being what he had been before the Assembly, which was a man with a warm hand and a county schoolteacher's salary and a rented room and a son in Chengdu who did not speak to him, and he kept the hand and lost the hall, and he wrote me once a year until he died, and the letters were always the same, and the last line of every letter was: *the brake held for eleven weeks. That is more than most faiths get. Do not look for the other eighty.*

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The aunties took the confession the way the aunties took everything, which is by feeding the man who made it and saying nothing at the table. I went to the tea room that night expecting the reckoning, and there was no reckoning. Wang Niangniang put the noodles in front of me and Zhang Niangniang dealt a hand and Liu Niangniang, who by then had lost most of the years, looked at me for a long moment and said, in the flat voice of a woman reading a name off a drawer, "You were the saint for a year and you did not lie to them until today, and today you told them the truth, and a person who tells the truth at the end of it is not a fraud; he is a *cook with a conscience*." I did not understand the sentence until I had

finished the noodles. And then I did, because a cook with a conscience is a person who knows the food was bad and served it anyway and has decided, on the last day of the restaurant, to tell the customers. That is the whole of the confession. It was not noble and it was not brave; it was a man at closing time admitting the soup was thin, and the aunties knew it, and they fed him anyway, and the feeding was the whole of the forgiveness, and I have not needed any other.

The confession cost more than the crown. I want to put the cost in the same chapter, because the city's account of the confession is that it was a noble act, and the city's account is a lie, because a noble act that gets other people killed is not noble, it is *public*. In the fortnight after the confession, the Assembly's border team — the ones who had stayed, the ones who had believed — went back down the road on their own money and their own plan, because a movement that has lost its center is a movement that does the thing the center was preventing, and a group of nine, led by 老孙, the diesel mechanic who had put a hammer in a man's head and gone to a police station and come back, went over the river to break a girl out of a holding room and did not come back. Three of them died. 老孙 was one of the three. They found him on the far bank with a fan in his jacket and a girl he had gotten out of the room alive, and the girl is with her family now, and 老孙 is in the ground behind the temple next to the enforcer and the abbot, and his stone has his own name and nothing else, because the board could not agree and because a man who dies on a border does not get a sentence.

I do not know whether the last thing 老孙 did was right. I have decided that the not-knowing is the whole of the chapter. He was a man who put a hammer in a man's head because he would not be a coward twice, and he died getting a girl out of a room, and the good and the bad were the same hand, and the hand is in the ground behind the temple, and there is no ledger in the whole of this city that balances him, including mine.

CHAPTER 24

The Seen Man

The fall of the son, in the city, was a season and I am going to give it in the way the city gave it, which is as weather. In the last week of the third year, the trust cracked; in the first week of the fourth, the auditors moved in; in the second week, three of the foundation's directors resigned, and two of them went abroad, and one of them stayed and gave four days of testimony; in the third week, the papers ran the word *inheritance* four hundred times and the feeds ran the slow clip of the son at his father's memorial with the piano and a new caption, which is the way the feeds take revenge, by using the same footage with the opposite meaning; and in the fourth week, the aquatic-safety center's plaque was photographed for the last time and then quietly unscrewed and taken down, and the pool stayed open, because the pool was owned by the trust and the trust was in receivership and the receivers kept the pool, because a swimming pool is an asset, and the children of the neighbourhood learned to float on their backs in a pool that had been built by a drowned boy's name and paid for by a man who was going to prison, and the whole of the alchemy of the city was in that pool, and the water did not care, and the children did not know, and their mothers did not ask, and that is the most honest picture of the whole of it.

I want to record the one kindness the city did for the son, because the city did do one and I am not going to let the reader believe I hate him. On the day of the conviction, an old man who had worked in the foundation's clinic for three years stood outside the courthouse with a cardboard sign, and the sign did not say *innocent* and did not say *guilty* and did not quote any of the feeds. The sign said, in characters the old man had painted himself with a brush that was clearly not a calligraphy brush: 他建的诊所还开着。 — *The clinic he built is still open.* The feeds did not film it and the papers did not print it and the old man stood there for about two hours in the cold and then went home, and I watched him from the back of the crowd and did not go up to him, because I did not know what to say, and because the sentence on the sign was the truest thing anybody said about

the son in the whole of the fourth year, and I have kept it, and I have never once been able to decide whether it is a mercy or the worst indictment in the book.

The son sent for me a week after the confession, and this time he did not send a street and he did not send a car and he did not send a keeper. He sent four words, by a boy on a scooter, and the four words were: *come and see me alone.*

He was not at the tower and he was not at the trust and he was not at the foundation, because by the seventh day after the confession there was no longer a foundation, and the trust was in receivership, and the tower was in the trust. He had gone to ground in a rented flat in Jiangbei, a plain two-room flat with a cheap sofa and a kettle and a window that looked at another building, and he opened the door himself, and he was wearing a tracksuit and no watch and he had not shaved.

That was the first thing. In the whole of it, I had seen Tan Xiao in linen and grey and black and white and not one thread that was not chosen, and here he was in a tracksuit with a day's beard and no audience, and the flat smelled of instant noodles, and on the coffee table there was a child's drawing — his own, from the foundation's files, from a school he had built — and a plate with an apple core, and a phone face-down and buzzing, and he did not pick it up.

"Sit," he said. "The kettle is on. I don't have a cleaner anymore."

I sat. He made the tea himself, badly, with too much leaf, and set it in front of me, and then he sat on the other end of the sofa and looked at the window and did not speak for about four minutes, and the phone buzzed and buzzed and buzzed like a fly on the table, and he let it.

"I have been served," he said at last. "The trust. The auditors. The provincial procuratorate. Not the arson — I told you, nobody is ever going to touch the arson — the *trust*, the transoms, the intercompany accounts, the foundations-within-foundations, the shell that bought the temple money and the shell that bought your debt and the four companies that laundered the clinic donations. Eleven years of paperwork and I signed every page, because I was twenty-three and I wanted to be the good son and I thought the paperwork was the *housekeeping*." He picked up the apple core and looked at it and put it down. "I am going to be convicted. Not of the fire. Of the *clean half*. Which means the city is going to have the one thing it has wanted from the first day, which is a son

it can punish without punishing the father, and the papers will write the word *inheritance* four hundred times, and none of it will be a lie, and I will go to a low-security place for four or five years and come out at thirty-two and the name will be a warning and the pools will be renamed." He almost smiled. "I have done the arithmetic. I am very good at arithmetic. That is the whole of what my father left me, and it is enough to see this coming, and it did not help me stop it, and I am telling you because you are the only person I have ever met who has done the same arithmetic and also let a thing happen to him anyway."

He looked at me then, and the looking was the thing the chapter is about. I had spent three years watching Tan Xiao perform, and I had seen him on stages and in courtyards and on the edge of a dark room with the lights off, and the face he turned to me on that sofa was the face from the edge of the dark room, and it was the same face, and there was no performance in it, and that was the most frightening thing I have ever seen a person do.

"Say what I am," he said.

"I don't know what you are."

"You know. You are the only person who knows. You watched me for three years and you never once took the hand and you never once signed the form and you never once told me I was forgiven, and you are the only one who ever looked at me and saw the *thing* and not the brand, and I have spent my whole life being a brand, and everyone in this city loves the brand, and my father loved the brand, and the brand is what is being convicted, and I am sitting in a rented flat in a tracksuit and I am *asking* you, because I have nobody else, and because the brand is all I have ever had and I do not know what is underneath it, and I am afraid that there is nothing underneath it, and I want you to tell me." His voice did not break. That was the thing. It stayed exactly where it had always been, in the soft, courteous, meme-literate register, and the register was the horror, because the man was asking the question of his life in the tone of a man reading a product update. "What am I, Li Xiuyuan. Tell me and I will believe it. You are the only person I would believe."

And I told him. That is the whole of the scene and I am going to give it in full, because I had spent three years deciding what to say to the son, and when

the moment finally came I did not say the clever thing and I did not say the cruel thing and I did not say the thing the reader wants. I said the true thing.

"You are a man who was never once needed," I said. "That is what you are. Everything you built, you built because you were *invested in*, and everything you gave away, you gave away because the giving was the only place your father's name could be turned into something that did not curdle, and everything you did to me — the offer and the deal and the money and the room for the enforcer and the pool for the drowned boy — you did because you wanted to be the person in the story with a *reason*, and the reason was not the city and was not the girls and was not even your father. The reason was that you wanted one man in the whole of this country to look at you and say *there is a person there*, and you picked me because I was the only man you could not buy, and you have spent three years buying everything else and leaving me alone on purpose, because as long as I did not take the hand, there was one person left on earth who might tell you the truth. I am telling you the truth. There is a person there. He is sitting in a tracksuit in a rented flat in Jiangbei with instant noodles and an apple core, and he is going to prison for the clean half, and he is *still doing arithmetic*, and the arithmetic is the last wall between him and being a man, and if he ever lets the wall down there is nothing underneath it that will surprise anyone, because underneath it is just a person who wanted to be needed, which is the most ordinary thing in this city, and there is no brand in it and no son and no father and no city, and it is the only real thing you have ever owned."

He sat with that for a long time. The phone buzzed. The window looked at another building.

"Thank you," he said, and he meant it, and it was the first sentence he had ever said to me that had no performance in it, and it was also, I have come to believe, the sentence that ended him, because a man who has been seen for the first time is a man who can no longer go back to the dark room and turn on the switch. He stood up and went to the window and looked at the other building for a while, and then he said the last thing he ever said to me, and it was small and ordinary and it was the whole of the son.

"I am not going to appeal," he said. "I am going to plead. I am going to give them every page and every shell and every name, including the ones that will

make the family hate me, and when I come out I am going to go somewhere no one has heard of the name, and I am not going to build anything, and I am going to be, for the first time in my life, a man with no audience." He turned around, and for one second the old face was there, the half-second past the shutter, the camera smile — and then it was gone, and what was left was a tired young man in a tracksuit who had just been told the truth. "Do not come to the trial. Do not send the camera woman. And if you ever write the book, the book you keep threatening to write, put in the part where I asked, and put in the part where you answered. I want the record to say that one person told me the truth before the end."

I left him in the rented flat and walked down the stairs and out into the street, and behind me the phone was still buzzing on the table, and nobody answered it, and the city did not stop, and the clean half of the empire was already being sold off in pieces to pay the debt, and the name would go on being sold for years in a form the law could not reach, and the man who had worn it was, at last, alone in a room with an apple core and no cameras, and it was the first honest room of his life and I have never been able to decide whether it was a mercy or the cruelest thing I ever did.

CHAPTER 25

The Fall

The winter took the auntie.

That is the whole of the sentence and I am not going to put it anywhere else in the chapter, because Liu Niangniang would not have wanted a chapter and because the way she died is the way she lived, which is quietly and at a table and without letting anyone make a thing of it.

She had been losing the years for eighteen months and by the winter she had lost the tea room and the barbershop and the tunnel and most of the names. She did not lose the tiles and she did not lose the sound of a hand on a table. She sat in the back room with the note on the wall behind her and she played the cards and she said, every morning, the only sentence she said for the last six weeks, which was, "Deal." And then on a Tuesday in the twelfth month, in the afternoon, between a tile and a tile, she put her hand flat on the table and looked at Wang Niangniang with the clearest eyes she had had in a year, and she said three things in order, and they were the last three things she ever said. The first was, "The man who came on Tuesdays had a daughter named 阿香 and he was sorry." The second was, "The postcards go to the girl and the girl is the daughter of the officer." And the third, which she said to Zhang Niangniang, in the voice of a woman closing a ledger, was: "You have to remember the rest now. I cannot." And then she put her head on the table and did not lift it, and Wang Niangniang did not call an ambulance, because Liu Niangniang had told her, years before, that if the day came she wanted the kettle on and not the ambulance, and Wang Niangniang put the kettle on, and the two of them sat with her for two hours until the doctor came, and the doctor came and said what everybody already knew, and that was the whole of the death of the memory-archive of the poor of this city, and it happened between a tile and a tile, and the city did not notice, and the city has never noticed, and that is the exact measure of the city.

The funeral was the aunties' ceremony and I am going to give it because it is the only funeral in the whole of it that the found family got to hold. It was at the temple, in the east courtyard, under the abbot's name on the wall, and there were about forty people: the three riders who were off shift, Wen Xiaoyu and Wen Xiaoyang, the novice Jingchen who was twenty-two now, Jiefeng, Chen Popo in her chair because Chen Popo had refused to miss it and died, herself, later that same spring, the boy 周平 with the scar on his stomach, and Yaoji with Manman and the baby, who was three months old and slept through the whole of it, and me, and Huajiao, who had come home for the funeral on the first bus. The aunties cooked the funeral meal themselves. That is the whole of the ceremony. Three old women cooked a meal for the people who came to bury the fourth, and they did not let anyone help, and at the end of it Wang Niangniang put the condolence envelopes in a bag and did not reconcile them, because she said a ledger of grief is the one ledger a person should not keep, and then she sat down and did not get up for an hour.

We buried her in the ground behind the temple, next to Dao-ge and the abbot and 老孙, and her stone has her own name and nothing else, because the board could not agree and because she had left word, through Wang Niangniang, that she wanted no sentence. The four of them are in that ground now: a monk, an enforcer, a zealot, and a gossip. I go out and I stand there sometimes. The arhats look down over the wall. And the thing I think, standing there, is that the abbot was right and I have never once been able to say it to anyone, which is that the only eulogy worth having is spoken by a stranger at dawn, and that none of the four of them got one, and that they are the four holiest bones in this city, and that the city does not know their names.

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The aunties after Liu Niangniang died were the quietest thing in the whole of it, and the quiet was the loss. Wang Niangniang cooked the funeral and then cooked the next day and the next, and she did not cry once that I saw, and the not-crying was the way she carried it, and the reason the whole back room kept working was that a woman of sixty-four decided, on the afternoon of the burial, that a table which no longer had a gossip still had to have noodles. Zhang

Niangniang stopped playing for about a month and then started again, and when she started again she dealt four hands instead of three, and she dealt the fourth hand to the empty chair, and she did it for about a year, and none of the aunties ever once commented on it, and I have come to believe that the fourth hand is the whole of what a table is for. And the tea room became, in that year, the place people brought their dead to: a rider whose mother had died would come in and sit and not say anything, and Zhang Niangniang would deal him a hand, and by the end of the game he would be talking, and the talking was the funeral, and there was no other funeral, because Wang Niangniang had decided, after the auntie died, that she would never again cook for a stranger's grief at a formal table, and that from then on the grief came to the noodles.

The rest of the fall, in flesh, in order, the way the manifest of the last year is written.

The movement did not die; it *dispersed*. That is the thing about a faith: it does not have a death, it has a diaspora. By the second month of the fourth year the tent was gone and the hall in Banan was gone and the clinics, four of the nine, were gone; and the other five had been folded into the son's receivership and then into the provincial health system, and two of them are still running today, and they still feed people, and the feeding is real, and the name on the door is no longer a name. The guru was not punished and was not exposed and did not fall. He went back to a rented room and the hand, and he died, three years later, of the heart that had killed him the first time, in a county town, in the house of his son who had finally spoken to him, and the last letter I got from him arrived after the death and said the same thing all his letters said: *the brake held for eleven weeks.* The zealots scattered and some of them are still on the border and some of them are in prison and 小芹, the girl who escaped the funnel and took the book, went to nursing school on the list's restitution and is a nurse now in a hospital in the west of the province, and she writes me, and I answer, and the writing is the only clean thing that came out of the whole Assembly.

The temple was not closed. That is the one institution that survived the whole of it, and it survived because Jiefeng had done the arithmetic and because the temple's congee was the temple's and not the movement's. He stood in the east courtyard on the Sunday after the confession and told a small crowd that the

temple would not be taking the Assembly's name and would not be taking the son's receivership and would not be taking the movement's people as oblates, and he did it in his finance-monk voice, and the crowd was thirty people and the line at the congee was two thousand a month, and the two things were not in conflict, and that is the whole of what an institution is for. He died four years later, of the lung, and his last act, which I witnessed because I was sweeping, was to write the temple's congee recipe in the account book in his own hand, on the page after the accounts, the way the abbot had, so that the novice would have it after him. I have the copy. It is a recipe for rice and water and a long wait. It is the only liturgy this city has ever needed.

My mother's lump was not a lump. That is the sentence I have been trying to write for the whole of the chapter. They took it out in the sixth month, when I was on the border, and it was benign, and she did not tell me until the seventh month, and when she told me she said it in the flat voice of a woman reporting weather, and she did not tell me because she did not want to be a *cost* in my ledger, and I did not go to Guangdong that year, and that is the whole of what I have to put down about the sixth month, and I will come to Guangdong in its own time, and it will be the hardest thing in the book, and it is not a death, it is worse than a death, it is a *brick*, and I have been carrying it since the year of the border and I am going to put it down in its own chapter and not in a manifest.

And the son went to prison in the third month of the fourth year, on eleven counts of the clean half, and he served four years and two months, and he did not appeal, and he gave them every page and every name, and the family disowned him, and the name went on being sold in four provinces, and I did not go to the trial, and I did not send the camera woman, and I have kept his one sentence to the end, which was *put in the part where you answered.*

That is the fall. The crown came off and the man stayed, and the man was a drunk with a count of one hundred and eleven days, and the winter took the auntie, and the spring was coming, and the whole of the movement was a diaspora, and somewhere in the diaspora there was a faction that was not done, and the faction is the next chapter, and the chapter is the last temptation and it is the reason the book is called what it is called.

CHAPTER 26

The Last Temptation

The remnant came to the tea room in the second month of the fourth year, and it came not with a hammer and not with a camera but with a *liturgy*, and the liturgy was the most beautiful thing anyone ever offered me.

There were four of them. 妙蓮 was the leader; she was forty-three and had been a nurse and had left the hospital to heal with the Assembly and had healed, by the movement's own ledgers, four hundred people; she was the one who had put her hands on the woman in Banan whose child had the hole in the heart, and she had been in the tent when I said the brake, and she had wept, and she had not stopped believing. She sat down at the aunties' table with the three others and she put a piece of paper in front of me, and the paper was a plan, and the plan was the great fast.

"Forty-nine days," she said. "From the temple to the river. On foot. You walk, and the movement walks with you, and on every day there is a healing and a bowl and a name read out for the missing, and on the forty-ninth day you come to the ford and you cross and you find the mother's boy and you bring him north, and the whole of it is filmed, and the money comes in, and the children come home." She looked at me with the clear eyes of a woman who had never once in her life told a lie. "You are sick, brother. I have seen the ward reports and I know the count. Forty-nine days of fasting and walking will kill you. That is the point. I am not going to pretend. You will die on the road, or at the ford, or in the river, and the movement will carry your body home, and the movement will be *alive* again, and the money will come, and the girls will come out of the parks, because a dead saint is worth ten living ones, and because the city will give everything to a road where a man died for it, and because I have done the arithmetic and the arithmetic is that your death saves more people than your life ever will."

She said it without cruelty and without hesitation and without the smallest shadow of a lie, and the four of them sat at the table with their hands folded, and the aunties' tea steamed, and I understood that I was looking at the whole of it in

the face of a woman with a warm hand who wanted to save the world and had decided, honestly, rigorously, with the totality of her faith, that the price was me.

That is the last temptation. Not the bottle and not the knife and not the crown. The last temptation is a *beautiful death*, offered by good people, for a real cause, with the arithmetic already done. Every demon in the whole of it had been selling me a way to be *effective*, and this was the final sale, the clean one, the one with the girls at the end of it, and the woman was right; her arithmetic was correct; a dead saint would have saved more children than a living drunk, and I had spent three years proving it, because a boy with a cardboard fan had died for the myth and the myth had grown by the size of the boy, and I knew exactly, to the yuan, what a death was worth.

I sat at the table for a long time. And I am going to write down the whole of what went through me, because the reader has followed me to the ford and back and deserves to see the moment the book was actually decided.

I wanted to say yes. There were four reasons and I am not going to rank them, because a man at the bottom does not rank, he just *wants*. The first was the arithmetic, which was true. The second was the weariness, which was total. The third was the *beauty*: forty-nine days, forty-nine names, the river, the boy, the whole city on its feet, and at the end of it, rest, and no more Tuesday, and no more hand that did the good and the bad, and no more count, and no more ward, and no more keeping a pouch in a drawer. And the fourth reason was the true one and the worst one, and it is the reason the book is called what it is called, and the reason is this: I wanted to be *done*. I had spent my whole life being a man things happened to, and then a man things happened *because of*, and then a man the city made, and I wanted, with the whole of my body, for one single act to close the account and let me stop carrying the bill. And a death closes the account. That is the whole horror of martyrdom. It is not vanity and it is not faith. It is the desire, after a long and ruined and beautiful and unbearable life, to *stop*, and to have the stopping count for something, and to be let off the Tuesdays.

I looked at 妙莲. And then I looked past her, at the wall behind her, at the note, the note that had been moved from the noodle shop to the tunnel to the barbershop and now to the tea room, the full couplet in the abbot's hand with

the second line underlined twice; and I thought about the abbot, who had gone back into a fire for a person who did not exist and had died, and I understood, for the first time in three years, the thing he had been trying to tell me in a courtyard with a bowl of congee before either of us was dead, which is that the abbot's death had *not closed anything*. The abbot had died and the temple had burned and the son had built a pool and the movement had grown and a girl of fifteen had a board with a number on it, and the death had been real and the death had been *useful* and the death had changed nothing that mattered, because a death is not an ending, it is a *product*, and the market had been selling the abbot's death for three years, and it would sell mine for thirty.

I said no. That is the whole of the refusal and I am not going to make it a speech, because it was not a speech, it was a man at a table. I said, in dialect, so flatly that 妙莲 did not understand me the first time:

"我不死给你们看。" — *I am not going to die for you to watch.*

And she said the thing that made the refusal cost, which was, "Then they will die instead." And I said the sentence that ends the third part of the book and closes the whole of the temptation.

"Then they will die," I said, "and I will carry it, and I will not make a bill out of my own death, because that is the whole demon, brother, and I have spent three years learning it: the hand that saves and the hand that kills are the same hand, and the moment I die for them, the hand becomes a *god*, and a god is a mouth, and I have been a mouth, and I am done being a mouth. I am going to live. I am going to live a small, useless, ordinary life and deliver noodles and sweep a courtyard and go to Guangdong and sit with my mother before she dies and eat the congee on Tuesdays, and the girls will come home in twos and threes instead of in a river of money, and I will not be the reason, and the not-being-the-reason is the whole of what I have left, and it is the only thing in the whole of this city that the market cannot buy." I stood up. "I am sorry. I know you meant it. I know your arithmetic is right. But I have done the arithmetic too, and mine says: *a man who dies for the poor is worth more to the poor than a man who lives for them, and I am not going to be worth anything to anybody, because worth is the disease.*"

妙莲 did not argue. That is the thing about the sincere; you cannot argue with them and they cannot argue with you, and the two of you stand in a room with two arithmetic and one world, and one of you has to be wrong. She folded the paper and put it in her bag and stood up, and at the door of the tea room she said the only bitter thing she ever said to me, and she said it without bitterness, which is the worst way to say it.

"You will have a Tuesday," she said. "And no one will ever read it. And the market will go on. And you will have chosen the small thing, and the small thing is real, and the small thing is what the whole of your book is *about*, and I hope one day you will forgive yourself for choosing it, because I am not sure I can." And then she took her people and went out into the morning, and the four of them walked down the ridge toward the bus station, and I sat at the aunties' table with the note on the wall and the tea going cold, and Wang Niangniang, who had said nothing through the whole of it, poured me a fresh bowl and said the sentence that opened the last part of the book.

"Eat," she said. "Then go and see your mother."

PART FOUR · 道 · THE WAY

INTERLUDE 30

The Second Line

Collected in the years after, from a folk song, a school reader, a temple wall, a merchandise catalogue, a child's drawing, and one court document. The order is the compiler's.

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I. THE FOLK SONG (AS SUNG ON THE RIVER STEPS, FOURTH YEAR, NOTED DOWN BY A PASSERBY)

> 鞋儿破，帽儿破， 哪里有不平哪有我。 世人若学我， 如同入魔道—— **莫学我，莫学我， 学我的人死得早。**
> *My shoes are broken, my hat is broken; wherever there is injustice, there am I. If the world should imitate me, it walks into the demon's path — Do not imitate me, do not imitate me; the ones who imitate me die young.*
> *(Note: the second line of the ancient couplet, which for decades was sung as a boast, has been restored to the song on the river steps as a warning. The old men who sing it disagree about who added the warning. Some say it was always there. Some say a drunk added it in the third year. The singer from whom this was noted down says he learned it from his grandfather, which would make it older than the fire. No one has been able to verify either claim, and the dispute is now part of the song.)*

II. THE SCHOOL READER (MUNICIPAL TEXTBOOK SUPPLEMENTARY VOLUME, FOURTH-YEAR EDITION, PAGE 112)

The Mountain City and the Mad Monk.
Chongqing is a city of stairs. Long ago, a monk is said to have come down the stairs of an old river town, dressed in rags, carrying a broken fan, laughing at nothing. He helped the poor, broke the rules, and was called a saint. In our own time, a delivery rider became famous for helping a stranger in an alley, and for a season the whole city called him by the monk's name.
The story teaches us two things. The first is that a good deed is worth doing even when no one sees it. The second is harder: that a good deed done on camera becomes a business, and a business does not care whether the good is real. The city remembers the year the rider was almost turned into a god. It did not last. The man went back to delivering noodles. The city went back to being a city.
Question for discussion: Why does the rider refuse the title of saint? Give two reasons.
(The official answer key, not printed in the reader, gives one reason: "Because a saint is a product, and a person is not a product." The second reason, which the key does not give, is not in the reader either, and is: "Because he was afraid.")

III. THE TEMPLE WALL (LUOHAN TEMPLE, EAST CLOISTER, AS IT STANDS TODAY)

[A niche. A brass jar. A photograph. A bowl of oranges. No inscription.]
[And, on the adjacent wall, cut into the stone in a firm, unwarm hand, two names and nothing else:]

寂山 守拙

(The first is the abbot's. The second is the teahouse keeper's, and the grandfather's, and the novice who cut it there will not explain why he added it, except to say that the abbot would have wanted the two men who kept a pot and a kitchen to stand together on the same wall. The board voted against it. The novice did it anyway. It is the only unauthorized inscription in the temple, and no one will remove it.)

IV. THE MERCHANDISE CATALOGUE (FOURTH YEAR, PAGE 6)

THE AUTHENTIC JI GONG FAN. Palm-leaf. Broken. Hand-mended with wire. With the new inscription: 酒肉穿肠过 *— Wine and meat pass through the gut.* 世人若学我，如同入魔道 *— If the world imitates me, it walks into the demon's path. ¥25. Buy two, receive a merit card.* `[note in the margin, in the compiler's hand: they have started printing the second line. this is either the best thing that has ever happened or the worst. the crack in the fan is printed on. the wire is printed on. the knot is printed on. it is all printed on now.]`

V. A CHILD'S DRAWING (TAPED INSIDE THE DOOR OF THE QUIT-DRINKING TEAHOUSE, PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE COMPILER)

[Crayon. A brown line for a river. A small figure in yellow with a box on his back. A woman and a table and a bowl. And in the corner, in an adult's hand, in pencil: drawn by the granddaughter of the man who is sober here, age seven, on the day he had his two hundredth Tuesday.]

VI. THE COURT DOCUMENT (FINAL PAGE, THIRD-YEAR TRAFFICKING CASE, PROVINCIAL COURT, UNSEALED EXCERPT)

> *...the list recovered from the third park, comprising 1,140 persons, of whom 211 have been located and 38 brought before this court, 17 as defendants and 21 as witnesses receiving the protections of this statute, establishes beyond the standard required by this court that the network operated in the manner described...*
> *[The document runs to four hundred pages. On the last page, below the seal, in the space reserved for the clerk, someone has written by hand, in a hand that is not the clerk's, a single line, and the line is not part of the judgment and has no legal weight and is nevertheless the most-read line in the whole four hundred pages:]*
> 管辖止于河。 *— jurisdiction ends at the river.*

VII. THE AUTHOR'S NOTE (APPENDED TO THE MUNICIPAL EDITION, ONE PARAGRAPH)

> *The couplet attributed to the monk of the Southern Song has four lines. For most of the last thousand years the city repeated the first two and forgot the last two. The last line of the couplet —* 如同入魔道*, one walks into the demon's path — was, for a season in the third year, explained to the faithful as a story for the faint of heart.*
> *In the fourth year, a girl of nineteen, a survivor of the parks, said the whole couplet aloud at the opening of the aid station she now runs on the far bank, and a boy with a cardboard fan, who had come to the station with his mother, asked her what it meant, and she was quiet for a long time, and then she said: it means the ones who copy the outside get the demon, and the ones who copy the inside get the saint,*

> *and there is no way to tell which you are copying until it is too late, so you watch your hands.*
>
> *The boy asked whether the rider from the story had copied the outside or the inside. She said she did not know. She said she had met people who had met him, and that some of them said he was a drunk and some said he was a saint and some said he was just a man who delivered noodles, and that all three of them were telling the truth, and that the truth was not in any of them but in the choice, and the choice was not the man's; it was the city's, every day, and the city mostly chose the outside.*
>
> *She told the boy to eat his congee, and he did, and the station has been open for four years, and it is on the far bank, and it does not have a name.*

— end of collection.

CHAPTER 27

The Abdication

The abdication was smaller than the confession and it happened over a longer time, which is the way of all real abdications. There was no moment when the crown came off. There was a morning when I went to the hall in Banan to collect the last of my things from the back room, and the back room was already a store cupboard, and the keepers had put the robes and the fans and the gourd flasks in three cardboard boxes and labeled them *RECEIPTS*, and I stood in a room that smelled of dust and incense and cheap cardboard and understood that the movement had already abdicated me, and that an institution's loyalty is shorter than a man's, which is not a betrayal; it is *hygiene*.

I kept two things from the crown, and I kept them on purpose, and I am going to say what they were. The first was the child's photograph, the girl with the hole in her heart, the only one I kept. The second was the book the girl 阿桃 drew, the woman with the bowl. Everything else — the robes, the fans, the pocket edition with my face where my back had been, the banner, the merit ledger — I put in a box and gave to 周平, the keeper with the scar on his stomach, and I told him to burn it or keep it or sell it, whichever he thought the market would do, and he looked at me for a long time and said the only honest thing, which is, "I will keep it. Somebody has to be the archive." And he is. He runs a small shop in Banan now that sells temple goods and, in the back, keeps the whole of the Assembly's records, and he has never once asked me for anything, and he is the reason the Assembly did not vanish without a trace.

I want to give the first ordinary month accurately, because a man coming out of three years of being the center does not come out clean; he comes out *loud*. In the first two weeks after the abdication I did the following: I answered every message I had been ignoring, which was about four hundred, and most of them were from strangers, and it took me four days and left me with nothing; I went to see the woman whose child had the hole in the heart and sat with her for an afternoon and made her promise to keep the medicine, which she did; I went to

an AA-adjacent table at a clinic in Yuzhong and sat for one session and never went back, because the group wanted me to tell the story of the fall and I did not want to be a saint at a meeting either; and I drank, on the eleventh day, a single bottle of baijiu in the room with the wall, and it was the last time, and the reason it was the last time is that 老董 came to find me. He did not lecture. He walked into the room and saw the bottle and sat down on the floor, because there was no second chair, and he said the sentence that is the whole of the recovery and that I have already put in the book once and am putting in again because it cannot be said too often: *you do not have to have a reason. You just have to have a Tuesday.* And then he sat on the floor with me for about two hours without saying anything else, and when the bottle was empty he took it out of the room, and I never drank again, and the not-drinking has been the whole of the rest of my life.

The ordinary came back the way the fog comes back, which is without being invited. I went to the temple and I swept. I went to the tea room and I ate. I went back to the platform and reapplied for my account and the platform, which had suspended me for the second time in three years, reinstated me in eleven days, because by the fourth year the city was bored of me and a bored platform is a merciful one, and my rating was 4.38 and my orders were fine, and I carried noodles to the fourteenth floor of a building in Yubei and the customer said *you're late* and I said *the elevator is broken* and the customer said *one star*, and it was the most restful sentence anyone had said to me in a year.

I want to put down the shape of the ordinary year, because the whole of it has been arguing that the ordinary is the only holy thing, and the reader is entitled to see what it actually looked like, and it looked like this: a man of thirty-one in a yellow jacket, with two hands that could not feel the tips of two fingers and a fan in his pocket and a gourd on his belt, going up and down a vertical city for eleven yuan an hour, sweeping a courtyard on Sundays, eating at a table in the back of a barber's shop with three old women, walking a ridge at dawn, carrying a girl's textbooks down from her room when she moved, and sitting with Zhang Niangniang while Wang Niangniang was in the hospital for her knee, and not drinking, one Tuesday at a time.

That was the year. I am not going to make it a lyric. The ordinary year was, in the ledger of those years, the year of the greatest losses, and I have already given

the losses their chapters, and the ordinary year is the thing they happened *around*, and the reason I put it here, in the chapter about the abdication, is that the abdication was not giving up the crown. The abdication was *accepting the ordinary*, and accepting the ordinary was harder, because the ordinary does not love you, and the ordinary does not need you, and the ordinary is thirty million people going to work, and being one of them is the whole of the work of the rest of my life.

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There was one moment in the abdication that I want to give, because it is the whole of the chapter and the whole of the man.

In the third month of the fourth year, on a Tuesday, I went to the tea room and there was a young man of about twenty-two at the table, a rider, with a delivery box and a cardboard fan, and he was crying, and the aunties were feeding him, and when I came in he looked up at me with the red eyes of a person who has just been told the thing they cannot carry, and he said, "I don't have anywhere to sleep. My account got closed. I have a debt. I don't have anybody."

That is the whole of the scene. A young man, a closed account, a debt, no one. And I stood in the door of the tea room with my own box and my own closed-account history and my own debt, and I did the thing that I had spent three years learning and three years failing to do, and it was not a miracle and it was not a crown and it was not a fan. I sat down next to him and I gave him my congee and I said the sentence that I had been taught by a monk in a courtyard and by a drunk at a table and by a woman with a kettle, the only sentence this whole city has ever actually needed.

"Eat," I said. "Then sleep in the room above the tunnel. Tomorrow you go to the platform office at nine and I will go with you and we will get the account back, and then you will do the run on the lower road for eleven yuan an hour, and you will pay your debt a hundred at a time, and it will take eleven years, and you will not die, and some days you will want to, and on those days you come here and Wang Niangniang makes the noodles, and you eat them, and you do not decide anything, and then you sleep." I gave him the congee. "That is the

whole religion. There is no other one. Anyone who tells you there is another one is selling something, and the thing they are selling is you."

He ate the congee. And on the next Tuesday he came back, and on the Tuesday after that, and he was there for a year, and he got his account back and paid his debt and moved out of the room above the tunnel and got a room with a window, and he is a rider still, and his name is 小陈, and he does not know that he is in this book, and if he ever reads it I hope he understands that the chapter about the abdication is about him, and not about me, because the chapter about the abdication is always about the next person, and the next person is the only door that opens.

CHAPTER 28

The Register

The trafficking case was the largest the province had ever attempted and I am not going to make it a triumph, because it was not one. It was a *register*, and a register, as the abbot had told me once and as I have been trying to write for three years, is a door, and a door does not open for the people it was built for; it opens for whoever comes next.

Here is what the register held, in the plainest numbers I have. The list from the third park named one thousand one hundred and forty persons. Of those, by the time the case closed, two hundred and eleven had been located: thirty-eight in the province, forty-two repatriated, and the rest either still on the road or dead or, in the phrase the court used, *status undetermined*, which is the phrase the law uses when it has done its best and its best is a word. Seventeen people were convicted, from the manager of the third park down to a bus driver; the sentences ran from two years to twenty-two. The men above the manager — the men on the hill, the men with the villas and the casino and the political cover — were not in the case, because the case had a border in it, and the border was the end of the case, and the men on the hill were on the far side of the border in a jurisdiction that had decided, that year, that the park was a *special economic zone*.

The four hundred pages of the judgment were read into the record in a cold courtroom over two days. I went. I sat at the back with Jiang Xue. I was not a witness and I was not a victim and I had no standing, and the clerk did not recognize me, and the judge did not look up, and it was the best two days I have ever spent in a room with the law, because for two days a court with no jurisdiction over the hill and no power over the river did the only thing a court is actually for, which is to *write it down*. And on the last page, below the seal, in the space reserved for the clerk, someone — and no one has ever admitted who, and I have my suspicions, and I keep them — wrote the line that is now the most-read line in the whole four hundred pages, and the line is: **管辖止于河。**

Jurisdiction ends at the river.

I have thought about that line for years. It was not in the judgment. It had no legal weight. It was an act of vandalism in a court document, and it is the truest sentence anyone in the official apparatus of this province ever produced about the whole affair, and it is the reason I keep the four hundred pages on the shelf in the room with the wall, and the reason I tell the young riders who come to the tea room, when they ask me about the law, the only thing I know, which is: *the law is a door and the door is real and the door opens in eleven years, and in the meantime, carry the water yourself.*

Tan Xiao was sentenced in the same courthouse, four months later, on eleven counts of the clean half: financial fraud, misappropriation, obstruction, the foundations-within-foundations, the shells, the laundered clinic money. He was given four years and two months. He had pleaded and he had given them everything, and the family disowned him and the papers wrote the word *inheritance* four hundred times, and the name went on being sold in four provinces, because the name was not a person and a person is the only thing a court can punish. I did not go to the sentencing. I have read the transcript. The only thing in it I have kept is the allocution, which was one page long, and the last line of which was: *I am not my father and I am not my brand and I do not know yet what I am, and I am asking the court to give me the years in which to find out.* The judge, who had been doing this for thirty years, looked at the son for a long moment and then said the sentence that was not in the judgment and that the papers did not print, because the microphones had already been switched off.

"Take the years," the judge said. "They are the only honest thing anyone in this room is going to give you."

The arson stayed stone. I have to put that here so that the reader does not close the book believing the fire was punished. The fire was not punished and it is not going to be punished. The electrical finding still stands in the fire-service report and the insurance annex; the estate still carries the liability in the civil register; the abbot's ashes are still in a niche in the courtyard of a building that was rebuilt by the money of the company that burned it; and the only living proof of what happened on the night of the twenty-third of the twelfth month is a recording made by a dead enforcer in a wheelchair for a woman with a camera, and the recording fell as rain, and the rain does not un-write a register. That is the

whole of what the law could do about a fire. I have decided that the not-doing is the honest place to stand. I have also decided that it is not the same as forgetting, and that the difference is the *wall*, and the wall is the next chapter.

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I want to give the survivors of the case accurately, because a register of convictions is not a register of girls, and the dignity protocol that this book has carried comes down to a single room in a courthouse in a province I will not name, on a morning in the spring, when the twenty-one witnesses under the statute were heard.

They were heard one at a time, and they were heard in closed court, and I was not allowed in, and what I have is what Jiang Xue gave me, and what she gave me is this. Eleven of the twenty-one testified. Ten did not, and their statements were read-in, and six of the ten statements were one line long, and the one line was the same in all six, and the line was *I do not want to be a person who was in the park; I want to be a person who is at work*, which is the most honest sentence this whole case produced. Of the eleven who testified, four described the phones, three described the dormitory, two described the guards, one described the book, and one — a woman of twenty-six who had been in the third park for three years — stood in the closed court and said the thing that Jiang Xue has never been able to stop thinking about, which is: "I do not want him punished. I want him to *know my name*. He called me a number for three years and now I am in the room and he is in the box and I want the record to say that the number was a person, and then I want to go home." The court wrote it down. That is the whole of what a court can do for a person: it can write the name down. It cannot undo the number. It cannot make the woman not have been in the room. It can only say the name out loud in a room with a seal on it, and that is not enough, and it is not nothing, and it is the exact size of the only thing that ever worked.

There is one more page of the register and it is Jiang Xue's, and I am going to give it because she asked me to and because she has earned it.

Her brother 江海 served three years of his four, and he served them in a prison in a province I will not name, and he was, by the account of the officers, a model prisoner, which is what a person becomes when he has spent five years in a

park being a model supervisor. His wife and child were resettled with a restitution payment from the list, and the child is in school, and the wife works in a garment factory, and the family did not come home, because the wife's mother is on the far side and because the shame of the park does not travel well, and because a person who has been on the road does not always want to return to the town that sold them the ticket. Jiang Xue visits him once a year, and she has told me, once, that the visits are the closest thing to a home she has had since 2018, and that the two of them sit in the visiting room and eat the noodles she brings and do not talk about the park and do not talk about the list and do not talk about the girl in the photograph with the orchids, and that this is the whole of what a family is for, and that she has stopped being ashamed of the smallness of it.

She runs the aid station on the far bank now, with the nun and A-Zhen and the list. That is the last sentence of her page. The drawer became a station, and the station has been open for four years, and it does not have a name, and the door is a woman of sixty-something with a bad back and a card shop's worth of experience in how the road works, and the station keeps the *only* complete file of the missing on either bank of the river, and Jiang Xue told me, the last time I saw her, that the file is now *fifty pages thicker* than the day she resigned, and that the fifty pages are not a loss, they are a *record*, and that she has decided to spend the rest of her life being the woman who keeps the record of the poor, which is the exact job that Liu Niangniang did for forty years in a mahjong parlor in a tunnel under a mountain, and which the city has never once paid for and never once built.

CHAPTER 29

The Mother

I went to Guangdong in the fifth month of the fourth year, five months later than I should have and nineteen years later than I could have, and I went because Wang Niangniang had said the sentence and because the sentence had done in four words what three years had not done, which is to make me put down the noodles and get on a train.

The train took nine hours and the last hour was through a landscape I did not recognize, because I had never been south in my life, and because the whole of my geography was a river and a ridge and a stair. She met me at the station. That is the thing I want to start with, because I had spent nineteen years constructing the meeting and the meeting happened at a bus stop outside a station in a city I did not know, and she was wearing a red jacket and had her hair up and she was fifty-four and smaller than I remembered, and she looked at me for a long moment and then she did the thing she had done on the telephone for nineteen years, which was to report the weather.

"You look thin," she said. "It is humid here. Come. The bus is this way."

That was the greeting. I had rehearsed the other greetings for nineteen years and none of them happened and all of them were wrong, and the weather was the only language the two of us had ever actually spoken, and the weather was enough to get us onto the bus.

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She had a rented flat on the sixth floor of a building with no elevator, in a district I will not name, two rooms and a balcony and a rice cooker and a television and a photograph on the shelf that I had never seen, and the photograph was the two of us when I was one, her holding me, my father in the frame at the edge, and it was the only photograph in the flat and it was turned to face the room. She cooked. That was the whole of the first day. She cooked three dishes and a soup and did not let me help and would not sit down until I had eaten, and she asked me about the noodles and the knee and the aunties and the

temple, and she asked about none of the other things, and I answered all of it and none of the other things, and we watched the television, and at ten she said the beds were made and went to her room and closed the door, and I sat on the sofa in a city I did not know and understood that we had been having the same conversation for nineteen years and that neither of us had ever known how to have the other one.

On the second day she did not get up.

That is the whole of it. She was fifty-four and she had had the benign lump out in the sixth month of the third year and had told me nothing, and in the fifth month of the fourth year, the day after I arrived, she had a stroke in the night, a small one, and when I went in to her in the morning she was awake and her left hand was not, and she looked at me from the bed with the flat eyes of a woman who had been expecting this and had arranged for it, and the first thing she said, in the flat voice of a woman reporting weather, was:

"Good. You came before it. I was afraid you would come after."

She was in the hospital for nine days and then she came home, and for the next three weeks I was in the flat and I did the thing I had spent three years learning to do, which is the *small* thing: I cooked the soup and I cleaned and I took her to the physiotherapy on the bus and I helped her with the left hand and I bought the groceries and I did not try to have the conversation. And the conversation happened anyway, the way it happens, in pieces, on the sofa, over the soup, on the ninth day, on the fifteenth, on the twenty-first, and I am going to give it the way it came, because it did not come in order and because a real conversation between a mother and a son who have not spoken in nineteen years does not have a structure; it has *weather*.

She asked about my father. Not the death; the *man*. She asked what I remembered and I told her what I remembered, which was not much: a back, a laugh, a gourd on a step. And she told me the thing that she had been carrying for twenty-nine years, which was that he had been afraid of the river, that he had been afraid of the river his whole life and had never once said it, and that he had gone into the porters' trade anyway because it was the only trade his family had, and that on the mornings he left she had watched him from the window and had known he was walking toward the thing he was afraid of, and that she had never

told anyone. She said it flatly and then she said, "He was a good man and he was not a *great* man and I have spent twenty-nine years not being able to say that because everyone says the dead are great, and I want to say it to somebody before I die: he was a good man and he was afraid of the water and he made a joke every morning so that nobody would know, and that is the whole of him, and the whole of him is enough."

She asked about Huajiao. I told her. She listened for a long time and then she said, "You are her mother now, and it is not the same as being her father, and the two of you are going to make a mess of it, and it will still be enough, because the child has a *wall* and a *table* and the wall is the thing that matters." She asked about the crown, and the movement, and the girl of fifteen. I told her. She did not judge me. She said the thing that only a mother who has been absent for nineteen years could say, which was, "You took the crown because you could not stand being nobody, and everyone in this city would have taken it too, and I am the only person in your life who gets to say that without making it a compliment." And she asked whether I was drinking. I told her the count. She looked at me for a long time and then she said, "Then add a Tuesday," and poured me a tea.

On the twenty-second day, in the evening, she did the thing that I have been waiting the whole of the book to write down. She was on the sofa with the television on and the left hand in her lap, and she said, without looking at me, in the flattest voice she had ever used, "The brick."

I did not know what she meant.

"The wall," she said. "The wall between us. I built it in 2006, when your grandfather died, because I had to go south and I could not take you and I did not know how to say it, and so I left and I sent the money and I called once a month about the weather, and every year I did not come back I put another brick on the wall. I have been putting bricks on it for nineteen years. I can see the wall. I know exactly how many bricks. And I want to tell you, before I die, that the wall was never *yours*. It was never because you had done anything. It was because I did not know how to be a mother and a worker and a woman at the same time, and I chose the worker, because the worker paid for your shoes, and the choosing was the wall, and the wall was mine, and the whole of the nineteen years was

mine, and you are not carrying anything. You are carrying my wall. Put it down." She looked at me then, with the flat eyes, and she said the last sentence, and it was not a reconciliation and it was not a forgiveness and it was the truth, and the truth was better than both.

"I did not come back because I could not. That is all. It was not a good reason. It was a *fact*. And now I am a woman on a sofa with a bad arm and a good son who took nine hours on a train, and the fact is over, and the wall goes down, and there is no more brick to put down, because there is no more wall, and you can go home."

And there were the small days, which are the whole of what a mother and a son actually have. We went to the market on the second morning, before the stroke, and she bought a fish and made me carry it and told the fish woman that her son had come from Chongqing, and the fish woman said, *is he the one in the yellow jacket*, and my mother said, *no, he is a rider*, which was both a lie and the truest thing she ever said about me, and we carried the fish home and she cooked it and it was good. And on the fourth evening, before the stroke, we sat on the balcony and watched the other building and she told me about her neighbour, a woman of eighty who played the erhu badly and did it every evening at seven, and we listened to the erhu, and my mother said, in the flat voice of a woman reporting weather, "For the first three years I could not listen to it. I would hear it and I would think, that is the sound of a city where my son is not. And then one year I stopped thinking that, and I do not remember when, and the not-remembering is the whole of what happened to us." That is the sentence I have kept from Guangdong. That is the whole of the nineteen years, in the mouth of a woman listening to a bad erhu on a balcony: she stopped thinking about me, one year, and cannot remember when, and the stopping is the wall, and the wall came down in four sentences on a sofa, and the erhu is still playing, and the woman who plays it does not know she is in this book.

She died eleven days later, in her sleep, in the flat, in the fifth month, and I was in the room. I want to put the whole of it down and I am going to, and then I am going to leave her alone.

I heard the breathing change at about four in the morning and I woke and I sat with her. That is the whole of what I did, and it is the whole of what anyone

can do, and I have decided, after everything, that sitting in a dark room with a dying woman who is the only person in the world whose face is also your face is the single most important thing I have ever done or ever will do. I did not call the ambulance until she stopped. I held her hand — the right one, the one that still worked — and I said nothing, because there was nothing to say, and the television was off and the city was loud outside and the rice cooker was on the counter with her soup in it, and at about six the breathing stopped and I sat with her for a while longer, and then I closed her eyes, and then, because I am the son of a woman who reported the weather, I did the only thing I knew how to do.

I went out onto the balcony and I looked at a city I did not know, in the grey light, and I did not cry, and I did not grieve, and I did not do any of the things the city's stories say a man does when his mother dies. I stood on a balcony in Guangdong and I thought about a wall of bricks that had never existed and a gourd on the thirtieth step and a man afraid of the water, and then I went in and I made the bed and I called the funeral home and I did the paperwork, and on the third day I put her in the ground in a public cemetery on the edge of the city, with a white cloth and a small stone and her name and her dates and nothing else, because the board could not agree and because she had told me, on the sofa, that she wanted no sentence.

And then I went home on the train with a red jacket in my bag. It was hers. I have it still. It is in the drawer in the room with the wall, next to a pouch I no longer open and a picture of a woman with a bowl, and I have never worn it, and I will never give it away.

CHAPTER 30

The Wall

The temple survived the whole of it, and the temple is the wall, and the wall is the last chapter of the argument.

I have described the temple in three years and I am not going to describe it again, except to say what it looked like in the fifth year, which is the year after the mother died, when I went back to sweeping on Sundays. It had a new green roof and an old bell and a hall of five hundred statues of which four hundred and thirty-nine were original and sixty-one were rebuilt and two hundred and fourteen were mended with a grey paste that everybody could see. It had a congee line that was three thousand bowls a month, which is more than it had ever had before the fire. It had the abbot's name in the east cloister, and the grandfather's name under it, which the novice had cut there without permission and the board would not remove. It had Chen Popo's chair by the door, empty, because Chen Popo had died in the spring of the fourth year, in the chair, in the sun, and the novice had not moved the chair and never would. And in the back room, in the account book, on the page after the accounts, there was a recipe for congee in the abbot's hand, and a second recipe in Jiefeng's hand, and the two of them were the same recipe, which is rice and water and a long wait.

Jiefeng died in the fifth year, four months after Chen Popo, of the lung, and his last act — I witnessed it, because I was sweeping — was to write the recipe in the account book in his own hand so that the novice who was now a monk of twenty-three would have it after him. He had spent the whole of it being the institutional failure mode and the institutional salvation at the same time, which is the only honest way to be an institution, and at the end he was a monk in a room with a book, and he said one sentence to me before he stopped working, and the sentence was, "The board is going to want the son's money again in five years, and the abbot would have refused it, and I did not refuse it, and the temple is standing." He closed the book. "I have thought about that every day for five years and I have not resolved it. I want you to know that it does not resolve. It is

the *institution*, and the institution does not resolve, and a temple that resolves is a temple that has decided to stop feeding people. Tell the novice to refuse them anyway. He will not listen. That is also the institution."

He died and the temple kept the congee and the movement kept its diaspora and the merchandise kept its second line printed on the fan, and the whole of the *wall* was this: after three years and a fire and a trial and a crown and a ward and a river, the only things that had actually endured were a bowl of rice porridge and a note on a wall and a ground behind a temple with four graves in it, and I had spent my whole life trying to be the *man* and had discovered, in the end, that the man is not durable, and that the thing that is durable is the *wall* and the *bowl* and the *record*, and that a person who tries to be the durable thing becomes a god, and a god is a mouth.

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I want to give one scene of the diaspora, because the diaspora is the true ending of the movement.

In the sixth month of the fifth year, in the third year after the confession, I was on the lower road on a run, and I passed a small shop with a yellow awning and the yellow awning had a fan on it and the fan had the second line printed on it, and I stopped, because the second line on a fan was new. I went in. The shop sold temple goods and medicine and small bags of rice and a wall of photographs of healings, and behind the counter there was a woman of about fifty with a warm hand and a steady face, and the woman was one of the four who had come to the tea room with the great fast. She was 妙蓮. She had set up the shop with the restitution from the case (she had been the Assembly's senior healer; her name was on the list of the healed; she had been awarded a small sum) and she ran it as a clinic and as a shop and as a shrine to the disappearance of a thing she still believed in, and she recognized me and did not turn away and did not bow.

"I heard about the fast," I said.

"There was no fast," she said. "You said no. I did not do it without you, because the fast without the saint is a diet." She straightened a medicine box. "I run the awnings now. Two of them. We feed about four hundred a week. I do not heal. I have stopped healing, because I cannot tell the difference between a

healing and a coincidence anymore, and because I am not going to be the woman with the warm hand who kills a child." She looked at me, and the look was the whole of the diaspora. "You were right, and I hate that you were right, and I am going to run the awnings for the rest of my life, and it is not a feat and it is not a fast and it is *four hundred people eating*, and I was in the room when you said the brake in the tent and I was in the room when you refused the fast at the tea room, and the two things are the same thing, and the same thing is *sit down and eat the congee and do not make a god of the man who fed the last one*, and I have a sign that says it now, in the shop, over the door, and the sign is the only liturgy I have." She pointed. The sign over the door said, in the Assembly's careful characters, **坐低，食碗粥** — *sit down, eat a bowl of congee.*

And I stood in a shop in the sixth month of the fifth year and looked at the sign, and I understood that the movement had not died and had not won and had not been resolved. It had *dispersed into shops*. It had become a hundred small awnings and a sign that said sit down and eat, and half of them were run by people who had healed and half by people who had been healed and some by people who had done harm and some by people who had done good, and the whole of it was the *diaspora*, and the diaspora is the way a faith actually survives, which is not as a doctrine and not as a leader but as a *habit* in the hands of the poor. That is not a triumph of the good. It is not a defeat of the evil. It is the *wall*, and the wall is a habit, and the habit is congee, and there is nothing in the whole of my three years that I would put in the place of it.

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I want to give the ordinary life of the temple in the years after the movement, because the temple is the wall and a wall is made of Thursdays. The congee line ran from six to nine and it was three thousand bowls a month, and the people in it were the people the city had stopped counting: the men who swept the roads and the women who carried the vegetables and the old men whose pensions did not reach the end of the month and the riders between the first order and the second. Wang Niangniang cooked at the temple on the fifteenth and the aunties' kitchen sent the pickles. The novice, who was twenty-five now and whose name was still Jingchen, ladled the congee and got the old words right and had stopped

needing the book, and on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month he read the couplet out loud in the east courtyard for the people who came to touch the wall. He did not interpret it. That was his one rule and he had learned it from a boy of seventeen who had read a wall to a room of old women and had said the truest thing any priest in this whole city ever said, which is that the note was *telling the man with the fan to put the fan down*, and that the man had gotten there on the wall and it was too late. The novice never explained the couplet. He read it and sat down and ate.

And once a year, on the twenty-third of the twelfth month, which is the night of the fire, the temple did the thing the board had never authorized and could not stop: the novice opened the hall at midnight and lit one lamp in the east cloister where the fire had come up, and sat there until dawn, alone, and anyone who came sat with him, and nobody spoke and nobody filmed and the whole of it was one lamp and one man and a wall, and I have sat in that hall for four of the years, and it is the closest thing to a service that this city has produced, and it is not a service, it is a *vigil*, and a vigil is the only liturgy the poor have ever been able to afford.

The note stayed on the wall. That is the last sentence of the chapter and it is the only sentence of the chapter that matters.

It stayed on the wall of the back room of the barbershop behind the sign that said *tea seats*, and the barber died and his nephew took the shop and did not remove the note, because the aunties paid the rent and because the aunties had told the nephew, on the first day, the only thing they ever told anyone about the note, which was: *that sentence is the reason this room is safe, and if you take it down the room will still be a room, but it will not be safe, and you will not know the difference until something happens.* And so the note stayed, and in the fifth year, on a Tuesday, a young rider came into the back room with a cardboard fan he had made himself and sat down at the table and read the note with his lips moving, and then asked Wang Niangniang what it said, and Wang Niangniang told him, in fifteen seconds, as she had told four hundred people, and the telling was the whole distribution system, and the boy went out and did not make himself a saint, and that is the only miracle in those years that I will claim.

CHAPTER 31

The Grave

The ground behind the temple holds four of them, and I go out and I stand there, and the standing is the whole of the chapter and the whole of what I have left.

The abbot 寂山 is the first. He died on the night of the twenty-third of the twelfth month, in a temple fire, going back into the smoke for a person who did not exist, because the count had already been complete and because a woman was safe and because a man who had spent his life ladling congee for the poor of a city had decided, in four seconds, that the right thing to do with his body was to spend it. His stone has his own name and nothing else. The brass jar is in a niche in the east cloister. There is always an orange in front of it, and the orange is put there by whoever comes, and no one organizes it, and it is never empty, and the novice has calculated, once, for me, that the oranges cost the community about four hundred yuan a year, and that it is the best money the temple spends.

The enforcer 刀哥 is the second. He died in a room off the east cloister, two years after the trial, of the injury he took when he fell seven floors into the consecration pit of the tower he had helped buy. His stone has his own name and nothing else, because the board could not agree and because he told the novice, at the end, that he did not want a sentence and that the only true thing about him was that he had watered the pots in the courtyard of a building he had burned, and that a sentence could not hold that, and that a stone could. He is the man who might have been on the stairs the day my father died. I have never learned whether he was. I have decided that the not-learning is the whole of what he left me, and that I am supposed to carry it, and that carrying it is the only forgiveness he ever asked for.

The zealot 老孙 is the third. He died on the far bank trying to get a girl out of a holding room, three weeks after he put a hammer in a man's head for the same reason, and the girl is with her family, and his widow is a woman of sixty in Jiangbei who still puts a fan on his stone on the first of the month, and who told

me, once, when I went to see her, the sentence that is the whole of the man: "He was kind his whole life and he killed a man at sixty-four, and the two of them were the same man, and I am the only person in this city who is allowed to say that without making it a story." She is right. I have put the man in this book anyway, because the record must hold both, and because a book that only holds the kind part is a *banner*, and I have had enough of banners.

The auntie 刘嬢嬢 is the fourth. She died between a tile and a tile in the back room of a barber's shop in the twelfth month of the third year, and her stone has her own name and nothing else, and she is the reason the whole of it exists, because she was the memory of the poor of this city for forty years and no institution ever paid for her and no government ever built another one, and when she died the *only* complete record of the collection men and the loan offices and the dead men's enforcers died with her, except for four notebooks Yaoji wrote down and the forms in a nun's station on the far bank and the list in a drawer in Yuzhong, and the whole of it together is a *door*, and the door is what she left, and I sweep a courtyard on Sundays and I do not know how to explain to a city of thirty million that the holiest person in it was a gossip who dealt tiles and kept a book in her head.

Chen Popo is not in the ground behind the temple. She is in the wall with the monks, because she left word that she wanted to be cremated and put there and no one to be told, and three people knew, and I have now told a book, and that is a small betrayal and I have decided to commit it because the whole of it is about the people the city cannot see, and Chen Popo was the second kind from before the Republic, and she never said one word that anyone could hear, and she was the moral center of the fire and the reason the abbot went back in, and the city does not know her name and I am putting her name in the record so that it is somewhere.

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I want to give the dead their due before I give the living their chapter, because the whole of it has been an argument about what a record is for, and the record is the four stones and the ground. The abbot is the only one of the four who died *well*, in the sense the city uses, and even the abbot's death was not well: he went

back into a fire for a person who did not exist, because the count was complete and because an old woman was safe, and he died for a *mistake* — the mistake of a man who could not believe the count, which is the same mistake as hope and the same mistake as love. The enforcer is the only one of the four who died *late*, and a late death is not a redemption; it is a man spending the whole of his last years watering the pots in a courtyard he burned, and the watering does not undo the fire, and the not-undoing is the whole of what I have to say about the enforcer. The zealot is the only one of the four who died *doing*, and he died with a hammer's guilt on his hands and a girl's life in the ledger, and the two do not cancel and never will, and the widow who puts the fan on his stone on the first of every month is the only person in this city who is allowed to hold both without making it a story. And the auntie is the only one of the four who died *with nothing to show*: forty years of memory, four written-up notebooks, a wall of forms in a station on the far bank, a list in a drawer, no monument, no plaque, no sentence. She is the reason I keep the four hundred pages of the judgment on the shelf, and the reason I tell the young riders, when they come to the table and ask, the one thing about the law that I actually know: *the state writes the judgments, and the poor write the forms, and the forms are the door that the judgments lean on.*

I want to put down the thing I actually do at the ground, because I have been circling it for a whole chapter and the reader deserves the plain fact.

I do not pray. I have never once prayed, in the whole of it, and I am not going to start at the end of it, because I do not know what prayer is and because the abbot told me once that a man who does not know what prayer is should not fake it. What I do at the ground is this. I stand in front of the four stones and I say the four names, out loud, in order, and I do not add a sentence, and then I sweep the path and I go home. The names take about eleven seconds. That is the whole ceremony. I have done it about forty times a year for the years since, and I do it in the way Wang Niangniang does the funeral meal and the way Yaoji does the whiteboard and the way Jingchen does the congee — not as a ritual and not as a discipline but as the *only thing left to do with the hands*. And the thing I think, standing there, is the thing the whole of it has been arguing toward and that I am now going to say plainly, once, because it is the last chance I have:

The dead do not need me. The dead are finished and the dead are safe and the dead have the good fortune of having been written down. What needs me is the *next* person, and the next person is at the gate of the temple right now, and the next person is a rider with a closed account or a woman with a debt or a boy with a cardboard fan, and the reason I stand at the four stones for eleven seconds is not to honor the dead. It is to *remember that I am not allowed to become one of them on purpose*. The fast was a beautiful death. The bottle was an easy death. The crown was a death dressed as a life. And the only thing I have to offer the next person is a man who is still here, with a broom, in the fog, doing the eleven seconds and going home.

I do not know whether the dead can hear. I have decided that the question is not mine to answer, and that the not-answering is the honesty the whole of it has been built on, and that the fog keeps what the fog keeps. I say the names. I sweep. I go home. And on the way out, at the gate, there is a bowl of congee, and there is always somebody who needs it.

CHAPTER 32

The Return

Huajiao went south in the fifth month, two weeks after the mother died, and she went alone, and she stayed on the far bank for four months, and she came home in the ninth month with a boy of ten and a suitcase and a notebook, and the whole of the return is the chapter and I am going to give it without any of the words that adults use about reunions.

She had gone back for the mother's end, because the mother's end was coming, and because Rule Three was *when the mission is over, I stay* and the mission had become a woman in a rented room above a market who did not want to die alone. She got there in time. She was with He Xia for the last five weeks, in the room, and she did the thing she had never once been given permission to do, which was to be a daughter: she cooked and she cleaned and she slept on the floor and she helped the left hand and she did the physiotherapy and she read the boy his homework and she did not once ask the mother why. And He Xia died on the first of the ninth month, in the room, in the afternoon, with the boy at school and the daughter on the floor beside the bed, and the last thing the mother said, Huajiao told me, was the last thing every mother in this city says, which was: *eat on time.*

And then Huajiao did the thing that the whole of it had been building toward without ever once naming it, which is that she took the boy.

She took him because the mother had asked her to before she died, and because the boy had no papers and a father on the road and a name on a book and a grandmother too old and a country that would not have him, and because Rule Three said stay and Rule Four said *a person can be loved from a distance* and neither of the rules said anything about a boy of ten with a suitcase, and so she made the fifth rule, on the bus, with the boy asleep against her shoulder, and the fifth rule is: **if there is a child, the child is the mission.** That is the whole of Rule Five. I have it in the notebook. She wrote it in the bus in the ninth month,

and it is in her hand, and it is the last rule she has written, and it is the reason the found family has a boy in it now.

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I want to give the boy accurately, because a book about a child that makes the child a symbol is the exact crime the whole of it has been about.

He Xiaozhou was ten. He had lived his whole life in a rented room above a market on the far bank and he had never crossed a river and he had never been in a building taller than four floors and he had never, until the suitcase, seen his sister. He arrived in the city with a red plastic bag of his mother's things and a school bag and a cough and the flat, watchful, survival-calm of a boy who had grown up in a room with a dying woman and no father, and the adjustment was not beautiful. That is the thing I want the reader to hold. The adjustment was *terrible* and it is still going on, years later, and it is the most ordinary terrible thing in the whole of it. He cried for the first week and would not sleep alone and slept between Wang Niangniang and Zhang Niangniang in the back room of the barber's shop, on the floor, on a mat, for eleven nights, and then he slept in Huajiao's room above the tunnel, and then he slept alone. He did not speak for three days and then he spoke in the far-bank dialect that the city mocked, the way the city mocks all the dialects it does not own, and the first sentence he said in the aunties' back room, on the fourth day, was, "Where is the television." And Huajiao said, "There is no television." And he said, "Where is the cinema." And she said, "There is no cinema, there is a school." And he said the sentence that the whole found family has kept, and that is the reason this chapter is not a tragedy, which is: "Okay. I am not used to okay."

He was enrolled in a district school in the tenth month, with a temporary guardian document that Jiefeng wrote before he died and that the aunties stamped with a temple seal that had no legal weight and that the school, because it was a school in Chongqing and because the headmistress had a heart, accepted. He was behind by a year and caught up. He learned to ride a scooter before he learned to swim. He has a temper and a beautiful laugh and he calls Huajiao *jiejie* and he calls Wang Niangniang *nainai* and he calls me, at first, nothing, and then, on a Saturday in the second year, in the middle of a delivery run I had let him ride

along on, in the traffic, at a light, without preamble, in the flat far-bank voice of a boy who had decided something and would not say it twice: "你是我姐的什么人." — *What are you to my sister.*

And I said the only true thing, which is, "I am the man who carries the noodles and holds the door." And he looked at me for a long moment at the light, and then he said, "Okay," and that was the whole of the adoption, and it is the only adoption that ever happened in the whole of it, and it happened without a document and without a board and without a temple seal, at a traffic light on the lower road, and I have not been able to improve on it.

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There is more to the boy than the adjustment, and I am going to put it down, because a rescued child who is written only as a wound becomes a symbol, and he was never a symbol.

He Xiaozhou was a *kid*, which is to say he was difficult and funny and sometimes cruel and sometimes afraid, and he did not become a symbol and he did not become a saint and he did not become grateful in the way the city's stories want a rescued child to be grateful. In the first year he stole from the aunties twice, small things, a lighter and fifty yuan, and Wang Niangniang caught him the second time and did not punish him and did not tell him it was all right; she put him at the sink and made him wash the bowls for a month and said the sentence the whole found family has kept, which is, "You are not a guest here. Guests steal. Family *works*." He was behind in school and caught up. He had a fight in the second year and a fight in the third and in the fourth year he did not have a fight, and nobody ever found out why, and Huajiao says it is because he made a friend, which is the whole of what a boy of thirteen needs. He asked about his mother in the first year and did not ask in the second, and in the fourth year, on the anniversary of her death, he asked Huajiao to take him to the ground behind the temple, and he stood in front of a stone with a woman's name on it and said nothing for a long time, and then he said the thing that Huajiao has kept, which is: "I don't remember her voice. I remember the room and the pot and I don't remember the voice." And Huajiao, who had spent her whole childhood on the road of a missing mother, said the only true thing, which is, "I

know. I have one photograph and no voice. You have a voice and a stone. That is more than I ever had, and it is not enough, and both of those things are true." And the boy, who was thirteen, said, "Okay," and they walked home.

He is sixteen now as I write this. He has a scooter he is allowed to ride and a temper he is learning to manage and a laugh that comes out of nowhere and takes a room with it, and he is on a vocational course for vehicle repair, and he does not know he is in a book, and if he ever reads it I want him to know one thing and it is the only thing: he was never the mission. The mission was his sister. He was the *reason*, and a reason is better than a mission, because a mission ends and a reason keeps going.

I have to put down the other return, because the reader has been waiting for it since the winter before and because I promised her I would write it true.

In the eleventh month of the fourth year, about two months after the boy came home, Huajiao came to the tea room in the evening after the game was done and sat down across from me with the notebook in her hand and did not open it. She was nineteen. She had a job and a ward and a boy and a city and a notebook with five rules in it, and she had spent the whole of her childhood being made into a weapon and the whole of the last two years being un-made, and she looked at me with the flat eyes of the girl who had put a knife on a table in a border-town tea house and asked a man what he wanted.

"You were carrying the whole of it," she said. "That is what I figured out on the far bank. Not the myth and not the movement. The *book*. Somebody has to carry the whole thing, all the dead and the boy and the mother and the wall, and you have been carrying it since the first winter, and no one ever asked you and no one ever took a turn." She did not soften it and she did not say it kindly, because she was not made that way, and the flatness was the kindness. "So I am taking the turn. Not the book. The *boy*. The boy is mine, and the rules are mine, and the part of the book that is a boy and a girl and a table is mine, and you can put that part down. You carry the dead. I carry the living. That is the arrangement."

And then she did the thing that had been coming for five years, and she said it plainly, in the dialect of the tunnel, in the voice of a person stating a fact, and she did not smile and she did not cry and she did not take it back.

"师父," she said.

That was the whole of it. She called me *master*, once, plainly, and owned it, and then she picked up the notebook and went up the stairs to the boy, and I sat in the back room of the barber's shop with the note on the wall and the tea going cold and the aunties at their tiles, and I did not cry and I did not do the thing the city's stories say a man does when a girl he has raised calls him master. I drank the tea. And Wang Niangniang, without looking up from her hand, said the sentence that closed the chapter, and the sentence was not about me and was not about the girl and was about the whole city.

"借的,还了。" — *The loan is repaid.*

CHAPTER 33

The Price List

A delivery manifest is a list of what a person owes and what a person has already paid, and I have carried enough of them to know that the two things are never on the same receipt. So here it is, the manifest of the four years, itemized in the order the platform taught me, which is by cost and not by meaning, and if the reader has come this far I am asking one thing: do not make it a lesson.

Item one. One abbot, male, seventy-four, in a fire, going back into the smoke for a person who did not exist. Recorded. Unavenged. An orange in front of a jar, every day, forever, costing about four hundred yuan a year.

Item two. One father, male, forty-one, under a refrigerator on a flight of stairs above the river, in 2003, because a man on a stair does not turn around, and because the stair does not permit it, and because he was afraid of the water his whole life and never said so, which his wife told me on a sofa in Guangdong, and which is the only new thing I learned about my father in twenty-nine years.

Item three. One girl, female, six, dead on the floor of a rented room in the fourth month of the third year while two hundred people told her mother that faith was the medicine. Her name was A-Yue. Her mother's name is A-Lian. Her mother is alive and works in an office building and still believes she did not love her daughter enough, and there is nothing in this book or in the law or in the whole machinery of the city that can take that sentence out of her.

Item four. One man, male, thirty-four, named 阿全, schizophrenic since nineteen, held down and chanted over by four healers in a tent in Jiulongpo and dead by morning, and his mother believed his soul was received, and the rule I wrote about it did not bring him back, and the movement printed the rule and went on.

Item five. One man, male, forty-five, named by no one I have ever been able to find, killed on a landing above a hardware shop on the far bank by a hammer in the hand of a man who would not be a coward twice, while he was opening a

door to save a girl. His wife said *take the road.* His name is not in the book and I am ashamed of that and I do not have it.

Item six. One girl, female, fourteen, who walked out of a holding room on the far bank while a woman knelt on a landing with her husband's head in her lap, and who was never found. She is in the forms, unnamed, and the forms are not a door.

Item seven. One girl, female, nineteen, named A-He, who wanted to be a nurse, who spent eleven days in the second park and came home, and who is a nurse now, and who is the only item on this whole manifest that came out clean, and I am putting her seventh on purpose, the way a delivery manifest puts the fragile thing in the middle of the box.

Item eight. One thousand one hundred and forty persons on a list recovered in a rice sack by a girl of nineteen who had taken a knife out of her own life, of whom two hundred and eleven have been located, and the rest *status undetermined*, which is the word the law uses when its best is a word.

Item nine. One captain, female, forty-one, who resigned the law she believed in, and who now keeps the only complete record of the missing on either bank of a river, and who visits her brother once a month in a prison in a province I will not name, and who says that the visits are the closest thing to a home she has ever had.

Item ten. One son, male, twenty-eight, four years and two months for the clean half, who gave the court every page and every name and did not appeal, and whose last word to me was *put in the part where you answered*, and who served his years and was released in the spring of the eighth year and went somewhere no one has heard of the name, and who is, as far as the record shows, alive, ordinary, and nobody's.

Item eleven. One archive, female, twenty-eight, three thousand entries and a name she gave up, falling as rain in fifty places, uncopyable and unpurchasable and unowned, filmed by no one because the woman who made it decided that the incorruptible thing cannot have a face, and who is the only person in the whole of it who ever got exactly what she wanted and paid for it and did not complain.

Item twelve. One cousin, male, twenty-five, married, with a daughter of two and a company of eleven riders and a permanent internal injury and a whiteboard of coloured magnets, who is the reason the found family has a *future* and not only a past, and who is, by the whole arithmetic of this manifest, the person who came out of the four years with the most and lost the least, and who does not think so, and who needs to be told.

Item thirteen. Three aunties, female, sixty-eight, seventy-two, and sixty-four, in the back room of a barber's shop behind a sign that says *tea seats*, with a note on the wall and a table and a boy on a mat and a game of tiles that has not stopped for five years. One of them is dead. The memory-archive of the poor of this city died between a tile and a tile and was paid for by no institution and replaced by no one, and the city did not notice, and the city has never noticed, and that is the exact measure of the city.

Item fourteen. One mother, female, fifty-four, dead in a rented flat in Guangdong after nineteen years of weather, who took the wall down in four sentences on a sofa, and who told me the truth about my father, and who wanted no sentence on her stone, and whose red jacket is in the drawer in the room with the wall and will never be worn or given away.

Item fifteen. One girl, female, nineteen, alive, with a gut wound scar and a boy of ten and a notebook with five rules and a job and a ward and a temper and a laugh, who was made into a weapon at six and unmade herself in front of witnesses, whose fifth rule is *if there is a child, the child is the mission*, and who calls me *master* once and meant it.

Item sixteen. One man, male, thirty-two, alive, with two hands that cannot feel the tips of two fingers and a crooked finger and a burn scar and a bad knee and a fan that a girl mended with wire and a gourd on his belt and a count that he is not going to write in this book, because the count is not the point and the point is the Tuesdays, and who is delivering noodles on the lower road as I write this, and who is, by the arithmetic of the manifest, the luckiest man in this city.

I want to give the two items that the official list cannot hold, because a manifest without them is a lie the way a price list without the small costs is a lie.

Item seventeen, which has no name. One assembly, spiritual, uncountable, dispersed. It began in a yard in a county town in 2019 with a widow's back and a

man's dead son and a woman's drinking husband, and it grew to thirty thousand and a hall and a bank account and a girl with a board, and after the confession it dispersed into a hundred shops and awnings and a sign that says *sit down, eat a bowl of congee*, and some of the awnings still feed people and some of them took money for cures and both the feeding and the taking are the same movement and the same hands, and there is no ledger that balances it and there is no institution that closed it and there is no one who can tell you whether the net was a hundred thousand bowls of congee or three dead believers or a girl on a platform with her eyes rolled back. It was the *hope of the poor, organized*, and the organizing is the demon and the hope is the only holy thing, and the whole of it is the attempt to say both in the same sentence, and I have not succeeded, and I am seventy thousand words in and I am going to leave it unreconciled, because a movement is not a person and a book that reconciles a movement is a book that has decided to become a brand.

Item eighteen, which is the last and the only one that matters. One man, male, thirty-three, alive, in a room with a wall, with a woman asleep in the next room and a boy asleep in the room after that and a shelf with a note on it and a drawer with a pouch he no longer opens and a red jacket he will never wear and a fan with a knot he has never once proved, and a count he does not write down, and a route at dawn, and a table, and a bowl. He is not a saint and he is not a drunk and he is not a fool, or he is all three and the three are the same man, and the whole of what he has learned in four years is that the good and the bad come out of the same hand and the hand is the only thing he owns and the owning is the whole of the religion. That is item eighteen. That is the manifest. That is the four years. The goods are delivered and the courier is still standing and nobody filmed the delivery, and that, in the whole of it, is the only miracle I will claim.

That is the list. That is the four years. The manifest does not balance and it was never supposed to balance, and the last item, the one with no number, is this: the good and the bad were done by the same hand, and the hand is still here, and it is holding a bowl.

CHAPTER 34

The Tea

The years after the abdication are the years the reader has been promised and the years the city does not tell stories about, because a city tells stories about the fall and the fire and the crown, and it does not tell stories about a man getting up on a Tuesday.

So I am going to give one, and then I am going to stop.

By the sixth year I was thirty-two and I had a count that was longer than any count I had ever had and I still did not write it anywhere, and I was still on the platform, and my rating was 4.51, and I had carried noodles to most of the fourteen thousand floors of the city and would carry them to the rest. Huajiao was twenty-one and had passed her exams and had a job at a logistics company that had, quietly and without ceremony, put her in charge of the night desk, which is the job in every company that actually runs the company, and she did it with the notebook in her bag and the rules in her head, and she came home to a boy of twelve who was in the second year of middle school and had a temper and a beautiful laugh and a scooter he was not allowed to ride and a mother in a ground behind a temple whom he visited on the Saturdays with the aunties. Yaoji and Manman had two children and a company of nineteen riders and had moved into a flat with a balcony, and their daughter called me *shushu* and their son was afraid of me for no reason either of us could find. Wen Xiaoyu was twenty-five and a supervisor at the bank and had, that year, finally gone back to the restaurant where her father cooked and eaten a whole meal with him without either of them crying, which she told me about in a stairwell, briefly, and then never mentioned again. Chen Popo was three years dead and Jiefeng was two years dead and the temple had a novice of twenty-five who ladled the congee and got the old words right. And Wang Niangniang's knee had healed, and Zhang Niangniang's eyes had not, and the tea room behind the barber's shop had a new barber and the same note on the wall and the same four hundred tellings a year.

That is the state of the family at the sixth year. It is not a resolution. It is a *wall*, and a wall holds, and the thing I have learned in the whole of my life is that the only thing a person can actually fix is a wall.

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The years had a rhythm and I am going to give the rhythm, because the rhythm is the answer and the answer does not fit in a scene. The rhythm was the week. On Monday I did the long routes and on Tuesday I sat at the table in the tea room and on Wednesday I took the boy to school and on Thursday I swept the temple and on Friday I did the night shift at the platform because the night shift paid double and on Saturday I walked the Trail with the woman and on Sunday I sat at the tea room again and watched the city. That is the whole of the sixth year. That is the whole of a life, said plainly, and the temptation for a man who has been a saint is to think that a life made of a *rhythm* is a life that has been *reduced*, and I have come to believe the opposite, which is that a rhythm is the only thing strong enough to stand against the disease, because the disease cannot get a purchase on a Tuesday that is already full. 老董, at his table, told me the sentence that is the whole of the recovery: "The bottle is not older than the week. The bottle is *younger* than the week. The week is what the city has, and the city has had the week for a thousand years, and the bottle is a *new thing*, and you do not beat a new thing by being stronger, you beat it by being *older*, and the way a man is older is by doing the same thing on the same day until the doing is older than the wanting."

And the aunties kept the week. That is the last thing I will say about the ordinary years, because it is the true thing. The tea room was open at six and closed at eleven and the tiles came out at seven and the pot did not stop, and in the seventh year the barber's nephew finally took the sign down and put up a new sign that said the same thing in the same characters, and the aunties did not comment, and the note stayed on the wall, and Wang Niangniang cooked for four hundred people a week, and Zhang Niangniang dealt, and the fourth hand was still dealt to the empty chair, and nobody ever said a word about it. And on the day the nephew got married, which was in the eighth year, the whole tea room went to the wedding, forty people in a rented hall, and the aunties sat at

the head table with the boy He Xiaozhou, who was fourteen and had grown tall and had a temper, and the boy asked Wang Niangniang, in front of everyone, the question he had been carrying for four years, which was: "Why is there a fourth hand." And Wang Niangniang looked at the boy for a long moment, and then she did the thing the aunties always do, which is not answer the question, and said, "Because there is always somebody who could not come, and the hand is how we keep their place, and when you are old enough to know who it is for, you will deal it too." And the boy, who was fourteen, said, "Okay," and went and ate, and I have never once seen anyone at that table ask again.

Yingtao came back to the city in the autumn of the sixth year, and she came back for good, and the coming back was the last big thing that happened to me and I am going to give it properly because I promised her once, in a hotpot place, that I would not make our life into a *structure*, and the only way to keep that promise is to make it a scene.

She had been living where the archive was, which was nowhere, for four years. She had kept the rain falling and had run the far-bank station's records with Jiang Xue and had done the slow work of being a person with no channel and no owner, and in the sixth year the platform that had fired her five years before offered her a documentary about the whole affair, with full editorial control, which is the most valuable and most dangerous thing anyone in her business can be offered, and she turned it down, and she told me why in the tunnel, in the back room, over the tea, in about four sentences.

"The documentary is the last version of the lie," she said. "It would have been a good documentary. It would have had the fire and the trial and the crown and the fall, and it would have ended with the man delivering noodles, and every frame of it would have been true, and the whole of it would have been the *market's* version, because the market's version is not the lie, it is the *frame*. I have spent five years learning that a true thing in a frame is worth less than a small thing in a room. So I am not going to make it. I am going to come home and cover the night desk at a paper that pays nothing and keep the archive in a locked drive and be, for the first time since I was twenty, a person who is not *doing* anything." She drank her tea. "And I am going to ask you for the one thing I have never asked you for, and then I am never going to ask again."

"The face," I said.

"The face," she said.

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I gave her the face. That is the whole of the scene and I am going to give it in the order it happened, because the reader has waited three years for it and because it is the last thing I have to give away.

We did it in the tunnel, in the back room, in the afternoon, in the good light by the mouth of it, and there was no gimbal and no lens and no crew and no tripod, because she had put all of it in a box in a flat in Shapingba and had decided that the face, if it ever came, was not going to be *content*. She used her phone. That is the whole of the apparatus. A woman of twenty-eight with a phone and a man of thirty-two in the chair by the table, with the note on the wall behind him and the tea on the table and the aunties out at the market and the boy at school. She did not direct me. She never once directed me; that was her rule; that was the only rule the two of us ever had. She sat across the table and held the phone up and pressed record and let it run, and for the first minute I did the thing I have done my whole life, which is to perform the drunk, to do the joke, to undercut the moment before anyone else could — and she did not laugh, and she did not stop, and she waited, and she kept the camera up, and after a while the performance ran out, because there was nothing to push against, and what was left was a man of thirty-two sitting in a chair in a back room in the fog light with a burnt hand and a crooked finger and a fan in his jacket and a gourd of tea on the table, and the man did not smile and did not look away and did not explain, and the woman with the phone looked at him for two minutes and eleven seconds, and then she lowered the phone and turned it off.

"Thank you," she said.

"Will you keep it?"

"I have already deleted it," she said. "That is not true. I will keep it in the locked drive with the rest and no one will ever see it, and when I am old I will take it out and look at it and remember that there was a man who was not a myth, and the man will be dead, and I will be the only person in the world who ever saw the whole of his face." She put the phone in her bag. "That is the whole

offer. That is the whole compromise. You spent the first year learning to be seen and the second learning that being seen is a market and the third learning that being seen is a *god*, and the thing you have finally given me is the smallest possible version of it, which is one person who knows your face and does not sell it, and I have decided that the smallest version is the only one that is worth having."

She moved into the room with the wall in the spring. That is the last fact of the chapter and it is the whole of the romance, and I will not dress it and I will not explain it and I will not give the reader the wedding the reader wants, because there was no wedding and there did not need to be one. There was a woman who had spent five years carrying a camera and a man who had spent three years refusing it, and they put their books on the same shelf and they ate at the same table and they argued about the note on the wall and they did not once make each other into a story, and the boy 何小舟, who was twelve and had opinions, told the aunties, on the third day, in the flat voice of a boy who had decided a thing and would not say it twice, that the woman was *okay*, which is the highest compliment in the found family and the only one that has ever been accepted.

And the gourd held tea. I want to put that sentence in the chapter and then let the chapter go, because the gourd has held tea for the whole of it and the tea was never the cure and the tea was the *ration*, and the whole of what I have learned in four years of being the man in the yellow jacket is that a ration, taken one Tuesday at a time, in a small room with a wall and a note and a woman and a boy and three old women and a table, is the only thing that has ever actually worked.

CHAPTER 35

The Second Line

The city forgot me in the way the city forgets everything, which is not a cruelty and not a mercy; it is *weather*. By the sixth year there was a new scandal and a new saint and a new tragedy and a bridge that had been painted a different colour, and the platform's feed had moved on the way a river moves on, and the name 山城济公 was, by then, a phrase that a young person might hear from a grandmother and not understand.

This is what remained, and I am going to give it in order, because after four years I am entitled to give the inventory.

The note stayed on the wall. That is the first and the largest thing. The note with the full couplet in the abbot's hand and the second line underlined twice stayed on the wall of the back room of the barber's shop behind the sign that said *tea seats*, and it stayed through the death of the barber and the arrival of his nephew and the two years of the pandemic and the trial of the son and the closing of the lower road and the reopening of it, and it was read aloud, by the aunties' count, about four hundred and ten times a year, and the reading took fifteen seconds, and the reading was the whole distribution system, and I have come to believe that the fifteen seconds in that back room is the only actual *institution* the whole of it produced.

The folk song changed. That is the second thing and it is the thing I want most to put down. On the river steps, where the old porters still gather and where I drank for eleven years and have not drunk for six, the old men sing the four-character song, the one from the television, only the way they sing it now has the warning in it, and the warning is the second line, and the old men who sing it disagree about who added it, and one of them will tell you it was always there and one of them will tell you a drunk added it in the fourth year and one of them will tell you it came up the river, and the whole of the disagreement is now part of the song, and the song is sung by men who do not know what it means

and who mean it anyway. I have listened to it more than once. I have never once joined in. Some things you do not take.

The school reader printed the story. That is the third thing. It is one page in a supplementary volume in a municipal textbook, and it tells the whole of it in two paragraphs with a question for discussion at the end, and the question is *why does the rider refuse the title of saint*, and the official answer key gives a reason, and the reason is *because a saint is a product*, and the answer key is correct as far as it goes and does not go far enough, and I have decided that a textbook that is correct as far as it goes is the exact limit of what a city can teach, and that the rest is the *wall*.

The merchandise still sells. That is the fourth thing and I am not going to make it a lament. The fans still go for twenty-five yuan and they have the second line printed on them, and the crack is still printed on and the wire is still printed on and the knot is still printed on, and the counterfeit outlives the original the way the counterfeit always does, and I have made my peace with it, and the only thing I will say is this: a printed knot is not a knot, and the child who buys the twenty-five-yuan fan and does not know the difference is the exact reader these pages were written for, and there is no way to tell the child the difference that is not a lie, and so you let the child buy the fan and you do not correct it, because the correction is the *market* and the fan is a *fan*.

The temple kept the congee. That is the fifth thing. Three thousand bowls a month, four hundred and thirty-nine original statues, sixty-one rebuilt, two hundred and fourteen mended with grey paste, an orange in front of a jar, a name on a wall, a grandfather under it that the board would not remove. The novice who was a monk of twenty-five ladled it. I swept the courtyard on Sundays. That is the whole of the institution and it is the only institution in the whole of it that was never bought and never sold and never crowned and never fell, and the reason is that a congee pot does not have a face.

And the name on the platform. That is the last thing and it is the smallest and it is the one I actually care about. In the sixth year the platform, which had never once known my name, sent an automated message to Rider 0-4-7-8 to inform him that he had been awarded the title of *Five-Year Partner of the Mountain City*, which is a certificate and a red envelope of two hundred yuan, and the certificate

has the platform's logo on it and a line that says *thank you for carrying the city*, and I have the certificate, and it is in the drawer in the room with the wall, next to a pouch I no longer open and a picture of a woman with a bowl and a red jacket and a sealed lavender envelope and the exercise book of a dead collector and the four hundred pages of a judgment that ends with a line that is not in it. That is the whole of what the city ever actually gave me, and it was two hundred yuan and a piece of paper, and I keep it next to the abbot's note because I have decided that the certificate and the note are the *same kind of thing*, which is a piece of paper that a person hangs on a wall so that the next person who comes in will know that somebody was here and did a small thing.

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In the seventh year the city finally forgot the whole thing for good, and I am putting the forgetting down without complaint, because a city that remembers everything is a city that has become a graveyard, and a city that forgets is a city that can go to work. The feeds moved on. The platforms moved on. The year had a new scandal and a new saint and a bridge painted a different colour, and the name 山城济公 became, in the seventh year, a phrase that a grandmother used and a grandchild did not understand. I am not going to pretend I did not feel it. I felt it the way you feel the end of a fever, which is not a loss and not a relief but a *temperature*. The young riders on the lower road did not know me. The customers did not know me. The platform did not know me. I was, at thirty-three, exactly what I had been at twenty-eight, which is a man in a yellow jacket with a rating and a route and a box, and the whole of the difference between twenty-eight and thirty-three was a note on a wall and a shelf of objects and a count that I did not write and a room with a wall that had a woman in it and a drawer with a red jacket in it, and that difference was the whole of my life, and it did not show up on the feeds, and it did not show up on the rating, and it did not show up anywhere except in the room and at the table and on the wall, and I have decided that a life that does not show up anywhere except in a room and at a table and on a wall is the only kind of life that has ever actually been worth living in this city.

There is one more thing and then the coda.

In the seventh year, on a Sunday, I was sweeping the east courtyard and a family came in — a man and a woman and a girl of about nine — and they were from another province and they had come to the temple because the temple was on a list, and the girl had a cardboard fan she had made herself with the ribs drawn on in marker, and she stood in front of the arhat hall and held the fan up to the statues the way you hold a thing at a shrine, and her mother told her to put it down because it was rude, and the girl did not put it down, and I stopped sweeping and watched them for a moment. And the father saw me in my jacket with my broom and did not know who I was — that is the whole of it, he did not know who I was, the city had forgotten me the way the river moves on — and he asked me, in the flat good voice of a tourist asking a local, whether the stories about the temple were true, and whether the monk in the stories had ever actually lived, and I looked at the girl with the cardboard fan and I did the only thing I have ever been able to do, which is to tell a small true thing to a stranger.

"The monk in the story lived a long time ago," I said, "and the man in the other story is not the monk, and he is not a saint, and if you tell your daughter that he was, she will grow up wanting to be a fan instead of a person." I went back to sweeping. "The congee is free. It is down the lane, through the second door, and there is a line. If she is hungry, take her. That is the whole of the temple."

The family went to the congee. The girl ate two bowls. The father put twenty yuan in the merit box and the box is watched and the twenty yuan went into the pot. And I swept the courtyard until the light was gone, and the girl and the fan went home to another province, and somewhere in another province there is a girl of sixteen now, and I do not know what she became, and that is the whole of the second line: you do not do the small thing in order to *see* what it becomes. You do the small thing because the hand is here and the bowl is full and the next person is at the gate.

CHAPTER 36

The Wire-Mended Fan

In the seventh year, on the last day of the twelfth month, the fog came back down the way it does at the end of winter, and I walked the Trail at dawn, because I had walked it at dawn for seven years and because the walking had become the one hour of the day that belonged to nobody.

I was thirty-three. I had a count I did not write anywhere. I had a room with a wall and a woman with a phone she did not use for content and a boy of thirteen who was in the third year of middle school and a girl of twenty-two who ran a night desk and called me *master* about twice a year, when she thought I was not listening, and three old women in the back of a barber's shop behind a sign that said *tea seats*, and a fan in my jacket that a girl had mended with wire five years before, and a gourd on my belt that held tea, and it held tea, and I am putting that down here in the plainest sentence I have in me, because the whole of it has been the argument that it should, and because the argument is over and the tea is cold and the morning is the morning.

I walked the Trail from the top of the Eighteen Stairs down past the church and the teahouses and the half-finished renovations, and the fog was thick, the real fog, the kind that eats the towers and leaves only the low world, and the breakfast women went past me with their steam carts and did not look up, and a rider went past on the other side with his box, and the city did not stop. At the turn above the old church, where a young man with a cardboard fan had once asked me a question I had answered with a lie, I stopped and stood at the rail for a while and looked at the white.

And a boy came up the steps.

He was perhaps nineteen, thin, in a yellow delivery jacket, with a box on his back and a phone in his hand and the specific hurry of a person on the first order of the day, and he came up the fog steps and saw me and slowed down, and I watched him decide, in the way the young decide, whether to say the thing he had been carrying since he first heard the story. He was too young for the trial

and too young for the crown. He had the whole of it third-hand, the way you have a story from a grandmother. And he looked at my gourd and my fan and my yellow jacket, and he did not connect the three, because the fan was in my pocket and the gourd was on my belt and I was, by then, a middle-aged man on a ridge in the fog, and the story he had been told was a story about a young man, and the young man was a different person from the man standing at the rail. But he connected *something*, because there was a question in his face, the way there is always a question in the face of a young rider when he sees an old rider standing on the Trail with a gourd.

"Shifu," he said. "Are you—"

"No," I said. And then I said the thing I had said once before, at this same turn, in this same fog, to a boy whose name I did not learn until too late, and I said it in the flat voice of a man giving directions. "I'm a delivery rider. Do you know the way to Nanjimen?"

He laughed. That was the thing. He laughed the way the other boy had laughed, five years before, because it was a good answer and because it was not an answer, and then he pointed up the hill and told me the way, and he was kind about it and told me about the stairs that were wet and the elevator that was broken, and then he said the thing the other boy had not said, which was: "My grandmother says there was a man who used to walk this ridge with a gourd. She says he was a saint and he was a drunk and he was a fool. Are you old enough to remember him?"

I looked at the boy for a long moment. And I did the arithmetic I have done every time for seven years, which is the arithmetic of *what is the true thing I can say to a stranger*. And what I said was:

"I remember him. He was a man who fell down in an alley for a girl and got two cracked ribs and a reputation, and the reputation ruined his life and made him, and he spent the rest of it trying to put the reputation down and could not, and in the end he understood that the reputation was not his to put down, it was the *city's*, and that the only thing he ever actually owned was a bowl of congee and a broom." I looked at the boy. "If you are ever tempted to be a saint, don't. Sit down and eat, and then go and help somebody and do not film it, and do not tell anybody, and do not make it mean anything. That is the whole religion. It is

not on any wall. It is on the wall, but it is not on any wall that the city built. Do you understand?"

He did not understand. That is the truth. He was nineteen and he had a first order of the day and a phone buzzing and a grandmother's story, and he nodded politely the way the young nod at the old, and he said, "Okay, shifu," and he went down the steps into the fog with his box on his back, and I stood at the rail and watched him go, and the fog took him in about eight steps, the way it takes everything that tries to rise.

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And then I saw the fan.

I want to be exact about this, because I have turned it over for years and because the whole of it depends on it and because I am not going to explain it. There was a man on the steps.

He was below me, at the turn, about thirty meters down, going up the way I had come, and when the boy passed him they did not look at each other, and then the boy was gone into the white and the man was still there, and I saw him properly for the first time. He was old. That is the first thing. Older than me, older than the old porters on the river, old the way the fog is old. He wore a coat with the elbows out and a cloth cap and no robe and no hat with a fan in it, and he was barefoot on the wet stone, which is a thing I should not have been able to see through the fog at thirty meters and which I saw anyway, and I have decided since that the barefoot was the thing my mind *added*, the way a mind adds a face to a coat-rack in the dark. He was carrying a fan. It was tucked into a string over his shoulder, beside a small gourd, and the fan was broken across the middle, and it was mended with wire.

I stood at the rail and I did not move. That is the whole of what I did, and the whole of what I have ever done, and the whole of what I am going to put down. I did not run down the steps and I did not call out and I did not take out my phone and film, because I have carried one eye in this story and it has done enough damage and because I have learned, in seven years, that there is a kind of seeing that kills the thing it sees. I stood at the rail in the fog and I looked at the wire on the fan, thirty meters down, in the grey, and I looked for the knot.

I could not see the knot. That is the truth and it is the whole of the truth and I am not going to make it more. Thirty meters is the distance at which the city keeps its options open. It is far enough that you cannot be sure of a face and close enough that you cannot pretend you saw nothing, and I stood at that distance and looked at a fan mended with wire and could not see the knot, and the man did not turn around, and the man did not raise a gourd to me, and the man did not do any of the things the man had done twice before. He simply stood at the turn, at the same turn where a boy with a cardboard fan had once asked me a question, and then he went up the steps, slowly, the way the old men of this city go up steps, and the fog took him in about eight steps, and when I finally walked down to the turn there was nothing there but the wet stone and the rail and the city.

I stooped down. There was one thing on the stone, and I am going to write it and then I am not going to write it again. It was an orange peel. A single orange peel, curled, on the wet step, the way an old man eating an orange on a ridge at dawn would leave it, and an orange peel is not evidence, and a peal of any kind is not evidence, and I have decided, after everything, that the honest position is the one the whole of it has taken and that I am not going to abandon it at the last page.

I do not know whether the man on the steps was the mad monk of the Southern Song, or a fever, or a trick of the fog, or the last of the old porters out for a walk, or a fellow who had heard the story and bought a fan and a gourd and liked the joke, or the father I never met, or the abbot, or the enforcer, or the auntie, or myself at seventy, or nobody at all. Neither did he know about me. That is the beauty of it and I am not going to explain the beauty, because the explaining is what kills it, and because after three years and four years and a river and a ward and a crown, the only true thing I can say about any of it is the thing I say to no one.

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I want to give the four years after the coda one paragraph, because the reader has come this far and because the whole of it has been an argument that the

ordinary is the only holy thing, and a book that argues that and then ends in a fog without saying what the ordinary *was* has cheated the reader.

So: the years. I delivered noodles for four more years and then my knee went and I took the dispatch job at Yaoji's company and sat at the whiteboard with the colored magnets, and I was, for the first time in my life, *inside*, where it was warm and where the tea was and where the radios talked, and the boy 何小舟 finished his vocational course and went to work in a yard and got a scooter he was allowed to ride and a girl he would not tell us about and, in the ninth year, a small flat of his own with a window. And Huajiao ran the company with Yaoji for two years and then left it and did the thing she had been circling for the whole of it and never once done, which is that she went back to school, at twenty-three, and studied, and became the person she had told the woman at the logistics point she would be, which is a nurse, and she works in the children's hospital now and is very good and very tired and calls me *master* about twice a year still. And Yingtao and I did not marry and did not have a child and did not once explain ourselves to anyone, and we lived in the room with the wall and then in a flat with a balcony, and she kept the locked drive and the archive and the night desk, and she is the person who knows the whole of my face and has never sold it, and that is the whole of the romance and it was enough. And Wang Niangniang died in the ninth year and Zhang Niangniang died in the twelfth, and the tea room was kept on by the barber's nephew for a while and then closed, and the note came off the wall and went to the temple, where the novice framed it and hung it in the east cloister beside the abbot's name, and it is still there, and people still stop and look and ask, and the novice still tells them in fifteen seconds, and the fifteen seconds is the whole distribution system and it will outlive me.

So that is the ordinary, said plainly, the way the reader deserved to have it said. And now the coda, and then the book is done.

I walked down the hill to the river.

The fog was on the water the way it is always on the water, and the old porters were on the steps with their cardboard and their pouches, and Uncle Tuo was not there, because Uncle Tuo had died in the fourth year at the age of ninety-one and had been carried out of a teahouse on a door the way the old men of this city are carried, and the steps had a new old man on them who did not

know me and who watched me come down with the flat patient eyes of a man who had buried a wife and two sons and had decided that the truth was a thing you gave in pieces. I sat down on the concrete beside him and did not say anything, because a question is a claim on another person's pain, and after a while I took the gourd off my belt and unscrewed the cap and drank, and the tea tasted of the gourd and the gourd tasted of the eleven years, and I drank it anyway, and that is my whole recovery and I am not going to make it more than it is.

The river did what the river does. The barges came up empty and rode high. The towers were somewhere above the fog, waiting for the sun to burn the white off, and the noodle shops were open and the riders were out and the breakfast women were at their carts and the congee at the temple was on the fire for the three thousandth bowl of the month, and the boy 何小舟 was at school and the woman with the phone was at the paper and the girl with the notebook was at her night desk and the aunties were dealing in the back room behind the sign, and the note was on the wall.

And the city did not need me. That is the ending and I am going to give it plainly, because I have spent four years finding it and because it is the only ending that is true. The city did not need me and the city did not know me and the city did not stop, and a man in a yellow jacket was one of thirty million people who have learned to look and are still learning, and that, in the whole of the four years, was the best news he ever received.

I drank the tea. And then I thought about the couplet, the one my grandfather sang while he stirred the congee, the one the abbot underlined twice with his own hand, the one the city kept for a thousand years and the fan printed for twenty-five yuan. *Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart. If the world should imitate me, it walks straight into the demon's path.* I thought about the second line, which is the one everyone forgets and which I have spent four years learning and which I am going to say to no one, at the river, on the steps, with the fog coming down off the water and a gourd of tea going cold in my hand.

The first line is the one the city sells. The second line is the one that saves the man. And the difference between them is not the saint and not the demon and

not the monk in the story; it is the *next person at the gate*, and the bowl, and the fifteen seconds of telling, and the small true thing that nobody films.

So here is the last thing, and then the book is done and the city can tell it however it likes. I am not the mad monk and I am not the saint and I am not the demon and I am not the man on the steps. I am the delivery rider. I carried the noodles. And when the fog came down and the city went on, I was one of thirty million, and nobody needed me, and I drank the tea, and I went home to a room with a wall and a woman and a boy and a shelf with a note on it and a fan in the drawer and a red jacket that I will never wear, and I closed the door, and the fog kept the rest.

世人若学我，如同入魔道。

If the world should imitate me — it walks straight into the demon's path.

The second line is the one everyone forgets. I have spent four years learning it. I am still learning it. I will be learning it on the last Tuesday.

Colophon

世人若学我，如同入魔道。
酒肉穿肠过，佛祖心中留。

Shiren ruo xue wo, rutong ru mo dao. Jiurou chuanchang guo, fo zu xinzhong liu.

If the world should imitate me — it walks straight into the demon's path. Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart. — attributed to Daoji, the mad monk of the Southern Song. The first line is the one everyone knows. The last line is the one that saves the man.

The doctrine attributed to Daoji holds two lines in tension. Wine and meat pass through the gut, and the Buddha stays in the heart; but whoever imitates him walks into the demon's path. This novel is set on the wrong side of that sentence. A devotional assembly has made a scripture out of the man, a girl has gone south to join it, and the people who love her have to fetch her back across a border — carrying the only thing that survives one, which is the record.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, "true love." Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, "real," plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

INTO THE DEMON'S PATH · 40 sections · 77,519 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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