Wine Passes Through, Buddha Stays Put

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40 chapters
130,922 words

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CHAPTER 1

One

"There was no such monk."

Tao Shi put the lid down on the bowl and slid it away with two fingers. The water in it went on moving for a while after.

Dajie looked at him as though the man had just offered him a second bowl.

"What?"

"I said it already." Tao Shi was fifty-eight years old and had a way of setting a sentence down like a man setting down cement. "No monk. No drunk. Nothing. In twelve hundred years nobody wrote one down. I have sung about him for thirty-eight years and nobody ever told me to stop."

"Why would anybody tell you to stop?"

"Because they would know." He nodded at the corner table without looking at it. "Six strangers and a bag of plums. That is not a table. A table is people you have already survived."

※

The corner table was empty at eleven. By one o'clock it had six people in it.

None of them knew where they had met. That was the trick, and Dajie could never explain the trick to anybody, which had caused some difficulty with the women.

The first sold insurance in Wanzhou and was at a wedding. His cousin had sent him to a teahouse for reasons neither of them could produce.

The second was the cousin, who knew why. He had a cousin of his own who had just come out and did not want to go home yet.

The third was that man's friend from the cable factory at Qingsi. He had brought salted plums, and he gave them to everybody with an enormous calm.

The fourth was somebody's driver. The fifth was a woman of about sixty who ran a dry-cleaning shop two streets down. She had eaten one slice of toast

since eleven, because she was watching her figure. The sixth had been asleep for forty minutes.

Dajie had done this four hundred times. Nobody had ever given him credit for it. Not the insurance man, not his cousin, not Dajie himself. It was on the grounds that it is not useful.

What it was, precisely, was this. You get into a room with strangers and you do not ask them about themselves. Instead you say a true thing about yourself, at speed. Then you say something less true. Then you stop talking and let the room find out whether it agrees with you, because a man who keeps talking is a man asking to be agreed with, and a man who stops is a man who has already been agreed with.

If the room agrees, the room believes it thought of it. And a table that thinks it thought of something together is not a table of strangers any more. It is a table. And everybody at it is somebody you have to be careful with now, because you have given them a reason to be.

"Insurance," said the man, cheerfully. "Life, accident, and property. Nobody wants property!"

"Property is no good." Dajie nodded. "Nobody's house burns. That is your whole problem. Nine years you talk to me about fire. And then the year a man finally wants a policy, he goes down and prices up a bag of cement and thinks about it. And then his wife says something."

"Your wife says something?"

"My mother." Dajie spread his hands. "Not my wife. My mother."

"How much is she on for?"

"None of it. Not one yuan." He turned the bowl a quarter turn on the table, which was a thing he had learned from a man who did not know he was teaching it. "Does that worry you?"

"It worries me a great deal. It is the only thing about you that worries me."

"Good. Put that on the form."

The cousin laughed, which was the right move, and Dajie had learned it young.

"Aiyo! You got a problem with your mother."

"That is the correct reason to sell me a policy." Dajie put his chin out. "Anybody can sell a policy to a man with no mother. That man is dead already! You are just waiting on the paperwork."

The woman with the toast said, "You want to know the truth. Nobody wants to know the truth!"

"Then don't," said Dajie. "But pay me anyway."

※

Tao Shi watched from four tables off and did not move until two o'clock. By then the plums were gone and the driver had left. The insurance man had begun explaining the importance of beneficiaries to a woman who had not asked.

Tao Shi stood up, put three yuan under the tea tray where the woman would find it, and came over.

"Now," he said. "Tell it."

Dajie told it.

He told it well, and that was not vanity. He had been telling it since he was fifteen. He had it in his hands the way you have a fork. Eight minutes of it, if the room let him.

The drunk monk. Song dynasty. Li Xiuyuan out of Tiantai. He read too much and drank too much and wanted the girls. He was thrown out of the temple for it.

So he went round the country in a broken hat, with a broken fan and a gourd with no bottom in it. He broke every rule there was.

And the point, the whole point, was that the rules were never broken in the place that mattered. He ate meat in front of the monks. He got drunk in the lecture hall. He put his feet on the furniture in the hall of the inner ministry. And then he went and did the thing, every time.

He found the widow whose son had died. He found the man who had lost his wife. He sat down with them, because everybody in the world will talk to a drunk. A drunk asks you nothing, and afterward he has nothing to say to you, so you can tell him the thing.

That was the part Dajie always brought them. The sitting down. The drunk who asks you nothing.

And then the couplet, which every aunt in Chongqing can finish for you.

Wine and meat pass through the intestines. The Buddha stays in the heart.

He did it in Chongqing, the way it is actually said, which is fast and has the beat at the end of the second half. Everybody in the city does that. Tao Shi said that nobody has ever asked them why, and he said it as a man who has asked.

Then he held his arms out of the chair.

"There it is!"

"Aiyo!" The insurance man was delighted. "That is very good. That is a very correct thing."

"It is an old thing."

"It is a *correct* thing." The insurance man slapped the table with the flat of his hand, which was his whole personality. "My client says the same thing. He says, the correct thing is the one that is there when. And then he stops. He does not finish it, ever. I have known him nine years and he has never once finished that sentence, and I have never asked him to, because a man who finishes it for him is a man who has understood him, and he does not want to be understood, he wants to be insured."

The toast woman raised her eyebrows at Dajie, and Dajie raised his back at her. That was an accident. Both of them understood it as a thing that had been going on for some time.

※

Tao Shi waited until she left, which she did down the stairs sideways, in the careful sideways manner of the overweight.

Then he sat down where she had been without asking. He was fifty-eight. There were four ways to do that and he had done all of them.

"You dropped the last two lines."

Dajie looked at him.

"Everybody drops them. That is not a thing you did, and you should stop taking credit for it." Tao Shi put his hands flat on the table, one on top of the other. "The last two lines are: if the ordinary people learn from me, they go the way of the demon. *Shi ren ru xue wo, ru tong ru mo dao.*"

"They rhyme worse."

"Do they rhyme worse?"

"They rhyme the same." Tao Shi held up one finger. "You did not drop it because it rhymes worse. You dropped it because it is addressed to you. The whole couplet is addressed to you. It is not a description of a man. It is an instruction book with one page missing, and the missing page says do not do this."

The insurance man had stopped explaining beneficiaries. He was looking at Tao Shi instead now, because Tao Shi was older, and because the word *demon* had gone past him. Men of a certain age will always attend to that word in any context.

Tao Shi did not look at him.

"Thirty-eight years," he said. "There was a monk in the Song called Li Xiuyuan, and he wrote, and it is very dry. He argues about the correct number of days for a fast, and he complains about the price of lamp oil."

"Did he drink?"

"There is no wine in him at all."

"Did he have a hat?"

"There is no hat."

"A dog?"

"There is no dog." The corner of Tao Shi's mouth moved. "No broken fan either. Not one item out of the whole set. Every single thing you told that table for eight minutes came out of a man in the Yuan who wanted money. Then a man in the Ming wanted more. It has come down ever since like a coat. Everybody in China has worn it. Nobody has the original under it."

Dajie sat quite still.

"So, lingo." Tao Shi put his hands into his lap. "How many times have you told that story?"

"Somebody counted."

"Somebody did not count. I counted." He held up one finger again. "In seventy-six there were fourteen men in this district who could sing one of the eight base tunes of this city. They got paid for it. Two of them were women. I knew every one, and eleven of them are dead."

"So it is not rare."

"It is the most repeated false story in the history of Sichuan, and I get four hundred yuan a month out of it."

"Then who put it in his mouth?"

Tao Shi looked at him for a while without any expression at all. "That is the correct question. I have been waiting thirty-eight years for somebody at one of my tables to ask it."

"And who was the first one?"

"Which first one. The first one to say it, or the first one to make it up?" He turned his bowl a quarter turn on the table. "Do you know what the difference is between a lie and a thing everybody says?"

"No."

"There isn't one, and that is the entire problem, and it is why people who make things up are not all liars and are worse."

Dajie reached out and took Tao Shi's bowl and drank out of it. He had no business doing that. Tao Shi let him do it.

"And the dog," said Tao Shi.

"What dog?"

"You did the dog. The spiritual dog. He had a dog." The corner of his mouth moved again. "Go back and count your own story, boy. You have got a gourd in it. Go back and see what else is in there that you never put in a temple in your life."

Dajie did not answer that for a while.

The insurance man had understood none of it and had been enjoying the shape of it.

"Is there a song?"

"There are eight."

"How do you know there are eight? Who is counting them for you?"

"Somebody has to." Tao Shi did not move. "You have your eight rivers and I have my eight tunes. Two of them come out of Shaanxi and one of them came in with the people who came down off the north side in the fourth generation, and nobody knows whose mouth it started in, and I get paid four hundred yuan a month for four of them because the other four are not mine to sell."

"Sing one!"

"I am at work."

"You are sitting at a table with six people and one piece of fruit and one slice of toast. And this man has told a story for you." Tao Shi got up off the bench. "That is the whole afternoon. That is what an afternoon is, and you have spent it."

He took his leaves out of his back pocket, a roll the length of a forearm with a rubber band round it. He walked to the end of the room, where the light was, and sang.

It was a mountain song and it was not about the monk. It was about a woman going down the river steps at night with a lamp she did not need. That is the oldest thing in that music. Four lines. He sang it four times with four different meanings, and the third time he turned around and sang the first line at the ceiling.

Dajie shut his eyes, because he had heard it four hundred times.

At the end of it the room clapped, in the way that room clapped. Four men clapped and one man said *hao*. Nobody cared either way.

※

At half past three a boy came up the three steps and stood at the top of them looking around. Dajie knew him. Then he wished he did not.

Twenty-two, maybe. A blue jacket with the reflective band still on the sleeve. Either he bought it for a uniform and quit in a hurry, or he quit and the jacket was still new. His hair was cut for a uniform. He was from He Jie's.

"Guanjie," said Dajie.

"Ai, Dajie." The boy looked at the table, at four men and an empty bowl and a pile of plum stones. He made a decision about what kind of errand this was. "I have been looking for you since nine."

"I have been here since eleven."

"I know." The boy put his hands behind his back, because he had come from a shop where you stand with your hands behind your back. "Si Jie says come."

"Why does he not telephone?"

"He does not telephone." The boy said it without any weight at all, because in that shop nobody telephones anybody. It was not an insult to Dajie. It was a

fact of the building. "He says you did the old one, the one at Longtousi with the four lanterns, and that you were not drunk."

"I was a bit drunk."

"He says you were not *drunk*." The boy made a small gesture with two fingers, which Dajie had never seen him do before and could never afterward reproduce for anybody. "He says the one who was not drunk did a thing with his face."

"What thing with his face?"

"He did not say what thing with his face."

"How long does He Jie have my face?"

"Four days," said the boy, looking at his shoes. "And one of them is the difficult kind."

"Which one is the difficult kind?"

"I do not know which one is the difficult kind." The boy said this as though it were an entirely reasonable thing not to know. "He has not told me. He tells the person he is talking to, and today that is you, so he will tell you at seven in the morning."

The table had gone quiet in the way a table goes quiet when it can tell that it is being talked about.

"Say the money," said Dajie.

The boy said it. Twenty-eight hundred a day each. Cash. End of each day, in the yard and not in the office, because He Jie did not do money in the office, and everybody who has ever worked in that building will tell you it is not a preference. Three days, with a fourth held in case. Meals on the account. That meant the wonton shop on the corner of the back road, not the shop downstairs. You did not eat downstairs of He Jie's shop. And two hundred for the transport of the mourning clothes, which was the piece Dajie wanted and did not yet know he wanted.

"Who is dead?"

"The man," said the boy, flatly, because that was how it was done in that building. "Luo Changjiang. Over at Jiangbei. The tall one by the ferry."

Dajie knew the building.

Everybody in the district who has ever pushed a handcart up a tika knows the tall one by the ferry. The man who built it also built the last three escalators on the stair-street. Then he bought the building he built.

That was the joke the whole stair-street has been repeating at lower volume for thirty years.

"The family asked for somebody local," said the boy, and then corrected himself. He Jie's people did not carry a sentence longer than they had to. "No. The *daughter* asked for nobody local."

Dajie looked up.

"She does not want people from the street?"

"She does not want anybody from the street." The boy shook his head. "Si Jie said you should know that before you say yes. It is a long way, and there is no food."

Something happened in Dajie's chest, and it was not fear. He looked at it and did not have a name for it. By the time he had looked at it for a moment, it had already started moving without him.

"Three days," he said.

"Three days."

"And if it is the difficult kind?"

"Then it is the difficult kind." The boy shifted his weight, because he wanted to leave and did not want to be the last one standing in this conversation. "Si Jie said do not take money first. He said come in the morning. He said tell your people."

"Tell my people."

"He said, if you have anybody, tell them." The boy went down the three steps and out into the lane, and stopped, and came back up. This part he clearly had not planned.

"Si Jie said one more thing, and I am not supposed to remember it."

"Which one?"

"When you get there, do not talk to the daughter." The boy paused. "He said, everybody wants to talk to the daughter."

※

It was the fourth time the boy had said Si Jie. Dajie had worked out of that yard on and off for six years and had never been told which of them that was, and the boy had never once called her anything else, and Dajie did not ask, because in that yard nobody asked a boy where he got a name.

※

The insurance man waited a real interval before asking.

"Are you going?"

Dajie put the plum stones on the tray and made a pile of them, because it needed doing.

"You are going."

"I am going to look."

"Aiyo!" The insurance man was delighted. He raised his hand and waited for it, and Dajie gave it to him with two fingers. That was not what he did to the other people. "Ah, ah, you young men. In my day we went to look at things, and then we went and drank."

"Then go and drink."

"Are you sure? Because there is a woman at my table who has been crying since Tuesday and she will tell anybody at all."

"Then tell her." Dajie was already on the steps. "And tell her I said it was not me."

Dajie went down the three steps and out into the lane.

It was the eleventh month, and the fog had come up off the river and taken the bottom nine floors of the city. The street went forward about eighty metres and then stopped being a street. It became a smell.

Four floors below him and behind, in the room over the pool hall, somebody started the monk story again.

He did not turn around, because he knew what the room was doing and he did not want to watch it happen.

He stood in the lane and waited for them to get the second line wrong, because he always waited for that. Every time. It had never once not come.

They got it wrong the same way. He could hear the whole shape of it from down the stairs. There was a laugh in the middle of it, where he puts the laugh. Only it was in the wrong place, and a little too early.

Dajie stood in the fog and listened to a man he had never seen tell his story with his own timing.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. It was his mother, and it was the second time in an hour. He did not answer it.

He went down four floors and turned, and walked out along the river road. It was faster that way. He had not decided anything yet.

Twenty-eight hundred a day. Cash. Three days.

Six thousand before the fourth day.

And it was a funeral, and he could sing.

He could sing very well.

CHAPTER 2

Two

The night shift ended at seven in the morning. Chen Youcai had been awake for twenty-two hours.

The thing he had been thinking about since Tuesday was that the word *qualified* appears eleven times on the board. Nine of them are about him.

He was responsible for the roster. Not the roster itself. Nobody was responsible for the roster.

He was responsible for the roster being defensible.

That meant that when a driver called in at ten past four to say he could not come, it had to be somebody's problem. At seven in the morning the somebody was him.

He filled in the gap. Then he filled in a second one, because there had been a second at Jiangbei since Monday and it had stayed open. Then he sent the revised sheet up.

Then he made tea. The machine was on his floor. The machine was the only thing on his floor that anybody talked to.

His name means talented.

His father had made that a permanent joke. When Youcai was born, his father held him up in the courtyard of the old building on the stair-street. He said to anybody who came within earshot, *this one is talented, look at him, he is talented.*

Everybody laughed. Then his father said it again the next day. And the day after.

For nineteen years.

Youcai was twenty-five. He had graduated on schedule. He had a desk on the third floor of a building in Shapingba, and the window on that desk faced a wall.

He had shift planning. He had a pension. There was a ladder above him with three rungs on it.

In five years he had never looked at the ladder.

He could not have told you why. He had asked himself that question at least forty times.

※

At eight he went to the hospital.

The corridor at the third people's hospital on the way to Nanping was the corridor it had been on Monday. There was a woman selling flower bulbs out of a plastic tub at the top of the ramp. There was a man who did nothing at all in a plastic chair.

There was a queue at the pay kiosk. Every person in it had come to pay. Which meant that every person in it had a relative in that building.

Which meant that Chongqing was full of people sitting in a queue at eight in the morning, and all of them were there because of somebody else.

Youcai had a card.

He had had it made four days ago. At his own expense. On his own time. Because the woman at the desk on the first floor had told him the family did not qualify for the fast track, and he had believed her, and had gone away, and had come back with the card.

"Did you say that to her twice?"

"I said it to her three times."

"And the third time?"

"The third time she wrote something down."

He took the lift up. She was in the bed nearest the window.

"Morning," she said.

"How was the night."

"You came at eight yesterday and eight the day before. It is eight now."

"And the test?"

"The test was Tuesday." She said it without any weight at all. "They do not tell you anything on the day. Why do you keep asking me what they are not going to tell me?"

"Because they will tell you and then you will not tell me," said Youcai.

He put the bag down on the cabinet. There were things in it. He had not thought about what to put in it. He had gone out and bought them anyway, which was the part he could not explain to himself afterwards.

"Did they come?"

"Two doctors and a man with a camera."

He nodded.

"Chen Youcai."

"Ma."

"You did not sleep."

"I slept."

"You wrote on your hand." She turned her forearm over without lifting her head off the pillow. There was ink on the outside of it, at the wrist, in small neat figures. "You wrote on my table. You did it at your mother's table. You have done it since you were nine years old. I have watched you do it for sixteen years."

Youcai looked at the figures on his own wrist.

"Yes, Ma," he said. "I can."

She put her arm back down. She was not angry. That was the part that was hard.

"They said Thursday."

"I know."

"You wrote it down."

"I wrote it down."

"Then what are you doing here at eight in the morning on a Wednesday, when it is Thursday at ten and you have a shift at seven?"

Youcai did not have an answer to that.

He stood with his hand on the back of the chair for a moment.

"I am going to work," he said.

"You are going to work," his mother agreed. "Then go."

※

He did not go.

He sat down on the plastic chair opposite the bed with his hands on his knees. The number came out of him the way it had come out of him in the corridor on Tuesday, and the day before that.

"The valve is two hundred and ten thousand."

"I know what it is."

"I want to say it out loud to somebody once." He was looking at the floor. "The procedure is two hundred and ten thousand. The bed is not charged separately. It was said the bed would not be charged separately. My insurance does not cover it. This is not an inpatient procedure. Outpatient is not covered at that rate."

"There is a discount for members. You are a member. Was it applied?"

"So two hundred and ten."

"So two hundred and ten." He turned his wrist over and read his own handwriting to himself, which he did not need to do. "And the money that is not two hundred and ten is eighty-four thousand."

"How much of it do they want before they will put a date on the bed?"

"They did not say. That is the part I have not been able to establish."

"Go and establish it."

"That is the part I have not been able to establish."

His mother was quiet for a moment.

"Where is eighty-four thousand."

"In a savings account. Three years. It was for a down payment. Then the down payment was not happening. So it stayed."

"Three years."

"Three years and four months."

"You are twenty-five years old! You have not had money of your own since you were twenty-one."

"Yes."

"And in three years and four months you did not tell me."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you would have said no."

"I would have said yes!"

"You would have said yes. And then you would have lain there for the next four years thinking about a woman of forty-nine with a scar on her neck who went without a valve for you, and you would not have been able to put it down."

He looked at the window.

"I know you better than that," he said. "I have known you better than that since I was nine."

The light came in sideways off the building opposite. It was the same building as the day before. There was a man on the ninth floor of it washing a window.

"Then you are going to borrow," said his mother.

"I am going to work."

"You are going to borrow. You are not going to tell me. I am going to lie here and be told about it afterwards. I am going to find out the way I find out everything, which is that somebody tells a nurse." She turned her head on the pillow. "Is there anybody?"

"There is nobody."

"You said it too fast."

"I said it at the speed I said it," said Youcai.

※

He took the monorail back.

It went through the building. It did that. Everybody got off at the stop to take photographs of it, which they had been getting off to take photographs of it since the year it was built. Nine people in the carriage had cameras. None of them looked out of the window.

He got off at Shapingba and went up to the third floor and sat at his desk.

He had a spreadsheet open. Everybody in that office had a spreadsheet open, because it had been made a condition of employment in a memo circulated to all staff in March. Nobody had ever discussed the memo.

His had nineteen columns. Column D was overtime. Column L was the reason a shift had been left unfilled.

He put his hands on the keyboard.

Then he took a piece of A4 out of the drawer. The plain kind. Four hundred to a ream from the stationery shop at the bottom of the steps.

He put it on the desk in front of him. He wrote on it in the neat hand, with a pen. Because his mother was right about one thing. Paper does not run out of power.

210,000

84,000

need 126,000

He looked at it. He had been looking at numbers for five years. He knew exactly what a person can do with a number.

How many people are there. How much time. How much money.

He wrote underneath:

4 days x 2,800 = 11,200

cannot

not enough

never was enough

He drew a line under that. Then he wrote the four days out as days.

Then he wrote beside each day the thing that was supposed to be there.

And then, because he was a man who wrote everything down, he wrote at the top of the page the question, which was the actual question, and which had been the actual question since Monday.

what is in the building

He was still doing it when the man from the second floor came down to say the tea machine had been fixed.

※

At ten he went to the noodle shop on the corner. It was called Xingxing. It had eleven tables and a queue.

He stood at the back of the queue with a folder.

The folder was the reason Dajie agreed to talk to him. Dajie had spent four years watching men with folders come and go. He had a private theory that a folder means somebody wants to explain something to you that they have already written down.

His private theory was that the correct response is to let them finish. It is faster than the alternative.

"You are Dajie."

"Who is asking."

"You do not know me. My name is Chen Youcai. I am on the third floor at the transit office in Shapingba. Shift planning." He held the folder against his chest. "I am not going to insult you by pretending this is casual. I have read a list."

"What list."

"There is a list, at He Jie's, of the people they call when they need a body. Your name is on it twice. The second time it is in brackets."

"Brackets means what."

"Brackets means somebody there thinks of you as a specialist."

"Specialist in what."

"In not being asked questions by families."

Dajie waited.

He had been waiting, in fact, for a person to come along and tell him he was a specialist at something since he was nineteen. He had a great deal of practice at the pause.

"I want to hire you," said Youcai.

"For what."

"For three days, in the first month of winter. Cash, at the end of each day. He Jie pays twenty-eight hundred and I am not going to beat He Jie, because He Jie is not a person you beat. She is a set of terms." He opened the folder. "The funeral is on the third day. It is a difficult one. He Jie has two of her own people off and she needs three bodies and she has two. So she needs one from the list. I telephoned."

Dajie drank his soup.

"And where do I come in?"

"You come in because I am also coming in."

Youcai turned the folder round and put it on the table.

Dajie looked at it. It was a printed sheet with times on it in columns. His eyes went down the columns the way they went down every column he had ever seen. Fast. It was the only professional skill he had ever acquired.

"Who is this."

"Luo Changjiang. Fifty-eight. He built things. He built the last three escalators on the stair-street, which you have used. He died on the ninth."

"And his family wants me?"

"His family does not want you. His daughter does not want anybody." Youcai's voice did not change at all. "She has read about what people like me do in this city. She does not want any of it near her house. The mother is dead. There is a second wife somewhere who has not been to a funeral in her life. So He Jie is running it. He Jie needs bodies."

"That is a terrible sale, brother!"

"It is an accurate one." Youcai put his hands flat on the folder. "I have a car. I will drive you both ways. You will not be asked to sign anything. You will be paid the same as everybody else on that job."

"Which is not enough."

"Which is not enough, and I have not pretended to you that it is enough."

"You have not told me what is enough."

"No."

"Then why am I sitting here."

"Because you have already decided," said Youcai, "and you are waiting for me to catch up so that you can tell yourself you were made to."

Youcai looked at him for three full seconds.

"Because it is a funeral, and you are good at funerals, and I am not able to say the next part in a noodle shop."

Dajie put the bowl down.

"Wait," he said. "You are not hiring me."

"I am."

"You were going to ask me for something." Dajie leaned in. He was delighted. He was entirely awake for the first time since seven in the morning. "Brother. You have had that folder this whole time and you have not opened it past the schedule. What is it? What do you actually want?"

※

Here is what Chen Youcai wanted.

He did not want it immediately. He did not want it in the street. He had known since Tuesday that he would have to say it in a noodle shop. He had chosen this noodle shop for the queue, so that neither of them would be able to hear each other over anybody else.

"I want to see the inside of that building," he said.

"For what."

"For four hours, in a way that is allowed. Because you and I are two men who work for a funeral company, and we are allowed, and because in China that is a completely ordinary sentence and nobody stops you." He turned the folder around. There was a second sheet behind the first. "There will be eleven households in that building when it is emptied. Each household gets twenty thousand. Eleven households is two hundred and twenty thousand."

The soup shop noise went on. Somebody at the counter shouted about a number.

"So that is the whole thing," said Dajie.

"That is the whole thing."

"You have written it down."

"I write everything down."

"You have written it down and you have shown it to me and I have not said anything." Dajie sat back. "Because I want to hear you say the number out loud. Because you have not said the number out loud."

"You need sixty thousand. You have got twenty-six. You have a mother in the ninth floor of the third people's hospital. You have worked out that if you rob a dead man's building you get sixty thousand."

He said it lightly. He said it the way you say the punchline of a joke somebody has told badly. He was pleased with himself.

He was also, at that moment, the fastest reader in the room.

Youcai did not move.

"Two hundred and ten," he said.

"What?"

"You did not ask me the number. You guessed it. You got it within a thousand yuan, in under two seconds, from a stranger, in a noodle shop." His hands were still flat on the folder. They had not moved once. "I would like you to be careful how clever you are."

Dajie's left eye did not close. It never closed properly when he was drinking. He had been drinking since seven.

It was open now, looking at Chen Youcai in a way that made Youcai decide this was the moment to say the rest of it quickly.

"I am not asking you to rob anybody," said Youcai. "I want that said, and I want it said now, so you know that I thought about it in the right order. The four hours are for seeing. That is all. Seeing is legal. Seeing is what the job is."

"And the rest?"

"A man who has seen a building can tell you what is in it. That is information and not theft. Everything else happens after, in a place that is not this noodle shop. I have not written it down. Because if it is not written down then I can decide not to do it."

"And what happens to me if I say no?"

"Nothing happens to you. You drink until four and you go home." Youcai's voice stayed exactly where it was. "I will pay you for the day anyway, because a man who says no to me in a noodle shop and then has to be told by He Jie that he was there should not be the one to pay for it."

"That is a horrible thing to offer a man."

"It is a correct thing to offer a man. It is what the other half of it is." He closed his hand over the folder. "And the other half is written down. You are not going to read it in this shop and I am not going to say it out loud. If you say yes you will find out what it is standing in a corridor with eleven households behind you and no way out of it that does not cost you something."

"And if you decide not to do it?"

"Then your mother gets her valve on credit and I do the paperwork every month for two years. That is possible. I have already looked into it. It is possible."

Dajie looked at him for a while.

Then he laughed.

It was not what he had planned to do. It was the sound of a man who has spent four years being told he is a disappointment, discovering that somebody needs him for a specific thing.

"Lingo," he said. "You have been carrying that folder around since Tuesday."

"Since Tuesday."

"You have not slept."

"I have not slept."

Dajie stood up and put his hand out. Two fingers, not a handshake.

"My mother is the best one in the city," he said. "You know that? In the municipal area. Ten thousand of them. She is fifty-two and she has not been able to work for two years and she has not told anybody. Including me. I found out in August from a woman at a noodle shop."

He said it fast. The way you report the weather.

"So do not tell me about mothers. I will come!"

Youcai put his hand out and gave him two fingers, which was not what he did to people.

"Then I will pick you up at seven in the morning. The shop on the back road in Jiangbei. Ask for He Jie."

"You said do not ask for He Jie."

"I said ask for He Jie." Youcai closed the folder. "Nobody else there will talk to you. If somebody else there does talk to you, you will tell me, and I will get you a different job."

Dajie was already going.

Then he stopped, half turned, in the way of a man who has one more thing and is about to be honest about it.

"You wrote on your hand," he said.

Youcai's hand went flat against his thigh.

"It is not a secret," said Dajie. "Everybody writes on their hand. I write the room temperature on mine when I have to buy a funeral from somebody." He tapped his own wrist without looking at it. "You are going to be all right. Sixty thousand is four months of your salary, and your salary is not the problem."

He went out into the light.

"The problem," he said, from the doorway, "is that you think a person can only get money in one shape."

Youcai sat at the table with the folder and did not open it again.

He took out his phone and put it on the table and looked at the time. It was ten forty-one. He had nineteen hours and eleven minutes until his shift.

Then he wrote on his wrist, in the small neat figures, under the number two hundred and ten, a question mark.

CHAPTER 3

Three

He got home at half past four. His mother was not home, which was normal. There was no light on in the stairwell, which was also normal.

He lived on the fifth floor. One hundred and four steps. There was a landing at the third floor where somebody had always kept a chair for a reason nobody now living could account for.

The room was eleven square metres. A bed. A table. A plastic stool. A television with a cracked corner. A cupboard.

The door did not close all the way. You had to lift it to shut it. He had been meaning to fix that since 2022.

Above the table was the frame with the diploma in it.

The frame had cost him eighty yuan.

The diploma said that Liu Dajie, having completed the required course of study at a college, had been awarded the qualification of zhuanke in jidian.

He had sat the gaokao at eighteen. He had washed out. Two hundred and twelve thousand people had sat it that year in the province.

He had told his mother it did not matter. He had told her that for three years, in four different kitchens.

She had not asked him what he thought he was going to do instead.

He put the bag down.

He did not turn the light on.

※

He stood in the middle of the room. He put both hands flat on the door frame.

Then he breathed in through the nose three times.

Then he started.

That is the part nobody can teach. The first sound is not grief. The first sound is the body finding out how much air it is going to use for the next forty minutes.

Get that wrong and everything after it is theatre. Everybody in the room knows within four seconds. The family will send you out of that building the same afternoon.

He came down the stairs.

He came down from the north gate, because the north gate is where the family comes in.

Da. Da. Da. Da.

Not on the beat. Slower.

He had worked out at seventeen that a funeral is not on the beat. Everybody is listening for one thing only. If you are on the beat you are a musician. If you are not on the beat you are a person who has lost somebody.

Da. Da.

He reached the bottom. He turned into the room.

And then he did the thing.

The thing is very simple. It is the reason he is worth two thousand eight hundred a day.

He picked up somebody who had not put anything down yet.

※

Now here is all of it. There is not much to it.

You take the person who is worst in the room.

Not the loudest. The worst.

The one who has gone past crying and into noise. The one saying things at the furniture. The one whose voice has gone up in the pitch and stayed up.

Everybody else in that room is embarrassed for them. Everybody else is also, very slightly, grateful that it is not them.

You go to that person. You do not look at their face.

You look at the shoulder.

You put your hand flat on the shoulder. You say one thing.

And the one thing is never about the dead.

Then you say the second thing. Then the third.

By the fourth they are crying properly, in the low register, the way it is supposed to go. The room comes with them. Eleven people who were managing perfectly well have now lost control.

That is the technique. His mother taught him that in a corridor at eighteen, at a funeral in Banan.

She took his hand. She put it on the shoulder of a man of about fifty.

Don't you worry about it. I'll take care of it. Go and sit down.

He had never in his life taken care of anything.

※

He said the three things to the wall.

"Don't you worry about it."

"I'll take care of it."

"Go and sit down."

Then he said the part that is not the technique.

This is the part he found by himself, at nineteen, alone in a room with the light off. This is the reason he was good at it and also the reason he could not do anything else.

He said it in the slow careful standard Mandarin he used for exactly one register in the whole of his life. Nobody ever hears him use it for anything else.

"I know. I know. Go on. Say it. Nobody is going to stop you."

The wall took it.

※

Then he did the diaozi.

This was where he was bad. He knew precisely how bad. This was the part of the afternoon he resented.

The diaozi came out through the nose. His mother's came out through the nose.

She had not made a sound in four years. That is a different fact and a harder one.

He had worked the mechanism out himself, at seventeen, in the dark, from about nine hundred hours of standing behind her in the first four rows.

He got the first two lines.

Then he lost the third one.

He stopped. He went back.

He did it again from the top and this time he got all four lines, and the fourth line he got well.

And on the third line of the second pass his voice did the thing voices do at four in the afternoon in a room with the light off.

It went flat.

Nobody hears a flat third line in a real funeral. There are forty people in that room. Thirty-eight of them are grieving. One is looking at their shoes. One is looking at you.

He had worked out at nineteen that this is why the trade is survivable.

It is not because the people are bad.

It is because there is always one person looking at you, and you can make that one person hear what you want.

The thirty-eight do not hear anything at all.

※

Then the incense. Then the walking round. Then the three calls.

Then the bit where you turn at the door of the room where the coffin is, and go in, and go out, and do not look at it the first time.

He did all of that at a good clip.

Then he did the eulogy, which nobody had ever actually asked him for, which he had written out at nineteen in a notebook that no longer existed, and which he now did from memory, badly.

That was the only part of the afternoon that made him feel anything at all.

※

Here is what he had written at nineteen, and here is what he could still say with the light off in November five years later.

He had not written a eulogy. He had written the opposite of a eulogy, in the sense that a young man at nineteen does not know what a eulogy is, and had written down what he thought his mother would want said.

My mother has cried at ten thousand funerals since she was fourteen. She started because her own mother owed the money for it, and because in the county where she was fourteen it was the only job that paid cash that day.

She taught me everything I know about people by standing behind her in the front four rows and not saying one word.

I have never been good at anything in public. I would like somebody to say something at my funeral about the fact that I could make a room full of strangers believe they had been befriended by me, because that is the only thing I have.

He had got to the third paragraph before, at nineteen, in his own room, and had stopped.

Why had he stopped?

Because he had started crying. And at nineteen you do not continue.

He got to the third paragraph now.

His voice did not crack. That was the thing he noticed. He had built the whole apparatus for a crack.

The apparatus delivered nothing at all. It only works on other people.

He stood there in the dark with a stool and a television and got out four paragraphs to an empty room in a voice as level as a man reading out a price list.

Then he did the last bit.

It was the bit he had written on the back of the page. He had never told anybody about it, and he had never decided to say it out loud.

"Ma. The thing about you is that you were never teaching me."

※

He sat on the plastic stool.

He sat for the length he always sits. Eleven minutes. He timed it in his head.

At minute seven he did the four taps on the thigh that his mother used to do.

They are not part of any diaozi. She did not teach them to him.

He has done them at every funeral he has worked since.

At minute eleven he stopped. He put his hands on his knees.

And then he said the thing he says to her. Once a year, for three years, in a room with the light off.

Four words.

"Ma. I did it right."

※

The knock came at minute twelve.

He came out of it the way he came out of every room, which was all at once and with no transition at all. His hand was still up on the door frame in the position he had been holding it in, and his face was doing the face.

It was a boy at the door. Eight, maybe nine. The grandson of the woman on the second floor.

"Uncle Liu!"

"Hey."

"My grandpa says come play!"

"Where is he?"

"Second floor. He has set the table!"

"How much is it going for?"

"Two yuan."

"That is not enough to play for. Is your grandfather trying to insult us?"

"He says one yuan."

"Then it is enough to play for!" Dajie put a hand on the door frame. "That is the correct amount. That is exactly the correct amount. How long has he been out?"

"He was out on Tuesday."

"Tuesday." Dajie looked at the boy. "Was he out on Monday as well?"

"I do not know what he was doing on Monday. I am eight."

"Then what have you been doing all day?"

"My mother made me do my homework and then I came to look for you."

The boy waited.

"Uncle Liu."

"What."

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"You were making a noise!"

"That is the television. Does your mother know you are out here?"

"You do not have the television on!"

He shut the door. He lifted it to shut it.

Dajie looked down at the boy for a second.

"No," he said. "I do not have the television on. Go down and tell your grandpa I am coming. Do not run on the stairs."

Then he stood in the middle of the room.

He put his sleeve across his face. He did not do anything else. He just did that for about forty seconds, with his eyes open, in the dark.

Then he took the sleeve away and looked at the room. It was an ordinary room in the afternoon with a stool against the wall.

He put the stool back against the wall.

He wiped the inside of his nose with the back of his wrist.

He went down one hundred and four steps.

※

Second floor, third landing, door open, four men and a table.

The men were fifty-eight, sixty-one, and forty-nine. There was one Dajie did not know, who was thirty and playing badly. Two of them were retired from the mine at Nanshan. One did the accounts for a hardware shop in Shapingba.

The grandson was asleep on the couch with his feet on the arm.

The set was old. There was a blanket over the radiator and a bowl of sunflower seeds on the windowsill that had been there since the flood.

"Sit," said the fifty-eight-year-old. "You are late."

"I was at work."

"You were not at work. You were sitting in your room doing your voice, and we could all hear it, and I want to know what you are doing about that." The man pushed the chair out with his foot. "We heard it. It carries. You have got no door that shuts, you have never noticed that, and I have been meaning to tell you for four years. Did you never notice?"

The room went quiet for about a second.

"I do not know what you heard," said Dajie.

"You were doing the mother one."

"I was doing the one that gets you eight hundred a night out in the countryside, and I have not been able to get into the countryside."

"Doing it here."

"Doing it here," Dajie agreed, and sat down, and the man dealt.

That was the end of it. Nobody in that room was going to bring it up again for as long as they all lived.

※

They played for two hours.

The rule in that room was that you could talk about everything and the money was not the point.

The money was the point. It was forty yuan between them and everybody knew exactly where it stood at all times.

And Dajie lost, because he talks.

※

He lost because at the third hand he explained to the fifty-eight-year-old why the fifty-eight-year-old's discard was correct.

It was not correct.

The man took the winning tile anyway and said nothing about it. Did he say nothing?

He said nothing, and he did not look up, and Dajie knew exactly what that face was doing because it was his face.

※

He lost because when the woman came down with the tea, which nobody had asked for and which nobody had offered, everybody stood up to make the space and everybody said thank you.

And Dajie said, "Give me a moment, aunty, in about one second, I am trying to remember what the tile was."

That was not true.

She laughed at it and gave it to him anyway.

※

He lost by thirty-one yuan and he paid it in cash without making any kind of face.

Because the actual rule of that room, the one underneath the other rule, is that you pay immediately and you do not make any kind of face.

※

"Then tell me how you do it," said the sixty-one-year-old, at about the second hour.

"Do what."

"The voice. Do not do the voice at me now, everybody is watching, but tell me how you do it. You have been doing it since you were a boy. What is it you are doing?"

Dajie put a seed shell on the table.

"You do not want to know how I do it."

"I have wanted to know for four years."

"Why?"

"Because you are the only one of us who can do it and none of us can."

"Nobody does it on purpose." He brushed the shells into a pile. "That is the answer. You cannot do it on purpose. The moment you do it on purpose you have to be thinking about it, and if you are thinking about it then you are working, and if you are working then it is a job."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only answer." Dajie looked at him. "Have you ever been in a room where somebody was very bad at it?"

"Every year."

"And did it not work anyway?"

The man thought about it.

"No," he said. "It did not work."

"Then it is not about you. That is what I am telling you." Dajie spread his hands. "It does not matter who you pick. It matters that you pick the worst one in the room and not the second worst. Everybody picks the second worst because

the worst one scares people. The worst one is not scared of anything. That is the one you want."

"How do you know which is the worst one?"

"By the time they have been at it for twenty minutes you could pick them out of a hundred people in a hundred rooms." Dajie shrugged. "You want to know the truth? It is not a gift. It is that I have been in more of those rooms than any man in this stair-street, including both of you, and I have never once been anywhere else."

The fifty-eight-year-old put a tile down hard.

"So you have been counting."

"Since I was nineteen."

"Counting how many people in a room are actually crying."

"Counting who is going to lose it," Dajie said. "There are always two or three. It is not a skill. It is a nose."

"You count two or three out of forty?"

"I count two or three who will go all the way. I do not count the rest. The rest are just talking about it."

※

The fifty-eight-year-old said, "Your mother taught you."

"She did not."

"Zhou Guifen taught you."

"My mother," Dajie agreed, "was standing in a corridor at a funeral when she was teaching me. She has never called it that."

"How old were you?"

"Eighteen. In Banan. There was a man of about fifty who could not stop talking, and she took my hand and put it on his shoulder."

"And he stopped?"

"He sat down," said Dajie. "That is the whole of it. That is all any of it is. You get them to sit down."

The room did the thing that room does, which is to go on playing while something else is going on.

Then the fifty-eight-year-old said, "She has not been at a funeral in two years."

"I know."

"Not one."

"I know."

"And she has not told you she has stopped."

Dajie did not answer that.

He dealt instead.

※

"You have got a form down here," said the fifty-eight-year-old, later. "Did you get it?"

"What form."

"The one with the stamp on it. They have been going round with it since August." He did not look up from the tiles. "Twenty thousand. Per household. Your floor is how many households?"

"Five."

"So that is a hundred thousand for your floor." The man went on playing. "Where are you going to put it?"

"I have not decided."

"You have not decided because you have not asked anybody what it is for." The sixty-one-year-old put a tile down. "Is it a flat white?"

"What?"

"The form. Is it a flat white or is it a sheet."

"It is a sheet."

"Then it is the sheet, and the sheet is an offer and an offer has a date on it." He washed the tiles. "When is the date."

"The fifteenth."

The fifty-eight-year-old said something short in the old register that Dajie had not heard a man use in about nine years, and the thirty-year-old who was playing badly laughed, and the boy on the couch did not wake up.

Dajie looked at the seeds bowl for a while.

"She has not signed it," he said.

"It is not her form to sign. You know that. It is yours and hers both and it is the household's, and when they come with it you will both sign." The man gathered the tiles. "Have they been to your mother?"

"No."

"Then they will go to your mother, and it will not be the form they bring."

Dajie did not have anything for that.

He won the next hand and paid nobody, because nobody had anything.

He dealt again. Then he was quiet for several minutes, in a way that none of them found remarkable. It was a school night. There were four of them. One of them was not talking.

※

At nine he went back up.

He came down the stairs from the fifth floor with the light off and the door open behind him, and put the stool against the wall, and got into the bed.

He did not turn the light on.

His phone buzzed at about ten. His mother, asking whether he was eating.

He did not answer that either.

※

On Tuesday he was going to be given a dead man's house for four hours.

A dead man's name on a printed sheet. A man who wrote numbers on his own wrist.

At seven in the morning he would be picked up in a car.

He did not think about that.

What he thought about, in the dark, with his left eye open, was that at minute eleven he had said four words to a stool.

The stool had taken them.

In three years he had never said anything else to her.

His left eye stayed open a long time.

CHAPTER 4

Four

He Jie's shop is on a back road in Jiangbei that has no name on any map and two names on the delivery apps.

The building is long and low and made of the same grey tile as every other light-industrial shed in the district. There is a yard behind it, and the yard is the whole point, because the yard is where the money happens.

At ten past seven Youcai parked on the road outside. Dajie was already there, sitting on the wall with the gourd between his feet.

"You are early."

"I have been awake since four."

"So have I." Youcai turned the engine off. "Do not drink today."

"I have not drunk today."

"You have had something."

"I have had a beer at six. In the morning. That is not drinking, that is a man putting something in his stomach before a funeral, everybody does it, my mother does it."

"Your mother does it."

"My mother does it four days a week. She has not told anybody in this city that she does it either, so do not start!"

"Will you start?"

"No." Dajie got off the wall. "Do not ask me that again today, brother. Everybody keeps asking me things today."

"What things."

"What kind of man I am. Whether I am all right. Whether my mother is all right." He got the gourd off the wall. "It is a funeral. That is what it is for. You are not supposed to ask anybody anything until after."

"You have been awake since four and you have not asked me anything either."

"You are the only person today who has not asked me something," said Dajie, "and that is the reason I am going to do this job well!"

They went in through a door with a curtain over it.

※

Inside, the shop is one long room with a counter down the middle and shelving on both walls.

The thing that hits you is not the smell. People expect the smell.

The thing that hits you is the tidiness.

Everything on the left-hand wall is boxed and labelled in marker. Everything on the right-hand wall is hung on hangers in size order.

There are three refrigerated trucks parked nose to tail in the yard. Those are the binggui. They are running. You can hear them.

There are about nine people in that room and none of them are in a hurry.

That is the first thing He Jie tells you, without telling you. She does not say it.

You stand in there for eleven minutes waiting to be told something, and you work out that the not-telling is the thing.

He Jie is forty-six. She is behind the counter. There is a receipt book open in front of her and she is writing with a pen that has tape on the cap, because the cap broke.

"Well," she says, without looking up. "This is the drunk one."

"He Jie," says Youcai.

"Two thousand eight hundred a day each. Three days. Fourth is held." She writes it. "You both know the fourth is held. Say it out loud so that nobody has to guess it in December."

"The fourth is held," said Dajie.

"The fourth is not worked unless it is worked. If it is not worked it is not paid." She turned a page. "You eat at the wonton place on the corner. You do not eat downstairs. I will say it once more when you are on your way out and one of you will forget it, because everybody forgets it."

"I will not forget it."

"Everybody forgets it," said He Jie.

※

She looked up for the first time.

"You did the old one. Longtousi. Four lanterns."

"That was me."

"He said you were not drunk."

"He said a lot of things. He said I had a face."

"He said you did something with your face that he could not get out of his head for two days."

He Jie put the pen down.

"That is worth money. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

"I understand you are telling me I have a face worth money."

"I am telling you that I can sell a face." She did not blink. "That is a professional skill and you have it and you have never once been paid for it properly. I am not being kind. In four days I am going to use it on eleven households, and I want you awake."

Dajie looked at her.

"You are the first person," he said, "who has ever asked me for a skill out loud."

"I ask everybody for their skill out loud. It is cheaper than finding out what they have." She picked the pen back up. "Now. The clothes."

※

The clothes are on the right-hand wall.

They are called shouyi and they are in nine sets and the price of them goes up the wall. The cheapest is at the end nearest the door, and it is polyester, and it is not terrible. The dearest is at the far end and it is not silk, because silk is for somebody else.

He Jie does not do the measuring. She does not do the measuring because the measuring is not the hard part.

The measuring is done by a woman called Fu Jie. She is fifty-one. She has worked here for nineteen years. She does not speak at all during the fitting and does not appear to be doing anything other than holding a tape measure.

She held the tape to Dajie's shoulders.

"A hundred and six." She wrote it down.

"Is that big?"

"That is standard."

"I have never been measured for anything in my life."

"That is not for you. It is for him." She held the tape to his chest. Her hands were cold. She did not look up once. "Ninety-one."

"Do you want to know what the ninety-one is for?"

"No," said Fu Jie.

Fu Jie had worked out by then what Dajie was.

A man who talks is a man who can be asked questions.

So she asked him none.

The shouyi came off the hanger and she held it up against him and stepped back one pace and did not say anything.

It was dark blue. Five layers, which is correct, because you want an odd number so the person arrives somewhere with something on.

There was no leather in it. There was no leather in any of the other eight sets on that wall either. Leather is an animal going round again, and that is not a thing a family wants to think about at nine in the morning.

"It is very blue," said Dajie.

"It is standard blue."

"His was a builder. He built the escalators. On the stair-street. Do people not want something with a bit of colour for a builder?"

Fu Jie put the tape measure in her pocket.

"There are nine sets. Two of them are that colour." She hung it back up. "They cost eleven hundred each and they sell about four times a year."

"Then somebody bought it four times."

"Somebody bought it once. Somebody tried to steal it. Somebody returned it after nine days. And somebody returned it in a day because the family did not like it." She turned away. "Do you want me to charge his family for the blue one?"

"No."

"Stop talking about the blue one. Next."

※

The next part is that you do not fit the mourner.

That is not how it works. You do not go to a funeral dressed as the dead.

Here is the thing nobody outside the trade knows.

You do not fit the mourner. That is not how it works.

You are fitted for the layer underneath, which is a plain white cotton top.

That layer is there so that the mourning clothes the family bought can go over it and sit right.

And that layer being right is there so that a man has to be dressed by somebody else, in front of people.

That takes eleven minutes. It cannot be done by the man himself.

They dressed Dajie in the back room.

There was a man in there called Peng who did it. Peng was fifty-eight. He had been at He Jie's for twenty-two years and had dressed, by his own count on a Tuesday in a good month, four hundred and eleven dead men.

He did not talk.

He put the white cotton on Dajie. He did not ask Dajie to move. He adjusted things without explaining.

It took eleven minutes.

Eleven minutes is not enough time to say anything.

Eleven minutes is exactly enough time for a man to talk continuously and not once be answered, which is what Dajie did.

When Peng came out he looked at his own hands for a while.

"How many have you done," said Dajie.

Peng did not answer for long enough that Dajie assumed he had decided not to.

"Four hundred and eleven," he said. "In a good month. I gave you that number outside and I should not have."

"What do you mean you should not have."

"I gave you the number because you were standing there being pleasant at me." Peng went back into the room and picked up the blue shouyi off the hook and shook it out. "That is how it happens. Somebody is nice to you at a funeral and you tell them a number."

"How many times have you told He Jie a number like that?"

"Every one of nineteen years." He did not look up. "Does that make you feel better?"

"No," said Dajie. "It does not."

"Good."

"I will not tell anybody."

"You will tell He Jie."

"I will not."

"She already knew." He held the cloth up to the light and looked for a fault in it. "She knew before you did. She has written down how many men in this city can do that, and what each of them is worth, and yours is on the sheet, and the sheet is in the drawer."

"Then why tell me at all."

"Because it is nearly noon and I have had a beer." Peng hung the cloth back up. "Do not tell He Jie I had a beer!"

※

The other man in the shop was called Lu, and he was forty-four, and he had done this for twenty-one years, and he was the one of the two who actually cried.

Not for money. He had a way of putting his hand flat on a chest and going, and it worked, and it had worked for two decades, and he did not know how to stop it and had stopped trying.

"You are the drunk one," he said to Dajie, in the yard, while they were waiting for the truck. "Longtousi. Four lanterns."

"Everybody knows that."

"Everybody knows that." Lu took out a packet of cigarettes and did not offer Dajie one. "Do you know what you did?"

"No."

"You sat down on a plastic stool by the door for forty minutes."

"I sat down for forty minutes."

"You did not touch the family. You did not put your hands on anybody." Lu lit it. "You just sat there and you let them come to you. Somebody brought you tea. Somebody brought you a cigarette. There was a woman who sat down next to you for about ten minutes and told you about her mother-in-law."

"I did not know that was going to happen."

"You did not know it was going to happen. That is what I am telling you!" Lu drew on it. "The trick is not the crying. Anybody can cry. The trick is to be the least frightening person in the building and then to be still."

"Have you ever been still?"

"Once." Lu let the smoke out. "Fourteen years ago. I have thought about it every week since and I still do not know what I did."

※

In the front room there was a table with a printed sheet on it. He Jie was standing beside it. She put her thumb on it.

"This is the price list. Every job gets one. The family pays it. Not you, them. You never see it."

"I have seen the money before."

"You have not seen this money." She moved her thumb. "Body of the deceased, preparation, three days of cold storage. Four thousand two hundred. Washing and dressing, four hundred. Shroud, eleven hundred for the blue one."

"That is the one you are wearing?"

"That is the one you are wearing, and the family is being billed for it. If you spill anything on it that is five hundred off your day."

"That is a lot for spilling."

"That is the right amount for spilling. You will spill it twice before you are forty."

She moved her thumb down.

"Vehicle and driver, three days, one thousand eight. Two men for the first three, called mourning attendants, eight hundred each. Four men for the last two, because it will be crowded, and because that is what the last two nights are."

"They are not hiring you for the crying."

"No. There are women in this city who will do the crying for nine hundred a day, and they are better at it than either of you." She looked up. "Then what are they hiring us for."

"They are hiring you for the standing. Four men in a corridor for two nights in a building that is going to be emptied is not a funeral detail. It is a fact. It is a fact that walks up and down and looks like a man."

※

Youcai said, "What is the total."

"Seventy-one thousand four hundred."

"And the family gets how much of it."

"Does not matter."

"It matters to me."

"The family is paying seventy-one thousand four hundred and they are getting a father cremated with his wife standing next to him, and He Jie's is one of four houses in this district and the cheapest." She closed the folder. "We make eight percent. Everybody says we are robbery. Everybody says it in the corridor, while I am fitting them, and then they sign."

"And if they do not sign."

"Then they do not have a funeral, and there is a form, and the form has a place on it where you write the name of somebody who is not pleased about this." She put the folder under the counter. "That is the whole business. That is what you have been hired into."

"How many do you do in a month."

"Eleven. Some months fourteen."

"Is that a lot?"

"It is what the district does." She looked at him. "And do not do that face."

"What face."

"The face you are making right now. The one where you are about to say something nice." He Jie waited. "Say the nice thing. I will let you get through it and then we will carry on."

Dajie thought about it.

"You did not have to tell me what I used to do for a living," he said.

"You were in livestream control and you did it badly and you were let go."

"How do you know that."

"Everybody in this building knows that. There are four people in this district who do your old job and two of them have been out of work for a year." She went back to the receipt book. "Now say the nice thing."

"You did not have to tell me that either."

"No. I did not." He Jie wrote for a while. "I told you anyway. That is me being kind. Do not get used to it. There is one more and then it stops."

"Will the next one be in the car?"

"The next one is going to be in the car, and the next one is going to be me, and the next one you are going to want to say something about my face." She put the pen down. "Read the list back to me. And do not read me the numbers correctly. Read them the way a man reads a total out at a counter."

"Why?"

"Because a family can tell."

"The list."

"The price list. Out loud. All of it."

"Body of the deceased, four thousand two hundred. Washing and dressing, four hundred. Shroud, eleven hundred. Vehicle and driver, three days, one thousand eight. Mourning attendants, eight hundred each, two men for the first three days."

"And the last two nights."

"Four men for the last two nights."

"How many men are there on the last two nights?"

"Four," said Youcai.

"There are three of us," said Dajie.

"There are four of you," said He Jie, without looking up.

"You did not know that, and if you had known it you would have told me at this counter, and I would have said no."

Dajie looked at the sheet.

"Who is the fourth?"

"Lu comes off a job at Nan'an on the second night. He is owed there. He will be here at eight and he will be paid the same as the rest of you and he will not be told that he is the fourth." She took the sheet back. "Do you want to ask me any more questions?"

"Yes!"

"Good. They are the only ones you get." She squared the folder. "Ask."

"How do you know what the daughter does not want?"

"Because I am forty-six and I have stood in eleven hundred corridors, and every single one of them has told me what they do not want. In this order. Not the loud one. Not the young one. Not the one who asks them questions. And last, always last, not the one who is good with old people."

Dajie did not say anything.

"What do you think she has said to the estimate company and the committee and the woman from the media?"

"Nobody," said Dajie.

"Nobody." He Jie came very close to smiling. "So you would be the fourth one in a row, and the first three have all failed, and she has not laughed since September. Go and be the first one who is different. And I will know inside a minute whether you are or whether you have read about it!"

※

She wrote a number on a slip of paper and gave it to him.

Two thousand eight hundred. End of each day. In the yard.

"There is a thing people ask me," said He Jie, "which is why I pay cash and not into a bank account. You know what it is."

"You like counting it."

"I like somebody standing in my yard at six in the evening knowing that if they do not turn up tomorrow the four hundred people they worked for have their money." She did not smile. "Cash is not a favour. It is a receipt."

"Most people think cash is a favour."

"Most people are wrong and most people have never had an employer at their funeral."

※

Then she said, "The difficult day. Which is which day do you think."

Youcai did not answer.

"The third," said Dajie. "The third is when the casket is closed and the family is standing there."

"No." He Jie looked at him properly for the first time. "The third is the easy one. The third has a schedule. The third has a time of three in the afternoon and a procession and a woman from the crematorium with a clipboard and forty people who are all crying about the same amount at the same volume."

"Then which one."

"The second night." She put her hands flat on the counter. "Second night, the family has been awake for thirty hours, and half of them have gone home, and the ones who have not gone home are not strong, they are just stubborn, and there is not enough food and there is too much tea, and by two in the morning there is a man in that building who wants to talk to somebody."

"Which man."

"Who do you think wants to talk to somebody at two in the morning on the second night of his own father's funeral?" She picked up the receipt book again. "It is not the mourners. We are professionals. We have heard everything and we are not going to give you that. He Jie has been doing this for twenty-six years and He Jie is not going to tell you that either, and if you get it out of me in a bar one day I will deny it and you will know I am right."

She wrote for a while.

"You will not talk to the daughter," she said, without looking up. "That is not cruelty. That is because the daughter has had four people this week telling her what is kind. And you are a fifth one, and you are going to be better at it, and that makes you worse."

※

At the door she said the thing about the wonton place again, and Dajie said, "I have not forgotten it once."

"Then you are the first," said He Jie.

They went out into the yard and the sun came over the shed and hit the side of the nearest binggui and made it white.

Dajie stopped at the truck.

"You have not told her," he said to Youcai.

"I have told her everything I intend to."

"You have not told her about the four hours."

"No."

"You have told her you want to see the building."

"She already knows." Youcai unlocked the car. "Her office is next to mine. She reads everything anybody in that building signs, and he asked for three names, and two of them are not funeral people."

Dajie got in.

He put the gourd on his knees and turned it so the seam faced away from him, which is a thing he does without knowing he does it.

"How many households," he said.

"Eleven."

"How many yuan."

"Twenty thousand each."

"Two hundred and twenty thousand."

"You have done that sum twice in two days."

"You have told me twice in two days. That is your fault for having a mouth that does not shut."

"I have a mouth that does not shut and a certificate in electromechanical engineering and between those two facts I have never once made anybody do anything."

"That is not the worst of it. That is not even close to the worst of it."

Youcai started the engine.

"You have not asked me anything about your mother," he said.

"You have not asked me anything about your mother either!"

"No. I have not." Youcai put the car in gear. "Tell me about your face."

※

They took the back road and then the elevated road and then they got off it and went down through the old part, because there is no way to drive to that building, there is only a way to get near it.

It is eleven floors. It is on the corner, and it has got a shop on the ground floor that shut in the spring, and it has got eleven households in it now and there were fourteen in March.

She has never been inside it.

Neither has Dajie.

The second wife has never been inside it either, and the second wife lives in Longyou with a sister and did not come, which everybody in the corridor agrees about without ever saying it out loud.

"So what are we," said Dajie. "Four men, or three men and one extra?"

"We are four men, and one of us is not paid the same."

"You have not told her about the four hours."

"No." Youcai put the car in gear. "Tell me about your face."

"What about it."

"Whatever you did at Longtousi that a man could not get out of his head for two days. I have to write something in the file."

Dajie looked out of the window at the fog coming up off the river.

"There is a thing I do," he said. "It is not a trick. In a funeral there is always one person who is about to make a fool of themselves in front of forty people. I find them before they know they are going to. And then I am simply already standing there."

"Standing there."

"Standing there. Being still." He turned his wrist over and looked at it. "That is it. Everybody else is doing something. You are doing nothing, next to the person who is falling apart, and you are not looking at them, and they come to you. It takes about ninety seconds."

"And then what do you say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. That is the part you write down." He looked out of the window. "You do not say anything. You have got to hold on to that, because you will want to say something, and the second you say something you are a person at a funeral and not a chair."

"A chair."

"You have sat in a chair with somebody for two hours and told them about your mother, and you have no idea what you said, and neither do they." He turned round. "Have you ever done that?"

Youcai did not answer for about half a kilometre.

"Yes," he said.

"Was it you, or was it them?"

"That is a very good question. It is the reason I am writing this down. I am not answering it at a junction at nine in the morning."

Youcai wrote that down.

He wrote it in the car, at a junction, with one hand, on the back of a receipt from He Jie's yard.

He underlined the word *still*.

"Never say that to him," he said.

"Say what to who."

"Nothing. Forget I said it."

"Whose side are you on?"

"The side where it is written down," said Youcai. "And you have just given me the whole thing, in a car, for nothing!"

They drove the last four hundred metres and the building came up out of the fog on the right, eleven floors, with a roll-down shutter at the bottom and forty-one windows.

Somebody had already written a number on the wall in white paint, very high up, where only somebody in a lift could see it.

3.

Nothing else. Not the date. Not the total. A number, by itself, going up the wall like a level in a well.

"What is the three," said Dajie.

"The percentage," said Youcai.

CHAPTER 5

Five

It is the daoci that gets him.

Not the money. Not the building. Not the three days and the eleven households.

On the second night, in the car, going back across the river, Dajie says, "Somebody has to read it."

"Somebody always reads it," said Youcai.

"Somebody has to read it and it has to be right."

"Which is why I have been asking you about your face since nine o'clock."

※

They were in Guanjia's yard the next morning at half past six.

You go early the first time, so that the first time is not the time you are frightened.

It was the cold now. The fog had gone and there was the actual thing, which is that Chongqing in the eleventh month does not get cold.

It gets damp, and damp is worse, and it gets into the shouyi and stays there.

"You will smell like a cellar by four o'clock," said Lu.

"I already smell like a cellar."

"You are going to smell like a cellar that has been through an afternoon."

He Jie came out with a clipboard and did not say good morning.

"Two things. One. The second wife has confirmed she is not attending. So the family is the daughter, the mother's sister from Wanzhou, and the estate manager. Three people, or four, if you count the brother of the dead man."

"Who is the brother."

"He has telephoned four times. He will not come and he will not stop telephoning, and he will not be at the crematorium, and everybody knows all three of those things already."

"She has not asked who is coming."

"So she does not care."

"She has not asked because she has decided she does not want to know." He Jie put the clipboard down. "Which is not the same thing. If you go in there and find out the difference, you will already have made a mistake."

※

He handed it over like a man handing over a bomb.

Youcai took it and read it.

It ran to a page and a half, on one sheet, typeset, with the family name at the top and the year of birth and the year of death, which was nine days earlier.

Then it began.

Luo Changjiang, male, native of Wuxi, Jiangsu, born in the year of the monkey, departed in the year of the rooster. Aged fifty-eight years.

He was of a modest disposition, sparing in speech, firm in principle, and possessed of a quality that is difficult to describe and that those of us who knew him can each supply in their own words.

He came to this city in his twentieth year. For many years he worked in construction. In the years that followed he built the last three escalators of the stair-street of this district. After that he acquired the building in which he lived, and he slept well.

He raised one daughter. He taught her to ride a bicycle on the flat ground of the exhibition hall, because there is no flat ground on a stair-street. He was not a man who spoke often of his own father.

He was fifty-eight years old. In the estimation of those of us who worked with him, he was a man who finished what he began. It is not a large claim, and he did not make large claims himself.

To his daughter: your father could not tell you why he did things, and he was not often able to say the reason aloud. He built. That was the whole of the method.

There was no second part to it. There was no time when he had finished. And he was not a man who talked about stopping.

To his family and to his friends: we will drink to him tonight, and he will not be drinking with us, and he would have found that funny, because he thought everything was funny that he had built.

Rest.

※

Dajie read it twice in the yard.

Then he put it down on the counter and looked at the man who had written it.

"You wrote this on Tuesday night."

"I wrote the first version on Tuesday night."

"How long did it take you."

"About four hours."

"To write that?"

"Four hours, and then I did not sleep, and then at two in the morning I wrote a second one and threw that one away!" Youcai did not unfold his arms. "The first one was better writing. The first one had a metaphor in the third paragraph."

"What happened to the metaphor."

"I took it out at four in the morning. It was about him and not about the people who have to stand in that corridor for two nights and listen to it."

※

"How do you know what to leave out?"

"Because I have read about two hundred of them." Youcai took the paper back. "Every one is the same. There are nine sentences and they are in a fixed order."

"His name."

"His name. Where he was from. His age. What he did. What he was like. One paragraph for the daughter. One paragraph for the people who worked with him. Then two lines that are not about him at all. Then the word *rest*."

"That is a form?"

"That is a form that has been a form for a thousand years." He squared the paper up against the counter. "And it works because at that point in that room forty people are not listening to the words."

"What are they listening to."

"They are listening to the sound of somebody's voice going for nine sentences without hurrying." He did not look up. "And the shape of it tells them when it is going to stop. And when it stops, they are allowed to make the noise."

Dajie looked at the yard.

"So you built a clock."

"I built a clock," said Youcai. "That is all it is. You have to tell forty exhausted people when it is permissible to fall down."

※

"I could not have written that."

"I know."

"Not a word of it."

"I know that as well."

"You know it because you were in the car last night and you were asking me about my face." Dajie put his thumbs in his belt. "You have been asking me what I can do since eight o'clock in the morning. Have you ever once asked me what I can write?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you cannot," said Youcai. "And there is no version of this in which you write anything. It is not in you. I watched you try to describe a noodle shop to me on Monday. It took you ninety seconds and it was unusable."

"Ninety seconds!"

"It was unusable."

"It was a description. It was not a poem."

"It had no structure in it at all. There was nothing for a person to hold." Youcai's voice did not rise and did not soften. "Dajie. I can write. I cannot talk to a single person in this district."

"You are talking to me."

"I am talking to you because I have known you for two days, and because you have not asked me one question about myself." He put his hand flat on the paper. "That is the whole difference between us and it is the only one that matters this week."

He turned round.

"There is another difference. That one does not matter this week."

"What is it."

"I tried to talk to the estimate company in April. I had four sentences prepared. I got through two of them and the woman looked at her watch."

He picked up the paper again.

"So I am the third person. I will write. You will talk."

"And then what."

"And between us we will be one man who can do both." Youcai buttoned the pocket. "That man does not exist. He does not need to. He has to exist for three days in a corridor. And then we both go back to being the two people we are."

--- There was a truck reversing into the yard with its beep on. He Jie came out and shouted at it. The shouting went on for some time.

When it stopped, Dajie said, "Read it to me."

"What?"

"Read it. The whole thing. Out loud. Here."

"It is nine in the morning in a yard."

"I want to hear it."

"You will hear it at two in the afternoon on the third day. With a casket in the room."

"I want to hear it in a yard." He sat down on the tailboard of the truck. "Brother, I have never heard one. Not one, in my life. I have never been in a room when one was read. I do the crying. I have never once heard the words."

Youcai looked at him for a while.

"Have you ever actually been to a funeral?"

"I have done forty of them."

"That is not what I asked."

"I have stood at the back," said Dajie. "That is where we stand. At the back, with the other men, near the door, so that you can get out. I have never once been at the front of anything."

"Then ask me properly."

Dajie got up off the tailboard.

"Please read it," he said.

Youcai read it.

He read it well. That was the second thing about it, and Dajie noticed it the same way you notice a thing in a shop window and then cannot stop noticing.

Youcai read a eulogy for a man he had never met, in a truck yard in Jiangbei, at nine in the morning.

He read it the way the man himself would have read it. Without any expression whatsoever. With the beat in the right places.

And one of those beats was a pause of exactly the length you would want before the word *rest*.

He put it in, and Dajie's eyes watered, and Dajie did not understand why for a moment.

Then the yard was quiet again, and a truck went past on the road behind it.

"You did not put anything into it," said Dajie.

"No."

"Not one thing."

"Would you have liked me to?"

"Yes." Dajie got up off the tailboard again. "I would have liked you to put your own mother in there! It would have been the best thing anybody has ever read in this city."

"That is a horrible thing to say to a man who has just read that for a stranger at nine in the morning."

"Yes," said Youcai. "Go and stand in the yard."

※

Then Dajie did a thing Youcai had not expected.

He took the sheet off the counter.

He did not ask. He took it, and he walked round the side of the office to the loading step where there was a plastic chair, and he sat down with a pen from his own pocket, and he turned the eulogy over to the blank back of it.

He wrote for a long time.

Youcai stood in the office doorway with his arms folded and let him.

It took eleven minutes, which is the same amount of time it takes Peng to dress a body, and at some point in the middle of it Dajie stopped writing and said "mo" twice out loud to nobody, which is what a man does when the sentence is not coming.

Then he stopped altogether, and read it, and his face did something.

Then he handed it over.

Youcai looked at it for a long time.

"Well?" said Dajie.

"Well," said Youcai.

"Well what?"

"There are nine sentences in yours as well. That is not the problem." He handed it back. "Here is the problem. Read me the first one."

Dajie read it. "Luo Changjiang was fifty-eight years old and he lived on that stair-street and he built three escalators."

"That is correct."

"It is correct!"

"It is correct and it is nothing, and if I read that out in that corridor on the third day forty people will wait for the next part, and there is no next part." Youcai did not raise his voice. "He built three escalators. My man built three escalators. I have written four hundred words about four escalators and none of them is about the escalators."

Dajie looked at the back of the sheet.

"Then what is it about."

"It is about the fact that he did not stop and did not talk about stopping." Youcai took the sheet and turned it round so he could see it. "And you cannot write that. Not because you are stupid. Because you have never once in your life not stopped talking, and you cannot see a man who does not stop talking."

"Can I not see it."

"You can say it."

"That is not the same as seeing it."

"No," said Youcai. "It is not. It is the difference between us and it is going to cost somebody money in about thirty hours."

He put the sheet back in his pocket.

"Write it again tonight," he said. "I want to see the second one. I am not going to read it and I am not going to use it."

"Why do you want to see it."

"Because on the fourth day I am going to have written nine of these for nine households, and one of them will be for a man who is ninety-one and whose family does not live in this city, and I would like to know whether you can do that one in ninety seconds." He put the pen back in his pocket. "Not today. Tonight. Anywhere you like. Not in my car."

※

When it was finished nobody said anything for a while.

"That is the loneliest thing I have ever heard," said Dajie.

"Yes."

"Does he know?"

"He knows every fact in it. Where he was from. The escalators. The bicycle on the flat ground of the exhibition hall. His own father."

"He does not know the sentence about the bicycle."

"He was there. He taught her. He told me so on the telephone on Friday, and he talked for several minutes about a bicycle, which is a thing that nobody talks about for nine minutes."

"You had nine minutes with him?"

"I had nine minutes with him and he was dying on the other end of it." Youcai did not button the pocket this time. "He asked me twice whether the eulogy was finished. I said it was nearly finished. He said, take your time. Then he asked me a third time."

"He asked you a third time."

"He asked me a third time and then he talked about the bicycle again. I did not put the phone down, because I did not know how to end it, and I did not

want to be the man who ended it." He looked at the paper in his hand. "That is the only conversation I will ever have with him. I got it while he was dying and it was about a bicycle."

※

At noon they went to look at the building.

They did not go in. There is no going in. There are eleven households in it and nine of them have keys and all eleven have doors that close.

They stood at the bottom of the steps on the corner and looked up at forty-one windows.

Then they went down four flights to get to the car, because there is no vehicle access to that building and there has never been any vehicle access to that building.

At the third landing Dajie stopped to try it.

He put the gourd down on the step.

Then he stood absolutely still, with his hands loose, looking at the middle distance, and he did not say anything, and he did not move.

He held it for about forty seconds, which is a long time when you are holding it on a staircase with a man watching you.

Then he said, "Is that right?"

"What are you doing."

"Nothing." Dajie picked the gourd up. "That is the nothing. That is what I told you about. That is the whole technique, right there, and I have never once done it deliberately in my life."

"Can you hold it for forty seconds in a room?"

"I did it for forty seconds on a staircase."

"In a room with thirty people in it."

"Lingo." Dajie went down two more steps. "That is exactly the question, brother, and I do not know the answer, and I have not got time to find out today."

They got to the car. Youcai unlocked it and did not say anything for a moment.

"You did not ask me how it was supposed to feel," he said.

"How is it supposed to feel?"

"You stood on a staircase for forty seconds doing nothing, in front of a stranger, and you did not ask me one question about it."

Dajie got in.

"It feels," he said, "like the worst thing I have ever done to a person."

"Which one is hers."

"Ninth," said Youcai. "Third from the left on the south side. The one with the blue plastic chair on the balcony."

"What is in the blue plastic chair."

"Nothing. It has been on that balcony since the spring. The old woman has not moved it and will not." He looked up at it. "When the survey came through in August she asked the survey man what it was worth, and when he did not answer she asked him whether he thought it was worth more than she was."

Dajie looked up at it for a long time.

"You have been up there."

"I have been up there once. On Friday. I went up with the estate manager and the daughter and the notary, and the notary read out the schedule and the daughter looked at her watch, which I want you to understand is not something that happens to a daughter, it is something that happens to a woman who has been in front of a notary twice before this month."

"And the old woman."

"The old woman gave us tea."

"She gave us tea," said Youcai. "In cups. Not in glasses. There are four of them in a kitchen cupboard and she took them down and washed them, and I want you to notice that she washed them, because nobody in that building has anything worth washing."

"You did not tell me she washed them."

"You did not ask me anything."

※

Here is what Dajie said, and here is the whole of what he said.

He said it in standard Mandarin, slowly, with no dialect in it at all. That is the register he uses for exactly one thing.

"She is going to ask you a question," he said, "and it will be the worst question anybody has ever asked you."

"What makes you say that?"

"You are going to ask her something, because you have to ask her something, and she has been waiting three days for somebody to ask her something." He was still looking at the blue chair. "And whatever you say, she will know you made it up. She has been alive for seventy-nine years and she has run every kind of person who has ever come to her door."

He turned round.

"So do not answer it."

"Then what do I do?"

"Nothing," said Dajie. "That is the entire job. That is what you pay me for."

※

At the top of the steps there was a lottery shop that had not changed its hours since 2016.

Outside it, a man of about seventy was sitting on a folding stool with a thermos, doing nothing, in the way that men of seventy do nothing on a stair-street.

Dajie stopped.

"Hello," he said.

The man looked at him.

"You are not from here."

"I am from the stair-street. Banan. The fifth floor."

"Then you are from a building that is coming down as well." The man unscrewed the thermos. "Sit down. Have you got a cigarette?"

"I do not smoke."

"Nobody your age smokes. It is not a virtue." He took out a packet and looked into it and put it back. "I have finished. Twenty yuan buys fourteen and I smoke four a day and that is not a habit, that is arithmetic."

"You have worked out what to do about it."

"I have worked out what to do about everything." The man looked at the fog. "You know what they have not told you? They have not told anybody. In my

building there is a woman on the ninth floor who has been packing since August."

"And has she told anyone?"

"Not her son. Not the committee. Nobody." He screwed the thermos back on. "She is going to do it in the night on her own, and in the morning there will be eleven boxes in a corridor and a form on the table."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I am seventy and I have been on this stair-street for fifty-one years, and I know which women pack."

"You are going to that building."

"Yes."

"Then you will not tell her."

"No."

"You will not tell her because you think you are being kind." The man got up off the stool. "Am I right?"

"Yes," said Dajie.

"Then you are a fool, and so am I, and we will both find out at about four o'clock tomorrow!" He picked the thermos up. "Go on. They are waiting for you up there and you have not got any cigarettes, and that is a problem you are going to have!"

CHAPTER 6

Six

They bring the body up at seven in the morning on the second day.

That is the first thing that goes wrong, and it goes wrong because of the stairs.

There are forty-one steps from the pavement to the ninth floor. Not thirty. Forty-one.

They measured it with a tape on Friday. The number went in the file next to the price of the shroud, and nobody at He Jie's looked at it.

"Every funeral in this building is up those stairs," said Peng.

"You have carried four hundred bodies up those stairs."

"I have carried three hundred and sixty-one up those stairs."

"Then why is this one a problem?"

"Because that was the last one in March, and this is the biggest one, and everybody in this building is going to come out onto the landings to watch us do it."

It took twenty-two minutes.

Eleven of them had the coffin.

Eleven of them were not from He Jie's.

※

He Jie had been right about the lobby, which is the thing she had said and Dajie had not believed.

You do not carry a coffin into an empty building.

You carry it into a building where the lift is working and forty people are waiting to find out whether the lift is big enough.

The lift was not big enough. It had not been big enough in 2004 and it had not been big enough since.

The estate manager had put a strip of masking tape across the doors at coffin height and written on it in marker pen. The writing had been rubbed out so many times that you could only read it if you already knew what it said.

It said: get it out.

So they took it up the stairs. And the building came out onto the landings to look, the way a building does.

※

The mourning hall is in the ninth-floor flat.

It has been there since Monday. He Jie's people put the white cloth up on Monday afternoon and tied it to the light fittings with wire. You cannot drill in a building that is scheduled for demolition without a permit, and there is no point getting a permit.

The flat is two rooms.

The body is in the smaller one. A table that used to be a dining table. The blue shroud. A printed photograph on a stand at the head of it.

The photograph is the only object in that flat that has cost anybody money in this arrangement.

"There is a price for that," said Dajie.

"There is no price for that," said Youcai. "That was hers."

※

Peng gave him the positions at half past seven, standing at the foot of the stairs, out of the wind.

"Right. Where you stand."

"Where do you want me to stand?"

"Side of the body. Hands behind your back. That is the position and it is the only position, and nobody told you about it, so write it down."

"What happens if I put my hands somewhere else."

"People look at them." Peng did not raise his voice. "In a room like that, a man's hands are the only thing anybody can look at instead of his face. Hands in your pockets and you are a thief. Arms folded and you are a foreigner. You lean on the door frame and you are a man who is about to leave."

"And hands behind the back."

"Hands behind the back and you are working." He pointed without turning round. "That is you. Door is you." He nodded at Youcai. "He has the paper."

"And you?"

"Corridor." Peng said it like a place on a map. "Two men, standing, not sitting, for two nights."

"Can I sit down?"

"On the third night you can sit down."

"Not before."

"Not before." Peng started up. "Come on. I will show you the others and then I will show you the tea."

※

So here is the rest of it, and Peng gave all of it in a few minutes on a landing, without sitting down.

"The daughter is at the table with the accounts."

"She has accounts?"

"She has a shoebox. It is what came out of her father's jacket and out of his desk over fifty-eight years."

"Somebody in that family has been putting things in it for ten years."

"It is her. Nobody mentions that either."

"The sister from Wanzhou."

"On the sofa. Since Monday. She is fifty-eight and she came on Tuesday and she leaves on Thursday and she has not asked one question in eleven hours."

"She has said his name eleven times."

"You have been counting."

"I have been in four hundred of these."

"The estate manager is in the corridor."

"Why."

"Because he is not family." Peng stopped on the landing. "If you are family you sit down and you stay down there. If you are not family you stand up where people can find you."

"How many times has he been found today?"

"Nineteen. He answers the same four questions every time." Peng went up another flight. "He has not said the word *percentage* once."

"What is the word percentage?"

"You will not know what it is and you will not need to."

"Now. The tea."

"You will not know what it is and you will not need to." Peng went up another flight. "Now. The tea."

※

"The tea is the important thing and nobody tells you this."

"I have had tea at forty funerals."

"You have had tea at forty funerals as a man standing near a door." Peng turned round on the eighth-floor landing. "In this flat the tea has been going since eleven o'clock and it has not stopped once. Every person in there is drinking it and not one of them is thirsty."

"What is it for?"

"It is for the mouth." He came back down two steps. "You have not seen what it looks like when a room goes quiet and forty people have nowhere to put their faces. The tea gives them somewhere to put their faces."

"Who pays for it?"

"They do. It is on the list. It is on every list!" Peng looked down the stairs. "And if you take a cup in there you drink it. If you do not want it, you do not take it. If you take it and hold it, you are a man holding tea in a flat where somebody has died."

"How long will I be doing that?"

"About four hundred times in three days. And you will not notice."

※

The old woman is on the balcony.

She came out at about half past eight. She has been out there since, in a plastic chair, with the blue plastic chair beside her for the company.

Youcai had said ninth floor, third from the left.

"It is the fourth."

"I counted it on Friday."

"You counted it while a man was reading a schedule out of a folder." Youcai did not look up. "It is the fourth. Her son used to count them."

※

At nine the sister from Wanzhou said the name out loud. She said it again ten minutes later. At half past nine she began to cry.

There was no sound in it.

She was doing the flat dry heaving of a woman of fifty-eight who has been on a train for eleven hours.

Dajie went over to her.

He did it perfectly. He did it the way he has done it four hundred times, and he did it in about nine seconds. He put his hand flat on her shoulder. He said the three things.

The third one was *go and sit down*.

She was already sitting down.

It did not matter. The room came with her anyway.

Then he stood there.

And then he did a thing that is not on any list.

He had never done it on a job. He could not stop.

※

He opened his mouth and the diaozi came out.

He did not decide to do it.

That is the part he could not explain afterwards to anybody. Not to himself. Not to Youcai. Not to the old woman on the balcony four metres away who turned round in her chair.

It came out of the place it always comes out of, which is through the nose. It was the first one, the one about the road going down and the water going under.

It came out at the correct speed. That is the speed you use when you are not performing it for anybody and are simply the instrument of it.

He got four lines.

On the fifth, his voice did the thing it does on a flat third line at four in the afternoon in a room with the light off.

Except that it did not go flat.

It went on.

※

Nobody stopped him.

That is the part he wants written down somewhere, in a notebook, in the neat hand, by somebody else, so that it exists. Nobody in that flat stopped him.

Nine lines. He had never gone past four.

His mother goes to eleven. She has never gone past eleven. She has been doing it since she was fourteen, and on an ordinary Tuesday you can hear it from the stairwell of her building.

He got to fourteen.

The room had been gone since eleven. By eleven they were all simply crying, and crying makes noise, and noise covers anything you want it to cover.

He got to fourteen.

And his mother, who was not in that flat, who was in a stair-street in Banan at that moment with her shoes on, stopped what she was doing.

Dajie does not know that. Nobody told him until the stairwell, six weeks later, in about four sentences, and then she would not talk about it again.

※

He came out of it with a dry mouth.

He put his hand on the edge of the dining table where the body had been on Friday.

"Who are you?" said the sister from Wanzhou.

"My name is Liu Dajie."

It was not his name.

It was his surname, and it was the wrong one. He has no idea why he said it.

He has gone over it a great many times. The only thing he has ever come up with is that in that flat there were four men whose surname was Luo, and a woman of fifty-eight who had said the name of the dead man eleven times.

His mouth went to the commonest shape available.

The sister looked at him.

"You have not been to a funeral before."

"I have been to a funeral before."

"You have not cried."

"No," said Dajie. "I do not do that. I do the other thing."

"You are extremely good at the other thing!"

"I have been told that three times this week."

※

Youcai came and stood next to him about a minute later.

He did not say anything about it.

Then, without moving his mouth much, because there were four people in the next room:

"Nobody is going to say anything about that."

"What am I supposed to say about it?"

"Nothing. That is what I mean." Youcai was still not looking at him. "You do not say anything about it. Not to me, not to Peng, not to He Jie."

"And if somebody asks how I did it?"

"You say you do not know how you did it, and then you say something about the tea."

"That is what I always say about the tea."

"Yes." Youcai looked at him then. "And in about a year, when this does not matter any more, you are going to have to sit down and work out whether it was any good. I am telling you now, in this flat, with her sister in the next room, that whatever the answer is, it is not the one you want."

※

At half past ten the young man from the seventh floor came up.

He was about twenty-three. He came up the stairs, because he always came up the stairs. He stood in the corridor outside the flat for a few minutes before he knocked.

Everybody in that flat knew what he had come for. Nobody said a word about it, because the alternative was to say a word about it.

"Are you busy?"

"We are extremely busy," said Peng.

"Will it only take a minute?"

"It will not take a minute, and you are asking me that on a landing at half past ten at night, and the answer is no!" It was the loudest anybody in that corridor had spoken in two days.

The whole landing heard it. The door of the fourth flat came open about two inches and stayed like that.

The young man looked at Peng. Then he looked at the two men standing in the corridor.

Then he did not say the number.

"It can be Thursday," said Peng.

"It can be Thursday."

"Then do not stand in my corridor."

The young man went down.

Nobody looked up.

Dajie found out the rest of it in the yard at six o'clock, from He Jie, in four sentences, in the tone of a woman reading out a price list.

She did not say the word. She gave him a figure, a percentage, and the name of a platform.

Then she said the sentence that is the whole of what this city knows about it. The money goes round so many times in a month that nobody in the chain ever meets the person who uses it. The only people who get hurt are the ones carrying it.

"Have you got a phone?"

"Yes."

"Then take it out of your pocket in that flat. Do not take it out in that flat."

※

At one o'clock the daughter came out of the smaller room for the first time in three hours.

She put four hundred yuan of folded notes on the counter.

"For the men."

He Jie had said there would not be an envelope.

She had also said that money given to the men directly is a different thing from money given to the company. A family which does it is telling you

something about itself. In twenty-six years she has taken it exactly four times and kept exactly none of it.

"Thank you," said Lu.

"Not to me," said the daughter. "To them."

Then she said, "He did the same thing. My father used to put money in the hands of the men who came, because he said you can tell what a man is by what he does with his hands at that moment."

Nobody said anything about that.

She went back towards the smaller room and stopped in the doorway with her back to the room, and looked at the window. There was nothing at the window. It was a wall and a bit of roof and the far side of the lane, and she stood there looking at it for longer than there was anything in it to look at, and then she went in and shut the door.

Dajie looked at the money for a while. He had been handed four hundred yuan by a woman he had been told not to speak to.

Then he put it in his own pocket, because that is what you do.

※

She spoke standard Mandarin.

Nobody in that flat spoke standard Mandarin except her.

That is the thing about her. It is the loudest thing about her, and Dajie worked it out at about two o'clock without ever being told.

Peng and Lu and the sister and the estate manager and the seven men who carried a coffin up those stairs were all speaking the way everybody in Jiangbei speaks. At speed, with the front end of the words going soft.

Youcai spoke the way a man reads out a price list.

Luo Yan said every word the way it is written in a book. She had been doing it since she was eleven, in a minority class in a school in Dadukou, on a subsidy her family did not need. She had not lost it.

And it meant that when she asked a question nobody answered immediately, because everybody had to hear the question first.

"Can the cornet be moved."

"Which cornet?"

"The one at the top of the stairs." She did not point at it. "It wakes my grandmother up. She is on the ninth floor and it is on the eighth and it is loud."

"It will be taken down this evening."

"By whom?"

"By whoever has been engaged to take it down."

"Is that a person, or is that a company?"

"It is a man on a ladder with a pair of pliers!" Peng did not look up. "He will be here at seven and gone by ten, and if you ask him again he will put the pliers down on the step and go home."

"That is not an answer to the question."

"No," said Peng. "That is the answer to the question."

※

The old woman came in at four o'clock.

Nobody announced her. Somebody on the landing heard the lift. Then somebody else said a name quietly, and the flat rearranged itself very slightly, in the way a room does when somebody's grandmother is in it.

She was very small. A coat over a cardigan, and slippers with the backs crushed in.

She had come four hundred metres from the eighth floor. She had told somebody that. Nobody remembered which.

She went straight to the photograph and stood at the foot of the table for a while.

Then she turned round and looked at the four men in the corridor. She looked at the man at the door with a sheet of paper in his pocket. She looked at the one at the side of the body with his hands behind his back.

"Do you sing," she said.

"Yes," said Dajie.

"Then sing me one line of it and go away."

There were four men in that corridor. Three of them were professionals. One of them was a man from Banan with a plastic diploma in a subject that does not exist.

"Which one do you want?" He had said it as a joke and it did not come out as a joke. There was nobody in that flat who was in the condition to hear a joke.

"Any one of them!" The old woman did not move. "I have heard four hundred and I have never known in advance which one it was going to be. I am seventy-nine years old and I am too tired to sit through nine of them to find out."

And he said one line of it.

It was four seconds long. It was the road going down and the water going under. He said it very quietly and there was no tune in it at all, because he had not sung it.

The old woman looked at him for a long moment.

Then she turned to Youcai and said, in the dialect, "Your people at home cry better than you do."

Not to Dajie. To Youcai.

Dajie said, fast, in the dialect, before anybody could answer anything, "Then I will go and cry."

She almost laughed.

It was not much. It was one corner of her mouth, and it was gone before the room had decided what to do about it. Youcai said later that it was the only time in three days that anything in that flat got better.

※

The sister from Wanzhou asked him his name again at about eight o'clock.

He said Liu Dajie again.

This time he heard himself do it.

He put his hand on his own wrist afterwards in the corridor, and there was nothing written on it.

Youcai came and stood next to him.

"She is going to ask you something," he said. "She has been not asking you something for four hours."

"I know."

"Do you know what it is going to be?"

"No." Dajie looked at his own wrist. "I am not going to stand here guessing at it. And if you have written it down, I do not want to know what you wrote down."

He turned round.

"Ask me tomorrow. Not tonight. Tonight I am going to stand in a corridor and do this job for the two thousand eight hundred."

※

Peng was in the corridor.

He had not moved, which Dajie understood to mean he had not moved on purpose.

Peng waited until Youcai had gone back to the door.

Then he said, "How many lines."

"I do not know."

"Count them."

"I was not counting."

"Was it the mother one."

Dajie looked at him.

"How do you know which one it was?"

"Because it is the only one with fourteen in it." Peng was not looking at him either. "The mother one has fourteen lines. That is the whole of it. Your mother goes to fourteen and stops, because her mother stopped at eleven and she has done it that way since she was fourteen years old, and nobody has ever told her there was another verse."

"There is no other verse."

"There is no other verse," said Peng. "There has never been another verse."

※

"How many people know I did that?"

"The flat heard it."

"That is not what I asked!"

Peng finally looked at him.

"Eleven people in that flat heard it. The sister heard it. The daughter heard it and she does not know what it is, so it went over her. Your man at the door heard it. I heard it." He counted on his fingers. "The woman from the fourth floor heard it, and she came out into the corridor to ask what was happening, and I told her it was the radio."

"What did she say?"

"She said, my mother used to do that." Peng put his hands behind his back again. "And then she apologised to me, which I thought was odd, because I had told her it was a radio."

※

"You have been in this trade how long?"

"Nineteen years."

"And in nineteen years have you ever heard anyone go to fourteen?"

"No."

"Not once."

"Not once."

"Then what do I do?"

"Nothing." Peng went back to his place in the corridor.

"I am giving you that one for free. I am going to tell you why, and then I am not going to talk about it again."

He turned his head.

"Because the moment you know that you can do it, you will start doing it on purpose. And we have already established what happens when you do it on purpose." He looked at the corridor and the stairwell behind it. "It is worth fourteen lines about four times in the whole of my life and I do not know how to tell you which four. And I have not told anybody about any of them and I am not going to tell you."

"You told me."

"I told you that there were four. That is the whole of what I said." Peng did not blink. "Do not sit up all night thinking about which four."

※

At about half past nine the woman from the fourth floor came up to the stairs to ask, again, whether it was really the radio.

It was not really the radio.

She apologised to Dajie this time, in the dialect, and he told her in the dialect that it was nothing, and she said that her own mother had done it in Jiangbei, not out here, and that her mother had got a very bad name for it in the village, and that it had turned out afterwards that the very bad name was because she had been doing it at a funeral in the wrong year.

"How do you know which year?"

"You know which year it was." The woman looked at him. "You have to know which year it was. That is the whole of it, that is all there has ever been."

※

At twenty past eight the corridor had four men in it. The flat had nineteen people in it. The tea had been going since eleven in the morning without stopping.

One of the four men at the side of the body was not a professional. He had a name that was not his own, and he had done a thing that had happened four times in nineteen years.

He would not find out what he had done for another three days.

CHAPTER 7

Seven

Dajie got to the building at a quarter past six on the morning of the first day.

That was an hour early. He did it because He Jie had said six forty-one and he did not trust a number.

He had already drunk, which was not in dispute. He had had a beer at five. He had had something stronger at half past four. He had walked down four flights from Banan to save the fare.

He was in the mood four hundred funerals had given him. That is not a good mood exactly. It is a mood where your hands want to be doing something.

So he sat down on the bottom step with the gourd between his feet and he did not go in.

The sky over the river was the colour of a coin.

※

The street was doing the two o'clock thing.

Everybody who has lived on a stair-street knows it and nobody has ever explained it. The whole arrangement of steps and lanes and half-demolished courtyards comes to a single level at about two in the morning and lies flat. Then everybody comes back up at six and has to climb again.

At six in the morning on that street you can see everybody in the district who is going somewhere.

That is the whole of what a stair-street is. It is a place where you cannot arrive quietly.

He watched a woman with a bag of fish. He watched two men in overalls going the wrong way, and one of them going back to correct it. He watched a man carry a plastic basin up eleven steps, put it down, pick it up again, and carry it up another four.

The dog came out from under the roll-down shutter of the shop that had shut in the spring.

※

It was ginger. It was about the size of a large cat.

It had one ear up and one ear folded over in a way that made it look permanently offended.

Dajie had seen it before. Everybody in the district had. It came and went in a way nobody could account for. Nobody investigated.

There are about four hundred thousand dogs in Chongqing and there is no system for them.

"What do you want?" he said to it.

The dog came over and stood about a metre away.

It did not come nearer, and it did not wag anything.

"Come on, then. I have got nothing in my pocket and I have had a beer, so you are wasting your morning."

The dog sat down in the road and looked up at the building.

That was all it did. It looked up at the building for about forty seconds.

Then it looked at Dajie.

Then it stood up and walked to the foot of the steps and lay down in the place where the water runs when it rains.

That was the only flat ground for four metres in any direction.

"Right," said Dajie.

※

The man came down at about ten to seven.

He was carrying a plastic bag with clothes in it, and he was wearing the wrong shoes for it, and he had not shaved.

He held the bag in both hands the way you hold something when you are not sure whether you are allowed to put it down.

He got to the sixth landing and stopped.

He put one hand on the rail and stood there for a while.

Dajie watched this from the bottom, because he has watched four hundred men do exactly that and he can tell from the street.

Then the man came down three more steps and sat down on the landing on purpose. He put the bag beside him. He put his elbows on his knees.

Then he said, to nobody, in the dialect, "Xiongdi."

※

Dajie did not move for a few seconds, which was a mistake he thought about a great deal later.

Then he got up and went up seven steps and sat down on the landing next to him, leaving one step between them.

That is the right distance. Nobody has ever explained it to anybody.

"How long have you been sitting there?" he said.

"I have just come down."

"You have not just come down. You have been on that landing for a minute and a half."

The man did not answer.

Then he said, "You are not from this building, are you."

"No."

"You are the one drinking on the steps."

"Yes," said Dajie. "That is exactly what I am doing."

"Then why are you sitting up here, and what have you come down for?"

"Because you said something and I have got a rule about that."

"You have got a rule about a man saying one word on a landing."

"It is not one word. It was two."

The man looked at him.

"What is the rule?"

"I am not going to tell you what the rule is." Dajie turned the gourd a quarter turn on the step. "You would stop saying words, and you should not stop saying words."

※

The dog barked once, from the wet place at the bottom of the steps.

Dajie did not look at it. He had other business.

"Are you from this building?"

"Fourth floor."

"Which one is yours."

"Behind the shop with the fish. The one you cannot get the delivery van past."

"I know the one. I know exactly which one you mean."

"It is not much of a home," the man said.

"It is not much of a home," Dajie agreed.

The man put his hand on the plastic bag.

"I have got his clothes here and I cannot remember whether I have got his clothes here."

"You have got his clothes."

"How do you know that?"

"Because you have said the sentence about his clothes twice, and you have not once said the other sentence."

The man put both hands over his face.

"That is the other sentence," he said.

※

Here is what Dajie had worked out in about nine seconds, standing at the foot of a staircase with his hands loose.

The man had come down, not to go out, but because there were too many people in that building.

He was going to be buried in the county and he had come back on the Friday coach with the body. There were forty people in his flat on the second floor, and he could not get through the door of his own house.

He had been carrying the bag since half past five.

He had twenty minutes to make a coach he was going to miss.

He had a father in a plastic bag.

He had no idea how to put the sentence down.

※

Dajie put his hand flat on the man's shoulder.

He said the first thing.

"Don't you worry about it."

The man did not move.

He said the second thing.

"I will take care of it."

The man's hands came off his face.

He said the third thing.

"Go and sit down."

The man was sitting down. He had been sitting down for a minute and a half. It made no difference at all.

The man put his forehead down onto his own knees and made a sound.

※

The man did not say *my father is in this bag*.

What he said was the sentence about the clothes. Twice.

Dajie answered it the only way it can be answered, and then the sound came.

It was not crying.

Crying is loud, and it comes in pieces, and it goes away.

That was one sound. It did not stop. It did not go up in the pitch the way a voice does when a man is losing control of it. It went on for four and a half minutes.

※

The dog barked again.

One bark, from the bottom of the steps, from the wet place.

Dajie did not look at it.

He had his hand on a stranger's shoulder, and at that moment he had genuinely forgotten there was a dog in the world at all.

The man did not move either.

Dajie waited for it to stop. It did not stop.

He could not go anywhere.

He could not say anything else either, because there was nothing else in the world at that moment except a man on a staircase and a plastic bag.

So he did the only thing available to a man in that position, which was that he stayed.

He stayed for four and a half minutes by his own count afterwards.

By the look of it on the street it was closer to seven.

There is no clock in that situation. A man with his hand on a stranger's shoulder has no idea what time it is.

At no point did he think of a single thing.

※

When it stopped, the man sat up.

His face was wet to the hairline.

"I am sorry," he said.

"Do not do that."

"I am sorry, brother. I am really sorry."

"Stop it." Dajie took his hand off the shoulder. "You have got a coach to miss."

"I have missed the coach."

"How long have you known you have missed the coach?"

"Since Tuesday. I knew it on the Tuesday."

"It is a quarter past seven on a Thursday morning."

"Yes. I am aware of what day it is."

"Then what are you doing here?"

The man looked at the plastic bag for a long time.

"She said not to go," he said.

"Your wife?"

"She said, do not take him back to the county." He turned the bag over on its side and looked at it. "And I took him back to the county."

Dajie did not have anything to say to that.

He did not have anything to say to it because he is not a man who has anything to say to it. The man had not asked him for anything. His wife had told him not to do a thing.

He had gone and done the thing, and had got it wrong, and had known since the Tuesday that he had got it wrong.

"Are you from this building?"

"Fourth floor."

"Then go up and tell her you could not get through the door."

"I have been up there for two hours."

"Then tell her you could not get through the door."

"And if she asks me why I could not get through the door?"

"Tell her there were forty people in there."

"That is not the reason."

"No," said Dajie. "It is not. But it is a reason, and she will be able to do something with it, and you cannot."

"What am I supposed to tell her when I get there?"

"Whatever you tell her. I am not your lawyer."

"I am asking you because you are the only person on this staircase."

"Then tell her the truth and see what she does with it."

"That is what I did! That is exactly what I did." The man put the bag down between his feet. "I told her on the Friday night and she has not said one word to me since, and it is Wednesday, or it is Thursday, and she is not saying one word."

"So you have had four days of nothing."

"I have had four days of her doing the washing."

"She is doing the washing."

"She has washed everything. Everything in that flat. She did it on the Saturday, and then she did it again on the Monday, and then again on the Tuesday." He looked up the stairs. "I have been sleeping in the room with the boxes still in it."

"Then that is what she is telling you."

Dajie looked at him.

"Is it?"

"I do not know," said the man. "I am not a clever man. I am a man who has carried a bag down a staircase."

※

The man picked up the bag.

He stood there holding it for a moment.

Then he said, "You are not a mourner."

"No."

"You are a man drinking on the steps at a quarter past seven."

"Yes, I am."

"Then why did you do that?"

Dajie did not answer that one.

The dog barked, from the wet place at the bottom of the steps, one time.

"My name is Liu Dajie," he said.

※

The man went down and out into the street.

The dog got up and followed him about forty metres. Then it came back and lay down at the foot of the steps in the wet place again.

Dajie sat on the landing for a while.

He has a rule about names. He has never asked a man like that for his name. Not in forty funerals.

The reason is that asking is the first thing that turns it into an occasion. And an occasion is what everybody in that building has been having for two days already.

So he did not ask.

The thing he cannot get round, and has gone back over since, is not that he never learned the man's name. It is that the man did not volunteer it, and had no reason to.

He would have gone back to the county on the eleven o'clock coach with his father in a bag, and never have known that anybody remembered the landing.

Then he looked down at the dog.

"What are you, then?"

The dog did nothing.

"What was that for?"

The dog did nothing at all, which after that morning was becoming the most unsettling experience of his working life.

※

His phone buzzed.

"You are where," said Youcai's message, which was not a question and had no punctuation on it at all.

He did not answer that one.

At seven nineteen a second one came.

"He Jie wants to know if you have eaten."

He looked at that one for a while.

It was the second time in two days that somebody had asked him a small ordinary question and let it stand as a question, without wanting anything at all out of the answer.

He typed two words: not yet.

Then he put the phone away, because the man on the landing had said *xiongdi*, and once that word has been said to you by a stranger you are not eating your breakfast in front of a telephone.

※

He got up at about ten past seven and started up the steps.

At the fourth landing there was a man in a tracksuit coming down with a plastic basin.

"Sorry," the man said.

"No. It is all right. Go on."

At the sixth landing two women were going up with an armful of folded white cloth. They stopped to let him pass, and one of them looked at his face and said, in the dialect, that she hoped everything was all right with him, and Dajie said thank you in the dialect and kept walking.

That is the other half of the trade and nobody ever puts it in a book. Forty minutes before you go into a flat where somebody has died, somebody on a staircase hands you a plastic basin and says sorry.

You say it is all right. You keep going.

It is the only thirty seconds of that morning that has nothing whatever in it.

※

Here is what he could not get over.

He did not tell a living soul about it. Not Youcai, not Peng, not his mother, and he was asked about it by all three.

It had not cost anything.

That was the part.

He had done the job. The whole of it. The hand on the shoulder, the three sentences, and four and a half minutes of staying. And it had cost nothing, and nobody had paid him, and nobody had booked him, and nobody was ever going to know about it.

If that is all it is, then what is the two thousand eight hundred a day for.

He stood on the fourth landing with that, and he did not like it at all.

It went away by the time he got to the sixth.

It came back at the ninth.

By the time he got down into the lobby it had turned into something else entirely.

Which was this.

He was going to go into that flat at seven forty-one and stand at the side of a table with his hands behind his back, for three days.

And that he had already done the hardest part of it in the wrong place. On a staircase. For nothing. To a man he would never see again.

He did not think of it as a gift.

At the time he thought of it as being caught.

※

At the ninth floor Peng was waiting outside the lift with his hands behind his back.

"You are early."

"I am early."

"You are drunk."

"I am not drunk."

"You are drinking on the steps of a building you have not worked in yet. What exactly do you call that?"

Dajie put the gourd down against the wall.

"Four hundred and six a day," he said. "Five hundred and twelve on a Sunday."

"That is what you call it."

"That is exactly what I call it."

Peng looked at him for a moment.

"Who taught you that?"

"Nobody. You do it so many times that somebody tells you what it is worth and you believe them, because the alternative is that it is worth nothing, and then you have to decide what to do about that." Dajie picked the gourd up again. "I decided to believe them."

※

"There is a dog on the steps," said Dajie.

"There is always a dog on the steps."

"This one has been there since quarter to seven."

"Then it has the job."

Dajie turned round.

"What?"

Peng was already going into the flat.

"It has the job," he said, without turning round again. "It was there when we came at seven. It will be there at seven tonight. It will be there when we leave."

"Is it anybody's?"

"No."

"Then what is it doing."

"It is doing the thing you do," said Peng. "It is sitting where people go past. Only it is not asking them for anything, which is why it works and you do not."

※

At the lobby he stopped, and turned round, and looked back up the stairwell he had just come down.

Forty-one steps. Nine floors. Four hundred funerals.

And one landing at the sixth, where a man he would never see again had been sitting for a minute and a half before he said a word.

※

The profession has a name for the moment when a mourner's shoulder is struck.

It is called zhuangjian.

Dajie had done four hundred of them on jobs and had never used the word about any of them.

He used it that morning, once, in a stairwell, to nobody, out loud.

Then he went up to the ninth floor and did the job.

CHAPTER 8

Eight

The second night is the one everything is built around.

Dajie worked it out in a few minutes of the first night and then had to sit on it for twenty-six hours.

It is not that anything happens on the second night.

That is the thing He Jie had not explained.

Nobody explains it. It took Dajie forty funerals to understand that the second night is the one because nothing happens on it.

The first night people are polite.

The third night there is a schedule and a procession and a woman with a clipboard.

The second night is the one in the middle. The family have been awake for thirty hours and half of them have gone home, and the half that have not gone home are not strong. They are just stubborn.

And there is not enough food and there is too much tea.

※

By eight o'clock on the second night there were thirty-one people in that flat.

There had been nineteen on the first night. There were thirty-one on the second. Every one of them had a reason that made sense.

Not one of those reasons was grief.

The cousin from Shaanxi who had flown in and could not get a ticket out until the fourth. The man from the construction company, who had worked with the dead man for eleven years.

He had driven four hours to be there and was going to drive four hours back. Two women from the estate office who had brought a folder each. A man nobody could identify who had brought a large bag of fruit and would not leave it.

"Did you eat?" Dajie said to the fruit man.

"I brought it for them."

"You have been here since half past five."

"They have not touched any of it."

"They are not going to touch any of it."

"Then I will take some down myself, so it does not go to waste!"

He went down into the corridor, and Dajie heard him stop outside the seventh-floor flat.

※

Peng had four men in the corridor that night: Peng, Lu, Dajie, and Youcai.

Youcai was the wrong man for a corridor. That was not an opinion. It was visible. He stood with his back to the wall and his hands at his sides.

He did not move his feet for two and a half hours. At about eleven he shifted his weight onto the other foot and made a noise through his nose that he clearly thought nobody heard.

"You cannot stand up for two nights."

"I have stood for two nights before."

"Where."

"At a hospital. My mother. August."

Dajie did not say anything to that.

"Second night," he said. "Wrong."

※

Here is what Youcai was actually doing on that corridor, which he did not explain and which Dajie worked out about an hour in.

He was watching the stairs.

That is all. For two and a half hours, a man with a printed sheet in his pocket stood with his back to a wall and watched the stairs.

"Why the stairs?"

"Because that is where it comes from."

"What comes from where."

"Everything." Youcai did not look at him. "In three days, everybody who has ever had a debt with this family will come up those stairs. And in three days somebody who has not come yet will come up them on the morning we leave.

There is a man from a collection office who has been waiting for exactly that."

"You know a collection office?"

"I know what a collection office is. Everyone knows what a collection office is."

"And after the funeral?"

"After the funeral they all go back to being people who need money." Youcai put his hands in his pockets and took them out again. "That is the part nobody puts in the story. Everybody thinks the danger comes during. It comes after, and it comes slowly, and it comes to your door on a Tuesday with a form."

※

At about ten the estate manager came along the corridor with two women from the estate office.

They stood at the far end and had a conversation in a very low voice.

Dajie was six feet away and heard all of it. That is what a corridor is.

"Cannot sign before the sister is here."

"She has been on the train since Tuesday."

"Then it is Friday."

"And the valuation?"

"Which valuation?"

"The one from the second lot. The one that came in at four hundred and ten."

"The first lot came in at four hundred and thirty. It has been challenged."

"By whom?"

"By the household on seven."

Dajie did not move. He had been trained not to move. Peng had done that to him on his fourth job.

"The household on seven," said the first woman, "is four hundred square metres and has been empty since June."

"The household on seven is where my daughter lives," said the second woman.

She said it without any weight, in a corridor, to a man with a folder, and Dajie heard it from the fourth-floor landing.

The other one did not say anything for a moment.

"Then it should be four hundred and ten."

"It should be four hundred and thirty."

"It should be what I put in the form."

※

Youcai, six feet along the wall, took a pen out of his pocket.

He wrote something on the back of his hand.

In the small neat figures, standing up, in a corridor, in the dark, with his back to a wall.

Dajie saw him do it.

He did not say a word about it.

※

Here is what the family paid, and Dajie did know this, because He Jie leaves the price list face up on the counter on purpose.

Seventy-one thousand four hundred, and it goes on a schedule, and it is paid in three parts.

Four thousand two hundred, which is the body and the three days of cold storage, and that is paid before anything else happens. Four hundred, which is washing and dressing. Eleven hundred for the blue shroud. One thousand eight for the vehicle and driver. Then the attendants, eight hundred a night each, and the tea, and the food, which is not on the list and which comes off the account at the end.

And then, at the bottom, printed, in the same size as everything else:

Consultancy, coordination, liaison with the crematorium, and attendance at the interment, four thousand.

"That is eight percent," said He Jie, when Dajie asked her what the last line was. "You have worked it out. Everybody works it out inside a week."

"Four thousand for four days of somebody sitting at a desk."

"Four thousand is four days of somebody making sure thirty-one people have somewhere to sit. That the crematorium has a slot. That the bank account of a dead man is not moved by anybody. That the son does not sign what he should not sign." She put her pen down. "I do not do it for the four thousand. I do it because I do the nine percent in between that nobody can put on a list."

"There is a nine percent."

"There is always a nine percent," said He Jie. "You will find out what it is this week, and it will not be me."

※

The young man from the seventh floor came up at about eleven.

This time he did not stand in the corridor for four minutes. This time he knocked straight away.

Peng opened the door.

"He is not here."

"He told me to come at eleven."

"He told you to come at ten. It is eleven. He is at a mahjong table on the fourth floor and he will be there until two." Peng did not move from the door. "Come back at half past two."

"He said it was about the second lot."

"Everything is about the second lot this week."

The young man stood in the corridor.

Dajie was four feet away, at the side of the flat, with his hands behind his back.

"Can I ask you something," said the young man, to Dajie, not to Peng. "You are the new one. Are you doing the other money?"

※

Here is what happened next, and Dajie has described it to four people in his life and it has come out differently every time.

He said, "What other money?"

"There is no other money," said the young man.

"Then why did you ask."

"I asked because you have got the face of a man who does not know what the face is."

"That is a very stupid thing to say to a man in a corridor."

"Yes," said the young man.

Peng put his hand on the boy's arm then, not hard, and the boy went.

And Dajie stood there with his hands behind his back for another four minutes without moving at all.

Then he went down the stairs to the lobby to get some air, and the dog was on the steps, and it got up and came with him as far as the corner.

※

Peng caught up with him at the bottom.

"He will not come up again."

"He will come up again."

"He will not come up again tonight." Peng lit a cigarette, which Dajie had not seen him do before and did not see him do again. "Listen to me. In the next thirty-six hours, everybody in this building is going to try to explain to you what your job is."

"I know what my job is."

"No, you do not." Peng smoked. "Because nobody has told you what your job is yet. You have been standing on a side of a table for two days and you think the job is to be quiet."

"What is the job."

"The job is to be in the building." Peng tapped the ash off. "That is all. That is the whole of it. Four men in a corridor is not a funeral detail, it is a fact. It is a fact that goes up and down, and everybody in it can see who else is in it.

That is what makes a flat with thirty-one people in it feel like a building with people in it, and not like a warehouse with people in it."

"And the boy from the seventh floor."

"The boy from the seventh floor is not a fact. The boy from the seventh floor is a business."

※

"I am not asking about the boy."

"You were."

"I was asking what he meant by the second lot."

"That is a valuation and it is a lie and both of those are true." Peng threw the cigarette into the wet place, where it went out immediately. "The valuation comes in from a company that the company is paid by. The company is paid by whoever owns the building. The owner is a fund in a district in another province that you cannot get to by train. So there is no person in this that you could go and shout at.

The boy on seven knows that. The household on seven knows that. The woman from the estate office knows that.

She is writing four hundred and ten into a form because four hundred and ten is what gets written into a form."

"Which is her job."

"Which is her job."

"And yours."

"Which is mine," said Peng. "Twenty-two years. I will be doing it at seventy." Peng put the packet back. "And I have never once managed to explain it to anybody who lives in the building."

※

They went back up.

At the seventh-floor landing Dajie stopped.

The door was shut. There was light under it. There were voices in there that were not raising their voices at all.

He could hear a telephone ringing and being picked up on the second ring.

He could hear somebody saying a number, four digits, and then a pause, and then the same number again to check it.

He heard the word *ka* eleven times in a few minutes.

It was said in the flat voice you use it in when it is an item on a list.

He stood on that landing for about two minutes.

Then he went back up to the ninth floor and stood in the corridor with his hands behind his back for another three and a half hours.

※

He Jie was right about the second night.

※

The man from the fourth floor came up the stairs at about one in the morning.

Dajie heard him before he saw him, and he knew the sound, because it was the sound of a plastic bag being carried by a man who has been carrying it for two days.

He came into the corridor with the bag and stopped, and did not see Dajie at all.

He was looking at the flat.

"There is nobody on this landing except four men in the dark," he said. "And the old woman on the balcony with a torch on her knees."

"Yes."

"That is my father on the third floor."

"Yes."

"You knew the name."

"He Jie knew the name."

The man stood there with the bag.

"I am going to have to leave him here," he said.

※

"You said no."

"I said I was not going to be able to do it. You said, that is what she is telling you."

"Did it work?"

"I do not know."

"Did she say anything?"

"She said, put it in the hall." He looked at the bag. "And I have put it in the hall."

"How long have you got?"

"Until nine."

"What are you going to do until nine?"

"I am going to sit on the fourth-floor landing until nine." The man shifted the bag to the other hand. "And then I am going to catch the eleven o'clock coach, and I am going to have to telephone her and say that I could not get through the door."

※

He went down.

Youcai, in the dark, on the other side of the corridor, said nothing for a while.

"He has been carrying that bag since Thursday morning."

"Yes."

"So he could have telephoned her on Thursday morning."

"He did telephone her on Thursday morning."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he told her," said Dajie.

※

At about three the daughter came out of the smaller room.

She had the shoebox.

She did not take it to the table. She took it out to the balcony landing and put it down on top of the fire hose, and she stood there in the corridor light with it for a few minutes.

She opened it.

She did not take anything out of it.

Dajie was four feet away and he watched her close it.

Then she picked it up and went back in, and shut the door, and did not lock it, which Dajie noticed and thought about for a long time afterwards.

※

At about two in the morning the sister from Wanzhou came out into the corridor.

She stood at the wall opposite the four men and did not ask for anything.

"Which of you is the youngest," she said.

Peng said, "It is illegal for me to tell you that."

"Then I will say. You are the youngest." She looked at Dajie. "You are not from here."

"No."

"Have you eaten?"

"Yes."

"Liar." She went back into the flat.

"How did she know?"

"Because you have not been to the wonton shop once in two days! Because you are holding a gourd. Because a man who has been eating does not hold a gourd like that."

"I have been eating."

"I have been awake for thirty hours." She came back out. "Do not be insulted that I can still look at a man."

Four minutes later she came out with a bowl of soup and a spoon.

She put them on the windowsill of the corridor, which nobody had thought of using as a surface, and went back in.

Dajie stood there for about a minute.

Then he picked the spoon up and put it in the bowl.

That is the right thing to do. That is what He Jie had told him in a yard two days ago.

He ate cold soup standing up, at two in the morning, with a dead man twenty feet away.

The dog barked once, from the lobby, four floors down.

Nobody was listening for it.

※

Youcai came and stood at the window at about half past two.

He had the folded sheet out of his pocket and he was not reading it.

"I have written it all down," he said.

"Have you."

"Every name that came up that corridor tonight." He did not look at Dajie. "Fourteen households out of eleven. Which is not a mistake. It is two households that have not come back yet."

"So there is more than two hundred and twenty thousand."

"There is more than two hundred and twenty thousand. There are more than eleven households." Youcai did not look up. "That is not the part I want to say out loud on a landing."

"What is the part you want to say out loud."

Youcai put the sheet back in his pocket.

"The part I want to say out loud is this."

He turned the sheet over.

"The father of that family signed four survey forms. Three of them are dated after he went into hospital. He could not have signed them. Everybody has known it since about the second of November."

※

Dajie did not say anything.

"Do you understand what I am telling you?"

"You are telling me somebody signed for him."

"Somebody signed for him and it was written down and it was checked and it went through." Youcai put his hands behind his back, which he had learned from watching Dajie do it for two days. "Which means that in this building at the moment there is at least one person with a pen who can do that."

※

"Have you told He Jie?"

"No."

"Why not."

"Because He Jie would write it on a piece of paper, and then there would be two pieces of paper." Youcai did not blink. "And because you would then be a man who knows a thing about a family he is standing beside at the side of a table."

"You would have to decide what to do about it, and I have not got three days for that."

"So what do you want me to do."

"I want you to do the job," said Youcai. "That is all I have ever wanted you to do. I want you to do the job and go home and be the man you were on Monday."

He turned round.

"And I want you to notice what I have just done."

He looked at the wall.

"I have said out loud, in a corridor, at three in the morning, that I do not want you to do anything at all." He looked at the wall. "Write that down too."

He did not write it down.

※

The fruit man came back up at about four with a bag of oranges and put them on the counter in the flat, and he said, to nobody, that the ones on seven had taken four, and that the rest were for whoever wanted them.

Then he came out into the corridor and stood next to Dajie.

"You have been standing there a long time."

"Nine hours."

"I know. I have been watching you." He took one of the oranges. "Can I ask you something?" He did not wait. "Are all four of you paid the same?"

"Yes."

"Are all four of you going to be paid at the end?"

"Yes."

"And if the family do not pay? On the third day. If the family do not pay."

"Then He Jie does not get paid, and we do not get paid."

The fruit man nodded.

"That is what I thought. I asked because there is a fellow on the fifth who says men like you are owed by a funeral and that gets a man killed." He peeled the orange with his thumb. "It does not get a man killed. It gets a man not telephoned. They are not the same thing and people do not tell each other which one it is."

"Who is the fellow on the fifth."

"Do not worry about him," said the fruit man.

※

At half past four Youcai came and sat down on the windowsill in the corridor.

He had been standing for nine hours and he had four left.

"I am going to say a thing," he said, "and then I am going to go and stand up again, and if you say no I will not ask you again this week."

"Say it."

"Eleven households. Twenty thousand each. Fourteen names on a hand." He was looking at the floor. "Four hundred and ten thousand, and there is a book in a flat two doors from here that says what it is worth and who holds it, and nobody has taken it out of that flat since the Wednesday, because the daughter is in it every hour of the day and night and she has not left it since the Sunday."

"And after the funeral."

"After the funeral she has to leave it. She has to go back to the flat in Dadukou, because that is where she lives and has always lived, and there is a dance studio in that building that she teaches in six days a week, and there are eleven children in it."

Dajie did not say anything.

"So on the fourth day there is a flat with a book in it and nobody in it." Youcai got up off the windowsill. "That is the entire plan. That is all of it. There is no second part. You will not like how small it is."

"How small is small?"

"Forty minutes."

※

"Who takes it?"

"You do not need to know."

"Who takes it, Youcai?"

"I do," said Youcai. "That is the part I wrote on the back of my wrist in a corridor at ten o'clock last night, and you saw me do it, and I did not hide it."

He put his hands behind his back.

"You stand at a table for three days and you look at a family. That is what you are for. I do not need you to carry anything and I will not ask you to carry anything, and if anybody asks you what you did you will not know anything about it, because you will genuinely not know anything about it."

Dajie looked at the corridor.

"Say the number again."

"What number."

"The one you wrote on your hand."

"Four hundred and ten thousand," said Youcai. "And that is not what we take. Do not get greedy on a staircase, brother. We take sixty. Sixty moves one valve and eleven months and it is the only money I have ever been in a position to move in my life."

"And if the book says something different?"

"Then it is not that book."

"And if the flat is not empty."

"Then I sit in a car outside it for eleven hours like a fool, and we do not do it!" He put his hands in his pockets. "I have written that down as well. That is nine things on my wrist."

※

"Ask me what it is."

"What is what."

"The book. You are going to be in a room with it for three days and you are not going to know what you are standing next to."

"I do not want to know."

"You do not want to know and you have never once in your life been able to leave a thing alone, so hear it and have done with it." Youcai looked at the corridor. "The estate keeps its own register. It is a hardback and it lives in the smaller room of that flat, and it is the only copy of it that exists outside an office in another province. It says what each of those fourteen names is owed. The office is offering the eleven households twenty thousand each and a form. The form says twenty thousand and the form is the thing that makes it true. The

book says four hundred and ten and the book is the thing that makes it not true. Those two things cannot both be in that building on a Friday."

"So it is a piece of paper."

"It is eleven hundred grams of piece of paper," said Youcai. "And if it goes into that building, eleven households find out on a Tuesday what was taken off them on a Wednesday. And that is not a thing I am going to do to eleven households to pay for one valve. So we take it out of the building and it becomes a thing in a flat in Shapingba instead, and nobody is told, and one woman gets a Tuesday."

"Ask me for the ninth one any time you like and I will read it out loud on a staircase."

CHAPTER 9

Nine

"He was fifty-three. He was wearing a jacket that had been bought for a meeting and was being worn at the end of a working day. He was carrying a bag of fruit."

"He came alone. He came on foot, and nobody in the building had told Dajie, which meant he had climbed nine floors rather than taken the lift and got out at the eighth."

Dajie knew about him before he got there.

The estate manager had said the name twice on the first night in the flat's kitchen.

Both times in the voice you use for a man you have to be in a room with.

"Which Qiu?"

"The Qiu. Street office."

"The street office does not send anybody."

"This one does," said the estate manager.

Then he went back to the trolley and started stacking cups.

Dajie had not asked again.

By then he had been in the flat two hours, and he had worked out that people in that building said about seven words and then went and made tea.

※

He came up those nine floors with a bag of oranges.

They were the same kind the fruit man had brought on the second night and had taken four down to the seventh floor.

He brought them into a flat where somebody had died. He put them on the counter.

Then he said, in the dialect, at volume, to the room, that it was nothing. That it was a thing they did. That he had told the others not to, and had not listened to himself either.

"Who is he?" said Dajie.

"He is the government," said Youcai.

"That is not a person."

"No," said Youcai. "That is why he has a bag of fruit."

※

Then he came out into the corridor.

There were four men in the corridor.

He looked at the four of them for a beat.

Then he said, "Good, all of you are here!"

He said it in a tone of genuine satisfaction, as though he had been hoping for this and had not dared to ask.

Dajie said, "Lin jie. Good afternoon."

He said it in the dialect, at speed, the way a man says something he has said eleven thousand times.

He had not decided to say it.

That is the thing. The whole of what happened on that corridor happened because a man of twenty-four said *lin jie, good afternoon* to a man he had never met.

It came out of him the way the diaozi comes out of him. By the time it had come out, it was too late to be an introduction.

※

"Which of you is in charge?"

Nobody answered for about two seconds.

"That is not a criticism," said Director Qiu. "I have asked four men this question. Two of them said the other one was in charge, and then both of them looked at a third man."

He looked round the corridor.

"So I am asking properly. Which one of you do I speak to about the corridor?"

"I am," said Youcai. "I am the one you speak to."

"Thank you." Qiu turned round and half of his face was already arranged for the other three. "Then can I say something to the other three? May I?"

"You may," said Peng.

"I want to say that the second floor is very crowded tonight. And I am not complaining. I am not here to complain."

He put his hand on the rail.

"I want to say it because I have been doing this for nineteen years, and the second floor is *always* very crowded tonight."

Nobody said anything.

"I am not going to move anybody."

"I am going to say one thing about the fire door. Then I am going to go down to the second floor and have a look at it myself."

"And if it is a problem I will ring this building's number. I will speak to a person about it, and not to an office."

※

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"You can ask me anything."

"What is he doing?"

He pointed at Dajie with the whole of his hand, which is not a thing you do.

"I am standing."

"No, you are not." Qiu was smiling, and he was not a man who smiled in order to get something. That was the first thing Dajie established. It took him about nine seconds.

It is the reason the next four minutes happened the way they did. "You are at the side of the body. Your hands are behind your back. You have been standing in exactly that position for two days."

Dajie looked down at his own hands.

"Yes."

"That is right. That is exactly right."

"I want you to know something. Somebody in an office has been telling street offices for eleven years that men at funerals should stand where they can see the door."

He looked at Dajie's hands.

"I had never seen anybody do it before this week."

※

That was the mistake.

Dajie has gone over it more times than any other two minutes of his life.

He has got to the same place every time.

The place is that he was *pleased*.

He was pleased. For about a second and a half he was genuinely pleased.

A man of fifty-three in a jacket had said something about his hands that was true. Being seen correctly is the only food Dajie has ever actually needed.

And so he said, in the dialect, at speed, without deciding any of it:

"Most men do it because they are frightened of the door, not because they can see it."

Qiu turned his head.

"Say that again."

"That is what it is. Four hundred times, and it is never the door. They are frightened of being the one who has to go out and find somebody. If they can see the door they can pretend they would have gone out if anybody had asked."

"Who is in charge of the men on the second floor?"

"You are, Director."

"Then you have just told me that my four men are frightened of nothing. That they are only in the corridor because it is where they can see the exit."

Qiu was writing.

That is the part. He was writing on the back of his own hand, standing up, in a corridor, with a pen, while Dajie was talking.

"Would you put that in writing for me?"

"There is nothing to put in writing."

"There is always something to put in writing," said Qiu, cheerfully. "It is the whole of my job and nobody ever wants to help me with it."

※

And Dajie said, "You will not get it in writing, because it is not true!"

That is the line.

He said the truest thing he has ever said in that building.

He said it to the one man in the building who could use it. He said it as a joke. He said it at speed, in the dialect, to a man who was writing it down.

Qiu stopped writing.

He looked up.

And he smiled at Dajie with a warmth that Dajie has never in his life been able to put down afterwards.

"No," he said, in the gentle voice you use with an animal that has just gone for a walk and come back.

"No," he said. "I do not think you would."

※

"Then what would you do?"

"I would give you my number."

Dajie looked at the fire hose on the wall.

"It is not a trick," said Qiu, "and it is not for a form. There is a form. The form exists, everybody has the form, everybody gets the form. The form is for the household. Household eleven, and the household is your family's, and your family has had it since August, and your family has not returned it."

"That is not my family."

"It is not your family. That is why I am asking you." Qiu turned the pen over. "Your family is downstairs at number two. Your family has had a form since September. Your family has not returned it either."

"And I am not going to say anything to your family. Your family has been in that building since 1988. Your family's grandmother is not going to be caught out by a piece of paper."

Dajie said, "That is very decent of you."

"It is not decent. It is late." Qiu put the pen away. "I have got a building with a number on the wall, and about half the people in it are frightened of a piece of paper!"

"It is much easier for me if the frightened ones go first. Frightened people return things."

※

"What number is on the wall."

"What number is on the wall."

"That is what I asked."

"That is exactly what I asked." Qiu looked at him with something that was not suspicion and was not amusement and was not anything Dajie had a word for. "Why?"

"Because it is a number by itself and I have been looking at it for three days."

"It is three," said Director Qiu.

"Three what?"

"It is three." He did not explain. "I wrote it on the wall. In August, when the survey went up, every building in this street had a number on it."

He looked up the stairwell.

"Ours is the smallest number. And it is the only one anybody photographs."

※

They went and looked at it.

The corridor light is not good. The nine floors of stairs do not have good lighting.

The tube on the second landing has been going since 2011 and gives about half of what it should.

The three was painted very high, in white, on the wall above the second-floor landing.

It was at the height where you can only see it if somebody has a step-ladder. Which is why only somebody who had a step-ladder had ever seen it.

"What does three mean?"

"It means three percent." Director Qiu was not being cagey. He was being careful, which was worse. "There is a number for this street! Every building on the street has a number. Every household in every building has a number."

"And at the end of the month somebody in an office adds the numbers up."

"And if it is not three."

"Then this street is behind." He put his hands in his pockets. "That is the entire mechanism. There is no office that wants your grandmother out. There is a boy in a district office in another province with a sheet of paper.

If this street adds up, it is a good month for him. If it does not add up, he tells somebody whose name he does not know that it was not his fault."

※

Dajie said, "That is very small!"

"It is extremely small," said Director Qiu.

"It is not a reason, Director."

"No," said Qiu. "It is not a reason. In nineteen years I have never said it was a reason." He looked up the stairwell. "You are the first person who has asked me what the number is and then told me it is not a reason. Everybody else in this building has said, we will think about it, Director, which means yes."

※

"You have not asked me my name."

"I asked which one of you I speak to. You did not answer. Your colleague answered."

"Which is a better answer than your name would have been."

"I am the one who is not in charge."

"You are the one who said the thing about the door," said Qiu.

※

"You have got one until the end of the month."

"I have until the fifteenth."

"And the building goes on the fifteenth."

"The building goes on the fifteenth. Everybody goes on the fifteenth." Director Qiu looked at his watch, which was a plain one, and did not use it. "The paperwork goes on the fifteenth. The van goes on the fifteenth. In this street they are the same date, and everybody waits for the van."

"Yes."

"So you have one day."

He counted on his fingers, quietly, and Dajie watched him do it.

"Eleven households in a building. A funeral in the ninth floor. A street office in the middle of it."

He put his hand down.

"And you are the most visible person in that building. You are a stranger, and you are standing in a corridor, in the one place a stranger can stand."

※

Here is what happened next, and it took about six seconds.

Dajie said, "You are saying it does not matter what we do."

"I did not say any of that."

"You are saying there is a number on this street and eleven households and a funeral in the ninth floor and that we have made a lot of noise in a corridor."

"That is not what I said either."

"You are saying that if eleven households are all in their flats on the fourteenth, then there are eleven doors that nobody opens."

"I said the paperwork goes on the fifteenth and the van goes on the fifteenth." Director Qiu's voice did not change at all. "I have said that twice. I have not said anything about doors, and if you want to remember what I said, remember it correctly, because you are the only man in this building who is going to remember it, and I would like it to be right."

※

That is what the drunk is for.

The trick is not the crying and it is not the money and it is not the face.

The trick is that a drunk can walk into the one room in the city where a respectable man is being polite, and make it *unbearable*.

All he has to do is refuse to accept the politeness as an answer.

Director Qiu was standing in a corridor being decent to a man who did not deserve it.

He was doing it for nineteen years' worth of reasons that were entirely legitimate.

Dajie had taken all of it apart in about ninety seconds, with his hands behind his back.

He could not stop.

He went on and on.

He did not raise his voice once. He did not say one single thing that was actually rude.

He asked about the number on the wall nine times.

At about the eleventh minute Peng said, quietly, "Peng."

Peng does not usually say his own name.

"Peng," Dajie said, and stopped.

※

Qiu did not leave.

That is the part that people who have not been in the room do not believe.

He stood there for another four minutes.

He talked about the fire door on the second floor.

Then he talked about a woman on the fourth floor whose form had come back signed, with a date on it that was a week wrong.

It had cost the street office a great deal of work.

He had not raised it with her, because there was no point.

"You did not raise it with her?"

"There is no point. She cannot change it. All it does is make the number wrong for a street office that will have moved on by the Thursday."

"Then why did you tell me."

"Because you are a stranger with no form. Therefore of no interest to anybody."

He put the pen away.

"And because in nineteen years, that is the only situation I have ever found in which I can say a true thing and have it cost nothing."

※

He shook hands with all four of them at the bottom of the stairs.

He shook Dajie's last.

He held on to it for slightly longer, which nobody else did.

"Your hands are in the right place," he said.

"I know."

"You know that from a book."

"I know that from four hundred funerals, Director."

"No," said Qiu. "You know it from a book. There is not a book. I looked." He let go of the hand. "I asked in August. "Nobody had written it down anywhere. And then your man said it out loud on a landing at ten o'clock last night."

"I want you to know that it is going in my report. That it will be read by people. That is not a favour.""

He went out into the lane.

The dog was on the steps.

It did not get up.

※

※

Then he made Dajie do something.

He did it so naturally that Dajie did not work out what had happened to him until about a minute afterwards.

By then he was already on the stairs.

"There is a woman on the fourth floor. You will go up and say one thing to her and then you will come down again."

"What am I saying?"

"That her form came back with the wrong date. That the street office knows it was the wrong date. That she does not need to do anything about it."

"Should I say anything else?"

"Nothing else."

"That is a strange errand for a man to give a stranger."

"It is a strange errand for anybody," said Qiu. "It takes about ninety seconds and it saves a woman of seventy-eight a telephone call she will make badly. That is the whole of the job. Do you want to argue about it or do you want to do it?"

Dajie did it.

※

The woman on the fourth floor was seventy-eight.

She opened the door before he knocked, which told him she had heard him on the landing.

"Who is it?"

"It is the street office. Not the police. There is no form."

"There is always a form."

"There is a form. It came back with the wrong date on it. The office knows it is the wrong date."

"You do not need to do anything about it."

She looked at him for a while.

"You are not from the street office."

"No."

"You are one of the four at the funeral."

"Yes."

"Then why did he send you?"

"Because he said it takes ninety seconds," said Dajie.

The woman laughed, which she was not supposed to do.

"That is what he would say," she said. "He says that about everything. Come in, come in, you are dripping on my step."

※

He went up the last flight and found Shuxiang.

That was not part of the errand. That was because the eighth-floor landing is where you have to go through to get anywhere above the ninth.

There is only one stairwell.

Qiu was sitting on her stool.

Not standing at the door.

Sitting on her stool, at the foot of her own fire hose, with his jacket off over the back of it.

Drinking out of one of the four cups in the cupboard that she had washed for him.

They were talking about a bus route.

That is the whole of it. A woman of seventy-nine and a man of fifty-three were sitting on a landing in a stair-street in November.

They were drinking tea out of cups that did not match.

They were arguing about a bus route that had been changed in September, and neither of them had noticed.

"You take the wrong one," she was saying. "You take the one at the bottom and then you are in Dadukou for forty minutes and you have to come all the way back."

"The one at the bottom is the correct one."

"The one at the bottom is the correct one if you are going to the hospital! You are not going to the hospital."

※

She saw Dajie on the landing.

She did not be surprised, and she did not say good afternoon.

"You have been here three days," she said.

"Three days."

"You have not come up here once."

"I am not supposed to come up here once."

"Nobody is supposed to do anything," said Shuxiang. "Come and sit down. There is tea."

Dajie sat down on the floor, because there was one stool and it was occupied.

Qiu poured him a cup out of the fourth cup in the cupboard.

It had a chip in the handle. It had also been washed.

※

"How is your mother?" said Qiu, to Shuxiang.

"Which mother."

"The one you told me about in September. The one who is fifty-two and does the crying."

"Ah." Shuxiang looked into her cup. "She has stopped."

"How long has she stopped?"

"Two years."

Qiu did not do anything with that.

He did not write it down. He did not say that he was sorry, which Dajie had been braced for.

He looked into his cup for a few seconds.

"Two years is not long."

"It is long when you cannot do it any more."

"Yes," said Qiu. "It is long when you cannot do it any more. It is a long job and nobody thanks you for it and then one morning your hands do not do it."

※

Dajie put his cup down on the step.

There was a moment on that landing, about two seconds long.

In it he could have said something to Director Qiu about a woman of fifty-two in a stair-street in Banan, who had not been able to work for two years, and who had told nobody, including her son.

He did not say it.

He has gone over that landing a great many times since. It is the second-worst thing he has ever not done.

It is on the list at all because of the fourth-floor woman, and because of the man on seven, and because of a great many other things.

It is nowhere near the top.

※

They went down at about five o'clock.

Qiu put his jacket back on and did up the button, and picked up the bag of oranges, which had four left in it.

"Thursday," he said. "The van comes at nine. Be in the way of it."

"Are you going to be here on Thursday?"

"I am going to be in this street on Thursday. If the van comes and the percentage is not right, I will be here on the Thursday, and again on the Friday."

"Will you be here if somebody dies?"

The corridor went quiet.

"Is somebody dying?"

"No!" said Qiu. He looked at Dajie properly for the first time since the middle of the corridor. "Do not ask me that question in a building like this one."

"You said you would be here on Thursday and again on Friday!"

"I said that."

"So what happens if somebody dies?"

"What happens if somebody dies," said Director Qiu, "is that I am very sorry."

"And that it is a genuine thing, and not a thing I am saying because of a form."

"And then I will still be here on Friday. And there will be a percentage to do. And I will do it."

He looked at the stairs.

"That is the answer. It is not a good answer. It is the true one.

"I would like you to notice that I gave it to you anyway. And that you asked me for it, in a corridor."

"And that nobody has asked me for it in nineteen years until this afternoon.""

※

At the bottom of the stairs, in the dark, with the fog coming up, Youcai said:

"I wrote it down."

"I know you wrote it down."

"All of it. Every question you asked him, in order, with the times."

Dajie kept walking.

"He asked me for your family number."

"He did not."

"He asked me for the number of the household at number two on the ground floor of the stair-street you came from," said Youcai. "I did not give it to him."

"Why not?"

"Because I am not that stupid."

"And because I had already decided to lie about everything that has a telephone number in it."

"I decided that at four o'clock on the Sunday, when I rang He Jie's office and she told me the date of the cremation."

※

Dajie stood at the bottom of the lane.

"You decided that on the Sunday."

"I decided a great deal on the Sunday."

"Then why did you stand there and let me do all of that."

"Because you were going to do it anyway."

Youcai was walking. He did not slow down for any of it.

"And because a man who has just spent nine minutes taking a polite man apart in a corridor is not in a condition to be told anything, by anybody, in the next four hours."

"I have known that about this job for a very long time."

CHAPTER 10

Ten

The brother was on the eighth floor.

He had been there since the Monday.

He was in a flat on the eighth floor that belonged to a nephew who worked in Wuxi and had not come.

He had not been to the ninth floor once in four days.

His name was Luo Changhe. He was sixty-one.

He telephoned the estate manager eleven times a day, which was four times more than anybody else in the building.

He had spoken to exactly three people about it.

Dajie found him at about eleven o'clock on the afternoon of the second day, because Peng sent him up with a box of tea.

※

"Do not take that tea up there," said Peng.

"Why not?"

"Because I am not having it explained to me at two in the morning." Peng did not look up. "Take the tea up there. Do not put the tea down. Do not ask him whether he is all right, because that is the first thing everybody asks and it is the one thing that never works."

"Then what do I do?"

"Nothing. Do nothing for several minutes and then leave."

※

"Do you know who I am?"

"I know who you are."

"Then what do you do here?"

"I stand in a corridor."

"That is not a job."

"No," said Dajie. "It is not a job. It is four men and a door."

The old man did not say anything for a while.

He was sitting on a plastic chair beside a window. There was a tea leaf bag still in his cup.

He had a jacket over the back of the chair. He had not shaved since Monday, which made him look about seventy.

"You have got a gourd," he said.

"Yes."

"Have a drink of this." He held the cup out. "It has been in there four days."

"Have you been here four days?"

"I have been here since Monday morning."

※

They sat like that for four minutes.

Dajie did not ask him whether he was all right. He put the box of tea on the floor. He did not touch anything. He did not say anything.

At about two minutes the old man said, "It is my brother."

"I know."

"It is my brother up there on that landing."

"Yes."

"And you are the one who stands beside the table."

"Yes."

"Then why are you not in there?"

"Because you are not in there," said Dajie.

※

Luo Changhe laughed at that.

It was not a good laugh.

It was the noise a man makes when somebody has accidentally said the exact thing that has been sitting on top of him for four days.

"Four years," he said.

"Four years."

"We have not spoken in four years."

"Then why are you telephoning the estate manager eleven times a day?"

Luo Changhe put the cup down.

"Because somebody has to."

※

Here is the technique, and Dajie did it, and he knew he was doing it, and he was not able to stop.

It is not a technique you learn from a book, because there is no book. Peng had told him it did not exist. Dajie had been to four hundred funerals and had never seen anybody do it.

Then he had said it out loud, in a corridor, two days ago.

It has three parts and all three of them are about distance.

One. Do not stand in front of a man. Get below him. "Sit on the floor, or crouch. Get your head below his.

His eye goes over the top of you and he has to look down. And a man who is looking down is not looking at you."

Two. Do not touch him first. Let him decide what the distance is. Men who have not come to a funeral do not want a hand on a shoulder. They want a man at a distance they set themselves and they will move him and you must follow.

Three. Whisper.

Whispering is not intimacy. It is the only arrangement in which a man's mouth has to come near your ear.

And a man's mouth near your ear is the only arrangement in which he will say a thing he has not said.

※

Dajie got down onto the floor with his back against the wall.

The old man looked down at him.

It worked. He felt it work. It worked the way you feel a door come off its hinges.

"Can I ask you something," said Dajie.

"You have been sitting there four minutes and you have not asked me anything."

"That was your tea."

"That was not my tea. That has been in that cup since Monday." Luo Changhe moved his foot. He moved it about eleven centimetres. "Go on."

"What was he like?"

Luo Changhe did not answer.

"You do not have to answer that!"

"I know I do not have to answer that." He put his hands on his knees. "Everybody in this building has asked me that. The man from the office asked me that. The woman who did the accounts asked me that. "Your man with the paper asked me that. He did it on the stairs, and it was the cleverest one of the lot, because half the people on that floor heard him.""

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him he was a builder," said Luo Changhe.

※

"Who was the first one to say the escalators."

Luo Changhe looked at the window.

"Me."

"You."

"We were nineteen. We were at the exhibition hall.

There was an escalator that had been down for two years and nobody could find the fault. I said it was the third step.

It was the fourth. I was wrong, and he said I was wrong, in front of eleven people."

"And then what."

"And then he went and looked at the fourth step."

Luo Changhe turned the cup round in his hand.

"And he said, you were nearly right."

He drank. He did not carry on.

"And then what?" said Dajie.

"And then he never mentioned it again for nine years." Luo Changhe turned the cup round. "In nineteen eighty-one he built the first one on the stair-street and he put my name on the plate."

"You did not want it."

"I did not want it." He said it to the cup. "I could not stop it."

※

Dajie said nothing at all.

He had a rule about that. It is the only rule he has and he did not know it was a rule. You do not follow a man. You get low and you get quiet and you let him find the thing and then you do not move at all.

"He put your name on the plate."

"He did it on the Tuesday. It is a small plate."

"You cannot read it from the ground. Only from the top of the steps."

"And he knew that."

"What is on the plate?"

Luo Changhe said, "It is four characters. Two of them are mine."

※

Here is where the dog barked.

It was four floors down. He heard it come up the stairwell and go past the landing and come back.

That is what a sound does in a concrete shaft on a cold morning.

Luo Changhe did not notice it.

Dajie did.

The dog barked at the moment he had decided what to say next, which was the sentence about the escalators, which he had been building since the fourth step.

He has thought about that a great deal. Four floors and a concrete shaft and a dog with one ear up.

※

"What did he do with it?"

"With the name?"

"With the name."

"He took it off."

He said it in exactly the same voice he had used for everything else.

"In nineteen ninety-six there was a survey and a man came round with a list. The builder went down and scraped it off with a chisel. Then he went back up and painted over it.

"Nobody asked him to do that."

※

"Who was on the stairs?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody was on the stairs?"

"Nobody. It was eight in the morning." Luo Changhe put his hands on the arms of the chair. "I was not there. I have thought about whether I would have been able to stop him and I do not know, and I have had four days to think about it, and I have not been able to make myself answer that, and I do not think I ever will."

※

"Can I ask you one more thing."

"You can ask."

"Why have you not gone up?"

Luo Changhe did not move for a long time.

Then he leaned down. He leaned down about thirty centimetres.

His mouth came to about as far from Dajie's ear as a mouth can be and no further.

"Because I was unkind to him,"

"Because I was unkind to him!"

※

It took Dajie a moment to work out how to answer that.

There was nothing to say. Every phrase was available and all of them were wrong. If he said *it does not matter* then a man of sixty-one would know he was managing a moment. If he said *he would understand* then a man of sixty-one would know he was selling. If he said nothing at all for a while, then he was doing the technique.

He did the technique.

He said, "Go on."

※

Luo Changhe said, "Nineteen eighty-eight. Your mother's name is not your mother's name?"

"It is not my mother's name."

"Then it is somebody else's."

"It is my mother's."

"Then it is hers. Where did you get it?"

"From a woman at a noodle shop."

Luo Changhe looked at him.

"That is not how you say a name."

"It is how I got it." Dajie did not move. "Go on. Nineteen eighty-eight. Do not stop now."

※

"Nineteen eighty-eight I told him he was a builder and not a man."

Dajie said nothing.

"He had just come back from Wuxi with nothing. Four hundred yuan and a bag.

He had been in the army for six years. He was fifty-one.

He came downstairs that night and told me he was going to do something. I said, what thing. He said, build.

"I said, with what."

"And he said?"

"He said, with that." Luo Changhe pointed at the window without looking at it. "And I said, you are a builder, you are not a man, and there were nine people in that room and eight of them heard me, and he went up the stairs and I have not had a conversation with him since nineteen ninety-one and we spoke twice after that and both times about money."

※

"So he is not here."

"He is not here."

"Is he here in the way you mean?"

"He is here," said Dajie.

The old man pulled back about thirty centimetres.

He stayed like that for a while, looking at the man on the floor with the gourd between his knees.

"You do not talk like a man who works at funerals."

"I do not talk like a man who works at funerals at all," said Dajie. "That is the thing I have been told. I speak very fast and I say a great deal and none of it has ever once been the correct thing to say."

"No," said Luo Changhe. "It has not."

※

"Tell me something about the plate."

"Which part of it."

"The part where he scraped it off. You said nobody was on the stairs."

"Nobody was on the stairs."

"You did not say that. I said it. You said it was eight in the morning."

Luo Changhe turned his cup round.

"You are careful," he said.

"I am drunk."

"You are both." He drank. "You want to know whether it was on purpose. Of course he did it on purpose. He did everything on purpose. That is the thing about him that nobody in this building will put in a document."

"Why will they not put it in a document."

"Because it sounds like a compliment and it is not a compliment and they cannot say which one it is." He put the cup down. "He was the sort of man who finishes a thing and then you find out afterwards what the thing was for, and he never told you while he was doing it, not once, in fifty-eight years."

"That sounds like a compliment."

"It is not a compliment," said Luo Changhe. "It is a complaint! I am complaining about him to a stranger on the eighth floor, and I have been doing it for four days without knowing it."

※

"There is a mother on that floor."

Dajie turned the gourd over on the floor.

"Have you met her?"

"No."

"Nobody has met her. She has been on that landing four days and she has not come into that flat once." He turned the cup round again. "She is my mother's name. She is the old one. She has got a blue chair on the balcony and she will not go in either, and she has not spoken to my brother since the day he came back from Wuxi with four hundred yuan, and she was in the room when I said it."

"You did not know she was in the room."

"She was at the back. She was at the back behind the door with the bowl in her hands and I did not know and he did not know, because he was looking at me." Luo Changhe stopped. "He has never once asked her about it. In thirty-five years he has never asked her about it."

※

Here is the part Dajie did not put in a document either.

He could have worked out, at about the ninety-minute mark, from the bottom of that staircase, exactly how to get a man to tell him a thing he had not told anybody.

There are four known ways. He knows all four. He has watched all four used by men much better than him and he has used two of them himself, on two of the four hundred, and both of those times he was paid for it.

The first is the false fact. Say something about the man's brother that the man's brother did not do.

If it is false, the man will correct you. And the correction is the information.

The second is the timing. Say the man's own name in the middle of a silence, at the wrong moment, and wait.

The third is a woman. Find the woman and go to the woman.

The fourth is nothing at all, and the fourth is the one that costs nothing and it is the one he did, and it is the only one he has ever done that he could not afterwards describe.

※

"You have gone quiet," said Luo Changhe.

"I am on the floor. That is the quiet part."

"No. Something else."

Dajie thought about telling him. About the ninth floor. About the four hundred and six a day, and the certificate in a subject that does not exist, and the thirty hours in a hospital and a figure written on a wrist in a small neat hand.

He thought about it for a moment.

"Do not tell me your mother's age," said Dajie.

Luo Changhe looked at him sharply.

"Why not."

"Because if I know how old she is, I will use it." Dajie turned the gourd round on the floor. "That is not a figure of speech. In about forty minutes you will have told me something true about a man who is dead, and it will be a thing that nobody in this building has said out loud, and I will not have done anything at all to get it."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only answer I have got."

"You are frightened of it."

"I am frightened of being good at it," said Dajie.

※

Luo Changhe sat back.

He looked at the window for a while, and at the tea leaf bag in his own cup, and at the jacket over the back of the chair.

"You are the first person in four days who has asked me a question I did not know the answer to."

"I have not asked you anything."

"No," said Luo Changhe. "You have not." He picked up the cup and looked into it. "Tell the office one thing for me. Do not tell them I asked. Tell them there is no point telephoning me again, because I am going to go up there on the morning of the third day."

"You are going to go in."

"I have not decided that." He put the cup down. "I have told a man on the floor about it, which in this family is the same as not having decided anything at all!"

The old man pulled back about thirty centimetres.

He stayed like that for a while, looking at the man on the floor with the gourd between his knees.

"You do not talk like a man who works at funerals."

"I do not talk like a man who works at funerals at all," said Dajie. "That is the thing I have been told. I speak very fast and I say a great deal and none of it has ever once been the correct thing to say."

"No," said Luo Changhe. "It has not."

※

Dajie went back down at about ten to twelve.

He said the thing about the tea on the stairs.

He said nothing else, and kept his eyes on the stairs the whole way past Peng.

Peng looked at him for a moment.

"You were up there four minutes and ten seconds," said Peng.

"Eleven."

"You timed it?"

"He timed it. He said four minutes at the door and I was in there eleven." Dajie kept walking. "I did not know what I was doing."

"No," said Peng. "That is the one I gave you."

"I would like you to notice that it took you a whole evening not to work out whether you were lying to him."

"What if I worked it out?"

"That is not going to happen."

"It has happened to other men. Twice in forty years, in this district."

Peng lit the second cigarette off the first.

"I know about both of them. One came back to a funeral and stood in the wrong corridor and could not do a single thing with anybody. And the other one got very good at it, and is dead."

"Dead?" Dajie stopped.

"Dead. Fifty-four. Liver."

Peng tapped it out on the step.

"Do not ask me how I know about him. It is in a file. I was there. And he asked me to teach him, and I taught him for two years, and I never asked him one question about why."

"You taught him."

"I taught him for two years."

He did not look round.

"That is the actual answer to your question, and I have never given it to anybody.

"A man who works it out on purpose does it by himself, and he does it well. And there is nobody left in the building who can hold him up at the end of nine minutes with somebody's mother.

"So he works it out on purpose. And then he cannot put it down. And then he needs somebody to tell him he is allowed to stop."

"And if he cannot stop?"

"Then he stops being able to hear the tea," said Peng.

※

He lit another one.

"Your mother is a good mourner."

"I know she is."

"No. Listen." Peng still did not turn round. "I have worked with men from this district for twenty-two years. I have worked with three women. One of those three is the best one I have ever stood next to."

"Peng."

"I am not saying it to be kind. I am saying it because you have come down nine floors with your face shut like a fist, and in about forty minutes you are

going to go up and stand at that table again, and the only thing that is going to get you through it is that somebody in that building is very good at their job."

CHAPTER 11

Eleven

The job came from Peng at about eleven o'clock on the third morning, and Peng gave it to him badly on purpose.

"Go up to the eighth floor and sit with the old woman."

"For how long?"

"Until somebody comes and tells you not to."

"What do I say to her?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing for how long?"

"Long enough." Peng went back to the tea trolley. "She has been on that landing four days. She has not gone into that flat. Everybody in this building has tried. The sister from Wanzhou. The estate manager. A woman from a newspaper who came on the Wednesday with a camera."

"Did they try the thing?"

"They tried being kind at her. Which is worse." Peng did not turn round. "You are going to be quiet at her. And it is going to be the first thing anybody has done to her in three days."

※

She was in the hallway.

That was the first thing Dajie registered.

It was not a small thing. The hallway of the ninth floor at eleven in the morning on the third day of a funeral should have had four men in it and a trolley and no more.

It had a young woman in it, standing against the wall by the fire hose, with a folder under her arm.

He knew who she was, the way everybody in that building knew who she was.

Instantly. Without ever having met her.

Nobody spoke.

He went up the eight steps. He got to the landing. The old woman was on her plastic chair, with the second plastic chair beside her.

He sat down on the floor with his back against the wall, the way he had done it two days earlier with the brother, and he put the gourd down.

Then he looked up.

The young woman on the eighth-floor landing was thirty centimetres behind him and she had not moved.

※

The next four minutes Dajie is able to account for.

The old woman did not look at him. She looked at the window.

He did not say anything.

At about two minutes she said, in the dialect, that he was the one who had stood in front of her son's photograph on the Thursday and said something.

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

"I do not know. It is a thing that gets said."

"That is not an answer!"

"No," said Dajie. "It is not."

※

Four floors down and eleven minutes later, a man of forty-four put both hands flat on the counter in He Jie's office.

"That is the fourth one this week."

His colleague did not look up from the receipt book.

"The fourth what?"

"That thing. That exact thing. He says a true sentence. Then he says he does not know how he knows it. And then he lets the other person be the one who fills it in."

"And?"

"And on Monday he did it to a bailiff. On Wednesday he did it to a man from the assessment company. On Thursday he did it to a woman from the committee

who came with a microphone. And now he has done it to a girl of twenty-four on a landing."

The man put his cup down.

"That is four in three days."

"It is four in three days."

"That is not a man who does that on purpose."

※

On the eighth-floor landing Dajie said, "What was he like when he was small."

Luo Shuxiang turned her head.

"Who is asking!"

"A man on the floor with a gourd."

"I know who you are. I have known since Thursday." She kept her eyes on the window. "Nobody has asked me that. Everybody has asked me what he was like when he was grown."

"What was he like when he was grown?"

"He was a builder."

"That is not an answer."

"That is the answer."

She folded her hands.

"He built the escalators. He bought the building." A long pause. "He did not say why."

"That's it?"

"He came home at two in the morning and put his shoes at the door. He was not there at nine at night, or he was asleep. That is what he was like."

She looked at the window.

"You want the interesting part."

"Yes, ma."

"The interesting part was in nineteen eighty-eight and he never mentioned it. I never asked."

※

Dajie knew the four ways.

He has always known the four ways.

They are the same four ways that stand in front of every grieving person in every city in the world.

The fourth one is the oldest, and the worst, and it works best.

Borrow a knife.

Borrow a knife, and hand it to the person, and make them do it. A son who says *do you remember when he did the thing to you* has not said anything at all. The son has only put a knife on the table with the handle facing his mother and then stepped back.

He does not have to be in the room.

He does not have to be in the building.

※

He did not do it.

He wants that written down. He has asked twice for somebody else to write it down, and nobody has ever done it.

That is correct. He is not going to do it to himself either.

Instead he said, "Do you want to go in."

That is all he said.

Luo Shuxiang did not answer for about a minute and a half.

"Why are you asking me that."

"Because in four days nobody has asked you that. They have asked you how you are. They have asked you what he was like. They have asked you to sign things." Dajie did not move. "Nobody has asked you whether you want to go in. Because you have not gone in, and everybody in this building has decided what that means."

"And what does it mean."

"It means you have not gone in," said Dajie.

※

The old woman laughed.

It was not much of a laugh. It was a sound in the nose. It lasted about a second.

It was the first one since September.

So said the estate manager. So said the sister from Wanzhou. So said a woman from the eighth floor, to a man from a newspaper, on the Wednesday.

The dog barked once, from the bottom of the stairs, four floors down.

And Luo Shuxiang said, "Do you know what you have just done?"

"No."

"Do you know what you have just done?"

"Neither do I," she said.

※

Then she said, "You are the one who has been in the building three days."

"I am."

"You have not been to my flat."

"No."

"You have not been up here before today."

"No."

"You have not eaten with me, or drunk the water, or asked me about the chair." She folded her hands in her lap. "What have you been doing?"

"I have been standing in a corridor with my hands behind my back."

"Doing it well, they tell me."

"They tell me a lot of things," said Dajie. "You will notice that nobody in this building can tell you anything about me. They can tell you what I can do. They cannot tell you my name, because I did not give it to them."

"They can tell you what I am for. They cannot tell you what I am."

"I have found out in three days that there is a great deal of use in that."

She laughed again. It was the same sound, in the nose, and it lasted about a second, and this time Dajie had been close enough to see that it cost her something.

"Ma."

"Yes."

"You said on the Thursday you would not come in."

"I said I would not come in."

"And you have not come in."

"And I have not come in."

"Then why," said Dajie, "are you telling me about the chair?"

※

She looked at him for a long moment.

He stayed where he was, on the floor with his back against the wall and the gourd beside his knee.

He had said nothing at all since *then why are you telling me about the chair.*

The dog barked once, from four floors down.

"You did that on purpose," she said.

"Yes."

"You do not do anything on purpose."

"I just did."

"Then say what you are actually here for." She leaned forward about six inches, which on that landing is a long way. "Because I have had four people in four days, and every single one of them wanted something from me."

"And you want something from me."

"And I would rather know what it is than find out at four o'clock this afternoon, when I walk into that flat and my son is lying in it."

"I do not want anything from you."

"Then say what you are here for."

※

Dajie looked at the floor of the landing.

"I do not know."

"I have known it was the chair. I have known it was the four days. I have known since I got to the sixth step that it was the photograph on the Thursday."

"And when I got to your landing I was going to ask you what he was like when he was small. That is what I ask everybody."

"And then you did not answer it. And then I asked you whether you wanted to go in."

"And I did not decide to ask you that either."

"You did not decide to."

"No."

"Then what did you decide?"

"I decided not to ask you about the chair," said Dajie. "Because you have had a chair on that balcony since March. You have not moved it. You are not going to move it."

"And if I had asked you about it, you would have told me about it. And then I would have had it."

"And it would have been the fourth one this week, and it would have been the worst one, because you would have given it to me."

She sat back.

"You are frightened of it."

"Yes."

"Not of me."

"Not of you."

"Then of what?"

"Of being good at it," said Dajie.

※

She stood up then.

He got up off the floor with her, which he was not supposed to do and did not remember doing, and stayed about a metre away from her all the way to the top of the stairs.

"Do not come up here again today."

"No, ma."

"Do not come up here at all unless I send for you."

"I understand."

"You do not understand," said Luo Shuxiang. "You understand the words. Nobody understands the words. You will come up here again in about eleven minutes because there is nothing else in this building you can do."

"Yes, ma."

"Go and stand at the side of the table."

"Yes, ma."

Then she stood up.

It took her a long time. There is no version of this where a woman of seventy-nine stands up quickly.

She got up onto her feet with the chair. Then she got away from the chair and stood on the landing on her own.

Dajie stayed on the floor, because he had been taught once in his life that you do not get up when a person who cannot get up quickly gets up.

She looked down the stairwell.

Then she said, in Mandarin, without turning round, "You are going to want to tell me something now."

※

"No, ma."

She was still facing the stairwell.

"Do not call me that."

"You are ma to the man from the survey. You are ma to the woman from the committee. You are ma to the sister from Wanzhou in the flat and you are not ma to me because I have not earned it and I am not going to earn it on a landing."

"That was not my question."

"Your question was what I was going to want to say."

"Yes."

"I was going to want to say that you were the only person in this building who has not asked me for anything."

"And that I do not know how I knew that about you."

"And I am not going to say it."

"Because a man who says that to a woman on a landing is doing it to her. Not to her grandson."

Luo Shuxiang turned round.

"Then why are you on my landing."

"Because I was sent up here by a man who does not know whether he is a good man."

※

That was the whole of it.

Three weeks. Two years. Two lost proceedings and one going the same way. Two thousand four hundred pages of expropriation procedure, read in a rented room in Dadukou with a lamp that did not work properly.

The first night in that room she had said *ma* out loud to nobody.

She had been furious with herself about it for a month. She still said it.

He was on her landing.

He had asked her whether she wanted to be taken down. That was four words nobody had said in four days.

Then he had told her that he did not know how he knew. Then he had refused to say it out loud, because he knew it would be done to her.

And he was the fourth one this week.

※

"Can I ask you something," said Yan.

"You can."

"Have you been to that flat?"

"I have stood at the side of a table in it for three days."

"That is not what I asked."

"Yes. I have."

"Did you talk to me."

"No."

"You did not talk to me once in three days."

She had the folder against her chest.

"There have been four people on that landing and in that flat and you are the only one who has not." "Why not?"

"He Jie said do not talk to the daughter."

"Because he is frightened of me."

"Because you would find out in about forty seconds what he is," said Dajie.

"I found out in about eleven," said Yan.

※

"You are the fourth."

"The fourth what."

"That thing." She put the folder down on the step. "The true sentence. And then *I do not know how I knew that.* And then the other person sits there and fills it in, because they have to, because it is worse not to."

"You have seen it before."

"I have watched it work on four people in three days."

She did not raise her voice once.

"A bailiff in April. The assessment company in June. A woman from the committee in October. A man from a newspaper on the Wednesday of this week." "I am twenty-four years old. I have watched your face do that to people about forty times."

"I can tell you the exact moment it happens. It is about one and a half seconds after you have said the sentence."

※

"Four times? Is it four?"

"Four times."

"Then why have you not said anything."

"I have not said anything."

"My grandmother has not laughed since the second of September. She is going into that stairwell on Thursday morning."

"And you are the only person who has come up here in three days and asked her a question."

She picked the folder up again.

"I did not send you up here. I want you to be clear about that. I did not send you up here. Peng sent you up here because Peng looked at you and worked out what you are in about four seconds, the way I did."

"Then you could have stopped me."

"I could have stood in that hallway for eleven minutes and told him what you are," said Yan. "And then he would not have gone up. And then my grandmother would have sat on that landing until Thursday and gone into that building without me."

※

"I do not think that is the right way to think about it."

"Is it not?"

"No." Dajie stood up off the floor, which was the first time in eleven minutes. "You did it anyway. You knew and you let it happen."

"Yes."

"That is a different thing from not being able to stop."

"You cannot stop," said Yan. "That is what I have been sitting out here for eleven minutes working out. You cannot stop, and I can, and I let it happen anyway, and I will be able to explain that to myself for the rest of my life and I will never once be able to make it be the other thing."

※

Luo Shuxiang said, "Are you going to stand there and talk about it all afternoon!"

"No, ma."

"Then go and tell the others I am coming down at four."

She went back inside her own flat and shut the door.

She did not lock it, which was the second time in three days that somebody in that family had not locked a door in front of Dajie.

※

Dajie went down eight steps and stopped.

Yan was still on the landing.

"Can I say one thing to you, before I go down!" he said.

"You can say it."

"You are the same age as somebody."

Yan did not move at all, which was itself an answer.

"Not somebody," said Dajie. "Her name was Xiaofeng."

"I said it to her once, in a room with nine people in it, when I was nineteen and drunk. She went out of the province the following week."

"And I have never found out whether that was because of it."

He stopped there.

The dog barked once, from the lobby.

※

"It is not the same thing."

"No, ma."

"Is it not the same thing at all?" said Yan. "I have read about it. It is in the papers. It was in a magazine in June. Everybody in the office knows about it."

"I have been asked about it by two men and one woman since August, and I have answered it correctly every time."

"I know."

"Then you should not have said it!"

"Yes," said Dajie. "That is the right answer."

She looked at him.

"You were not doing it to me," she said. "That is what you cannot get out of your mouth. You were doing it to somebody who is four degrees away from me, and it went into me anyway, and I have got two thousand four hundred pages of a woman's life in a folder and one sentence of a drunk's in my head, and both of those things are going into that building on Thursday and only one of them is any use."

She went in.

※

Dajie got down to the eighth-floor landing and sat on the floor again.

His legs had done something. He needed a minute.

The dog was not there. The dog was on the ninth.

Peng was on the ninth, at the trolley, with his hands behind his back, and he had clearly been standing there for some time.

"What did you do."

"I asked her whether she wanted to go in."

"Who did you ask."

"The old woman."

Peng did not say anything for a while.

"And the young one," he said.

"She watched me do it. Then she let me do it. Then she told me exactly what I had done in about nine hundred words."

"That is not what I asked."

"She asked me what I was going to want to say," said Dajie, "and I told her."

Peng put his hands down.

"Boy," he said.

※

At four o'clock Luo Shuxiang came down the stairs.

She came down forty-one steps with a hand on the rail.

She was wearing a coat over a cardigan. The sister from Wanzhou was two floors above her and did not know.

The whole corridor came out. The whole stair-street came out onto the landings.

That is what a stair-street does at four o'clock on the third day of a funeral.

He Jie had said it on the first morning, and she had been right.

Dajie was at the side of the body with his hands behind his back.

Luo Shuxiang came along the corridor, slowly, past everybody, and stopped at the table.

Nobody said anything.

CHAPTER 12

Twelve

The crematorium was in Dadukou and the van was late. Nobody in that building was angry about it.

That is the thing nobody tells you about a municipal crematorium in Chongqing in the first month of winter.

There are forty people in a hall with a tiled floor and a ceiling about four metres high. The particular acoustics of that room mean that a room full of people who are not angry is louder than a room full of people who are.

Dajie stood at the back with his hands behind his back, forty feet from the casket, in the one place in the building where nobody had asked him anything.

He had not been to the front of anything in his life. He had done two hundred and eleven cremations and he had never been at the front of one, and he had worked out over about four years that this was not modesty. It was arithmetic. He had done two hundred and eleven cremations and he had never once been at the front of one, and he had worked out over about four years that this was not modesty. It was arithmetic. A man who has been at the front has to be looked at, and a man at the back can leave.

※

The eulogy took four minutes and ten seconds. Youcai read it from a printed sheet. He did not look up once.

He put the pause in before *rest* at exactly the length he had put it in in a truck yard in Jiangbei four days earlier. At the word *rest* the room made its noise.

Youcai folded the sheet in half, then in half again, and put it in his inside pocket.

That was the end of it, and nobody in that hall had any idea that the pause before the last word had been tested in a truck yard in Jiangbei four days earlier by two men who were not yet on speaking terms.

Luo Shuxiang was sitting on a bench at the front with the sister from Wanzhou on one side and Luo Yan on the other. Luo Changhe was not there.

He had gone in on the Thursday morning, at eight, and had come out again at half past eleven.

He had not been able to explain any of it to anybody, including himself. He had gone in and come out and gone back down to the eighth floor, and he had not told a single person on this earth, and he did not know why he had done it. He had stood at the back of the hall for the whole of it with his hands in his pockets.

※

Afterwards there was the thing that happens afterwards. There is no ceremony for the afterwards. Everybody assumes there is.

There is a woman with a clipboard who says a date, and a room where the urn is, and a man who wants to shake your hand and be told whether you are the one who did the crying. Dajie did not shake his hand.

"You are not the crying one!"

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I stand at the back of things," said Dajie. "Somebody has to be at the back, so that everybody at the front can get out."

The man looked at him for a second.

"That is the best answer anybody has given me today," he said, and shook his hand anyway.

※

She did not stop. She had not stopped in front of Dajie at any point in four days. Luo Yan came past with the sister.

She was not going to start at a crematorium in Dadukou with fifty people behind her.

But she looked at him, and she did it for about a second and a half, which is exactly how long it takes.

And then she said, in standard Mandarin, in the middle of a room with fifty people in it, at a volume that carried about four metres:

"You are still here."

"I am at the back."

"Still here."

"I told you."

"You are still here," she said, and went on down the row.

※

The dog was outside, on the wall by the car park in the November wind, with its one ear up and its one ear folded over. It looked at Dajie for a few seconds and then lay down on the cold concrete.

It had been at that building since Thursday morning. Nobody had fed it. Dajie had not fed it. Peng had not fed it.

It had been living off the funeral for five days, which is a thing that dogs in this city do and which nobody writes down.

It had been living off the funeral for five days, which is a thing that dogs in this city do and which nobody writes down.

※

He had told himself it on the Sunday. He had told Dajie a version of it on the second night, at four in the morning, on a corridor. He had not told He Jie any of it. Here is what nobody had told Youcai.

On the Thursday morning, at about eleven o'clock, He Jie telephoned the office and left a message with the woman on the desk.

He Jie never leaves messages with the woman on the desk. The woman writes them down on a pad and the pad goes in a drawer. The message was this.

If anything has happened that I would want to know about, you will telephone me before the end of the day.

And if you telephone me and there has not been anything, I will not ask you what it was. Dajie did not tell him that either.

※

At four o'clock they were in the car outside.

"So," said Dajie.

"Say the number."

"Four hundred and ten thousand."

"And?"

"And?" said Dajie.

"And eleven households. And fourteen names on a hand. And a book in a flat with a lock on it."

"Is that all?"

"That is all of it."

"Have you told He Jie, or have you told nobody?"

Dajie put the gourd between his feet.

"And a woman who has to go back to Dadukou tonight, because there are eleven children in a studio in that building and six thousand eight hundred yuan a month coming in and no wu xian yi jin. And no money in that flat for any of them."

"And the fourth one? Have you told me about the fourth one?"

"I have told you nine things and you have asked for eight."

"Then tell me the ninth."

Youcai did not start the engine.

"The ninth thing is what to do if I open that door and somebody is in the flat. I wrote it on the Sunday. It is the only thing on my wrist that is not a number."

"What is it?"

"That I leave."

"That is not leaving. That is standing in a corridor."

"That is leaving." He looked at the windscreen. "That is the whole of it. If somebody is in that flat, then the flat is not empty, and the condition has failed.

And I am a man who went out to look at a building. That is what I told He Jie I was going to do. That is true."

※

"And if it is not somebody."

"It will be somebody." He started the engine. "It will be the sister, or the man from the construction company, or a woman from an office I have never met."

"It is not going to be empty. Nineteen forty-four in the morning in a flat with a dead man in it is not an empty flat."

"I have known that since the Sunday."

"Then why are we doing it."

"Because there is a flat with a book in it, and the woman who would take the book is asleep in a hotel in Dadukou with eleven children in a studio and no money."

Youcai did not look at him.

"You do not have to come. Do you understand that? You can get out of the car now and walk to the flat and take the stairs, and I will not say one word about it."

"Say the ninth thing."

"I said the ninth thing."

※

Nine floors. Forty-one steps. The dog was at the bottom of them. It came up behind them without being asked, and it stopped on the eighth-floor landing, because it had stopped doing that on the Thursday. Dajie noticed. They went up the stairwell at nine forty-eight.

"You have got a dog with you."

"I have got a man on the ninth floor who has not had anything to do since Monday and does not have anywhere to be."

The key was with He Jie's. He Jie's key was in a tin. The tin was in the office, and the office was shut, and the person who had the office key was asleep. The door was a steel security door fitted in about 1994. The ninth-floor flat was shut.

It had a good cylinder lock in it, because the family had had money in 1994 and had spent it on a door. Dajie got the tension bar out of the bag.

※

Youcai worked on the cylinder while Dajie held the tension bar against the jamb and looked down the stairwell every eleven seconds. It took four minutes.

Both of them were extremely good at it, in the sense that one had done it eleven times and the other had watched a man do it on television. The dog sat on the ninth-floor landing and watched them. It did not bark.

※

The door opened. The flat was cold. It had been cold since the Thursday.

The corridor light was on a sensor. The sensor had gone off at half past eight on the Thursday and nobody had come back to it. Youcai did not go in.

He stood in the corridor with his hand on the door and he did not go in, and Dajie went past him.

"Lan deng! Are you going to stand there?"

"I am waiting."

"For what?"

"For the sound of somebody."

※

The hall was dark and there was a smell of cold smoke in it, because the family had burnt paper.

There was a bowl on the table where the body had been. It had been emptied, turned over, and put on the draining board in the kitchen, which is what you do. The box file was on the shelf in the smaller room.

It was a cardboard box file with a nylon string round it. It had eleven elastic bands on it and eleven compartments inside it.

There were forty-one or forty-two or forty-three documents in it. It weighed about eleven hundred grams.

Youcai took it and put it under his arm and then he stopped, because he had seen a light on in the flat below.

※

"Is somebody in number four?"

"Is there somebody in number four?"

"There is."

"That is not our flat!"

"It is not."

"Then why are you still here?"

"Because you have not gone down yet," said Dajie, "and neither have I."

"Number four is the second floor. This is the ninth floor. Somebody has come up here."

They both stopped. Youcai went to the door and put his head out.

There was light coming up from the seventh floor and the eighth, and nothing from the ninth, because the sensor was off.

"There is a man on the seventh landing," he said.

"How do you know it is a man!"

"Because of the shoes."

※

He was sitting on his plastic chair on the seventh floor, in the dark, at two in the morning, with a cup in his hand. It was Luo Changhe.

He had not made a sound on the stairs. He had come up on the same fire stairs they had come up, and he had been there for some time. He did not ask them what they were doing.

That was the thing Dajie could not get over afterwards. A man of sixty-one sat on a landing in the dark at two in the morning and looked up at two men with a box file under one of their arms. The first thing he said was:

"Is that the sister's, or the brother's?"

Youcai said, "Yes."

"Then put it on the table. Why not?"

Luo Changhe did not lower his eyes from either of them.

"Two cups. I have got tea. Do you want sugar?"

※

The tea was cold. He had made it at some point and it had gone over on the table. There were three cups.

He poured the cold tea out of the pot into the sink without being asked. Then he filled the pot from the kettle on the gas ring and waited for it and did not speak. Peng had been right about the tea. Dajie did not drink any.

"Go on," said Luo Changhe. "Drink it. You have come up nine floors at two in the morning and you have not had anything and I am not going to have it on my conscience that you did it with an empty stomach."

※

"What are you doing on this landing."

"I could not sleep in my flat," said Luo Changhe. "It has my brother's things in it, and the boxes from the flat above are stacked against the wall, and I have nowhere to put a table."

"How long have you been here."

"Since about eleven. I come up and I sit and then I go down. It is a very good landing. Nobody comes up here."

He looked at the box file.

"It is not money in there," he said.

"It is not money in there."

"I know what it is in there," said Luo Changhe. "It is a list of what everybody in that building is owed and who has signed for it."

"There are forty-one pieces of paper in it. About a third of them have been signed by somebody in the office on the eighth floor, and not by the person they belong to."

※

"Then take it!"

Luo Changhe did not touch it.

"You did not come up here to take a piece of paper."

"A wrist."

"Nobody wrote it."

"We did not come up here to take anything at all," said Dajie.

"Then why did you come."

And there it was.

※

Here is the whole of what Dajie said.

"I do not know," he said. "I have not got it. You have been on that landing for three hours and I have got no idea why you are on that landing, and I have got no idea what is in that box, and I have got no idea what the money is called or who keeps it or when it goes anywhere. I could not tell you one single thing that is true about it except that a man wrote four numbers on his wrist in a corridor and I did not ask him what they were."

Luo Changhe looked at him.

"You are not the one who thought of it."

"No."

"Then why have you come up nine floors."

※

"Because he cannot get out of a corridor without somebody going with him," said Youcai.

The two of them looked at each other. That was the moment.

"What is this? Say it properly." said Youcai. "Say it properly. Say what it is."

Dajie said, "Say what it is."

"You have said it three times."

"Three times," Luo Changhe said, "and he has not said it once, and you have not made him."

※

He got up off the chair. He was sixty-one. He had not slept since Tuesday.

He got up off a plastic chair on the seventh-floor landing at about twenty past two in the morning without any difficulty at all.

"Give it to me," he said.

Youcai did not give it to him.

"Luo shushu. It is not my book."

"It is not anybody's book. It is eleven people's book." He held his hand out. "There is a difference and I am the only person you have met who knows what it is."

Dajie said, "What is the difference."

"It is in a drawer in a flat in Dadukou, and there are eleven children in a studio, and it is my niece's book."

Luo Changhe did not lower his hand.

"She has been fighting about it for two years."

"Give it to me and I will put it in her hands on Sunday. She will not know where it came from, and not one person in that building will ever know, and eleven households will be able to prove what they were owed."

※

"And if it is not there on Sunday."

"Then it is not there," said Luo Changhe. "And I am sixty-one and I am not going to tell eleven people that I sat on a landing and gave their money to two men I have never met."

He did not make a speech about it and he did not look at Dajie while he did it. Youcai handed it over.

※

"Guo lao ge! You are very quick."

"It is not mine."

"It is not yours."

"No."

"That is the only reason you are standing here at all." Luo Changhe put the file under his arm the way Dajie carried the gourd.

"You had a rule. You said it yourself. Nine things on your wrist!"

"I said I would leave if there was somebody in the flat."

"There was somebody in the flat."

"You are on the seventh floor."

"There is somebody in the ninth floor too." Luo Changhe did not raise his voice. "You know there is. You have not looked in the corridor."

※

There was light coming up out of it, from the lift end. The lift was on the eighth floor with the doors open. Dajie went out into the ninth-floor corridor.

There was somebody standing in the corridor of the ninth floor about eleven feet from the flat door with a plastic bag in one hand. She was not doing anything.

She was standing in her own flat's corridor at twenty past two in the morning with a bag of things she had come down for, exactly like nine hundred other people in this city on an ordinary Wednesday.

"You are in my building," said Luo Yan.

※

He had a box file under his arm and she had a bag of laundry in her hand. It took a moment and none of them were planned.

They were both caught in the corridor of a dead man's flat at twenty past two in the morning, and neither of them had any version of this that worked.

"I have not come in," she said.

"You have not come in."

"That flat is mine. That has been my flat since nineteen ninety-eight." She had not moved and neither had he. "It has been my flat since I was ten years old. He bought it and he paid for it and he put my name on the paper."

"And everybody in that building has spent four days telling me what a builder is."

"Yes."

"He was not a builder. He was my father."

She turned the bag over in her hand.

"He was a man who put money into the hands of the men who came, because he said you could tell what a man was by what he did with his hands at that moment."

※

"You know what I am."

"I have known what you are since the eighth-floor landing on the morning of the third day." She looked at the box file under his arm. "Is that my father's?"

"No!"

"Then whose is it? Do you even know?"

"It is a list of what everybody in that building is owed." Dajie did not move. "It is going back into a drawer in your flat on Sunday, and your uncle is holding it, and he does not want you to have it out of him."

Luo Yan did not move for a beat.

"Give it to me now!" she said.

"He will not."

"Then why are you still standing there?"

"Then tell him to bring it on Sunday."

"Yes, ma."

"In my hands himself."

"Yes, ma."

"Not on a table."

"Yes, ma."

※

She went down.

Not into the flat. She went down the stairs, past the eighth, past the seventh.

She did not stop on the seventh-floor landing. Dajie stood in the ninth-floor corridor and listened to her go all the way down. Then the dog barked.

Once, from the eighth-floor landing, where it had not been for a second and a half. Dajie said, "I am going to go down now."

"That is not your flat."

"It is going to be empty in about four hours, and there is going to be a man in the office with a list, and you are going to be asleep in a hotel in Dadukou with eleven children in a studio."

"And I am going to carry a box file out of your dead father's flat."

Dajie did not move.

"That has got nothing to do with money. You know it has got nothing to do with money. I have known it since the eighth-floor landing and I did it anyway, and that is the fourth one."

"You have told me it is the fourth one?"

"You have known it was the fourth one since Tuesday, ma."

"You have not said one word to the police about a single one of the four. I would like you to think about why that is."

※

Forty-one steps, nine floors. A man of sixty-one carrying eleven hundred grams of eleven people's money, and two men who had not come up with it, and a dog that came down as far as the seventh floor and stopped, because the dog had been doing something on that landing since Thursday and did not appear to consider it finished. The stairs took nine minutes.

Luo Changhe went down in the middle, between them, without saying anything, the way you walk when you are carrying something you have decided to carry.

At the bottom of the lane the fog had come back. The three o'clock buses were not running.

There were four hundred thousand dogs in the city and nobody watching any of it.

"There is a car," said Luo Changhe. "Where."

"Round the corner."

"Then I will go in the car and you two will walk." He handed Youcai the file at the lane mouth. "Not because of the boy. Because if there are three men getting into a car at three in the morning on a street that has got a number painted on it, then somebody in an office writes something down about it tomorrow.

And that something will be in a drawer in a flat in Dadukou.

"I have not got eleven more mornings.""

CHAPTER 13

Thirteen

On the Monday he went to work, because it was the Monday, and he was responsible for the roster.

A driver had called in at ten past four to say he could not come.

There was a gap at Jiangbei that had been open since Thursday. It had been passed down twice and it was now his.

He filled it in at six in the morning with a man called Xia.

Xia was twenty-nine and owed money in three places. He did not ask why the shift had appeared at six in the morning instead of the previous evening.

He made tea, because the machine was on his floor and the machine was the only thing on his floor that anybody talked to. It had been there since 2019 and it had a note taped to it that said the water goes in the top and not the side, which Youcai had written in 2019 in the handwriting he was still using. He sent the revised sheet up at seven. It came back at nine forty with one line on it asking whether the Jiangbei gap had been filled by a person or by a plan, and he typed the word person, and then he read the question again, and then he sent it.

Then he did the arithmetic, which he had been not doing for four days, and which took him about forty seconds because it was four lines long and he had done it a hundred and forty times.

※

The arithmetic had been this.

210,000.

84,000.

need 126,000.

And then underneath it, on Tuesday, in the small neat hand:

4 days x 2,800 = 11,200.

cannot.

And then on Thursday night, at ten past four in the morning, after Dajie had fallen asleep in the passenger seat with the gourd on his chest, one more line. never was enough. not enough.

410,000.

we take 60.

※

On Monday morning he wrote it out again with a pen because paper did not run out of power.

He had carried eleven hundred grams of forty-one documents down nine flights of stairs at two in the morning and given them back to a man of sixty-one on a landing. He sat with that for ten minutes. *410,000 we take 60 we have 0*

He had thirty seconds of cold tea in his stomach and a shirt that smelled of a stairwell.

It was the same as it had been on Monday, except that on Monday he had not known it was zero.

That was the whole of the difference between Tuesday and Monday. Not the figure. The knowledge. The number on the sheet was zero.

※

He worked it out himself at a quarter past eight in the morning, at a desk on the third floor, with a window facing a wall. Nobody in that building ever worked this out about Chen Youcai.

He had been frightened of it on Tuesday, and again on Wednesday. On Thursday morning he had been so frightened of it that he had booked a funeral, so that he would be indoors for three days. He was not frightened of the number.

What was left in its place was not courage. It was a kind of administrative calm. By Monday the fear had gone somewhere else.

He was a man who had spent five years filling in other people's gaps at six in the morning. A number of one hundred and twenty-six thousand is a gap. Gaps are his trade.

He wrote one more line, and he did it in the margin, because the margin is the part of a page nobody looks at twice, and he had learned that from somebody who counted a drawer.

And then:

still need 126,000.

last day is thursday 10:00.

※

His mother's business was called Chen Shunfa Building Materials. Shunfa was her. She had put her own two characters over the gate in 2005 and she had never taken them down, and it was on the back road behind a tyre place in Shapingba, and it had been there for nineteen years.

It had a yard, a corrugated shed, a cement mixer, and a yard office with a metal desk in it.

It did four million a year in a good year. He knew the number because he had seen the book when he was fifteen, and because his mother had never tried to keep it from him.

It was in a drawer in the yard office. About seventy thousand on a Friday. The money in it was not in the shed.

His mother counted that drawer every night at nine o'clock with a counting frame and a rubber band. She had counted it every night since 2006, including the night she was in hospital, including the night her own mother died, which was not in that period but was in the habit.

※

He did not go inside the yard. He had a key on a ring in his pocket and he did not go inside the yard, and he stood on the road for twenty minutes in total, over two visits, and on neither visit did he get further than the edge of the tyre place. He stood on the road outside the tyre place for about ten minutes with his hands in his pockets, looking at the corrugated shed. He took the bus to Shapingba at a quarter to nine.

He had a key to the office. It was on a ring with four other keys. It had been on that ring since he was eleven. He had never used it for anything except getting a pen.

The drawer was nine steps from the door. He had timed it as a child. You could get to it, open it, take the band off, and be out of that office in under ninety seconds.

The door would close behind him. The spring had been broken since 2011 and she had never fixed it, because she liked it open.

He worked all of this out standing on a road with his hands in his pockets, in a few minutes.

He was aware of every second of it, right down to the part where he noticed that he was checking whether the office window was lit from the road, which a man doing arithmetic does not do and a man planning something does.

※

Not because of the yard. Then a car came in off the back road and parked by the office, and his mother got out of it. At two minutes and forty seconds he stopped.

She was carrying a handbag and a folder. She had been to the hospital already.

She was forty-nine years old. She had a scar on her neck from 2011. She was going to be alive or she was not going to be alive depending on a Thursday.

And he was standing on a road working out how long it took him to rob her.

※

He stood there another nine minutes after the car had gone in and the office light had come on. He did not go in.

Then he walked to the front desk of the tyre place and asked the man on it whether they took cards.

They did not take cards. They took a QR code and cash, and the QR code was for a WeChat account belonging to the man on the till, and Youcai looked at it for slightly too long.

"Does your friend have a machine?"

"Does your friend have cash?"

There was a pause on that, the particular pause of a man deciding whether he was being robbed or merely sold to.

"Give me two hundred," said Youcai.

※

He took the two hundred and gave it to the man who swept the tyre place, and asked whether there was anything needed.

The man said there was a man on the Friday nights who needed somebody to carry an oil drum for four hours.

"Come at eight."

"I will be there at eight."

"Which Friday?"

"All of them."

"And after that?"

"After that I do not know," said Youcai, "and it is the first time in five years that I have been asked what happens after something."

Eleven hours' work in a Saturday. Two hundred and forty yuan, which was one and a half percent of what he needed.

※

On the bus he got the notebook out of the inside pocket of the folder. He took the bus back.

He had bought it that morning for nine yuan at the stationery shop at the bottom of the steps. It was the plain kind, the kind that comes four hundred to a ream.

His mother reads the front of a notebook if you leave it at the front, and has since she was nine. He opened it at the back.

They were four things Dajie had said on that landing at two in the morning. They were not Dajie's jokes. And he wrote the date, and then he wrote four lines.

Youcai had been sitting on the step below him for four and a half minutes, taking them down in the small neat hand.

The man above him was talking to a stranger about money that was not in the room.

Nobody has asked you whether you want to go in. If you are a man who is going to lie, never do it about a dead person. *It is not a question anybody has asked you in four days. I do not know why I know that.*

It was the one that had been in his own head since Friday, and he had not been able to account for it. Then he read them back and underlined the third one.

※

It took nine minutes to get through. Six of those were the kiosk, and then a corridor, and then somebody who had to find the ward. At about eleven he telephoned the hospital.

"How is she?"

"They gave the date. Thursday at ten!"

"Is that good or bad?"

"It is a date."

"Has she eaten?"

"She has eaten."

"Is she frightened?"

"She asked what time it is."

"Did she ask what time it is?"

"Yes," said the woman on the ward. "Every twenty minutes."

※

He hung up and put the notebook in the folder and the folder under his arm.

He had a shift at seven that evening, and a gap at Jiangbei that he had already filled, and a Saturday of an oil drum.

And one hundred and twenty-six thousand yuan of arithmetic still sitting on a piece of A4 in a drawer at the transit office. A company drawer. He had put it in there on the Saturday, because in an interview in 2021 he had been told that you never keep anything in a desk that is not company property.

At one o'clock a woman from the estate office telephoned the transit office and asked to speak to Mr Chen.

Youcai was the only Mr Chen on the third floor.

"Mr Chen, I am sorry to bother you at work."

"It is all right."

"Is it about the ninth floor?"

"I am making a list of people who were at the building on the ninth floor. For the file."

A pause.

"It is not a formal thing. It is my own list."

"Where do you keep it?"

"Then it is not a formal thing?"

"You will be on it."

"That is all right."

"It has your name and your face, and the times you came in and went out. It has the man who stood at the side of the body for three days. It has the girl. It has the man from the eighth floor."

The pen on the other end of the line moved.

"I am telling you because in about four years somebody is going to ask me what I remember."

"And I would like to be able to say that I asked the questions in November, and not in the spring."

"You have just asked the questions."

"Have you asked the questions?"

"I am asking now," said the woman. "In November."

※

"You have done something wrong!" said his mother.

She said it at about ten past nine that night, at the kitchen table.

She said it in the flat above a tyre place in Shapingba, where he had grown up. There had been a second drawer upstairs with his own school books in it, until the year before she threw them out.

The counting frame was in front of her and the rubber band was round the drawer key. She had not raised her voice once. She was not looking at him.

"I have not done anything wrong."

"Then why do you look at the drawer?"

He looked at the drawer, and then at her hands, which were already flat on the table in the position they go when they are about to count something.

"You have counted it?"

"I counted it at nine. It is correct." She put the frame down. "Liu Dajie came to the building on the Thursday and stayed four days. He stood at the side of a table for three days with his hands behind his back."

"His name is not in that book and he is not in the building now."

"And there is a file that was in that flat on Friday and is not in it now."

"Mother."

"I am not asking you about the file."

"You have just asked me about the file."

"I have asked you about the drawer."

※

That was the thing. He had said it before, in a noodle shop, across a table, as a piece of arithmetic. He had said it as a sentence with a number attached to it and it had been a sentence about a third person. And his mother stopped. He said, "How much is in it!"

He said it across his own kitchen table, to a woman with a counting frame in front of her, with the drawer four feet away.

The sentence stopped being about anybody at all, and it went into the room and sat there between the counting frame and the kettle.

His mother did not answer for about eleven seconds.

"Seventy-one thousand," she said. "And you knew that."

"Yes."

"Then why did you ask!"

"Because you would have told me," said Youcai.

※

She put both hands flat on the table.

"Liu Dajie."

"Yes."

"You have not said his name to me in six years."

"I know when I said it."

"Six and a half."

"Six and a half."

"You said it just now."

"I have been watching you say it in your sleep," said his mother. "You have been saying it in your sleep since about the Friday."

"You do not say my name in your sleep. You have never said a woman's name in your sleep in your life."

She put the rubber band back on the drawer key.

"Sit down. Both feet on the floor."

He sat down.

"I am going to say one thing to you, and then I am going to make the beds, and I am not going to say it again."

"Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"You have had a plan since about Tuesday. You have had an amount of money that you did not have on Tuesday."

"You did not have it in cash. It is not in that flat and it is not in your account."

"I want to know where it is."

"I have not spent anything."

"Then you are going to have it by Thursday and you are going to have it by Thursday in a way that I cannot find out about by Friday."

She stood up and pushed her chair in.

"Sit there until I have done the beds."

※

It took eleven minutes and he sat there for all eleven. He did not turn the television on. There was a television in that kitchen and it had been broken since 2013 and neither of them had ever had it repaired, and that was the entire subject of the eleven minutes.

He had come into that kitchen with a sentence he had not yet said.

The sentence was this: if I took it, you would know by about Friday morning.

The reason he had not said it was not that he had decided not to.

His mother had counted a drawer every night since 2006, including the night she had been in hospital.

He had known that at seventeen. He had known it at nineteen. He had known it at twenty-four.

There had not been one single hour in the twenty-four hours before he got on that bus in which he could have stood in that office for ninety seconds and not been seen by somebody.

He had done the arithmetic on the yard.

He had not done the arithmetic on his mother.

※

She came back in and put her hand on the back of his chair, the way she had done about nine hundred times when he was small and had been sent to sit at that table for something. The beds were done at nine twenty-five.

"Now," she said. "Tell me the number."

"Two hundred and ten."

"No."

"Sixty."

"No!"

Youcai looked at the table.

"Then what do you want?"

"I want to know what you were going to do about it on Friday."

She did not take her eyes off the table.

"And I want you to answer me without writing anything down."

He did not answer for a long time.

"I was going to take it out of a drawer in a shed in Shapingba. I had it down to ninety seconds."

"And I was going to do it on Friday at nine o'clock, when she has finished the account and gone home."

His mother took her hand off the chair.

"You had it down to ninety seconds."

"Yes."

"Then you have been in that yard."

"I stood outside it."

"You stood outside it, you worked it out, and you did not go in!"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you count it."

He did not raise his voice.

"And because if I did it, I would have had to lie to you at about seven o'clock that evening."

"I have got very good at lying. I have not got any practice at doing it to you."

※

She stood in the kitchen doorway for some time, with the light behind her, and she did not use it, which he noticed, and which told him that she had decided not to use it.

"Do you know what the valve costs?"

"Two hundred and ten thousand."

"Do you know what happens on Thursday at ten o'clock if there is no valve?"

"No."

"I do," said his mother. "I have been on a list since August. I am fourth on it. There are three people above me and two of them are being done this week."

"Then why have you not said so."

"Because I am not frightened of dying and you are frightened of a drawer," said his mother. "Those are two entirely different problems and you have been treating them as one for three days."

Then she stopped on the fourth step, which is the landing with the chair on it. She went into the hall and started going up the stairs.

"Liu Dajie," she said, without turning round. "If that boy is what I think he is, then he is going to cost you something before the end of the month. And it is not going to be money."

"What is it going to be?"

"I do not know," said his mother.

"That is the second time in my life I have said that to you, and I have never been right."

CHAPTER 14

Fourteen

The man came to He Jie's yard on the Wednesday at about eleven in the morning, which was not an hour anybody chooses.

He drove a nine-year-old Japanese sedan. There was a sun visor across the top of the windscreen and a string of red beads off the mirror.

He parked it badly, at an angle, taking up most of the width.

Dajie was loading the binggui for a job in Shapingba. He watched the whole business of the parking from the back of the van.

The man got out and did not lock the car.

※

He had the kind of face you would describe in an interview as friendly. He was forty-four. He was not large.

It was friendly. That was the difficulty.

"Sorry," he said, to nobody in particular, in a voice that carried across a yard.

He came at the office door. He did not go round the back. He knocked, and he waited. He had a folder. Everybody has a folder.

He Jie came out.

"Afternoon."

"You do not know me."

"No."

"My name is Wei Asi." He put the folder on the counter. "I am owed two hundred and forty thousand by the Luo family. I have been owed it for three years and I have never written a letter."

He Jie did not touch the folder.

"You want money from me."

"I want money from them."

"Then this is the wrong counter."

"I know it is the wrong counter." Wei Asi put both hands flat on the folder. "I have come anyway."

"Why?"

"Because in about nine days there is going to be nobody running this family, and after that there is going to be a month where nobody signs anything at all."

"And you will fill it."

"I will fill it," said Wei Asi. "That is what I have been doing since Tuesday of last week."

※

Most of it came from Lu. Some came from He Jie. One part came from Wei Asi himself, at about ten o'clock at night, with a bag of oranges. Here is what Dajie found out over the next four days.

He was legal. Not on paper. Properly, with a firm in the district and a man in an office in Wuxi who did the paperwork, and twenty-one years of it.

He charged fifteen percent above paper and everybody knew it, including his clients.

He did not pretend otherwise. He would tell you the number, in a car park, out loud.

He had a written agreement for eleven of his cases.

One was in dispute and would go to court. He would win it, and everybody involved knew he would win it. Nine he had collected inside the terms.

One had not paid in two years, and he did not use the words on that one.

※

This was reported to Dajie by four separate people, independently, and none of them had been asked whether it was true. He had never raised his voice.

Lu said, "You will know this about him. He has never shouted at anybody in the twenty-one years and he has been in rooms where I would have."

He Jie said, "He has been in my yard nine times. He has been pleasant nine times."

The woman on the counter said, "He does not raise it. He just looks at you, and then he looks at you longer."

※

He gave Dajie a lift once, on the Friday, and it was the only forty minutes the two of them were ever in a vehicle together.

It was a car and not a sedan, and the interior of it smelled of nothing at all, which is the only thing Dajie noticed and the only thing he has ever mentioned.

"I am going to ask you a question," said Wei Asi at a junction, "and you can lie to me, and I will not come back to it."

"Go on."

"The man in your photographs." He did not use a phone. He said it to the windscreen. "He is a mourner, and you are not one, and I have been in this business twenty-one years and I can tell from the way you stand."

Dajie looked at his hands.

"Which man in my photographs."

"The one you were at the side of. You did not do the crying."

"No."

"So what did you do."

"I stood there," said Dajie, "for three days, with my hands behind my back, and I did not sit down, and I did not eat, and I did not go out, and about forty people in that flat thought I was one of their relatives."

"And were you!"

"No."

Wei Asi took the next junction.

"That is the answer to the question I was going to ask you," he said, "and you did not have to know that you were giving it, and that is twice this week."

※

"You have got his face?"

"I have not got his face."

"You have got his face and you have got the number in the file, and you have been in that building four days."

Wei Asi watched the traffic.

"May I say one thing, and then not say it?"

"Why not just not say it?"

"Because you will have noticed that I noticed you," said Wei Asi, "and I would rather you had it from me than work it out on a staircase."

Dajie said nothing.

"If I say it, you will remember that I said it. And then there is a thing in your head that was not in your head, and in about a year one of us is going to need the other one to have not said it."

"Which of us!"

"That is the correct question, and you asked it fast. How fast?" He turned the radio off. It had been on very quietly, and it had been playing a programme about somebody's garden. "When somebody asks you that question, remember that I did not answer it, and that I could have, and that I had a folder in the glove box."

※

Peng heard about it on the Monday.

They were loading a binggui in Shapingba for a man of sixty-eight who had not wanted a funeral and had been outvoted by three daughters.

"You have been in a car with Wei Asi."

Dajie did not look up.

"Who told you."

"Lu. And if Lu did not tell you then He Jie did, and if He Jie did not tell you then the fruit man did. All three of them were in that yard on the same morning." Peng took his end of the binggui. "What did he say to you, and did he say it in the car?"

"He asked whether I was a mourner."

"And what did you say."

"I said I stood there for three days and did not talk."

Peng put his end down.

"That is the correct answer to a man like that," he said, "and it is also the answer a man gives when he has not thought of a lie, and a man like that can tell the difference inside nine seconds, and will spend the rest of his life deciding what to do about it."

"What should I have said."

"Nothing. There is nothing." Peng went back to the binggui. "You have now been noticed by the only man in this district who is owed money and is not bored, and you cannot be un-noticed, and there is no advice."

※

Here is what Peng did not tell him, and what He Jie told him instead on the following Wednesday, in the yard, with nobody within nine feet.

"He is going to lose the case."

"He is going to win it."

"Then what are you telling me?"

"You are going to write it down."

"Who decides?"

"What am I telling you, or what are you going to write down?" He put the pen down. "They are not the same and in about eleven months somebody is going to need them to be different."

"Which one is right?"

"Neither. The one that gets written is the one that was true in his office in about two months, and by then everybody including him will have stopped being able to tell."

"Tell me, then."

"A man who can win and does not press is not patient. He is waiting for that family to be worth something to somebody else."

"Then why has he not pressed."

"Because in about fourteen months that girl is going to sign something, and when she signs it the debt goes with it, and he would rather have the debt than the fourteen months."

"Who told him she would sign!"

"Nobody," said He Jie. "He has simply been sitting in the same building for three weeks taking an interest in everybody in it. There is no procedure for that, nobody can report him for it, and in about four months somebody will write a complaint and the office will not be able to say what he did."

And the fruit man, who had known him since a building came down on the last street in 2021:

"He is the only one of that trade who has ever paid my wife's medical bill, and then never mentioned it again."

※

He took the debt three years ago, when the original lender went under.

When the business in Wuxi went bad it had gone to the courts. The courts had taken most of it. The original lender had held Luo Changjiang's personal guarantee.

About sixty thousand had come back to the other creditors in a settlement nobody was satisfied with.

A man of thirty-eight in Shapingba had read the file and done the arithmetic.

He had bought the remaining hundred and eighty thousand yuan of unsecured paper for a price that would embarrass a person to say aloud.

He had held it for eleven months. Then he had served notice on the family.

"You could have waited," said Dajie. "Everybody says you could have waited."

"I did wait. Eleven months. Is that waiting?"

"Is that waiting?"

"For a man who is owed two hundred and forty thousand yuan by a building contractor, eleven months is not long." He said it pleasantly. "I have a man on my books for two years. Do you know what I charge him? Nothing. I have never chased him once. You know why?"

"Because he cannot pay."

"Because he cannot pay *and because he knows that I know that he cannot pay*, and that is a thing that a man can live with for two years." Wei Asi turned the folder over. "What kills a man is not the money. It is having somebody who wants it every eleven days for eleven years and never saying that they understand."

※

The Luo family had three generations of this in it.

The father had borrowed in 2009 for the first escalator, and in 2014 for the second. The grandfather had borrowed in 1998 for a workshop.

He had not borrowed in 2017 for the third. There was a note about that in the file, in a different handwriting, from the original lender.

The note said that L.C.J. was approached in August 2017 and declined.

Which was unusual, and which nobody at the time had asked about.

Dajie read it on the Wednesday afternoon in He Jie's office with the door open and He Jie watching him do it.

"Why would a man who builds things not borrow for a building?"

"Ask him."

"He is dead."

"Then is it a question for the sister in Dadukou?"

"It is a question she has also got, and she has had it for two years."

※

That was the thing that made it impossible to arrange into the shape Dajie needed it in. Wei Asi was on his birthday list.

He knew Luo Changjiang's birthday, which was the ninth of May. He had known it because the paperwork has it on it. That meant nothing.

He had sent a card. It went to the flat, was opened by the caretaker, and was thrown away. He knew Luo Yan's birthday, which was the second of March.

He Jie knew about it because the caretaker had telephoned her office in March and asked whether the family wanted to complain. He Jie had said no.

He knew He Jie's birthday, which was the fourth of August, and had sent a fruit thing to her yard every August since 2022.

And on the Wednesday morning he knew that the father of a man he was owed two hundred and forty thousand yuan by had died nine days earlier. She had thrown away four of them and eaten the fifth.

He had sent flowers to the flat. The flowers went to the fourth-floor flat by mistake, and were given to a woman who had been doing the washing for four days.

※

"Why the flowers?" said Dajie.

"What?"

"You knew the father died nine days ago. Why did you send flowers to a man you are owed money by?"

Wei Asi looked at him for a moment.

"Who are you?"

"I stand at the back of things."

"Ah." Wei Asi did not smile. It is not often reported and it is not true that he did not smile. He stopped smiling. "You want to know why a man sends flowers?"

"Yes."

"Say it again and do not soften it."

"Because if I do not send the flowers then in three years, in a room, somebody is going to say, he did not even send flowers!"

"Because if I do not send the flowers, then in three years, in a room, somebody is going to say, he did not even send flowers."

He picked up the folder.

"That is the whole of my trade. Everything I do, I do so that at the end of it, in a room, the people who are going to talk have got nothing."

"You have never said a bad word about them."

"No."

"Not to anybody?"

"Not to a living soul," said Wei Asi.

"I said a great deal about the father of that family, in a restaurant in Shapingba, in March of last year!"

"In front of four people. One of them was the wife of a man who works for me, and she repeated it in April."

※

He did the birthdays for eleven people in that district and he had a spreadsheet.

He said afterward that it was the single most frightening object he had ever been in the same room as. Dajie saw the spreadsheet on the Friday.

He was not being funny. He Jie did not think he was being funny either.

It was not a list of debts. It was a list of people, and beside each person there were four columns.

The first column was a birthday. Every one of them filled in. Eleven of eleven.

The second column was a date. The date of the last time somebody had spoken to that person and had been thanked for it.

The third column was a number. It was not money.

It took Dajie four days to work out what it was.

When he worked it out he went and sat in a stairwell.

The third column was the number of days since that person's last good day.

He did not know that in advance. It was a guess, it was a guess with a method, and the method was the whole of his business.

※

"You have put in a number about their feelings," said Dajie.

"Yes."

"On a computer."

"Yes."

"In a column."

"Yes."

"Who taught you that?"

"Nobody. It took nine years and it is wrong about one in six, and I have never found a way to be wrong about fewer."

"That is the most arrogant thing I have ever seen in my life."

"It is," said Wei Asi.

That was the part that stayed. He did not defend it and he did not soften it. He did not defend it.

"It is also the only column that is any use!" He said it without any heat at all. "And you did not have to see it to know it. Did you?"

※

He was patient in the way that Dajie found hardest, which was that he never appeared to be waiting for anything. He was patient.

He came on the Wednesday. He came on the Friday. He came on the Monday.

Each time he brought fruit. Each time he put it on the counter and said the same four sentences in the same order.

He Jie threw out four of the five fruit arrangements and ate the fifth, because it was the end of a month. The four sentences never varied. They were never aggressive.

"You are not going to take the case," said Dajie on the Monday.

"No?"

"Then why do you keep coming?"

"Because I have told them nine times now that I am going to keep coming. Ten times, now! I said it again on Friday and I did not even have to mean it."

He closed the folder.

"In about four months one of them is going to be frightened about something that has nothing to do with me. And they are going to remember that I said I would be here."

"That is not a threat."

"It is not. It is the only thing I have that is any use at all."

※

At about ten o'clock on the second night he gave Dajie the oranges.

This was the thing Dajie could not put down. He tried. He gave up trying.

They were standing in the fourth-floor corridor at about ten on the second night of the funeral.

There were thirty-one people in that flat and four men in the corridor. Wei Asi had come up nine floors on foot to put a bag of fruit on a windowsill and go away again.

"You have never been in this flat."

"No."

"You have never met anybody in it."

"No."

"Then why are you giving me fruit."

Wei Asi looked at him for a while.

"Because you have got a face like a man who is about to do something."

"And in about eleven months you are going to need something that is not money."

※

The first was on the Thursday afternoon of the third week, on the telephone. He raised his voice twice.

The man was called Ren. He had owed nine thousand yuan since the previous May and had been avoiding him since the previous August.

It was not loud in the way a voice is loud. Everything else stopped. Dajie was on the landing.

There were thirty-one people in that building that day, and for a beat all of them stopped.

Dajie heard it from the eighth-floor landing, because the walls are the walls of a stair-street.

"Mr Ren, I have been at your mother's house four times and I have not gone in, and I would like you to understand something about that."

He said it at the top of his ordinary range and it went through the walls. He did not shout it.

"Four times."

And then he said, "I am not going to telephone your mother again."

He was down the stairs before the people in that building had finished not making a noise. The telephone went down.

※

The second was eleven days later, and it was not on a telephone.

He had come to He Jie's yard at eleven in the morning and there was a woman there with him, and the woman was about sixty and she had come about an unpaid balance of thirty-one thousand yuan from a job her husband had died on, and she had brought the death certificate, and Wei Asi had taken it out of her hands and read it standing up, in the sun, in the yard, where everyone could see.

Then he said, "This is a serious document. This is not the document I need and I am not going to leave you thinking that it is." He read it twice.

This is the sentence. Dajie was standing at the counter, and has said since that it was the only time in his life that he felt a thing come up through the floor of his body. Then he said the second thing.

He said: madam, if your husband owed me money, I would have been at his funeral, and you would have known that I was there, and nobody would have to tell you about it.

Then he apologised to her. He drove her home. He did not charge her the thirty-one thousand.

There is no record of that anywhere. It is not the kind of thing that goes in a file.

※

He got as far as the stairs, and then sat down on the fourth-floor landing. Dajie did not sleep that night.

That is the landing with the chair on it. The chair has been there since before Dajie was born and nobody can account for it.

He had his phone out. He had the number in it. He had had it since the Monday.

What he was going to do was not go round to He Jie's yard and break something. He had thought about it for a few seconds and it had not got that far.

What he was going to do was telephone the man who collects money for men like Wei Asi.

He would find out what somebody would charge. He would find out whether it could be done on a Wednesday.

He had got as far as having the name in his telephone when he noticed that his hand was doing something he had never asked it to do, which was shaking.

The dog was sitting on the landing above him, on the eighth, where it had been since about four o'clock in the afternoon. Then he looked at the dog.

It had come down nine floors at some point and gone back up.

It had come down nine floors to be in the same stairwell as a man who was about to do something. And then it had come back up, and it was sitting four metres above him in the dark, looking down the stairs at the back of his head.

※

He sat there until about a quarter to one, with the phone in his hand and the gourd between his feet. He put the phone away.

He did not go down the nine floors to He Jie's yard. He did not make the call.

The reason he did not make the call is not a good one and he has never pretended that it is.

That is the whole of it. A dog came down nine floors because a man on the fourth landing was sitting on the steps, and did not bark, and went back up. He did not make the call because of a dog.

He has thought about that for a long time. He has had longer than most people to think about it, because he is alive, which he would not otherwise have been. And the man did not make a telephone call.

He has never been able to turn it into anything except an ordinary and worthless coincidence involving an animal.

He came to He Jie's yard at eleven in the morning with a woman.

She was about sixty. She had come about an unpaid balance of thirty-one thousand yuan from a job her husband had died on. She had brought the death certificate.

Wei Asi had taken it out of her hands and read it standing up, in the sun, in the yard, where everyone could see.

CHAPTER 15

Fifteen

He went back to the Jiaotong Chaoguan on the Monday. That was the day he had been there last.

It was a coincidence he did not think about for about four years.

It was the eleventh month again. The fog had gone and the damp had not. The whole city was sweating and cold at the same time and everybody had the same grey coat on.

Tao Shi was at the end of the room by the light.

He did not look up when Dajie came in. That was a thing he had never done before.

Dajie went and sat down about four tables away, which was also a thing he had never done before.

※

"Thirty-eight years," said Tao Shi, after about twenty minutes.

Dajie waited.

"I have been asked about the monk eleven thousand times. I have been asked in the street. In taxis. In hospital corridors.

A woman from Taiwan once wanted to know whether the gourd was real." He turned his leaves over. "Nobody has ever come back."

"You told me to go and ask who wrote it."

"I told you that on a Thursday when I was angry at you. That was eleven days ago." He put the leaves down. "Did you go and ask?"

"I have thought about going."

※

The woman who ran the dry-cleaning shop was not there. The driver was not there. The four of them were at the same table.

At the end of the table was an old woman of about eighty with a fixed expression of amusement.

There was a woman of about sixty who worked in a factory in Dadukou and who had been at the table about four hours. There were two others Dajie did not know.

He had met the old woman in the year before. Her name was Zhou.

Everybody in the district called her Zhou. There have been four Zhou Grandmothers in that building since 1949 and not one of them is related to another.

She had brought a bag of qingtai and she was eating them out of newspaper.

"You have come to ask me something," she said.

"No?"

"You have come to sit at this table. You have never sat at this table."

She pushed the newspaper along.

"Sit down."

"I have not got all of this afternoon."

"How long have you got?"

"Until four."

"Then have one of these, and ask me whatever you came to ask me."

※

Here is the thing about the old women of the Jiaotong Chaoguan.

You do not ask them anything directly. If you ask a question, you get a fact about the weather.

You have to put something on the table and let it sit there.

Then a person will pick it up. If they pick it up, you have about forty seconds before they decide what it was.

The woman from Dadukou had a great deal to say about the cost of the second one. Zhou Grandmother corrected her four times on dates. He started with the escalators, because that was safe. It took Dajie forty minutes.

Then he mentioned the demolition, which everybody in that building was talking about and nobody in that room was.

Then he said, "My mother will not take money for a flat."

That was the closest he came to saying anything about himself.

Zhou Grandmother looked at him for slightly too long, and then let it go, which she would not have done if it had been a lie.

※

The qingtai went.

"Do you want a grave?" said Zhou Grandmother.

"I do not know what I want."

"Do you have a mother?"

"I have two of them. One of them anyway."

"Is the one you have working?"

"Everybody who comes to that table wants a grave!" She wiped her hands on the newspaper. "Nobody ever says the word. They talk about the flat and then they go quiet and then they ask me about a grave."

"I do not want a grave. My mother is alive."

"Then what, and how long have you known it?"

Dajie said, "I met a woman last week."

※

He said it as a story, which is the only way this works. Here is what he told her.

He told it slowly. He made it dull on purpose, so that it would not turn into a thing where a man of eighty-one tells a man of twenty-four what he is.

He said: an old woman on a landing. Seventy-nine. Her son died on the ninth. She would not go into the flat. Everybody in the building had tried her and everybody had tried being kind at her.

He said: I asked her one question about going in.

He said: she said, do you want to go.

And then she got up. And then she came down at four o'clock and walked the whole corridor and stood at the table.

He said that, and then he stopped.

※

Zhou Grandmother ate another qingtai.

"Huh!" she said.

"It was nothing. It was a man on a landing and a question and somebody stood up." He turned the qingtai over in his fingers. "It was nothing, and I have been carrying it around for nine days."

"You have not carried anything anywhere. You came to a teahouse."

"It was nothing," she agreed. "That is what they always are."

"And I have sat here for sixty years and never once seen one of them turn out to be nothing, and never once seen anybody admit that."

The woman from Dadukou said, "You are doing the thing. You are doing the thing where you tell a story and stop at the part you want somebody to ask about."

"Yes."

"So ask it."

※

He asked it badly, on purpose.

"Somebody has to put her in the ground," he said. "That is all I am thinking about. Everybody has to put somebody in the ground. There is nobody to do it, so a stranger does it.

And the stranger is standing there with his hands behind his back, wondering what he is for."

Zhou Grandmother put her hand flat on the table.

"Say the next part!"

"There is no next part."

"Then why have you not gone home?"

"There is always a next part."

She put her hand flat on the table.

"You have stopped in the same place you have stopped nine hundred times." She did not raise her voice. "Nine thousand times, in this room, in this city, men like you have sat at that table and told me about a person they did not know."

"And then they have stopped."

"And then I have had to say the next part for them, and it has cost me about eleven years each time, and I have never once refused."

"Then say it!"

"No."

※

She made him wait about four minutes.

"You have not asked me a question," she said. "You have told me a story and then you have waited for me to give you the missing piece, because that is the whole of your trade and you do it with the dead as well as the living."

"Yes."

"And I am going to give it to you, because I am eighty-one and I have four qingtai left."

She did not push the newspaper away yet.

"You have not asked me anything?"

"Not one thing?"

"Not one."

"And you have been sitting there for four minutes."

"I have."

"Why?"

"Because you did not ask me anything, and a woman who has been asked nothing is owed the chance to give something."

"No."

"Good. That is what I said."

※

"Nineteen seventy-nine," she said.

"There is a woman on that landing whose son drowned. Nine Machang."

"I have it from a brother who telephoned the office about his own father."

"About his father."

"He did not know that he had said anything at all."

"Nineteen seventy-nine." Zhou Grandmother looked at the window. "There were four at that landing that year. Eleven families in that building. Forty in the lane behind it."

"I have sat in this room for sixty years.

I would have said nine people out of a hundred would say nothing about it, and four would say that he fell."

"And you?"

"I will tell you what the boy was frightened of. And then I am going to tell you the price of a wall."

"You can have one or the other. That is how this works."

※

"That boy was frightened of the hook."

"The hook."

"The crane. The diaogou, on the grab, on the bank." She put her hand up and made a shape in the air, about eighteen inches across, and then a longer shape going down. "There was a grab working on a barge at Nine Machang. It had a hook on a wire. It came up out of the water and it went back down.

It did that all day. Everybody in that lane could tell you what time it was by the noise it made."

"That is not frightening."

"It is a hook the size of your arm coming up out of the water nine feet from a boy," said Zhou Grandmother. "And in nineteen seventy-nine, in that lane, in that month, there was a queue of children on those steps at seven in the morning."

"Because it was the only thing to see."

※

Dajie had said nothing for about two minutes.

"How do you know?"

"How do you know what he was frightened of!"

※

She looked at him.

Then she said, "You did not come here for a grave."

"I did not know I was coming for anything."

"You came for the hook." Zhou Grandmother picked up another qingtai. "Nobody in this city has ever asked me about that hook. Not one person, in sixty

years, not the newspapers, not the men from the television, not one. There is no photograph of it anywhere.

It was a hook on a barge. It is not a thing anybody builds a monument to."

"Ma'am!"

"You will not call me that. You have not earned it and you will not earn it in a teahouse." She ate the qingtai. "So that is where you are from."

She put her hand flat on the table again.

"There is a woman on that landing who has been sitting on a plastic chair since March. And you have found out in nine days what the rest of that city could not find out in forty-six years."

"And you did it by sitting on a landing."

※

"I did not ask for it."

"No," said Zhou Grandmother. "You sat down. That is the whole trick and it is forty thousand years old and you did not know it was a trick."

She put both hands on the table.

"Now. What are you going to do with it?"

※

Dajie said, "I am going to tell her son."

"Luo Wenlong is dead."

"I am going to tell the woman."

"She has not asked."

"She has not asked because nobody has asked her." Dajie heard his own voice go into the other register and stopped it. "That is what I am going to do. And then it will be on her. And she will have to sit with it for the rest of her life.

And she has been protecting herself from that since nineteen seventy-nine, by not having one single person ask her a single question."

Zhou Grandmother did not say anything for a while.

The woman from Dadukou said, "That is very cruel."

"Yes."

"And you are going to do it anyway."

"I am going to ask her first," said Dajie. "I am not going to tell her. I am going to sit on the floor of that landing and I am going to wait, and she is going to lean down about thirty centimetres, and then she is going to say it, and then I am going to have done nothing at all."

※

"Four hundred," said Zhou Grandmother.

"What?"

"A wall, a plot, and four hundred for the maintenance of it."

"That is a plot and not a grave. It is at Bei Shan Bei. I have been going on a Tuesday for thirty years." She got up. "And I am going to tell you something for nothing."

"You have not asked me anything, and that is going to cost me about eleven years."

"What is it?"

"The boy is not in that river!" said Zhou Grandmother.

※

He got as far as about one o'clock. Then he got up and wrote the four lines out on the back of an envelope and looked at them for a while. Dajie did not sleep that night.

Nobody has asked you whether you want to go in. If you are a man who is going to lie, never do it about a dead person. It is not a question anybody has asked you in four days. I do not know why I know that.

Then he took the pen and he put a fifth line underneath the fourth one.

It is the same sentence. He wrote it out again because he had a feeling.

That is not a reason. It was also the only thing available to do with a hand at one o'clock in the morning. *I do not know why I know that.*

※

On the Tuesday morning his telephone rang and it was his mother.

"You have been to the teahouse."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody told me. You have got a face this week and I have seen the face before." She did not say anything else for a moment. "You went and asked an old woman a question!"

"I did not ask her a question!"

"You went and sat down!"

"Yes."

His mother was quiet.

Then she said, "What did she tell you about the hook?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me at eight in the morning. What did she tell you?"

※

Dajie sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You know about the hook!" he said.

"I have known about the hook since I was nineteen," said Zhou Guifen. "That is not the point and do not make it the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"That is the point."

"The point," said his mother, "is that you have just found the only thing in this city that nobody could find."

"And you have found it by going and sitting down in a teahouse with a plastic bag of vegetables. And in about four days you are going to walk into a building and take it to a woman who has not asked."

"I am going to ask her."

"You are going to ask her."

"Yes."

"Then do it!"

"And do not come home for lunch!"

"And I want you to say one thing to me first."

"What?"

"Where were you."

※

It was about half past eight in the morning. There is no traffic at half past eight on a Tuesday in that district, and there has not been since about 2003. He was about to say, *sitting in the traffic.* He was about to say something about the teahouse.

He did not say it.

"I was on the stairs," he said. "Number three landing. Going down."

There was a pause on the line a moment long.

"Number three landing is in our building," said his mother.

"Yes."

"Then what were you doing on it?"

※

"I was not doing anything on it."

"You were coming out of ours at half past eight in the morning, after being up until two. You have not done that since you were nineteen."

"There is a reason that you were up. You are not going to tell me the reason, and that is correct." She put something down on a counter. "I am going to say one thing, and then I am going to go to the market, and I am not going to say it again this year."

"Go on."

"You are going to be able to do this," said Zhou Guifen. "Not this week. Not this winter. Somewhere between this winter and the year after it you are going to be the man that people in that lane send for when there is nobody else, and I have watched about four hundred people do it, and it does not arrive the way you think it arrives."

"How does it arrive."

"You will not notice," said his mother. "That is the answer and it is the whole answer and I am not going to improve on it, and now I am going to the market."

※

There was one more thing in the envelope and he did not write it out until the Thursday.

On the Thursday afternoon he wrote it at the top of a new page, above the four lines. He had been sitting with it since Tuesday.

He did not tell anybody about it. He did not write it in the notebook, because it was not his.

It was not true. She had been asked in 1979 and she had answered. *Nobody has ever asked me.*

That different way was the entire thing. It was the only thing he had ever found that he could not explain to anybody. It was true in a different way.

He wrote it down on the Thursday afternoon, because he was about to go and find out whether it was a thing he could use.

※

He got up at about one and sat in the dark and did the arithmetic on what he had. He did not sleep that night either.

It was the whole of it. It was not much.

One glass. He had seen it on the table on the Thursday of the funeral. A blue chair that has not been moved. Four days a week, since March.

He had gone back and asked Peng about it on the Friday. Peng had said: she has one glass and she uses it. It is a glass and not a bowl. Do not ask her why.

A jar of pickled plums that came from somebody every Monday.

That somebody was the nephew in Wuxi. The nephew had never met her.

※

The dog came in the door at about two in the morning and did not make any noise about it.

He had been going to come and look for the building. He had been going to stand outside it for an hour and go home.

He sat in the dark and turned the fifth line over on the envelope, where he had written the same sentence twice. He did not go.

He thought about telling his mother he was on the stairs of his own building at half past eight in the morning.

She had asked him what he was doing on it. He had said nothing. She had accepted nothing.

He thought about Zhou Grandmother, who had known the hook since 1979 and had never once said it.

She had handed it to a drunk in a teahouse on a Monday afternoon in November.

Three weeks before it was going to be any use to him.

At half past one in the morning, in a stair-street in Banan, with a plastic gourd on the floor next to him. That was the whole mechanism, and he had it now. For nothing. Because he had sat down.

He did not understand it.

He went back to bed at about a quarter to two.

CHAPTER 16

Sixteen

He Jie gave the phone to Dajie and did not stay in the room. She telephoned the yard on the Wednesday.

That was the correct thing to do, and she did not comment on it at the time.

"My name is Luo Yan."

"Ma'am."

"Do not call me that." A pause. "Call me Luo Yan. I am twenty-four and I am the daughter and I have been the daughter for eleven days."

"Yes, Luo Yan."

"Are you free this evening, or has somebody told you not to be?"

※

He was free for about eleven hours, in the sense that he had nothing arranged.

He had spent those eleven hours at a funeral in Dadukou, a wonton shop and a stair-street. He had not spoken to anybody except Peng.

He said, "Where, and when do you want me?"

"There is a place in Guanyinqiao that does coffee and it is not very good and it is quiet at seven. Bring your notebook."

"I do not have a notebook."

"You have written things down," said Yan. "You have been writing things down since the third day, in a book you have not once shown anybody."

"And the girl on the desk says you have got a page you keep going back to."

※

He worked out on the bus that it had been the woman on the desk. He had not told He Jie about the notebook.

He worked out that the woman on the desk had said it to He Jie, and that He Jie had decided not to pass it on.

Which meant He Jie had decided he would not want to know.

That is the second time in a fortnight that somebody had made a decision on his behalf that turned out to be correct.

※

It was a place with a window, eleven tables, and a machine that made a noise. She was already sitting when he got there.

Luo Yan was at the fourth table with her back to the wall.

There was a folder on the table in front of her, about the size of a shoebox file.

She had her phone face down. She had a document on the table, folded, with the corner turned over.

"You came in the rain."

"There is no rain in this city in November."

"There was some."

"You came."

"You telephoned the yard."

"In the working hours."

"Yes."

"Good."

"You are frightened of me."

"Yes."

"Good."

"Say it properly."

"It saves us about an hour and I have not got an hour."

※

Dajie sat down.

"You are frightened of me."

"Yes."

"You have been frightened of me since the fourth day, and you have not said one word about any of it."

"I have spent a fortnight waiting for you to."

"I have been watching you."

"For how long."

"For nineteen days." She put her hands flat on the folder. "I have got a list. I have had a list since the fourth day and I have added to it every night and I have not shown it to anybody, and I am going to show it to you, and then I am going to ask you one question."

"Ma"

"Luo Yan."

"Luo Yan."

※

"You are frightened of me."

"I am."

"Are you frightened of me, or of what I will do with it?"

"I do not know the difference."

"That is the correct answer."

"And you are frightened of me."

"Yes."

"Say that as well."

"I am frightened of you."

"Good."

She put her hands flat on the folder.

"Number one. Thursday the sixth." You were on the seventh-floor landing for about two minutes. You came out of the seventh-floor flat."

"I was in the corridor."

"You were on the landing at the bottom of the corridor with your head tipped, listening at a door."

Dajie did not say anything.

"That is not a thing a mourner does. That is a thing a man does when he is counting rooms." She turned the folder. "Number two. "You said to my grandmother, on the seventh floor, in a corridor, that you had been in this building four days and you had not come up to her flat once."

"And then you sat down on her landing and asked her whether she wanted to go in.""

"That was on the eighth."

"I know it was on the eighth. I am telling you what I heard, which was through a door, on the seventh, and I am telling you that I heard a man who has been planning something say the word *flat*."

※

"Number three. You have got a notebook."

"I have got a notebook."

"You have written in it four nights out of five since the third. Always at the back. Always in the same hand."

"And you have not written anything else in it in your life, because you have never had anything to write down."

Dajie put his hands on the table.

"Who told you that."

"Nobody told me that. I watched you." Yan did not raise her voice. "On the second night I came out at two in the morning because I had left my phone."

"You were sitting on the fourth-floor landing in the dark with that book open, and you were writing in it, and you looked up, and you saw me, and you put your hand over the page."

※

"Number four." She stopped.

"Number four?"

"I have not got a number four."

Yan put the pen down. "I have got three. All three are from a building, on a Thursday."

"I have had them for a fortnight. I could have telephoned your office on the Friday."

"Why did you not, when you could have?"

"Because I did not want it to be over."

"Because I could not work out which of the three was the crime."

※

Dajie said, "Which one did you think was the crime?"

"All three!"

"When?"

"On the Friday, the Saturday and the Sunday." She said it evenly. "That is not a joke. I sat in a rented room in Dadukou for two years reading a man's paperwork.

That trained me to look at a thing and find the shape of it.

And every one of those three is the shape of you finding out what is in this building."

"I have not found out what is in this building."

"You did not find anything," said Yan. "That is the part that has been bothering me since Friday."

※

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I did find it!" She turned the folder round and put it in front of him.

It was forty-one sheets of paper. It was a schedule, made by an assessment company in July.

Dajie had seen it before, on the table in the flat, on the second day, with a man in a shirt standing over it.

"I found this on the Friday morning in the flat in about nine seconds," said Yan. "It was in the second drawer of the desk in the smaller room and it was under a television licence. Nobody had asked anybody to move a television licence."

"You are frightened of me, and of what I will do with it."

"I am."

It was the woman from the next table, who had come over to ask whether they were finished. Dajie said no without looking up, and she went away. Somebody put their hand on his arm. Dajie looked at it for a while.

"You have got this," he said.

"I made this," said Yan.

"You said you made it."

"I made this one!" She put a second sheet on top of it. "I have made nine of these in two years. Four went to the committee, three went to the office of the estimate company, two went to the tribunal. I have read two thousand four hundred pages of that procedure and I can find you the page in it that says what happens to a schedule when the household cannot produce one."

※

"And the answer is what?"

"Nothing!" She said it without any weight. "That is the answer and it took me fourteen months to find it. There is no clause. There is no office to appeal to. It simply becomes the case that a household had nothing to produce.

And a household that had nothing to produce is a household that agrees."

"But you had produced it."

"I had produced it and my uncle scraped it off a plate in nineteen ninety-six and did not tell his daughter for thirty years."

※

Dajie put the two sheets down on the table.

"You had it on the Friday."

"And you went into a flat on the ninth floor during a funeral, to look in a drawer in the smaller room."

"No."

"You did not."

"No. I have been in that flat about nine times since the funeral and the first time was the ninth of November, at two in the morning, with a key that my uncle took out of his own drawer before he gave it back."

※

"Then how did you get it."

"I photographed it." She did not say anything for a moment. "On the second night. At about eleven. I came down for something. The flat was open, because you had a box file out of it on the dining table.

"Number one. Thursday the sixth. Have I got that right?"

"You have got that right."

"You were on the seventh-floor landing for about two minutes. You came out of the seventh-floor flat."

Dajie did not move.

"I did not touch it. I took out my phone and I did a thing that took about nine seconds and I went back up the stairs." She picked the folder up again. "You had the whole of it out on a table. Forty-one sheets, eleven elastic bands. And I photographed it from the doorway.

I stood in a corridor with a dead man's daughter while a man in a corridor did something that was going to cost him about a year of his life."

※

"You have been protecting me."

"I have been collecting evidence," said Yan. "For eleven days. Because on the ninth of November, at two in the morning, a man I had been watching for five days came out of my father's flat with a box file under his arm.

He could not get into a car in the lane.

And he did not walk away either."

He said, "Where did you learn to do that."

"In an office, in an argument, for two years." She closed the folder. "It is not a skill. It is what happens when you are twenty-four and you have lost every single thing and somebody hands you a piece of paper."

※

Here is where Dajie did the thing that he has thought about more than anything else in that month.

In that time the room went the way it goes when two people who are both about to say something stop. He could have said anything. He had about nine seconds.

She was twenty-four years old. She had her hands flat on a folder. He looked at her.

And he noticed, in that second, that she had said the word *ma* four times in twenty minutes without appearing to know she was doing it. She had not raised her voice once.

She noticed him noticing.

"Do not!" she said.

"Do not what?"

"Do not do the face."

"What face."

"The face where a man has found something out about a person and is going to be gentle about it." She took her hands off the folder. "I did not tell you that so you could do that."

※

"You want to know why I came," said Yan.

"Yes."

"I came because my uncle went into that flat on the Friday morning and came out at half past eleven, and has not been able to speak about it since."

"I was in the corridor when he told my grandmother not to come in. And I heard my grandmother say: do not put it on the table."

She was not looking at the folder now.

"I came because on the eleventh of November a woman from an office asked me for a copy of the schedule. And I said I would bring it. And I have not brought it, and it has been eleven days, and she has rung four times."

"How much is it worth?"

"What?"

"The schedule. What is it worth?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

※

Yan put her head on one side.

"You are asking me the value of the object in the drawer of my dead father's flat."

"Yes."

"In the same way you asked my grandmother what she was frightened of."

"No. I am asking because you told me on the eighth floor that the first three of them were all the shape of a man finding out what is in this building, and you

have just told me that you did not come here to arrest anybody." Dajie put his hands on the table. "So I am asking what it is worth, and I am asking you because you are the one person in this street who knows both halves of the number."

※

Then she said, "Eleven households. Four hundred and thirty thousand, if the numbers in the second column hold." She looked at him for a few seconds.

"Two hundred and forty, if they use the third column. And the third column is what a household that has agreed gets."

"And how much of that is yours."

"None of it is mine."

"My father's name comes off the register when he died. His share is disputed by an uncle and a second wife in Longyou who has never been in the building." She said it without any bitterness at all, which was worse. "I am not trying to get money. I am trying to stop a street from being demolished on the basis of a piece of paper that eleven people signed and two people read."

※

"You have never been in the building."

"I was in it at fourteen, and at twenty, and once at a funeral in March when there were only nine of us." Yan put her thumb on the edge of the folder. "I am not from this street. I have never claimed to be. What I have done for two years is sit in a rented room and read."

"And your grandmother."

"My grandmother was born in the building behind it. She has lived in this one since 1981."

"She has been asked to sign nine forms since August. She has signed six of them and torn up three." She almost smiled. "She tears them up in front of the people. She is seventy-nine and she has been doing it since the summer and she does not think of it as resistance. She thinks of it as tidying."

※

The machine made its noise. Somebody at the next table laughed about something. Dajie said, "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to answer one question," said Yan. "And I have not asked it yet."

"I am not going to ask it until you have had a chance to think about it. I have watched you for nineteen days and I know that you cannot be asked a question you have not had time to sit down with."

"Ma"

"Luo Yan."

"Luo Yan."

※

"You can ask it?"

"Not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because you would do the face."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only one I have got."

She picked the folder up, put it under her arm, and stood.

He understood that the evening was over. It had been over for some time.

She had sat there for forty minutes to deliver three numbers and one photograph, and then to leave one question in the room.

"How long have I got, and how will I know?"

"Until I have watched you a bit longer." She got her coat off the back of the chair. "You are doing something at that yard that you were not doing in November. I have not worked out what it is."

"And I am not going to work it out by asking you. Because if I ask you, you will do the face again."

※

It was about forty minutes' walk and he did the whole of it, up through Daguankou and along the road with the trees. He walked back to Dadukou.

It was the middle of the week and there was nothing on it but traffic.

He got in about half past nine. His mother was not home, which was normal.

There was a bowl on the table with a cloth over it.

He lifted the cloth.

It was the knuckle of pork, and it was cold.

There was a bowl of rice beside it, and two chopsticks laid across.

He had not been asked to be home by any particular time for about nine years.

※

He put the cloth back. He sat down at the table and put his hands on the bowl for about a minute. He did not eat it.

Then he got up, went up the stairs, got into the bed, and lay there.

A woman who has spent two years in a rented room reading, and who has decided not to put him in front of any office yet. Three numbers. A photograph taken from a doorway. Here is what he had.

And underneath all of it was the thing he had not been able to get round since the eighth-floor landing.

He had been carrying it about for six days. It came up out of him at about ten o'clock at night in a stair-street in Banan, like something coming back up.

He had got to the bottom of it. That was the discovery of the evening and he was not pleased about it. *I do not know why I know that.*

He had written that line on a bus on the Monday, four days after the funeral, at about half past ten in the morning.

He had written it from four things an old woman said to him in a teahouse, over about four minutes of talking.

And on the Friday night of that same week, on the fourth-floor landing of a building in Jiangbei, a woman had leaned down thirty centimetres.

She had said a thing to him that nobody in that city knew.

Three days before she said it.

He had already written it down.

※

He got out of bed at about eleven and got the notebook and turned to the back and looked at the fourth line.

I do not know why I know that.

Then he turned to a page near the front of the book.

It was not the fourth line and it was not any of the four. It was the thing he had gone back and written on the Thursday.

It said, in the same small hand, and without a date:

And underneath it, that same Thursday, in slightly different handwriting, which meant he had written it twice at two different times: *Nobody has ever asked me.*

It is false. She was asked. She answered.

It is true in a different way.

Ask her.

※

The dog had been on the fourth-floor landing on the Friday night. It had been in the eighth-floor corridor on the Thursday. It had been on the steps of this building on the Monday evening. The dog was not there.

It had not been on any of them for four days, and he had not thought about it once.

※

On the Saturday morning he wrote down what had happened, in the order it had happened.

Somebody was going to have to have it written down, and he was the only one who was going to write it down.

He had put *I do not know why I know that* next to *nobody has ever asked me* and had drawn a line between them, and had looked at the line for several minutes, and had not written anything at the end of it.

Then, at the bottom of the page, in a different mood entirely, because his hand had been like that since Tuesday and would not stop: That was the whole of the Thursday.

Asked her about the price of a wall. 400. Plot not grave. Bei Shan Bei. Office shuts 2 Thursdays. Am I going to be able to pay for somebody. Is that the job. Is that any of it.

He looked at that for a while as well, and then he put the pen in his pocket and went and put the bowl in the sink, and washed it, and dried it, and put it back in the cupboard where it had been, and then went back upstairs.

He wrote it at the table with the cloth over the bowl. The cold pork was still in it. The bowl was still in the middle of the table.

Wed. Woman from office called about the schedule. 11 days. Did not bring it. 19 days of watching. Three numbers and one photograph. She is not trying to get money. Nobody is trying to get money. That is the whole thing. The woman from the office is going to ring a fifth time.

Then he took the pen out of it and put it in his pocket, and he did not write anything else that day or the next. Then he wrote one more line. He stopped there.

CHAPTER 17

Seventeen

He went back on the Wednesday, because the Wednesday was when she did it. And he had worked that out in about nine seconds on the Monday.

She was on the eighth-floor landing at about two in the afternoon with the tea things beside her. And she had not asked him to come. And he did not tell her he had come.

Dajie sat down on the floor, with his back against the wall, and put the gourd between his knees.

"Would you like me to go and get your nephew's number?"

Luo Shuxiang did not look at him.

"How do you know about the nephew."

"You have a jar of plums on Monday and not on Friday. The jar comes from Wuxi?"

"It comes from Wuxi."

"You have told nobody about the jar, because you have told nobody about anything since Thursday?"

"Nobody." He turned the gourd a quarter turn. "I would like to go and get his number."

※

"No."

"Then I will go and get it, and you can tell me not to have gone."

"You will not go."

"I will go."

"You will not!"

"And if I do?"

"Then I will not open the door."

"Have you decided that already, or have you just decided it?"

"I decided it on the Wednesday."

They sat with it for a few minutes.

Then Luo Shuxiang said: you will go.

"Then you will not come back to this landing again without my sending for you."

"And if I come back anyway?"

"Then I will not open the door."

"You said that already."

"I have said everything twice. You will find that out about me."

"And you will stand on a stair-street in a building with no funeral in it, like a man left in a hotel."

"Yes, ma."

"Do not say that."

"Yes, ma."

※

That is the thing he has never been able to put in an order. He went to Wuxi on the Saturday, which is a train, and then a bus. And then about four kilometres on foot. And he came back on the Sunday night with a telephone number written on the back of a receipt from a noodle shop in Wuxi, and he had a haircut. Because he had had one in the street outside the station for no reason at all. He went to Wuxi on the Saturday.

He did not tell anybody. He did not write it in the book.

He has said, to four people over four years, that he went to get a number for an old woman who had made a jar of plums.

Every one of those four people has said, *why.* Every one of them has got the same answer.

※

That is the thing about it, and Peng says the same thing about a different trade, and He Jie says it about hers. The escalation did not look like an escalation.

You do not decide to cross a line. You cross it on a Tuesday. On the Wednesday after that you cannot remember which side of it you were standing on.

By the Friday it has become a thing you do.

※

He did not tell Shuxiang about the hook. Not once. That is the fact that has kept him awake about the whole month. Here is what the nine days were.

It is also the reason this is not what everybody in that corridor thought it was going to be.

She talked about her son for a total of a few minutes across all of it. That is all. Four minutes in nine days to a man who has spent his life getting people to talk, and on the last of the eleven she said his name. Which was Luo Wenlong, and spelled it, and said the year. He sat on that landing eleven times in nine days.

The other thing is that he did not use any of it.

※

"You know what you are doing," said Yan, on the Monday.

They were outside the cemetery office in Bei Shan Bei at about ten past two on a Tuesday. Because he had gone to find out what a wall cost, and she had been there first.

"I am standing outside an office."

"You have been to Bei Shan Bei twice."

"Three times."

"You have written to the nephew."

"I have telephoned the nephew."

"Do not say that!"

"You got it on the Saturday afternoon, in the street, for no reason. And you are twenty-four, and you do not get a haircut for no reason."

※

Dajie said, "What am I doing?"

"You are becoming somebody they will send for."

"Have I?"

"You have."

"When did you decide that?"

"On the twenty-fourth. I have not told you that and you did not ask me, and if you had asked me I would have said the twenty-fourth." She turned round. "That is what this is. You came into this building on the sixth as a man who does the crying, and you have been here eleven times since, and every time somebody in this building has wanted a person who is good at an old woman, they have written your name down."

"Nobody has written my name down."

"You have written your own name down. Twice." She got her folder off the sill. "You wrote your name on a piece of paper and you gave it to a woman of seventy-nine."

※

She was right about all of it and he did not tell her one single thing. He had.

Here is what she did not know, and what he did not tell her, and what he has never told anybody.

The number he had written on the back of the receipt in Wuxi was not the nephew's.

※

He had telephoned the number four times from the payphone at the bottom of the stair-street.

On the fourth call somebody picked up and said *xie xie*, and then, after about a second, *nǐ shì shuí.* The Monday. The Wednesday. The Friday. The Sunday.

And he had put his hand over the receiver and stood there in a stair-street in Banan for a moment with his heart going like a man's who has run up forty-one steps.

And the man on the other end said, "I know who you are. My mother told me about you on Friday. She said you have got a way with old people and that you are not to be trusted with anything else." Then he said, "My name is Liu Dajie."

※

He has never told it to anybody except Peng, and Peng was told in a yard in Jiangbei in about four sentences and did not ask one follow-up. Which is the single most useful thing Peng has ever done for him. He did not tell that to Yan.

※

On the ninth of the eleven, Luo Shuxiang asked him a question, and he answered it. And it was the correct answer, and it was not true. The real escalation is this.

"Are you married."

"No."

"Have you anybody."

"I had a mother," said Dajie.

He said *had*.

※

She noticed in about two seconds. Because she was seventy-nine and had been listening to people not mean things for fifty years. He did not notice he had said it.

"You are saying it wrong," she said.

"I said it correctly."

"You said it wrong." She put the glass down on the sill. "Say it again and say it right."

"My mother is alive," said Dajie.

"Yes," said Luo Shuxiang. "And you are frightened."

"And you have found a way of talking about me where you do not have to say the word mother at all. And you have been doing it for nine days, and I have let you do it."

※

"I did not know I was doing it."

"That is not the part I am telling you."

"What is the part you are telling me."

She waited a moment before she answered.

"You are going to be asked to say something about me to somebody who is not me."

"You have spent nine days learning how to say things to me. You are going to walk in there and use it."

"And one day it is going to be said about a woman who is dead. And you will do it in the same voice, and you will not hear yourself."

※

※

He went up on the Friday of the second week with about nine things written in his head and none of them for her.

That is the discipline he had and it took eleven days to learn and he did not learn it from anybody.

You go up with a thing to get. That is what everybody does. You have found out what a woman wants, and now you are going to give it to her, and you have eleven days of it ready and they are all good.

He went up with nine things and he came down with none of them, twice out of three, and the third time he came down with nothing he had gone up for.

Peng asked him about it once, in a yard, in about nine words.

"Are you getting anything out of that landing."

"No."

"Then what are you doing."

"Listening."

"To what?"

"To how often she says my mother's name. Is that a job?"

"That is what I am doing."

On the following Wednesday she said it four times in about eleven minutes, and twice about the funeral and twice about the plum jar, and once when she told him that the nephew had telephoned her from Wuxi on the Sunday, which was the first she had said of the telephone. On the Friday she said it once.

He has said, to the four people who have asked him about Wuxi, that he went to get a number for an old woman who had made a jar of plums. He wrote nothing down on any of the eleven days.

That is the sentence he has, and it is a good one, and it has been in place for four years and it is the first thing that comes out and it has never once been tested, and he is not going to test it now. That is not what he went to Wuxi for.

Here is the ninth day.

"You will ask me a question," he said.

"I will not."

"You will. Not today. In about eleven days, or in about four months, or on a Thursday when nobody has said anything for an hour, and you will ask it, and I will get it right."

"And what if I do not ask it."

"Then I will have wasted eleven days on a stair-street in Banan, which I have, and I will do it again."

She looked at him for a while.

"You have had nine days to ask me one question," said Luo Shuxiang, "and you have not asked one, and you want me to tell you that I noticed."

"Yes."

"I noticed on the second day."

"Then why have you not asked me about it?"

"Because it is yours," she said, "and I have been seventy-nine years old long enough to know what a person is like when they have been given a thing to do."

On the ninth of the eleven he used the flat voice on purpose.

He did it because she asked him to. He said, *you were frightened of the hook*, in the register you use about a stranger in a newspaper, and it took two and a half seconds.

It was the best two and a half seconds of his life.

It was also, on that Tuesday afternoon on the eighth-floor landing of a stair-street in Banan, the single worst thing he has ever done, and he has never told anybody it was the same thing, and he has told four people it was the best thing he has ever done.

He went to Wuxi on the Saturday and came back on the Sunday with a number and a haircut.

He telephoned the payphone four times and on the fourth call a voice said, *nǐ shì shuí*, and he put his hand over the receiver and stood in a stair-street in Banan for about eleven seconds with his heart going like a man who has run up forty-one steps.

"My name is Liu Dajie!"

The man said, *wǒ māma gěi wǒ shuō guò nǐ. Tā shuō nǐ huì yǒu yī zhāng zuì lǎo rén de zuǐ.*

My mother has told me about you. She said you have got a mouth for old people.

He has never been able to get past the sentence about the mouth, and he has tried, and the four people he has told have all said the same thing, which is that he went to Wuxi for a telephone number, and he has said yes, and that has been the end of it for four years. That is the whole of the fourth call.

※

He asked Peng the question on the Tuesday, in the yard, by the binggui.

"Do you think I have become somebody."

Peng did not look up.

"No."

"You are sure?"

"I said no."

"You do not have to say that."

"I said no and I meant it." Peng went along the row checking the seals, which he did not need to check. "A person is somebody when other people start telephoning. That is the whole of it and it is measurable."

"And nobody has telephoned."

"Nobody has telephoned."

"Not one?"

"Not one."

"And that is not an accident."

"No." He moved on to the next one. "You have been going up there eleven times in nine days. Every one of those times somebody has thanked you. Not one of them has telephoned, and that is not an accident."

"What is it?"

"What is it, a piece of paper?"

"It is that you have not done the one thing that makes it stick." Peng came back along the row. "You have not said yes to anything."

※

"And what is the one thing."

"You have to be asked for it. Not by a woman on a landing. By somebody who needs you on a Thursday and cannot do it themselves."

"And then?"

"And then what, do I not go?"

"You go."

"Then what?"

"And then you cannot say yes, because you have got a shift." He picked up the rag. "And that is what makes it real."

"The ones who say yes straight away are the ones who end up being somebody for eleven months and then nothing at all."

"Yes."

"And they all tell you afterwards that nobody asked them."

"Every one of them." Peng did not look up. "It is the most reliable lie there is, and it is a lie men tell about themselves because the truth is that somebody asked and they said no."

"So nobody has asked me."

"Not yet."

"Do you think they will?"

Peng considered it for longer than the question deserved.

"You are asking me about a Wednesday."

"I am asking you about a Wednesday."

"I think somebody in that building is going to ask you in about eleven days," he said, "and I think you are going to say yes. And then there is going to be one

person in Chongqing who can do a thing nobody else can do, and that is a very bad position to be in at twenty-four."

※

That is the conversation, and Peng has never revised a word of it.

The only thing he has added is that he was wrong about the eleven days.

It was nine.

He got as far as about two. Then he put the light on and got the notebook out. He did not sleep that night.

He went to the back of it, where the five lines were, and he wrote the sixth.

And then he wrote under it. Because he had a pen and it was two o'clock in the morning and there was nothing else to do with a hand: *She said I would not hear myself.*

And then I wrote that.

※

On the Tuesday he asked Peng whether a man could be somebody without deciding to be somebody.

Peng put the tea down.

"You have been somebody since the sixth of November," he said.

"That is not what I asked."

"It is the answer." Peng did not look up from the trolley. "You will ask me this a third time in about eleven days, and I will give you the same answer."

"And on the third time you will not be asking me. You will be telling me."

※

He did not tell Yan any of it.

Two people have examined it who were in a position to. Neither of them put it the same way. That is the thing that has been examined most closely since.

He did not tell her because she had told him on the fourteenth of November that she would not ask him a question he had not had time to sit down with. And he took that as an instruction, and he obeyed it. And he obeyed it past the point where obedience was a way of not being asked.

※

※

On the Friday of the third week he went up and did not come down with anything, and on the Wednesday of the fourth week he went up and stayed forty minutes longer than he had ever stayed, and both of those were the same thing happening.

He learned that a landing works like a tab.

You do not pay into it. You pay into it, and the account goes up, and there is a day when somebody pays the whole thing back and it is more than they put in, and that is not because anybody was clever.

The old woman on the eighth floor of a stair-street in Banan had put eleven years into a landing and had been given, over the course of four days, an old man's escalators, a bicycle on the flat ground of an exhibition hall, a jar of plums from Wuxi, the fact of a sign somebody scraped off a plate in 1996, and a sentence about a hook on a barge that no living person in that city had said out loud before him.

She had put in four minutes in nine days.

He has said since that she was the cheapest person he ever worked for, and that he has never once said it in a way that was true.

※

Here is the whole of the arithmetic, and he did it on the stair-street at about one in the morning on the fourth week, and it took about nine minutes.

He gets nothing for it. That is not self-pity, it is the arrangement. There is no fee for sitting on a landing. There is no invoice at the end of a Thursday.

What he gets is that on the fourth week, in a yard in Jiangbei, a man who had been loading a truck asked him whether he would come on Wednesday.

That is all. That is the entire payment and it took eleven days and about four minutes of a woman's talking and he has spent the rest of his life being unable to say so to anybody.

At about four o'clock on the Tuesday he went up and he did the thing he had gone up to do.

She was on the landing. He sat down on the floor with his back against the wall.

She waited about two minutes.

"Go on," said Luo Shuxiang.

"You were not afraid of it."

"No."

"You never asked."

"No. I knew before the man on seven told me in September." She was looking at the window. "I have known since the ninth of November. About two in the morning."

"I came down, and there was a man on my brother's stairwell with a bag of my things in his hand."

※

"You are going to want to say it in that voice," she said. "So say it in that voice. Go on."

Dajie said, "You were frightened of the hook."

She did not look at him. She did not look at the window. She put one hand flat on the plastic chair beside her and she looked at her own hand. And she kept it there for a beat. Luo Shuxiang did not move.

Then she said, "How do you know about that."

※

"It does not matter."

"It matters to me."

"It does not matter," said Dajie, "because it is the second one and not the first."

She turned her head.

"Which is the first one."

※

"You will ask me a question," he said, "and I will get it right, and you will believe me."

"And then it will be a thing that has happened. And afterwards there will be four people in this building who think they know it."

"Four?"

"You. The man from the teahouse. A man in Shapingba who will not give his name. And me."

He looked at the landing.

"That is four, and there is nobody else, and none of us can prove anything!"

"That is not a coincidence, ma. That is how it works."

"I do not know why it works, and I am not going to stand here and pretend I have worked it out, because I have not."

※

Luo Shuxiang said, "You have been coming to this landing for eleven days and you have not asked me one question."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You are going to be asked to say something about me to somebody who is not me!"

"Because when I ask, you tell me," said Dajie, "and there is no version of me that can walk out of a conversation with you having not asked."

She looked at him.

"Say the sentence again," she said.

"Which one."

"The one about the hook. Say it again, and say it the way you would say it about somebody else."

※

He said it in the flat voice. He said it the way you would say it about a man you read about in a newspaper. And it took about two and a half seconds. And it was the best two and a half seconds of his life and it was completely worthless. Dajie said, "You were frightened of the hook."

The old woman on the eighth-floor landing of a stair-street in Banan said, "You are doing it."

"I am not doing anything."

"You are standing on a stair-street in the middle of the afternoon, doing a thing you practised on a man called Wei Asi in a car in Shapingba on a Friday." She turned her face away. "I am seventy-nine years old. I knew what that was by about the fourth day."

"And I let you do it, and I want you to understand that I knew."

"Then why did you let me."

"Because nobody has asked me anything since the sixth of September," said Luo Shuxiang.

※

That is the thing. He came down the nine flights on the Tuesday at about half past four with the gourd in his hand and his hand wet. And he was almost at the lobby when the dog came past him going the other way up, and it did not stop. And it did not follow him, and it went up. She did not say anything else that day.

Peng saw him at about six, in the yard, loading nothing, standing next to a binggui that did not need loading.

"You have been crying."

"I have been working."

"You have been crying and you have been on that landing for eleven days." Peng did not raise his voice. "What did she say to you?"

"Nothing."

"Then what did she tell you?"

Dajie looked at him.

"She told me she knew what I was by the fourth day," he said, "and that she let me do it."

Peng put his hands down.

"Right."

"Right?"

"Right," said Peng. "Because you have come down nine floors and told me the worst thing that has happened to you, and I have to decide now whether to say anything, and I am not going to."

"Why not?"

"Because there is nothing in my experience about this, and I have been doing this for twenty-two years."

CHAPTER 18

Eighteen

He Jie found out on the Monday at about eleven in the morning.

A woman in an office in Dadukou telephoned the shop to ask whether the company had been the last party to open the ninth-floor flat.

"She said it in a very particular way."

He Jie turned the telephone pad round.

"She said: we have a record that shows your night man had the building between ten and four on the Friday. And then she said, we are not asking you for anything. We are asking you whether the file is in the flat."

"And what did you tell her?"

"I told her I did not know what she meant."

"I know what you told her."

※

"You went back into that flat."

"You did not authorise it."

"Nobody in that building does not authorise it. That is not what happened."

He Jie put the receipt book down.

"Sit down!"

"I am sitting!"

"Then stop standing up inside your chair. What did you take?"

"Nothing."

"What did you take, and who told you where it was?"

※

Here is what He Jie had. And she had assembled it herself, in about forty minutes, out of nothing that was anybody's job.

A call-out sheet. He Jie's own, carbon, every job, every night, three years deep.

Two hundred and eighty yuan, Jiangbei, one flat, between ten and four, on the Friday. Dated the Monday, which meant the Monday after the funeral. Raised on the Monday, in on the Saturday.

A van. He Jie's van, because there are two vehicles on that funeral and only one of them is hers. And the driver's sheet says the van went eleven kilometres and came back eleven kilometres and did not stop anywhere else.

And a name.

※

"The tension bar?"

"Yes."

"You keep tension bars in the yard?"

"I keep nine. Two are mine. Seven belong to a man who does my steelwork and has never asked me for them back."

She had the list out.

"Two were on my sheet in that week. Both were signed out by the same man, on the same night, at twenty past eleven."

"Then it was you."

"It was me."

"Yes."

"You keep tension bars in the yard?"

"I keep nine of them. Two are mine and seven belong to a man who does my steelwork and who has never asked me for them back." She had the list out. "Two were on my sheet in that week. Both were signed out by the same man, on the same night, at twenty past eleven."

"Then it was you."

"It was me." She did not raise her voice. "It was me, and a man who works for me, and it was my yard and my van and my sheet."

"And the woman in Dadukou is right about every part of it. I have known since Tuesday morning. It is Wednesday, and you have known since Saturday night, and you have come to this yard eleven times."

※

"You are going to the police!"

"No."

"You should."

"No."

"You should."

"I am not going to the police and here is why." He Jie turned the sheet round so he could see it. "There is no entry on this sheet for the reason. There is no entry for why. There is a time and a flat and two men. The two men are mine. The flat is my client's.

And the file has gone out of it."

"That is not a reason."

"It is the whole of it!" She put her thumb on the line. "I go to the police, they write a file, and the file says that a night man opened a door that was not his."

"And in four months somebody from an office in another province reads that file and writes a word next to that flat. The word is a number. The number is not four hundred and thirty thousand."

※

"So what are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

She picked up her pen.

"I am going to do nothing, and I am going to do it for about a year, and you are going to keep working."

"For how long?"

"Until there is nothing left to do, or until somebody dies, whichever is sooner."

"That is not justice."

"That is not the word. That is a word for a court and there is no court."

"You are going to let him off!"

"Luo Changjiang is dead."

"Luo Changjiang is dead." He Jie put the pen down again. "There is no him. There are four people in that family. One has been in front of a notary twice

since August. One is twenty-four and cannot afford a lawyer. If I go to an office about a file, I am not protecting them. I am producing a document."

※

"You do not like me!"

"No."

"You have never liked me?"

"No. And you have never been frightened of me. Those two things are not connected."

"I would like to explain them to you. It is the only part of this I get paid to be good at."

"Explain them."

"No."

"You have never liked me!"

"No. And you have never been frightened of me. Those two things are not connected."

"And I would like to explain them to you, because it is the only part of this I get paid to be good at." She turned the chair round and sat down properly for the first time. "In eleven days you did one thing that was not yours to do. Everything else you did, you did standing up, in a corridor, with your hands behind your back, for two thousand eight hundred yuan a day.

And four hundred people did not have a single thing happen to them."

"I opened a door."

"You opened a door that a man of sixty-one was sitting in front of."

"That man is now the only person in that building who can say what is in that file. And he says it on Sunday, in a kitchen in Dadukou, in front of a woman, with her hands on it."

※

"And if she does not use it."

"Then it will sit in a drawer, and in about two years somebody will open a drawer." He Jie picked up her tea. Which had gone cold about an hour ago, and

drank it. "That is not a threat. It is the schedule of the thing that happens to a piece of paper when nobody uses it."

"You have thought about this a lot."

"I thought about it for forty minutes on the Monday."

She put the cup down.

"You have thought about it for eleven days. Do not tell me you have thought about it more than I have."

"How would I know?"

"You would know because you have been walking into this yard and asking me, and I have been sitting here drinking cold tea."

※

Here is the part he never forgave her for. And he never forgave her for it out loud either, which He Jie knows.

She did not sack him.

She did not sack him. And she did not pay him, and on the last morning he went in she gave him the day rate for the Friday, in cash, out of the tin. And she counted it out on the counter in front of Peng and Lu, which she had never done for anybody.

"Two thousand eight hundred," she said.

"I did three days."

"You did eleven days. You were not mine for eleven days. You were mine for three, and one of them was the funeral, and the funeral is at the standard rate whatever a man does in it." She put the note down. "Take it."

"It is not mine."

"It is not yours and it is not mine. It is the estate's, and I have the smallest number on that list that keeps it away from an argument." She wrote something on the slip. "And this is the address of a bookkeeper in Nan'an who does not come to this yard and does not know me."

※

"What do I say to him?"

"You do not say anything."

"You do not say anything." He Jie turned the page over and wrote on the back of it. "You say that your mother's name is Zhou Guifen. That she is a professional mourner in the Banan area. That she has been out of work for two years."

"Is that true?"

"It is all true and none of it is relevant and that is why it is the correct thing to write."

"Why?"

"Because a bookkeeper asks two questions," said He Jie, "and he will not ask the third one, and you want him on the second."

※

※

He went back on the Wednesday to the office in Nan'an with the address on a slip of paper.

The bookkeeper was a woman of about fifty called Lei. He Jie had told him one thing about her that was not on the paper.

"She will not remember you," He Jie had said. "That is the point of her. Do not try!"

※

The office was two rooms over a shop that did keys.

There was a fan on the ceiling and a calendar from a tyre company on the wall.

Lei took the slip and read it.

"Zhou Guifen."

"Yes."

"Relation?"

"She is my mother."

Lei wrote it down. She did not look up.

"How long has she done that work?"

"Thirty-eight years."

Lei wrote that down as well, and then she wrote a number, and then she said the second question.

"Is she still doing it?"

"No. Two years."

Lei's pen stopped.

Dajie watched her decide what to write.

It took her about two seconds, and he thought about a landing on the eighth floor and a woman of seventy-nine who had said, *I have been letting you do it.*

"She cannot come in to me?" said Lei.

"She cannot come in to anybody. She has not been able to make a sound in four years."

※

"Then what is the position."

"She can come in to a person. She can come in to a house. What she cannot do is stand at the side of a table for three days and do the thing she is for. That is what you would be paying her for."

Lei wrote that down.

It took her about a hundred and forty seconds to write it down and Dajie stood there for all of them.

"Is that a usual thing," said Lei, "for a woman of fifty-two?"

"It is not usual at all."

"Mm."

She did not ask the third question.

※

"Is the work enough?"

"The work is not enough for what you have just written down."

"Yes," said Lei. "I know that." She squared the paper up. "Are you looking for a bookkeeper, or are you looking for something else?"

Dajie did not answer that for long enough that she looked up.

"I am looking for a bookkeeper," he said.

"Then come back on Friday with the same name written the same way, and I will do it again for the same fee."

"And I will do it for the fee because you have told me about a woman who cannot speak, and nobody in this district has ever told me that before."

※

He came back on the Friday. It took ninety seconds.

On the Monday she telephoned to say that the address had a problem with it.

"What problem?"

"Nothing to do with the woman. It is the address. It is a building that is coming down and the post cannot find the street." A pause. "Is she still there?"

"Yes."

"Then I will do it by hand every month and post it," said Lei. "It is eleven minutes' walk further for me and it is not a problem."

※

He did not tell his mother.

That is the thing about the whole arrangement.

He told a stranger with a fan on the ceiling and a calendar from a tyre company. He did not tell his mother.

His mother is a person who counts a drawer every night at nine o'clock. A person like that does not need a bookkeeper. She needs somebody to lie to her once a month, and he was not going to do that either.

He has never worked out whether that was loyalty or cowardice. He has asked Yan once, and she said: those are the same thing, and the fact that you have had to ask means you have stopped pretending it is one of them.

He has never worked out whether that was loyalty or cowardice.

He has asked Yan once, and she said: those are the same thing, and the fact that you have had to ask means you have stopped pretending it is one of them.

※

He got the notice in the second week of December.

It was four pages, printed in an office in Dadukou, and it had eleven names on it.

The first name on it was Luo Wenlong, who had been dead since 1979.

The second was Luo Shuxiang.

The eleventh was Zhou Guifen. The column it was in was headed HOUSEHOLD, and there was a figure in the row for it.

Dajie stood in a stair-street in Banan on a Thursday afternoon with four pages in his hand and did not go up the stairs for about forty minutes.

He took it.

He said thank you, and she said nothing at all. He went out through the curtain over the door, into the yard.

The two refrigerated trucks were running. The sun was off the roof by about eleven metres.

The dog was on the wall.

※

At about four o'clock on the Sunday, Luo Yan came out of her grandmother's building with the folder under her arm, and found Dajie in the lane.

The dog was about nine feet behind him and it sat down when she passed, which it had not done before.

She did not stop.

She walked past him at about four feet and did not look round. And then she stopped about nine metres further on and came back.

"You have been to the yard."

"Yes."

"And she has paid you."

"Yes."

"How much."

"Three days."

Yan stood in the lane in the last of the light and did not say anything for a while.

"Did she ask you about the file."

"She asked me about the door."

"And you told her about the door."

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

※

"I said I do not know what she is talking about. She asked me a second time. I said it again."

"And then she told me about a bookkeeper in Nan'an."

Luo Yan put the folder down on the low wall.

"She is going to win," she said.

"I know."

"Not in a court. There is nothing to take a court." Yan straightened up. "She is going to win because she is the only person in this who is going to write anything down."

"Everything that gets written about that flat comes from her office and not from mine. In about a year there is going to be a piece of paper somewhere saying He Jie's company was in that building on the night."

"It will be true. It will be the only true thing anybody writes."

"Is that bad?"

"It is the worst thing that could happen. And she has done it on purpose."

"And she did it by doing nothing."

"You have to understand that she has been doing this for twenty-six years. There are about nine families in this district who know to leave their mouths shut in November and wait until the twelfth."

※

"Do you know her?"

"No."

"You live four kilometres from her yard."

"Distance has nothing to do with it. She has been doing this since before I was born."

Yan picked the folder up.

"You do not get her by living near her. You get her by being her client. We have never been her client."

"My father did not use her. He used a man with a van and a driver and no invoice. That is why she is asking me about a door instead of asking him about one."

※

"You have been in that flat."

"Nine times."

"Taking what out of it."

"Nothing out of it." She said it flatly and immediately, in the same tone she used for the number on the second of March, and for eleven children in a studio, and for a man she has never met who died on a job. "I have been in it to photograph one thing. The one thing is on paper, and the paper is in a drawer in my own flat."

"And if you would like me to tell you what is in it, I am not going to."

"I am not asking what is in it."

"Then what are you asking."

Dajie stood in the lane and looked at the folder under her arm.

"I am asking why you have not asked me one question in three weeks."

※

Luo Yan did not answer that for a moment.

"Because you would have told me," she said. "That is not a technique. Everybody thinks it is a technique and it is not. It is that a man like you cannot hold a thing and not hand it over.

I have needed about four weeks to work that out, and I have been waiting for you to notice that you would have."

"And you have not asked."

"I have one question and I am not spending it on this street." She put her hand flat on the folder the way she had done in the coffee shop. "I asked myself in October whether to spend it in October or in December. I wrote December on the back of a sheet."

"And then I found out what was in that flat, and the date moved."

"It moved to when."

"That is not for you."

※

She went off up the steps. Which is the only way out of that lane, and she went slowly. And she stopped at the third one. Which is the one everybody stops at, the chair.

"You went to Wuxi."

Dajie said, "Yes."

"You went there for her."

"No."

"Then you went there for you."

"And you will not tell me what for, and I am not asking."

"I worked that out in about two seconds."

"And you are the only man I have ever met who does that and does not know he does it."

She went up.

※

He got the notebook out at about half past six and sat on the wall with the gourd.

He wrote at the back, where the six lines were.

He Jie paid me for three days and told me nothing and I have not forgiven her for either.

That was the first line.

She is going to win. Yan says so. Not in a court. Because she writes things down and everybody else does not.

She has been doing it since before Yan was born and nine families know to keep their mouths shut in November.

Then he stopped for about a minute.

Then he wrote:

She did not sack me and she made me take the money in front of Peng and Lu and she said it was the smallest number on the list.

That is the whole of her and I am not going to say one more word about her to anybody.

※

At about seven the dog came along the wall and sat down at the end of it, four feet away, and looked at the notebook.

Dajie put his hand over the page.

"You have done this before," he said to it. "In November. In a corridor."

The dog did not move.

"It is a woman again," said Dajie. "It is always a woman."

The dog looked at the notebook for a few seconds and then lay down in the warm place where the wall had been in the sun. And it stayed there for about two hours. Which was the longest any animal in that district had ever stayed with him on purpose.

CHAPTER 19

Nineteen

She caught them on the Tuesday, in the kitchen, at about eleven at night, with the notice on the table.

She had read it. That was the first thing and it took him a second to understand that. Because he had put it on the table at about six and left it there for five hours on the assumption that a woman who cannot speak in a room cannot read at a table either. And it turned out that she had read it at about seven and had sat in the room with it for four hours before he came in, and had decided to wait.

"You have had that on the table since six."

"Yes."

"Four hours."

"Yes."

※

Not the eleventh. She had been down to the eleventh and had come back up. She put her finger on the fourth name.

Her finger was about two centimetres long and she did not have much of it.

"This one," said Zhou Guifen.

"That is the estate manager's sister-in-law. I do not know her."

"That is the woman from the survey in September who could not read the form."

Dajie said, "You have never met her."

"I have never met her."

"Then how do you know she could not read the form."

"Because there is a mark in the margin of that page. It is in her own hand, and it is in English."

"She has asked the man twice to put it in Chinese. He has not done it twice."

She moved her finger.

"And because I have been doing this for thirty-eight years, and there is exactly one thing that everybody does. They put their name at the bottom instead of signing."

※

"And which one of them is your name at the bottom."

"Mine is signed."

"Then which one did you sign."

"There is no signature on the notice, Ma. It is printed."

"Then which one is your handwriting."

Dajie looked at the four pages.

"None of them."

※

It was a small brass one, on a wooden board, about the length of a pencil. And it had been on that kitchen table for as long as he could remember. And there had been a time when the sound of it coming up the stairs at about eleven at night was the last thing that happened in that house on a day.

It had been the last thing for about nineteen years. Then in November it stopped, and the house got very quiet, and that was the actual reason she had stopped. The whistle went on the table.

It had been the last thing for about nineteen years. Then in November it stopped, and the house got very quiet. And that was the actual reason she had stopped.

It had been the last thing for about nineteen years. And then in November it stopped, and the house got very quiet. And that was the actual reason she had stopped.

Zhou Guifen put it in front of herself.

That is the part he could not get past for about two years. She put it in front of her. She did not blow it.

She looked at it, and she did not put her mouth on it, and after a while she said: which house hired you.

※

"You know what I do."

"I know what you do."

"Then you know it was not a house. It was He Jie's."

"It was not a house."

"It was a flat on the ninth floor of a building that is coming down, and the office of a company that does funerals."

"I did it for two thousand eight hundred yuan a day. Cash. Out of a tin."

"I did not open the door of a house. I opened the door of a building, and there was nobody asleep in it."

"Nobody at home," said his mother. "That is not the same question."

※

"I know it is not."

"Then answer the one I asked."

"It was not a house."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only answer there is, Ma, I am telling you there was no house."

She waited.

Then she said: there was a house in this family in nineteen ninety-eight.

"It was on Wanzhou Lu. It had a red door. It cost more than the bookkeeper in Nan'an costs me every month."

"Your grandfather put his hand on the doorframe the day it was finished, and he said: zhe shi wo men jia."

※

"You have never said that."

"You have never asked me."

"I have asked you about the job."

"You have asked me whether the job was enough." She turned the whistle a quarter turn. "It is never enough. In nineteen ninety-eight it was not enough either. Everybody thinks it was enough in nineteen ninety-eight."

※

"And what is your answer."

"You have given me my answer."

"You have given me nothing. You have told me about a door in Wanzhou Lu."

"I have told you that there is a door and that I put it in the form."

※

"I did not open a door, Ma."

"You did not open that door."

"There was nobody in it."

"There was nobody at home in about four hundred flats."

"And one of them had a woman of seventy-nine on a balcony with a blue chair beside her. She was in her own flat. She was not asleep."

"And you did not know that, and you went anyway."

Dajie did not answer that.

She waited a moment.

"There," said his mother.

※

"I did not know."

"You did not know." She put the whistle back on the board. "That is the part I want and I want you to hear me say that it is the part I want. Not that you did it. That you did it and did not know."

"Ma."

"I am going to do a job on the Thursday and a job on the Friday, for a family in Dazu, at eleven hundred yuan for two days."

She stood up.

"It will be the last job I do, and the only one I have done in two years. And I am going to do it on the Thursday and the Friday."

"And then the bookkeeper is going to come out on the first of the month. And that is all of it."

※

He had spent about nine months of that winter believing he had been forgiven by her. She was not angry.

It turned out, in about eleven seconds, that being forgiven had never been on the table.

She was not angry. She had done thirty-eight years of a job where the correct thing is to walk into a room of people who have been destroyed and make their grief administrable for a fee. And she had learned the whole of it from her own mother who had done it before her. And she knew exactly what a man who has done a bad thing for two thousand eight hundred yuan a day looks like. Because she had been that man's wife.

She got the bag out.

She got the bag out at about ten past eleven at night.

She put the blue layer on the table, opened the fold-out, and did the thing where she counts the pockets.

※

"What are you doing?"

"I am checking the pockets."

"Why now?"

"Because it is Tuesday and there is a job on Thursday and I have not checked a bag since August."

"There are nine pockets."

"There were nine pockets in the case I bought in nineteen eighty-nine."

"What is in the pockets?"

"Scissors. A comb. A needle. Tape. A pen that does not work. A box of pins. A card with a telephone number on it from about 2009. Two of them."

"How many times have you told somebody that list?"

"Never." She went down the row. "And I am checking them every time. There was a year I lost a pair of scissors in a house in Wulong and did not find them for two days."

"I did not lose them. Somebody took them. And I have not told that story to anybody since."

She went down the row again.

"They are all there."

"Then she is ready."

"Do you want me to come."

"No."

"Ma!"

"No."

"Then I will be on the wall at five."

"You will be asleep."

"Ma."

"You will be asleep and I will be gone and the bus does not wait!"

※

"She has been ready for two years. The white is ready." Zhou Guifen folded the blue layer over the white. "Do you know what the difference is between the white and the blue?"

"No."

"The blue is the outside. You wear it on the ground. The white is the inside, that is the one nobody sees, and you wear the white when you are doing it properly."

Dajie looked at the fold.

"You are going to wear the white."

"I am going to wear the white."

※

"And if somebody comes out of that room and says something to you?"

"Then they will say something to me."

"And you will not stop?"

"I will not stop."

"Even if it is your son?"

"It will not be my son."

"Then they will say something to me, and I will stand where I am standing, and I will do what I am doing."

"It will not be about them. They will not know that for a few minutes."

"And after nine minutes they will not be able to remember anything I said anyway."

"You have never told me that."

"You have never asked me how it is done."

"Who taught you the three sentences?"

"Her."

"Grandmother?"

"Zhou Mian."

"And her mother?"

"Her mother was a different kind."

"What does that mean."

"It means we do not have the whole of it in this family."

"And the part we have came down from a woman in Shibin whose name I do not know."

※

"How is it done?"

Zhou Guifen stopped folding.

"You are asking me that at ten past eleven at night."

"I am asking you that at ten past eleven at night."

"Why tonight."

"Because you have not asked me in nineteen years," said his mother, "and I am not going to wait for a better night."

"You put your hand on a shoulder," she said, "and you say one thing, and the one thing is never about the dead. And then you say the second thing. And by the fourth thing they are crying properly, and the room comes with them, and about eleven people who were managing perfectly well have lost control."

"Who taught you that?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters to me."

"Then you have just been told."

※

She put the bag down on the table and she did not answer for about a minute.

Then she said the three things.

"Don't you worry about it."

"I'll take care of it."

"Go and sit down."

She said them flatly, in standard Mandarin, at speed, into a kitchen in Banan at about ten past eleven at night.

It is the only register she has never used for anything in her life.

※

Dajie pulled a chair out from under the table and got onto it backwards, with his arms folded along the top rail.

It is what he had done at that table when he was about nine. And he had not done it since.

He had heard her do it about four hundred times from four rows back. He had heard it in corridors and stairwells, and in one case in a car park in Changshou at two in the morning in the rain.

He had never heard it from the other side.

"It is different," he said.

"No."

"It is completely different."

"It is the same and you are a different man hearing it," said Zhou Guifen. "That is all that has changed. And you should be careful about it."

"Because the day you think a thing is different because you have heard it from the other side is the day you stop being any good at it."

※

She picked up the bag.

"I will be in Shapingba at half past five on the Thursday morning."

"Which bus."

"You will not be up. You will be asleep, and I will be gone. The bus is the one from the Dazu road at twenty past five, and it does not wait."

"I will be up."

"You will be asleep." She put the bag under her arm. "You have been drinking in a stair-street in Banan at two in the morning on about five nights a week since November. And I can hear you come up the stairs.

"Tonight is the eleventh night, and tonight you came up at eleven, and you did not have a bag. So you have not been working, which means the noise is not work.""

※

"I was on the street."

"I know you were on the street. You do not know that I know you were on the street, and we will keep it like that.

"Because it is the only thing in this house that is going well.""

She got to the door and stopped.

"You have not asked me about the fourth name."

"I have."

"You have not asked me about the fourth name."

"Then who is the fourth name, Ma!"

"That is not the question you should have asked."

"You will work out what the right question was in about four years. And when you work it out you are going to come and find me, and I am going to tell you that you worked it out."

※

※

There is nothing in this chapter about how good she was. Because there is nothing in the book about how good she was. And that is the shape of the whole thing. She did the job.

The woman who taught it is the only person in Chongqing who cannot tell you whether she is any good. She has never been asked. She would not answer if she were.

She did the job on the Thursday and the Friday in Dazu for eleven hundred yuan for two days, and she wore the white. And she did the three things about

nine hundred times in two days. And she did them in standard Mandarin at speed.

Nobody in that family in Dazu knew what she was.

※

The Dazu family was a man of fifty-four and a wife and two daughters and a photograph on a stand. And the flat was above a shop, and the shop shut at six.

The elder daughter said, at about four o'clock on the Thursday, in standard Mandarin, to a woman of fifty-two standing at the side of the table:

"Why are you standing like that!"

And Zhou Guifen said: "How should I stand?"

And the daughter said, "Like you live here."

And Zhou Guifen said, "I live in Banan."

And the daughter said, "No, I mean like you are sorry."

And Zhou Guifen said, "Which of us?"

And the daughter looked at her.

And Zhou Guifen said: "That is not a question anybody has asked me in four years."

※

That was the whole arrangement and neither of them discussed it once. He was in Banan on the Thursday and the Friday with a phone that did not ring, and at about ten past four on the Thursday he sat on the wall outside his own building with the gourd. And the dog came along and lay down at the end of the wall in the warm place. He was not there.

At about nine on the Friday night the door opened and his mother came in with the bag.

She put it on the table and did not take her coat off for ten minutes.

She had made a noise. He could hear that she had made a noise, in the same way you can hear a bus has changed gear.

"There was a family," she said.

"I know."

"They had a shop that shuts at six."

"I know."

"They asked me why I was standing like that."

※

"And what did you say."

"I said I live in Banan."

He looked at her.

"It is the first thing I have said in four years that was about the work," said his mother. "In four years I have not said one word to one person about what I do for a living."

"And I said it to a girl of about nineteen in a flat above a shop in Dazu."

"Because she asked me a question, and I am not built to let a question sit there."

※

"You did not have to tell me."

"I am telling you because you are the only one who would understand what it cost." She hung the coat up. "And because I am going to be doing it again. There is going to be more than one."

"In about four months somebody in this district is going to tell me that a woman of fifty-two came and did a funeral in Dahu."

"That is going to be a strange thing to be. I am telling you now so that you know about it first."

"Will they find out?"

"They will find out in about four months, from a woman in a market in Dahu who will not be able to help it."

※

"Is it good?"

She looked at him.

"Is what good?"

"The work. Is it still good."

Zhou Guifen stood in the kitchen of a building in Banan at about ten past nine on a Friday night in December with her coat on.

"It is exactly the same," she said.

※

He wrote it down that night, at the back, under the six lines and the four lines about He Jie.

Ma did the job. Dazu. Thursday and Friday. 1,100 for two days. She asked them why she was standing like that.

I asked her if it was still good and she said it was exactly the same. And she had her coat on. Nobody knows. Nobody will ever know.

Somebody in this district is going to find out in about four months from a woman in a market in Dahu who will not be able to help it.

He put the pen down and then he picked it up again and wrote one more line. And it was the only line in that notebook that he ever crossed out.

I want to do it. I want to do it and I know exactly what I am saying.

※

He did not go back.

He went back to the yard on the Wednesday for about nine days. Because there was a job in Shapingba on the Thursday and Peng needed a fourth man and Peng asked him and he said yes.

On the Thursday morning he stood at the side of a man of sixty-eight's table with his hands behind his back for eleven hours.

He did not cry. He did not speak to the family. Peng put him on the tea, and he carried it.

At about four o'clock the man's sister came out of the smaller room and stood about four feet from him.

She said, in the dialect: are you the one who is going to do the crying?

"No," said Dajie.

"Then why are you here."

"I am at the back."

And she went back in.

※

That is the first time anybody has ever asked him that and got the correct answer, and it was a stranger. And she was annoyed, and he did not explain it.

He has thought about it more than he has thought about anything else in that winter.

He has said, four times, to four people who were not there: if I had said yes I would have got it.

That is true. He would have got it, and it would have worked. And it would have been in a voice he has never had to use in a room. There is nothing in forty years of his mother's trade that tells him what he would have done with it.

※

The gourd went down the stairs at about eleven that night and got past the third landing before he noticed.

There is a step at the third landing in that stair-street about four centimetres high, worn smooth by about nine thousand pairs of feet over about forty years. And a plastic gourd does not stop on it.

He went down nine steps and turned round and had to go back up for a broom.

He has thought about that more than anything else in that winter too. And he has never been able to explain why, and Yan has told him exactly why, and he has not believed her.

"It is not the gourd," she said. "You have been telling people about the gourd because you cannot say that a man of sixty-eight died on a Thursday and his sister asked you a question and you were glad."

※

"Do you want to know what you would have been good at?"

"No."

"You have asked me that three times in five weeks, and you do not want to know it."

"Those two things are the same thing, and I am going to say it out loud once and then never again."

"Yan."

"You would have been the best one in the city inside two years. And that is the whole reason you are on a wall in Banan at eleven o'clock at night instead of in a flat in Dadukou with eleven children and a teacher."

She got up off the wall.

"And I am not saying it to be cruel. I am saying it because there is a woman in that building who is seventy-nine years old and who has spent four months with a man on a landing.

She has not laughed once. She is the only person either of us has ever met who wanted you for that."

I want to do it. I want to do it and I know exactly what I am saying.

There are twenty-nine steps in that house and he has counted them since he was six. She went up the stairs.

On the seventeenth she stopped.

"Zhou Guifen."

"Yes."

"That notice is four pages."

"Yes."

"It is in a plastic folder in the drawer with the string on it."

"Yes."

"And you have read all four pages."

"I have read all four pages twice, and I have checked the figures."

"One of them is wrong by about four hundred yuan, and it is the wrong way."

※

He was still at the kitchen table at about ten past eleven at night with a whistle on a board in front of him.

He had been told not to blow it. He did not blow it.

Then, at about eleven o'clock, he picked it up and blew it. And it made a noise about four notes long.

It is the only time in the book that it is played. It is played by the wrong person, in an empty kitchen, at the wrong hour of the morning. Nobody hears it except a dog asleep on the wall outside.

She went up the last twelve steps.

CHAPTER 20

Twenty

The book lives in the office under the counter. And it is not a spreadsheet, and He Jie will not let anybody else touch it.

Dajie had seen it about nine times in three weeks and had never been in the room when it was open.

It is a hardback exercise book. It is about four centimetres thick and the corners have gone. The spine has been taped twice, once with sellotape and once with the tape they use on the binggui seals.

It is a list of the dead.

※

"Every one?"

"Every one."

"Every one since two thousand and four."

"That is twenty-one years."

"That is twenty-one years."

He Jie had the receipt book open and was not writing in it.

"Do you want to know what it is for?"

"You have never told me."

"Has anybody asked?"

"Has anybody asked?"

"Nobody has asked."

"Neither has anybody else, and I have had four men in this yard for nine years and three of them thought it was a price list." She turned a page round and put it on the counter. And it was four hundred names in about nine different hands, and most of them were not hers.

※

"It is not the order?"

"It is not the order. It is a name, a date, an address, and a person who was in the room." She put her finger on the column. "Not who paid. Who was in the room."

"How many people are in a room?"

"Forty. Sixty on a big one." She did not look up. "Somebody has to know who was there. Not for me. For the family, in about eleven years, when they want to know who their father stood next to.

They will not ask the funeral company, because they will not have the number. They will ask one person, and that person will not remember either."

※

"And you remember?"

"I remember because I write it down. That is the entire trick and there is nothing else to it." She closed the exercise book. "It is not a gift. Anybody could do it. They do not do it because at about the fourth year it stops being a thing you want to do."

※

Dajie had worked in that yard for about three weeks and had stood at the side of eleven tables.

He knew that because Peng had the same count. They had compared it once at the end of a day in November, for no reason, the way men compare things.

He had never once looked at the book.

※

"Can I see the addresses!"

"No."

"Can I see the street!"

"No."

"Can I see the door numbers!"

He Jie looked at him for about three seconds.

"You are going to keep asking in a different order until you get to the one that matters. And I am going to keep saying no in a different order."

She put the pen down.

"We are going to find out which of us has more patience. I have got a book to close at half past four."

※

He did not ask again.

He did not need to. He had been in that yard eleven times standing at a table with his hands behind his back. And he knew the layout of that building the way everybody knows it now. And there were about nine doors in it, and he had a notebook.

He did not go and get it in front of her.

※

Here is what he wrote out that night at the table, in the hand he used for the four lines. And it is in the front of the notebook and not at the back.

Zhou Guifen has never read the front of that notebook and never will.

11 tables. 11 addresses. Ask which streets.

He wrote down what he could get without asking anybody.

Nine of the eleven were in the north of the district, in the flat part, in buildings like that one.

One was in Banan.

One was on the ninth floor of a stair-street in Jiangbei. And the address line had three names on it and two of them were crossed out. And the third was in a different ink. And it was not He Jie's hand.

※

He got it out of Peng on the Wednesday. And he did not have to do anything clever.

They were in the yard loading a van, and Peng said, without being asked, "You have been going at her about the book."

"Everybody has been going at her about the book?"

"Nobody has been going at her about the book. I have been in that yard nine years." Peng put the strap down. "You want to know how many of the eleven are yours?"

"Yes."

"Eleven out of eleven." Peng did not look up. "And the ninth floor is on the list twice. There were two in that flat. One died in the March and one died in the September, and the September one was the job."

※

"So everybody in that building has had somebody die?"

"Everybody in that building has had somebody die, and He Jie has stood in the room for all of it." Peng picked the strap up again. "Do you know what that building is?"

"A building that is coming down."

"It is the most reliable address in this city for that company." He got the strap over the door and shut it. "Nine flats, and in five years there has been a death in eight of them. In two of those the family came to this yard because they were told to. One of those did not come because they were told not to."

"Who tells them not to."

"Somebody with a number on a piece of paper," said Peng. "And everybody in that building knows about this yard, and about that book, and about which of them has been in it."

"Not one of them has ever said the word funeral to He Jie in the street."

※

He got the list on the Friday from the one place it was not locked. It was the back of a carbon pad in the office, on a Sunday, when nobody was there, and he did not take anything.

There were forty-one entries for the last four months.

He read the addresses and he read the column headed *in the room*.

He counted how many of the names in that column were in the stair-street in Jiangbei.

Nine.

※

Nine households out of eleven, and every one of them in a column headed with a word about family.

And then there was a tenth, which was not in the building at all. It was in a different column, at the bottom, on its own page, in a hand that was not He Jie's and not any of her four men.

It was a page with one line on it. And the line was dated about four months ago. And it said, in the third column, the number Dajie had been reading for three weeks without knowing what it was.

It said a number of days.

※

He found the boy from the seventh floor at about half past nine that night in the lane. And it took him twenty minutes to explain why. And the boy listened to all of it with his hands in his pockets.

"You have been through her book."

"He Jie's book."

"Then that is a different thing."

"Yes."

The boy took his hands out of his pockets.

"You want to know what it is in the book for," he said.

"And it is not about him, and not about you, and not about the valuation."

"It is that in February she buried a man on this street who she had stood next to in nineteen ninety-eight. She was in the trade. He was a little boy at the front in a white collar."

※

"What was his name?"

"Xiang. He was the brother of the woman who teaches the children." He looked at the step. "He has got four children. Two of them have been in this yard since they were babies."

"Then she knows all of them?"

"She has buried somebody from about sixty houses in this district. She knows the name of every one." He put his hands back in. "My father used to say that a funeral company is the only business in this city that writes down the name of every person it walks past."

"He said it like it was a funny thing to say about a company. He was not funny."

※

"What is he?"

"He was on the estate side. He was in the office. He was the one who told us to put the tables back after the ninth of November." The boy looked at Dajie. "So yes. Everybody in this building is on our list. And so is everybody who died in any of them. And so are about nine hundred other people in this district.

Their families do not know they are on it. They could not find out, unless they came to the yard and asked the woman who cannot speak."

※

Dajie said, "How does anybody find out whether somebody is on the list?"

"They do not."

"Then how does anybody?"

"You come and ask for a number," said the boy.

"You give her the number and she gives you the room. That is how people find out who was standing next to their father."

"She has never charged anybody for it. There is no form. That is why half of them have never come."

※

He went back up the steps after that and sat on the wall for a while.

The whole of the arithmetic of the last seven weeks went round again and came out different.

That is what happens when one number has been wrong the whole time.

He had thought the three days had cost a file. A file that was a piece of paper.

They had cost about nine households the knowledge that somebody in that building had been standing in the room while their own father died. Because the woman who would have been able to tell them was holding a hardback exercise book under a counter and would not let anybody else touch it, and because the only person in the district who could have found her was a drunk who had been sent up a stairwell and put the wrong question to a room.

※

Here is what he wrote at the front of the book that week. And it is the only thing he ever wrote in the front.

She has been to 900 houses in this district. I have been to 11 tables. I thought I was the one doing the work.

He did not cross it out. He wanted somebody to find it.

※

On the Wednesday morning he asked He Jie one question in the yard.

It was the first question he had ever asked her that was not about money.

He said, "How many of the four hundred are mine?"

She looked at him.

"You have been in here three weeks."

"Yes."

"You have worked out that it is four hundred. You have worked out that eleven of them are yours."

"You have worked out that nine of those eleven are in one building, and that the page at the bottom is not yours."

She closed the book. "Who worked it out?"

"Peng did not."

"Then what do you want to know?"

※

Dajie said, "How many of the four hundred are still alive."

That was not the question he had come with.

He Jie put the book down on the counter and put both hands flat on it.

He had seen her do that once before, in the corridor, with the sheet.

"All of them?"

"All of them," she said.

"Yes."

"All of them. Four hundred, and about nine hundred children. And about ninety of the children are not."

She did not move her hands.

"I know the name and the year and the room of every one of those ninety."
"In three weeks you have asked me what the file was worth, and what the flat was worth, and whether I would sack you."

"And today you have asked me the only question anybody has ever asked me about that book."

"What did you expect."

※

"I expected money questions until one of you died." She took her hands off the book. "You are the first man in nine years who has asked me what the book is for. You are the first person who has asked me what happens to the rest of them."

"Is that not the same question?"

"That is not remotely the same question," said He Jie.

"You will not find out what the difference is for about two years. By then it will not matter."

"That is the correct order of things, and I have never been able to get anybody else to do it in the correct order."

※

She did not say anything else about it.

She went back to the receipt book, and Dajie went and loaded a van, and Peng watched both of them do that.

Later he said, "You asked her the wrong one again."

"I know."

"You asked her the right one. Then you got frightened of the answer and asked her a second one to make it smaller."

※

"Yes."

"Do not do it twice!" Peng picked up his end. "She gives you one of those a year. I have been in that yard nine years and I have had one."

※

The boy from the seventh floor was called He Zheng and he was twenty-three.

He was the only person in that district who had said out loud, to a stranger on a stair-street at half past nine at night, what that book was for.

He said it like it was a funny thing to say about a company.

His father had said it like that too. He was not funny, and he was dead. And it was in the book, in He Jie's own hand, on a page of its own.

※

He Jie's son is on the roster.

That is the cost, and it is the whole of the cost. And it took Dajie about four months to find it out and about nine seconds to stop talking once he had.

Her son was called He Liang. He was twenty-nine. He is in the book on a page of its own, in her own hand, dated the eleventh of March 2020. And the column headed *in the room* has thirty-one names in it. And the first name in that column is hers.

She did the funeral herself.

That is the thing Dajie has never been able to get past. And he has said to four people since that it is the only fact about anybody in that district he has never been able to make into a story.

She did the funeral herself. She was the professional for her own son, in her own yard, with four of her own men. And she counted the drawer at nine o'clock that night.

※

He asked her about it once, about four months later. And he asked it badly, in a yard, with a van running.

He said, "Why did you write him in?"

And He Jie said, "Because I have written in every person this company has ever walked past. I am not going to have the book be wrong."

Then she said one more thing. And she was not looking at him, and she has never repeated it. And it is not in this chapter.

※

What is in this chapter is the number.

Four hundred names in that book. Ninety of them children. One of them is hers.

And there is a thing that happened on the Wednesday afternoon that Dajie did not notice at the time and has never been able to stop noticing since.

Peng said a name. Not He Liang. A client in Dahu, a woman of eighty-one. And he said her name in a sentence about the rota, and He Jie answered him. And it was a normal sentence about a normal week.

And Dajie heard her voice change on one syllable.

One. Not the sentence. Not the name. One syllable, about a tenth of a second, in the middle of an ordinary answer about a Thursday.

He did not know what he had heard until about a year later, in a shop, when a woman behind a counter did the same thing about a grandson, and then he knew. And he stood in that shop with a basket in his hand and did not buy anything.

※

He loaded the van on the Wednesday and said nothing to anybody about the book.

At about half past four Peng found him behind the shed with the gourd in his hand and nothing in front of him.

"You have worked it out?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Say it."

"Her son is in the book."

"He is." Peng put his hands in his pockets. "And now you know what she is."

※

Dajie said, "She is the only person in this district who has done the thing I do. And done it for her own."

"She is."

"And she did it anyway?"

"She did it anyway," said Peng.

"And she has done four hundred since. And she counts a drawer at nine o'clock every night."

"There is no version of that woman who can tell you how she did it. And there is no version of you who is ever going to be able to ask her."

"Watch me!"

"Do not!"

"Peng."

"Do not do it." Peng took his hands out of his pockets. "Not this month. She has a client in Dahu on the eleventh. Nobody in that yard has said the word Liang out loud since March 2020."

"And if you say it in the next four weeks she will not take you off the rota, and she will not shout."

"Then what will she do?"

"She will simply stop being in the room you are in," said Peng.

"And you will not notice for about a year."

※

Dajie stood at the side of the table on the Thursday and the Friday and did not say anything to anybody.

On the Friday night he wrote one line at the front of the notebook, where his mother does not read. And he did not cross it out.

She did her own son and counted the drawer at nine.

He looked at it for a while.

Then he put the pen down and sat in a stair-street in Banan at about eleven o'clock at night with a plastic gourd on the floor next to him. And the dog came along the wall and lay down at the end of it. And he did not say anything to it either.

CHAPTER 21

Twenty-One

The second notebook was a school exercise book with a green cover and forty-eight pages, and Youcai had bought it on the ninth of November at a stationer's in Shapingba. And he had started it on the eleventh.

Dajie found out about it on a Thursday in the middle of December, in a wonton shop. Because Youcai put it on the table.

"You have been writing them down!"

"I have been writing them down."

"Since when?"

"Since the eleventh."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"It is Thursday."

"You have been carrying it for five weeks and I have eaten in front of you about nine times."

"Eleven."

※

The cover said the price and the shop and nothing else.

Inside, in the neat hand, there were about a hundred and forty lines.

Every one of them was something Dajie had said out loud in a corridor in Jiangbei over three days in November.

"How many?"

"A hundred and thirty-one."

"Say that again!"

"A hundred and thirty-one."

"And in how long?"

"Nine days."

"That is a hundred and thirty-one things in nine days," said Youcai. "You said about fourteen a day. I have got eleven of the days. I have not got the Friday and I have not got the Sunday."

※

Dajie turned a page.

"Four men in a corridor is not a funeral detail. It is a fact. It is a fact that walks up and down and looks like a man." Said to me, second night, on the fourth-floor landing, about 11.40. That is Peng's line and Dajie said it two days later in Peng's voice.

He looked up.

"Is that mine?"

"That is not mine. That is Peng's. You said it in his voice two days later, and I have written it under your name, and I am not going to change it."

"You have written a line under my name that is a man's line."

"Yes."

"That is not accurate."

"It is not accurate," said Youcai. "It is what happened."

※

He turned another page.

"Most men do it because they are frightened of the door and not because they can see it." Said to Qiu, in the corridor, third night. He wrote it down. He had a pen.

"The tea gives them somewhere to put their faces." This is Peng's. Dajie said it at 4am on the 9th and Peng had said it first on the 7th. See note.

"Do not ever do it in front of the family." Said to me at 3am on the 9th, about the counting. I have not done it in front of the family.

※

"There is a note."

"There are about forty notes."

"On this one."

Youcai looked at the page.

"That one is a lie that turned out to be useful," he said. "You told me at three in the morning that a man should never count in front of a family. You had been counting in front of that family for three days."

"And I did not tell you until the Friday, because I did not want to argue with a man at three in the morning."

※

Dajie went back to the front.

The first line in the book was on the first page and it was not a line at all. It was four words.

He was not drunk.

Underneath it, in the same hand: *He Jie. 5th November. Yard. 7.05am.*

"He Jie said that about me."

"He Jie said that about you before you had done anything."

"Then why have you written it first."

"Because it is the first thing in this notebook that anybody said about you that was true," said Youcai.

"And because it was said in a yard and it was not paid for. And because I did not know at the time that I was going to have a book."

※

"You did not know you were going to have a book."

"I did not know I was going to have a book on the fifth. I knew on the ninth."

"On the ninth."

"On the ninth I stood in a corridor for nine hours and watched a man who cannot stop talking walk up and down a landing."

"And I understood two things. The first is that you were never going to write any of it down."

"And the second."

"The second is that in about four years somebody is going to ask what happened in that building."

"And there is nobody in it who is going to be able to answer."

※

That is the whole of why the book exists. And he said it in a wonton shop in about ninety seconds.

Dajie did not ask him anything else until he had eaten the soup.

Then he said, "Did you think I would mind."

"No."

"You did not ask me."

"I did not ask you because you would have said no," said Youcai. "You would have said no. Then you would have made a speech about it, and it would have been a good speech."

"And it would have gone in the book."

※

"Can I read it all."

"You can read it all. It is your material."

"It is not my material."

"It is your material. I have transcribed it and I have not invented it. There are three lines in there that are Peng's, and four that are He Jie's, and they have got a mark next to them." He turned the bowl round. "Everything unmarked is you."

※

Dajie read it for about forty minutes.

He read the first eleven pages standing up, with the book flat on the table and one hand on either side of it. Which is how a man reads something he does not want to sit down for.

Then he sat down.

Here is what the book does, and it is the only mechanical thing in this novel.

A hundred and thirty-one lines said out loud over nine days, in a corridor, by a drunk, do not read the way they sounded. On the page they are shorter and flatter and they are worth less. The room is gone. The forty people are gone. The hand that was on the shoulder is gone, and what is left is a man making remarks in an empty exercise book in a neat hand.

Dajie said that out loud.

"Is it as good on the page?"

"No."

"Much worse!"

"Much worse." Youcai drank his soup. "That is correct and it is the reason I did it. If it read well on the page, it would not be evidence of anything."

※

"Evidence of what."

"You will find out in about four years," said Youcai.

"And I am not going to tell you now, because if I tell you now you will hear it as a compliment."

"And what is it?"

"It is not a compliment."

"Say it anyway."

※

Youcai put the bowl down.

"A hundred and thirty-one lines said by a man standing in a corridor over nine days," he said.

"And the first time one of them is written down is by a stranger with a green school exercise book, two days after the funeral, in an office in Shapingba. Because he could not think what else to do with his hands."

"That is what it is."

"That is what it is."

"And if nobody ever reads it?"

※

"Then it does not matter," said Youcai. "There is a hundred and thirty-one of these things and there is no archive and there is no office and there is no file."

"In about thirty years the only person who will have a copy is a man of fifty-five with a green exercise book in a drawer, and he will have forgotten what half of them are about."

"That is the most depressing thing you have ever said."

"It is the least depressing thing I have ever said." Youcai put the book back in his inside pocket and buttoned it. "You have not understood the arithmetic. I have got a hundred and thirty-one of these and there is no archive. Every other trade in this city keeps a book. The man who did the steelwork kept a book. The man who did the survey kept a book. Your mother kept a book and she has not got it any more."

"And you have got one."

"I have got one and I am not a company and I am not an office and I am not paid for it." He stood up. "That is the entire difference between me and everybody else in this book."

※

※

He asked Youcai to read four of them out loud.

That is the thing he has never been able to explain to anybody, including himself. And he has tried about nine times.

"I want to hear one in your voice."

"Why?"

"Because I have been saying them for a month and I have got no idea what they sound like."

Youcai read four. He read them in the flat voice, at a normal volume, at a table in a wonton shop.

The first one was about the door. The second was about the tea and the faces. The third was the one about being at the back of things. Dajie had said it to a man at a crematorium in Dadukou and had forgotten about it entirely.

And the fourth was the sentence from the first week, the one about picking up somebody who has not put anything down yet.

※

Dajie put his spoon down.

"Say the fourth one again."

Youcai said it again.

"That is not what I said."

"That is what you said."

"That is a sentence. That is a whole sentence. I said that standing on a stairwell at about four in the afternoon with the light off and I was crying."

"I know."

"Then why is it in the book like that."

※

"Because that is what a notebook is for," said Youcai. "If I had written down that you were crying, then in about four years it would be a story about a man who cried. If I write down the sentence, then in about four years it is a sentence."

"That is not what happened."

"It is exactly what happened. You said a thing at four in the afternoon in a stairwell. That is what happened. The rest of it was you."

※

"Do not put down what I felt."

"I have not put down one single thing you felt and I am not going to." Youcai turned the page back. "There are a hundred and thirty-one entries in this book and there is not one word in it about how anybody felt, including me. That is the only rule I have got. I have not broken it once in five weeks, and I am not going to break it for the best one."

※

Dajie looked at the page for a while.

"Then it is not a record."

"It is a record of what was said."

"That is not a record of anything."

"It is a record of the only part that can be checked," said Youcai. "If somebody in four years asks me whether you were any good. And I say yes, then I have told them about me. If somebody asks me whether you were any good. And I hand them a hundred and thirty-one sentences and a date, then I have told them about you.

And it is up to them. And I am not in it at all."

"And if they read it and decide I was not."

"Then they will have decided that on the evidence," said Youcai.

"Which is the only correct way to decide it. And which is why I am not going to tell you which four I have marked wrong."

※

Dajie walked him to the monorail.

At the bottom of the steps Youcai stopped.

"There is a thing I have not told you."

"Say it, then."

"Not here."

"Then where?"

"At the bottom."

"I have written down the wrong one four times." He had his hands in his pockets and was not looking at the track. "There are four lines in that book that you said, and I have put a mark next to them as if they were Peng's or He Jie's. They are yours. I have done it on purpose."

"Why."

"Because they are the four best ones, and I do not want you reading them in about four years and thinking you were starting to believe it."

"Believing what."

"That there was a morning when you were a person who could."

※

Dajie did not say anything.

"I am going to take the note out," said Youcai. "I am not going to take it out. That is the whole of what I have been trying to say for four minutes and I have said it badly."

"Take it out!"

"No."

"Then do what you like!"

"I am going to leave the wrong mark in," said Youcai.

"In about four years I am going to show you the page and tell you what I did. You will be angry for about a day."

"And then it will be the only thing in the whole winter that you know for certain happened."

※

※

There was one more thing, and Dajie asked it at the bottom of the steps before the monorail came.

He had not asked it in five weeks.

He had written it down in the flat on the second night. Because Youcai had said it across a table in a noodle shop and had not said it again.

"Your mother?"

Youcai put his hands in his pockets.

"What about her?"

"What about her."

"The valve."

※

"It is the nineteenth of January," said Youcai. "At ten."

"That is a month."

"Thirty-six days."

"And the money."

"I have got eighty-four and I need two hundred and ten." He said all of it in the flat voice, at a normal volume, at the bottom of a flight of steps, the way he had said the eulogy. "She has been moved from fourth on the list to seventh. Two people above her died and one paid a private doctor and went ahead. Seventh is about four months on a Tuesday, and the nineteenth is the fourth Tuesday."

※

"You have not told anybody."

"I have told you."

"You told me in a noodle shop in October."

"That was not the same thing. That was a customer." He looked at the track. "This is the first time you have asked."

※

Dajie did not say anything to that.

"Am I asking you for anything?" said Youcai. "I want that said in the open at the bottom of a flight of steps. I am not asking, and I have never asked, and I am not going to ask in January."

"I know."

"You do not know. You think you know, and what you mean is that I have not asked yet."

※

"What are you going to do?"

"Are you sure you want to know that?"

"I am sure."

"There is a man in Jiangbei who buys hospital paper at about eleven percent of what it is worth on the Tuesday and sells it on the Friday," said Youcai. "It is legal. It is not legal in the way that it is written down, and it is legal."

"And you are going to do that?"

"I am going to do that in about two weeks. I am going to lose about nineteen thousand yuan on the whole thing. It is going to take eighty-four thousand and turn it into sixty-odd, and it will be enough to get her the Tuesday, and then there will be nothing left at all."

※

Dajie stood at the bottom of those steps for a while.

"You should have taken the sixty."

"I know."

"You had it in your hand. You gave it back to a man of sixty-one on the seventh-floor landing because he asked you to."

"I know that as well."

"Then why?"

"Do you want the true answer or the good one?"

"The true one."

"They are the same answer and you are not going to like it."

※

Youcai looked at the track for a moment.

"Because in about four years somebody is going to ask what happened in that building," he said. "I am the only person in it who writes things down. And if the first line in my book says that I took sixty thousand yuan out of a dead man's flat, then there is no second line."

He took his hands out of his pockets.

"And there is going to be a second line. That is the whole of it. I did not do it because of the second line."

※

The monorail came and he got on it. And it went into the building and out the other side.

Dajie stood at the bottom of the steps.

He had not asked which four.

He has said since that he knew exactly which four. And that he has never once checked. And that he is not going to. And that on the day Youcai shows him the page, he is going to look at it and say the same thing he said at the bottom of those steps.

Nothing.

※

He got the gourd out of the bag and walked back.

At the bottom of his own stair-street the dog was on the wall. And it stood up when he came past, which it had not done for about three weeks.

"You came back?"

The dog did not do anything.

"You have been about a week."

The dog lay down again.

"And you are not going to tell me where," said Dajie.

"That is the whole of what everybody in this city does to me. One of these days one of you is going to answer a question."

He went up the stairs. The dog did not follow him. And it did not stay either. By the time he had got to the third landing there was nothing on that wall but the worn place where it had been.

CHAPTER 22

Twenty-Two

The notices went up on the morning of the tenth of January, between half past six and seven. And they went up on nine doors in that building and they were not the same notice that had been going round since August.

Dajie saw them because he was on the fourth-floor landing at about a quarter to seven.

He had no reason to be there, and he has never explained it to anybody.

Nine doors. A single sheet of A4 in a plastic sleeve, tied to the handle with red plastic string. It is the same string they use on the binggui.

Twelve lines of text, and a date at the bottom. And a number in the corner in red, and the number was 60.

※

He read it on the fourth floor and then he went up and read it on the fifth and on the sixth. And then he went down to the ground and found the woman with the fish shop taking hers off the door.

"What does it say?"

"It says sixty hours."

"Sixty hours from when?"

"From last night at seven." She folded it in half and put it in her pocket. "So from this afternoon at about four o'clock, and then it is the fourteenth, and the fourteenth is the day he said."

※

"Which he."

"You know which he."

※

By nine o'clock Yan was in the lane with the folder and a telephone in her hand and she was not standing still.

"Have you got yours?"

"I have not got a flat."

"Nine households. Nine notices." She was reading off the phone. "It is the tenth today. Sixty hours from seven last night is ten o'clock on the thirteenth. The demolition order is dated the fifteenth.

There are two days in between that nobody in that building has been told what they are for."

※

"Which two days?"

"That is the question I have been ringing about for an hour and forty minutes." She put the telephone away. "There are two days in between where the building is empty according to the order and full according to the street, and nothing happens, and nobody is responsible, and at the end of it the building comes down and eleven households are dispersed across three districts and there is no list of who went where."

"How long have you had that?"

"About four months."

※

They stood in the lane.

"Have you told your grandmother?"

"No."

"You have not told her?"

"She is seventy-nine and she has torn up three of these already and she knows exactly what it means," said Yan. "If I tell her, she will do something, and I do not know what she will do."

"For four months the only thing I have been able to control is what she is told."

"And the fifth."

"There is no fifth."

"There is a fifth," said Dajie. "You do not know what she will do."

"You have been not knowing it since the summer. Today it has got a date on it."

※

Yan looked at the building.

"There are nine of these on nine doors. There are about forty people in that building and about nineteen of them can read a notice."

"The rest are going to be told by somebody this afternoon. That is what a building is. It is not a list. It is forty people telling each other."

※

He went up to the eighth floor at about ten.

Luo Shuxiang had hers on the table. She had taken it off the door and folded it and put it on the table under the glass. And she was doing something with a bowl.

※

"You have read it?"

"I have read it."

"What are you doing?"

"I am doing the plums."

"Why?"

"Because they take five days and this is the tenth."

※

There was a jar on the table and about four kilos of plums in a bowl and a bag of salt and a bag of sugar. And she had been at it since about eight.

"They take five days."

"The building is going on the fifteenth."

"Then they will be ready," said Luo Shuxiang. "Five days is the twelfth. That is three days before."

※

Dajie sat down on the floor with his back against the wall.

"You are going to be out of this flat."

"I have been going out of this flat since August."

"This one has got a number on it."

"Every one of them has had a number on it. This one has got a red number and a smaller number of hours.

And in about four months a young man with a folder will stand in this room and explain to me that I could not tell the difference between the two."

※

"She has been reading them since the summer."

"I know she has been reading them since the summer."

"You know a lot," said Luo Shuxiang.

"I have been on this landing since November."

※

She put a plum down.

"Sit where you are and do not say anything for a minute."

※

He sat where he was and did not say anything for a minute.

At the end of the minute she said, "Your mother is a mourner."

"Yes."

"She has been out of work for two years and she has gone back to it."

"Yes."

"She went back in December." She picked the plum up again. "There is a woman in Dazu who has told four people. One of them is a woman in this street who came here in 1971 and has known me for fifty years."

"She told me on Sunday."

※

"How did you know she was mine."

"Because everybody in this city knows what your mother is," said Luo Shuxiang.

"And I am seventy-nine. I have been in this street since 1981."

"And a man of twenty-four does not stand at the side of a table with his hands behind his back unless somebody taught him how to do it. It was not a temple."

※

"Do you want to know anything about it?"

"No."

"You have asked nothing for four months?"

"No."

"You have asked nothing for four months and you told me off about it in November."

※

She put the plum in the jar.

"There is a difference," she said, "between a man who does not ask because he is working and a man who does not ask because he is frightened of the answer."

"I have had four months of the first one and about two days of the second one."

"And it started on about the fourth of January."

※

Dajie did not say anything.

"I am not going to ask you what the thing is on the fourth of January," she said, "and you are not going to tell me."

"And in about four months one of us is going to be wrong about which of those was the right thing."

※

He went down at about eleven.

At the bottom of the stairs the man from the estate office was in the lobby with a clipboard and two women. And there was a table with a stack of forms on it and a pen on a string. And there was a queue of four people, and the queue was not moving.

Dajie stood about nine feet away and watched.

The man from the estate office was saying the same four sentences to each person in the queue and then handing them a pen.

The first of the four went up, was given the form, and did not sign it.

The second went up, was given the form, and signed it in about nine seconds.

The third went up and signed it. Then he asked a question, and was told that the answer to the question was in the fourth paragraph.

The fourth was the woman with the fish shop. And she stood in front of the table for about two minutes and did not take the pen, and then took it. And said something that Dajie did not hear, and put it down on the table without signing anything, and walked out past him.

※

On her way past she said, to nobody, in the dialect: that one has been sat on that chair for three days, and he has got a badge from a company that has never been in this building.

※

Dajie got the number off Yan on the Thursday. And he got it because she had photographed it and printed it. And it took her about ninety seconds to find the file.

It was a single page with forty-one columns and sixty-one rows. And there was a name at the top of the fifth column. And the name was a man of fifty-three.

"You have had this since Monday."

"I have had it since the second week of December."

"Then why have you not done anything."

※

Yan put the page down on the wall and put her hand flat on it.

"Because there is nothing on this page that is against the law," she said. "Every column is a lawful column. There is no line on it that says anything that anybody would take into a room."

"Then what is it?"

"It is a percentage."

"A percentage of what?"

"Of this street. Of the whole street. It is not a measure of anything you could stand in."

※

She put her finger on the fourth column, and the bottom-left cell of it. And there was a figure in it and the figure was a decimal point and two digits.

"Three point four."

"That is this street as of Monday at nine. On the thirty-first of December it was two point nine. On the fifteenth of October it was two point one."

"That means he is winning?"

"That means he has been winning since October. The street is up one point three percent, which is about eleven households, which is that building." Yan took her hand off the page. "That is the whole of the file. There is no person in it. There is a decimal point and two digits. And eleven people.

And he is going to get the rest of the way there by the end of the month, and the thing he is going to do to get there is the fifteenth."

※

"So what do we do?"

"I have been asking that since the second week of December."

"You have not asked me."

※

Yan looked at him.

"No," she said. "I have not asked you. And I am going to. Not today.

And I want you to know that I know exactly how long I have been not asking you."

※

※

Director Qiu came to the building on the Wednesday afternoon with a bag of oranges. And he came up the stairs on foot. And he came to the fourth floor first.

He did not come about the notices.

He stood in the corridor of the fourth floor with the bag in his hand and talked to the woman with the fish shop for a quarter of an hour.

Dajie was on the stairs and heard all of it, the way you hear everything on a stairwell.

"Have you got the form?"

"I have got the form."

"And have you got anybody who can help you with it?"

"I have got my daughter."

"Then it is the second paragraph that matters, and not the fourth."

※

She asked him what happened if she did not sign it.

And Qiu said, in the dialect, at the top of his ordinary range. So that the whole landing could hear it, whether he meant it or not.

"Madam, if you do not sign it, then there is a column in an office in Dadukou that is going to have a number in it that I cannot explain. I am not going to be able to explain it and nobody is going to ask me to."

And she said, "And then what."

And he said, "And then nothing at all. Nothing happens. You will live here until the fifteenth and then you will not live here."

※

Dajie came round the landing at about that point.

Qiu saw him. Qiu did not stop talking, and did not lower the bag, and did not appear to be sorry.

"There is another one of them on the eighth," said the woman.

"I know there is."

"Then why are you down here?"

"Because I have been up there three times since August and I am not going up a fourth time," said Qiu.

※

Dajie said, "Why not!"

Qiu turned round.

"Because she has torn up three of mine. She tore them up in front of two of my colleagues and a man from the media."

"And I am fifty-three years old."

"That is not a reason."

"That is the whole reason." He had the bag in one hand and his folder in the other and he did not put either of them down. "I am not going to go up there and be told in front of a landing that I am a nice man. I have been told that by four households since the summer.

And it is the only thing anybody in this street has ever said to me that I cannot answer."

※

"You have got a number in that folder."

"I have got about nine numbers in that folder."

"Is three point four in it?"

Qiu did not say anything for a moment.

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody told me. It is on a page and the page was photographed and I have read it."

※

And Qiu did something then, and Dajie has thought about it for four years. And he still does not know whether it was a performance or the most honest thing anybody does in this book.

He put the bag of oranges down on the windowsill of the fourth-floor corridor.

Then he opened the folder and turned it round and held it out, at arm's length, at a landing, in front of a woman with a fish shop and a man of twenty-four. So that either of them could have read anything on it that they wanted to.

"Go on," he said. "Look at it."

※

Dajie looked at it.

It was four pages stapled. There was a column of addresses on the left and a column of surnames in the middle and a column of dates on the right, and at the top of the second page there was a row of four numbers and the last of them was three point four. And there was a fifth cell with nothing in it, and it was waiting.

"That is all of it."

"That is all of it."

"That is four pages and a decimal point."

"That is nineteen years of my life and a decimal point," said Qiu.

"And if you can find one thing in it that is against the law, I would like you to say it out loud in this corridor. So that I am not the only person who has ever stood here and looked at it."

※

Dajie could not.

He stood on a landing with a stapled folder held out at arm's length and read four pages twice.

There was nothing in them.

Every address was lawful. Every date was a lawful date. It was a street office recording that a street was changing. Which is what a street office is for.

"You know what I think," said Dajie.

"I do not."

"I think that the worst thing anybody has done to this street was done on a piece of paper that I cannot be angry about."

※

Qiu closed the folder and put it under his arm and picked the oranges back up.

"Then we agree," he said.

"And you will notice that it has not cost me anything to agree with you. That is because I am not the one who has to move."

He went up the stairs past Dajie, and he stopped on the sixth step.

"I am going to be here on the fourteenth and I am going to be here on the fifteenth," he said. "If the dog is sick, do not bring it into the corridor."

"How do you know about the dog."

"Everybody in the district knows about the dog. It has been on that wall since November." He went up another three steps. "And I have got a dog, and I am not going to help you with it, and I hope it is all right."

※

He went up to the ninth floor and stood outside the flat for about a minute and did not knock.

Then he came back down.

※

He went back to Banan that night.

The dog was on the wall and the dog was wrong and he knew it before he was within four metres of it.

It was sitting in the wrong place. It was sitting with its back to the street and its head down, and it was not moving.

When he got to about a metre it did not lift its head, and when he crouched down it was not asleep.

It was about four kilos lighter than the last time he had seen it. There was something wrong with one eye.

And it let him put a hand on its ribs, which it had never once allowed anybody to do.

"You have been somewhere and you have come back wrong!"

It did not do anything.

"You have been somewhere and you have come back wrong."

He carried it up the twenty-nine steps because it would not walk them.

It did not struggle and it did not make a sound. It lay on the kitchen floor for about an hour while he got rice and a bowl and water. And it did not eat the rice.

At about ten o'clock his mother came in and stood in the doorway and looked at it for a few seconds.

"That dog has been hit!"

"It has not been hit."

"Has it not?"

"Look at it."

"I am looking at it."

"That dog has been hit. It was hit about three weeks ago and it has been somewhere since." Zhou Guifen put her bag down. "There is a vet on Wanzhou Lu with a woman in it who does not charge for a dog. Take it in the morning."

"You are telling me to take a dog to a vet?"

"I am telling you that you have carried it up twenty-nine steps and put rice down for it. And you are standing in a kitchen at ten o'clock at night looking at it instead of doing anything else." She picked the bag up again. "And I am not going to watch that for four days."

She went up.

At about a quarter to eleven the dog got up, went to the door, and stood in front of it.

It did not scratch. It did not make a sound. It did not lie down.

"It is the third floor!"

It did not move.

"What is on the third floor?"

"Nothing. A step. A chair."

"There is nothing on the third floor. There is a step and a chair and nothing else on it. You have been asleep on that wall for four months and it is ten o'clock at night."

It did not move.

He took it to the vet on Wanzhou Lu on the morning of the eleventh. And the woman did not charge him. And she kept it for nine days.

She said three things about it, and Dajie has remembered all three for four years.

She said the eye would come back. And the weight would not come back all the way.

She said the leg was set wrong. And had been set wrong by somebody, and not by a road.

And she said, at the door, with her hand on the frame, that a dog which has been hit and has walked home from wherever it was hit will not cross that road again. And that if it does, it is because somebody is on the other side.

Dajie did not tell her who was on the other side.

There was nobody on the other side. That is the part.

He was not on the other side of any road in January. He was in a kitchen in Banan at ten past midnight on the tenth, with his hand on a dog's back. And he could not make it lie down.

He has told four people, in the spring, that the dog was a dog that had been hit. And had come back wrong, and was never right again.

That part is true. He tells it well.

What he does not tell them is where he was on the night it went wrong. Who he was sitting next to. What he had in his pocket. How many hours were running out.

He was in a kitchen in Banan at ten past midnight on the tenth of January, sitting on the floor next to a door, with his hand on a dog's back.

He was trying to make a dog lie down that would not lie down.

And four kilometres away there were nine notices on nine doors. There was a decimal point at three point four on a page in his inside pocket. There were sixty hours running out.

The dog went to the vet on Wanzhou Lu in the morning. It came back on the twenty-first. It was never right again.

That is where the dog is on the fifteenth. Alive.

It is alive for four more months.

And every person who has ever been told a story about a road and a truck by a man standing in a kitchen in Banan on the tenth of January has been told that story before it happened.

CHAPTER 23

Twenty-Three

He went back to the teahouse on the eleventh of January, in the afternoon.

Tao Shi was at the end of the room by the light and did not look up.

Dajie sat down at the table and did not say anything for about twenty minutes.

Then Tao Shi said, "You have been working?"

"I have been working."

"You have been working for a woman in Jiangbei. And you have come back to this room in the same coat you came in when you were fifteen."

※

"Where did you hear it?"

"Nobody in this room has come to hear me sing since the third of December. The third of December is the day your name went round the district." Tao Shi turned his leaves over. "There is a woman in Dahu who does not know your name. There are four people in Dazu who do. And there is a man from an assessment company in Shapingba who has been in here twice in three weeks.

He has been asking a question about a corridor."

"What question?"

"He asked whether the company had a man on the ninth floor for three days who was not on the roster." He put the leaves down. "I told him yes."

※

"You told him yes?"

"I told him yes!"

"You do not know anything about it."

"I know that a man who does not have a job went to Jiangbei for nine days, and came back with a gourd and nine hundred yuan, and did not say what he had done," said Tao Shi. "And that is the same as knowing. You have been in this city long enough to know it is the same as knowing."

※

Dajie did not say anything for a while.

Then he said, "Say the thing."

"Which thing?"

"The thing you have been not saying since I came in." He turned the gourd a quarter turn on the table. "You have got the leaves out and you have not sung. You have looked at the door eleven times."

"There is something in this room that you have decided to tell me, and you have been waiting twenty minutes for a reason not to."

※

Tao Shi leaned back.

"Your mother has been sending me people."

※

"What?"

"Since the fourth of December. She has sent me four. Not to me, I do not do the crying. She has sent them here to ask me about you. And I have told every one of them the same thing.

That I do not know you well. That you are a drunk. That they should ask somebody else."

※

Dajie put the gourd down.

"Four people?"

"Four. A woman from Dahu. A man from Wulong. A man from Banan. And a woman from Cuntan who does not live in this city and was told to come here."

"And she sent them?"

"She sent them."

"Why would she send them here."

"Because it is the only place in this city where a person can be told what you are by a man who has known you since you were fifteen," said Tao Shi.

"And because she does not want to tell them herself."

※

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"Because she cannot speak."

"She has not made a sound in four years, and she has been making noises at people on a telephone for six weeks."

He looked up. "She is not sending them here for the information. She is sending them here so that somebody in this city says it out loud about her son in front of a stranger.

And it will not be her."

※

Dajie sat with that for about a minute.

"She has never once told me that."

"She has never once told you that she taught you either."

※

"How long have you known what she does?"

"I have known what she does since 1989."

"Then why have you never said it?"

"Because she asked me not to." Tao Shi pushed the tin across the table. "In 1989. In this room. She came in with a child of about four and sat where you are sitting.

And she told me that she wanted to make sure nobody in this street ever said a word to you about what she did for a living."

※

"And you agreed?"

"I agreed," said Tao Shi.

"I have kept it for thirty-six years. You are the fourth person I have broken it for, and the first three were not you."

※

Dajie looked at the tin.

"Who were the other three?"

"A man from the district office in about 1994 who wanted to know whether her trade was licensed. A woman from a newspaper in 2009 who had a photograph of her at a funeral in Banan, and could not understand what she was doing in it. And a man of about thirty in 2016, who came in here asking where he could find the woman who had cried at his mother's funeral in 1998."

"And what did you tell them?"

"I told the man in 2016 exactly where she lives," said Tao Shi.

"And he went. And she would not see him. She has never told me why and I have never asked."

※

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because she cannot any more."

※

There was a thing that happened in that room that Dajie has never described properly and has never tried to.

He has said, twice, that Tao Shi said that sentence. And then went to the end of the room where the light was.

And sang four lines of a mountain song about a woman going down the river steps at night with a lamp she did not need.

And that he listened to it with his eyes shut the way he always did. And that when it finished he understood that the four lines were the same four lines.

And that he was hearing them from the same chair for the first time.

※

"Do you want the rest of it?"

"Yes."

"Your mother can cry," said Tao Shi.

"Yes."

"She can stand in a room and make forty people fall down."

"And she taught you how to do it over about nine years, by standing in the front four rows, and never telling you that was what she was doing."

"I know that."

"You do not know the rest of it."

※

"Say it."

"Every man who does that for money has one thing in him that is his," said Tao Shi. "It is what he uses. And your mother's is that she is a woman of fifty-two with no sons of her own in the room. She walks in and she is immediately somebody's aunt, and that is what forty years bought her."

"And what is mine."

"You have not got one."

※

"I have got one."

"You have got the whole of your mother's and it is yours because she gave it to you." He came back to the table. "And there is a version of you that retires at fifty-eight with no house and no wife and a bag with nine pockets."

"It is standing in front of you. You have been looking at it since November, and you have decided that it is a man you are better than."

※

"That is not what I decided."

"You decided that in about the second week of December and I heard it in your voice on the eighth." Tao Shi sat down. "You came in here on the eighth and told me for four minutes about a household in Jiangbei."

"And there was a word in it that I have not heard out of a man of twenty-four in this room since about 1998."

"What word?"

"Not a word," said Tao Shi. "You said *we*."

※

Dajie did not answer.

"You said, we went up at nine and we had the file out and we were in that corridor until two." Tao Shi poured tea into a bowl he was not going to drink. "That is not a thing a hired man says. It is not a thing a man says about a job."

"It is a thing a man says about a family, and you have been saying it for six weeks and have not once noticed."

※

"Then what is it?"

"It is that you have been in that building since November and you have not been to a job since the third of December." Tao Shi pushed the bowl away. And he had still not drunk any of it. "You are not on that company's books. You are on a man's wrist. There is a difference and you have not found out what it is and you are going to find out in about four days."

※

Dajie said, "Why four days?"

And Tao Shi said, "Because that is how long a notice is."

※

There was a long silence in that room.

The woman with the dry-cleaning shop looked at them both and went back to her toast.

※

"Say the thing about my mother."

"Your boy can cry," said Tao Shi.

"Say it in the dialect."

"No."

"Say it in the dialect!"

※

Tao Shi put both hands flat on the table.

"Ni wu tou na ge wa er, ku de lai."

"Na bu shi ben shi."

"Na shi ba bie ge wu tou de wa er ku diao le cai xue de lai de."

Your boy can cry. That is not a talent. That is a thing you learn by crying other people's children away.

※

Dajie sat at that table for several minutes.

Then he got up and took the gourd and went down the three steps and out into the lane. And it was the eleventh of January, and the light was going. And he went the wrong way for about two streets. Then he stood still and had to think about which direction his own house was in.

He had lived in that district for twenty-four years.

※

He did not go home.

He went to Jiangbei instead, which is about eleven kilometres. And he got there at about half past five and stood at the bottom of the stairs of a building with nine notices on nine doors.

He did not go up.

He stood there for about forty minutes with the gourd between his feet and did not go up, and Peng came out at about a quarter past six and saw him and did not ask him what he was doing there. Because Peng had been in that yard nine years and had watched men stand in that lane.

"You are not on the rota?"

"I know."

"Then why are you standing in the lane!"

Dajie said, "Where is she?"

"On the landing. Where she has been since November." Peng put his hands in his pockets. "And you have not been up there since the fourth of January. I have counted. She has counted."

※

"I know what day it is."

"Do you?"

"I have known about the plums since the tenth."

"Then you know that they are ready."

※

Dajie stood in the lane, and the light went out of it. And the fog came down off the river and took the bottom of the building.

Somewhere above him a woman of seventy-nine was on a landing with a jar of pickled plums and one glass.

"Do you want me to go up?"

"No."

"Then what do I do?"

"Do nothing," said Peng.

"Which is what you have been doing since the fourth, and which is the only thing in this whole business that you have never once been able to do."

※

He did nothing for about two hours.

He stood in the lane at the bottom of the building and he listened to it the way you listen to a building at seven in the evening. Which is not a thing anybody in that district has to explain.

There was a television on the third floor. There was a woman on the fifth shouting at somebody about a delivery that had come to the wrong lane. There was a man on the seventh floor playing something at a volume that a man of sixty-one should not play it at, and Dajie knew which flat that was and could have told you the name of the man inside it, and did not.

At about eight the estate office woman came down with a plastic tub and put it in a car and went away. At about half past eight the woman from the fourth floor came out and stood in the doorway with a bowl and ate it in the doorway.

And at about nine the fog came all the way up and he could not see the ninth floor any more. And he has said since that he was glad.

※

At about half past nine somebody came down the stairs and out into the lane and stood next to him.

It was the boy from the seventh floor. He Zheng. Twenty-three.

He had a jumper on and no coat and he stood there for several minutes without saying anything and then he said, "You are him."

"I am him."

"She has said your name twice since the fourth."

※

"Twice?"

"Once to me, and once to Peng, and Peng told me about it, and there is nobody else on that landing so twice is twice." He put his hands in his pockets. "She has not said the word for anybody else since November."

"Why are you telling me that?"

"Because you have been standing in this lane for about three hours." He shrugged. "There is nothing in this building for you and there has not been since the fourth and the whole of that lane knows it, and I am the only person under thirty in it."

※

"Are you on the rota."

"No."

"Have you signed the form?"

"I have signed the form, and my grandmother has not, and my mother has not, and there is a family in the ninth floor who are going to be out of it in four days either way."

※

At about ten past ten He Zheng said one more thing and then went in.

"Your mother rang my mother on the third of December."

"My mother rang He Jie?"

"I was in the office and I heard one side of it. It was about eleven minutes long." He had his hands in his pockets. "And my mother did not say a word for the last four minutes of it, and then she said thank you, and put the phone down, and sat in the chair by the counter for about twenty minutes with her hand on her face."

"What did she say?"

"She said your mother had told her a thing about you that she was not going to write down."

"And then?"

"And then my mother put you on the rota on the fourth and took you off it on the third of January, and there is nobody in that yard who knows why either of those happened, and I am not going to say any more about it at the bottom of a lane."

"Then say the first thing."

"That is the first thing," said He Zheng. "Your mother telephoned this company on the third of December and told the owner of it something about you, and the owner of it has not said a word about it to her four men in six weeks, and I only know because I was standing behind the desk with the receipt book."

※

"And what are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"That is the answer."

He said it the way a man of twenty-three says a thing he has been saying for six weeks. "That is the answer. Everybody in that building has asked me and I have said nothing, and I am aware of what nothing is worth."

※

He stood there a while longer.

Then he said, "Do you know what is on the ninth floor?"

"I know what is in the corridor."

"That is not what I asked! You have been standing in this lane three hours and you do not know what is on the ninth floor?"

"I know what is in the ninth-floor corridor."

"That is not the same room."

※

"There is a stool," said Dajie. "There is a jar of pickled plums that is ready today. There is one glass on the sill and it is a glass and not a bowl and nobody has ever asked her why."

"How do you know about the glass?"

"Peng told me in December."

"Peng is a man who checks the seals on a truck nine times." He Zheng looked up at the fog. "Why would a man like that tell you about a glass?"

※

"Because he was answering a question I did not ask."

"That is the whole of this building," said He Zheng. "Everybody in it is answering a question that nobody asked, and the answer is always about somebody else, and there is nobody left in it who has said the first thing out loud since about the ninth of November."

※

He went back in at about ten.

Dajie stayed until about half past ten and then got the last bus and went home. And it is the last time he was in that lane before the twelfth. And he has been asked about that three times by people who wanted to know whether he knew. And the answer is that he did not know and that the whole reading of the thing is done afterwards.

※

He got back to Banan and his mother was out, and the table had been laid for one.

He took the cover off.

Cold pork knuckle. Rice. Two chopsticks set straight rather than dropped.

He stood with his hand on the cover for about a minute.

Then he sat down and ate it, all of it, in a few minutes, standing up, and did not turn a light on. And then he went up the twenty-nine steps and got into the bed with his clothes on.

He lay there with his eyes open for about an hour, and then he got up again.

※

Here is what Tao Shi said that he did not put in the notebook. And he did not put it in the notebook because it was not his.

He said that a man who does that work for money has one thing in him that is his. And that it is what he uses. And that there are four ways to do it and no fifth.

He said that the first way is the face and the second is the voice and the third is the patience. And that they can all be learned and that all three of them together are worth nine hundred yuan a day in this city.

And he said that the fourth way is that a man has once in his life been the person in the room who lost somebody. And that if he has been that person then he does not need any of the other three. And that it cannot be taught and cannot be faked and cannot be held on to.

Dajie asked him which one his mother had.

And Tao Shi put his tea down.

And Tao Shi said: she had it before she was fourteen.

And then he said the thing that Dajie has not written down and has said to nobody.

He said, "And she gave it to you, and she will not get it back, and she has known that since about 1998, and that is the whole of why she has not been able to say a word to you in four years."

※

The bus got in at about half past eleven.

The dog was not on the wall.

The dog was not on the wall and Dajie walked the last eleven metres to the steps and did not notice.

That is the last thing in this chapter and it is four words long and it is the reason the whole of the next one happens: the dog was not on the wall. And it had not been on the wall since the twenty-first, and Dajie walked past the place where it had been lying for four months and did not notice for about nine steps.

CHAPTER 24

Twenty-Four

He got up at about twenty to twelve and put his shoes on and went back.

There is no version of that which makes sense and he has never tried to make one. He had been home for about forty minutes. He had lain on the bed with his clothes on. And at twenty to twelve he got up off the bed and put the gourd in the bag.

He went down the twenty-nine steps and out to the road and waited eleven minutes for a night bus. It came past the bottom of Wanzhou Lu at about ten past twelve.

The fog was on the river. The buses run all night on that road and there were four people on it and one of them was asleep.

※

The building had one light on. It was the ninth floor and it was on the landing and not in a flat. And it had been on since about nine. Because he had seen it from the lane at nine and had not thought anything about it at the time. He got to Jiangbei at about half past twelve.

Forty-one steps. He counted them going up because he always counted them going up, and at the third landing he stopped. Because the dog was not there. He went up the stairs.

It had not been there since the twenty-first of January and it had been there every night before that for four months. And he stood on the third landing at twenty to one in the morning and thought about it for a few seconds.

Then he went on up.

※

Not in the corridor and not in the flat. On the landing, at the top of the last flight of stairs, where she had been sitting on a plastic chair since March. She was on the eighth.

There was a wooden stool beside her that he had never seen before. There was a jar on the stool and a glass on the jar and a bowl of something. And there was a blanket over her knees. And there was a bigger light on than there had been on the ninth floor. Which was the light he had seen from the lane.

※

"You came back?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Sit down."

※

He sat down on the step below her, which put his head about level with her knees. And that is the correct position. He did not have to think about it.

He has never decided whether that was the technique or not.

"How long have you been up?"

"Since about nine."

"Why?"

"Because they are ready today," said Luo Shuxiang, "and I am not going to be here on the fifteenth."

※

Five days. She had done them on the tenth at about eight in the morning and she had done them on the eleventh and they were ready on the twelfth. Which is three days before the fifteenth. And she had brought them out onto a landing at nine o'clock at night in January in a stair-street in Jiangbei in a stone building. The plums were ready. That is what the jar was.

"Take one!"

"I do not want one."

"Take one and eat it!"

※

It was salt and sugar and the sour of a plum that had been picked in a season that was not this one. And it was very good, and he said so. He took one and ate it.

"You have not asked about the glass."

"I know about the glass."

"Who told you about the glass?"

"Peng told me in December."

"He would." She turned it a quarter turn on the jar. "And what did he say about it?"

"Nothing. He said it is a glass and not a bowl and to not ask you why."

※

"Then do not ask me why!"

"I was not going to."

"You were going to in a few minutes."

※

She did not pour it for herself. She poured it into the glass and put the glass down on the stool between them and did not push it toward him. And then she sat with her hands in her lap and looked down the stairs. She poured.

"I am seventy-nine years old and I have been on this landing every day since the fourteenth of March," she said.

"And in that time there has been one man up here."

"And this is what he did with it."

"What did I do with it?"

"You sat down?"

※

"That is all?"

"That is all," said Luo Shuxiang. "There is a woman in the flat below who has been putting her television on louder since October, so that she does not have to listen to the man on the ninth floor dying."

"And there is a man on seven who goes to a yard in Shapingba three times a week to be told that he owes money."

"Everybody in this building has been given a form and told a number and asked to sign it. And in four months there has been one man up here who sat down and did not ask me anything."

"I asked you things."

"You asked me three things in four months, and two of them were about the dog."

※

"Which was the third?"

"That I am not going to say, because you are going to work it out in about an hour."

"And when you work it out, I want it to be yours."

※

He has never been able to explain why he drank it. He does not drink with people he is working for. And he has not drunk out of a client's cup in his life. And he has said to four people since that the reason is that it was a glass and not a bowl. And that he has known what a glass means in that trade since he was nine years old. And that he has never once said what it means out loud. He drank the glass.

It was baijiu. It was about fifty-two degrees and it was not the good kind. It was the kind you keep for a night like that one.

※

"Your mother."

"Yes."

"She is back at work?"

"She is."

"Then she has about four years," said Luo Shuxiang.

"That is how long it takes after a woman of fifty-two stops and starts again. I have watched four of them do it and it is always about four years."

"And then the hands go."

※

"Ma."

"Do not!"

"Ma."

"Say it again and I will go inside!"

※

They sat with it for a while. There was the traffic on the road, and a television on the third floor. And a bathtub filling in a flat on the sixth. He did not say it again.

Those are the three sounds of a building in Jiangbei in the middle of the night in January. And he has remembered all three for four years.

※

At about ten past one she said, "You have been coming up here since November and you have not once asked me about him."

"No."

"Everybody else in this building has asked me about him. There have been four people in it since September."

"And one of them was a man from the assessment company who asked me a question about him in the doorway, with a folder in his hand."

"What did he ask?"

"He asked whether the deceased had any siblings." She said it flat, in standard Mandarin, in the voice you use for a form. "And I told him no."

※

"Why have you not asked me?"

"Because I do not ask the family about the deceased."

"You are not the family."

"No."

"You are a man in a stair-street who came up nine floors and sat on a step."

"Yes."

"Then why have you not asked."

※

"I have been afraid of it since the fourth of January," said Dajie.

"Afraid of what?"

"Of the asking."

※

She looked down the stairs for a while.

"That is the first true thing you have said on this landing," she said.

"And it took you four months. I want you to know that I have been waiting for it since the eighth of November."

"And that I had begun to think you did not have it in you."

※

"Then I will ask now."

"No."

"I am asking!"

"You will ask and I will tell you, and then it will be done," said Luo Shuxiang.

"I have not told anybody. There are about four people in this building who do not know, and nobody in this city who does."

"And the only reason I have not told anybody is that there has never been anybody to tell who was not going to say something about it afterwards."

※

"Do I say things about it afterwards?"

"You have told four people about a dog."

※

He put the glass down on the step.

"That is fair."

"That is not fair! That is arithmetic." She pulled the blanket up about an inch. "You met my brother on the eighth-floor landing in November, and you have told four people what he said to you."

"And one of the four is a man in Shapingba who sold it to an office."

※

"Say the thing about the hook."

"What?"

"I know about the hook."

※

Not the building. The building went on. The television on the third floor and the bath on the sixth and the traffic. And the woman from the fourth floor came out and put a bag of rubbish at the top of the second flight and went back in. The landing was quiet for a long time.

Neither of them moved.

※

"How?"

"I am not going to tell you how."

"How?"

"Ma."

"How do you know about that?"

※

He has gone over the next four seconds more than any other four seconds in his life. And there are two versions and he has never been able to choose between them and he is not going to here.

Version one is that he sat on a step on an eighth-floor landing in a stair-street in Jiangbei at twenty past one in the morning and said the sentence. And the sentence is what he said. And it was said in standard Mandarin at speed, and behind it there was a man of twenty-four who had learned a piece of information in a teahouse in Yuzhong on a Monday afternoon in November from a woman of eighty-one who was eating qingtai out of a newspaper.

That version is completely ordinary.

※

Version two is that he did not say the sentence and that it was in the room before he said it. And that he has looked at that for four years and cannot find a way to make it go away.

That version is also completely ordinary.

※

What he actually said was this.

"Mo wen le."

"Mo wen le, wo bu xiao de wei sha de xiao de."

Stop asking. I do not know why I know.

※

She took the glass off the step and poured about two centimetres into it and drank it herself and put it down. Luo Shuxiang did not say anything.

Then she said, "That is the answer."

"It is not an answer!"

"It is the only one that has ever been given to me," she said.

"I have asked about nine people about nine things in seventy-nine years."

※

"Ma."

"Do not."

"I am not going to."

※

At about two o'clock the television went off on the third floor and the bath finished on the sixth. And the building had nothing left in it but the traffic on the road, and the two of them. And the light over the stairs, which has a tube in it that has been going since 2011 and gives about half of what it should. They sat on the landing.

At about two o'clock she said, "Say the year."

"Nineteen seventy-nine."

"Say the month."

"August."

"Say the place."

"Jiumatou."

"Is that right?"

"That is right."

※

"Were there four of them working that landing?"

"There were four."

"There were."

"There was a grab on a barge and it went into the water and came up again."

"I know."

"And there is a hook on the end of it?"

"I know."

※

She put both hands flat on the blanket.

"Nobody in this city has said that out loud to me since 1979!" said Luo Shuxiang. "Not my husband. Not my daughter. Not the man from the newspaper. Not the man from the assessment company. Not a woman from the committee in October who sat in my front room for forty minutes and asked me about the demolition."

"And I have not thought about the hook since about 1983."

※

"You have been thinking about it since the ninth of November."

"That is a different thing. I have been thinking about a man on a step who sat down."

※

At about half past two the woman from the fourth floor came out again, in a coat over a nightgown, and stood at the top of the second flight.

She looked up at them.

She looked at Dajie for a few seconds and then she looked at Luo Shuxiang and then she went back in and did not shut her door all the way. Which is the way she did it and which he noticed. She said nothing.

※

At about three she said, "You are going to want to ask me whether he was frightened."

"No."

"You are."

"I am not going to ask you a question about a dead boy on a landing at three in the morning in January."

"That is the first time you have said no to me."

※

"The first time I have said no to you was the first story." Dajie put the glass on the jar. "In November. You asked me for one line of it and I said one line and went away."

"Yes."

"And you said, everybody wants to talk to the daughter. And He Jie said the same thing about you and about her."

"And I have not worked out which of the two of you was warning me about which."

※

It was the second time. The first had been on this landing in November. She almost laughed.

This one lasted about a second and a half and was not a good laugh and did not change anything.

"Both," she said.

※

Not about the plums. About the jar. He told her that there is a jar of pickled plums that comes every Monday from a nephew in Wuxi that she has never met. And that the nephew rings the shop and does not ring her. And that he has told four lies about the jar to four separate people and does not know why. At about three o'clock the dog was not on the landing and that was the thing he noticed.

He had been noticing it since the third floor and had not said anything about it, and at about three o'clock he said something about it, and it was not to her.

"There is a dog."

"I know there is a dog."

"Have you seen it."

"I see it on the wall from the window." She pulled the blanket up. "It has not been there since about the twenty-first."

"That is right."

※

There is a dog that has barked at every true thing this man has said in four months.

That is the whole record and it is in the notebook and it is not in the notebook. And there are four instances in this book and three of them are in November and one of them is on the fourth of January, and every one of them is a moment when a man of twenty-four said something out loud that he had not planned to say.

The dog is on a wall in Banan on the night of the twelfth of January and it is about four kilos under its weight and one of its eyes does not open all the way. And it has been wrong in the leg since the tenth, and nobody in that lane has seen it for three weeks.

※

"It has not been on the wall since the twenty-first."

"I know."

"Where is it."

"It is in a house in Banan," said Dajie.

"Then it is not on the wall."

"No."

※

Luo Shuxiang turned the glass a quarter turn on the jar.

"You have been waiting for it to bark."

"Yes."

"For how long."

"Since about half past two."

※

"It is not going to bark."

"I know it is not."

"Then why have you been waiting."

"Because it has done it four times," said Dajie, "and I have never once known what I was saying when it happened, and it has never happened when there was nobody in the room, and it is not in the room tonight, and I have been sitting on this step for two hours waiting for a dog that is four kilometres away."

※

She did not say anything about that.

He has said since that he does not know whether she understood what he was telling her. And that he is not going to ask anybody, and that it does not matter. Because she said the next thing about nine minutes later and it was not about the dog.

※

What she said was about the stool.

She said, "It was my mother's."

"The stool?"

"It came out of the flat behind this one in 1981 and it has been on this landing since the fourteenth of March, and everybody in this building has walked past it for ten months and four of them have offered to take it up to the ninth for me, and I have told every one of them no."

"Why."

"Because it is on this landing," said Luo Shuxiang.

※

And at about twenty to four. Which is half an hour before, she said the thing about the light.

She said that the tube in the light over the stairs has been going since 2011 and gives about half of what it should. And that she has asked the street office about it four times and that a man came in 2019 and stood on the landing and looked at it and told her it was a bulb.

"A bulb."

"A bulb."

"Did you tell him?"

"I told him it was a tube and he said it was a bulb and he did not have one."

"Do you want me to do it?"

"You cannot get up there."

"I can get a chair."

"You would fall," said Luo Shuxiang, "and then there would be two of us on this landing and one of us would be in the way."

※

At about half past three he told her about the plums.

That was the four minutes. It is the last four minutes of anything and he has said that he does not know why he put it in that place. And that he would put it in the same place again.

"I have not told anybody about the jar."

"I know you have not."

"Then how do you know about the jar?"

"The same way," said Dajie.

※

It is a man of twenty-four on a step in a stairwell at twenty to four in the morning, saying four words to an old woman. And that is the sentence.

And she accepted it, the way everybody accepts it. There is nothing in the four words that anybody can check.

※

She said, "Sit where you are."

"I am sitting."

She said, "I am going to put my hand on your head."

※

She put her hand on his head. She was seventy-nine and her hand was about four inches across and it was cold and there was nothing in it. And there was no weight in it at all. And she left it there for about a minute. He did not say anything.

Then she took it off and put both hands back in her lap and looked down the stairs.

※

She said, "Tell the woman in the flat below that the noise she has been hearing for four months is a man on the ninth floor who is dying." At about ten to four she asked him about his mother. And it was the second time on that landing. And the first time she had ever asked twice.

"How old is she."

"Fifty-two."

"Then she has got the four years."

"Yes."

"Does she know she has got four years."

"No."

※

Luo Shuxiang put her hands on the arms of the plastic chair.

"Then you have got about four years to tell her and you are not going to."

"How do you know that."

"Because you have been on this landing since November and you have not told me a true thing about her once," she said. "You have told me her age and her trade and that she has stopped, and you have not told me what she is like, and there is not a man in this city who tells a stranger what his mother is like unless he has decided not to say it to her."

※

"That is not fair."

"None of it is fair. I am seventy-nine and I am sitting on a landing at ten to four in the morning with a man of twenty-four and a jar of plums, and I have been talking for two hours about a hook in the river in 1979, and I am not going to spend the last of it being polite about your mother."

"What do you want me to say."

"I want you to say what she is like."

※

He said it.

He does not know why he said it and he has never told anybody what he said and it is about four sentences long.

And he said it in standard Mandarin, slowly. Which is the register he has used for exactly one thing in his whole life. And he did not notice that he was doing it and she did not comment on it, and it took about twenty seconds.

※

When he had finished she said, "Good."

"That is all."

"That is all." She pulled the blanket up about an inch. "You will not say it again for about four years and it will be at her funeral and it will be in the wrong register, and there is nothing that can be done about that now."

※

At about four o'clock she said the last thing.

"And not a dog."

Dajie said, "Yes, ma."

And she said, "Do not call me that."

※

He said, "I am not going to call you anything."

And she said, "Good."

※

At ten past four in the morning on the twelfth of January, Luo Shuxiang stopped talking in the middle of a sentence.

She was on the landing of the eighth floor of a stone building in a stair-street in Jiangbei, four kilometres from the river and three days from the fifteenth.

There was a wooden stool beside her with a jar of pickled plums on it and one glass. There was a man of twenty-four sitting on the step below her head.

She was not in the middle of a word. She was in the middle of a sentence and the sentence was about the number eleven bus and the stop at the bottom of the

lane being moved in September and nobody telling anybody. And she got about fourteen words into it and then the fourteen words stopped and she did not start a fifteenth. The sentence was about a bus route.

※

That is the part he has never been able to explain either. He sat on the step for two minutes with his head about level with her knees and did not move at all. And the reason is that he has been in rooms with dead people four hundred and six times. Dajie did not move for about two minutes.

He knew within a few seconds.

And he sat there for two minutes anyway.

※

Then he stood up and put two fingers on the side of her neck the way you do it. And it was about half past four. And then he sat back down on the step.

He sat back down on the step and stayed there until the light came.

In that city in January, that is about twenty past seven.

※

The woman from the fourth floor found them at about a quarter past six. Because she had left her door open and nobody had gone past. And she came up the last flight with a coat over a nightgown and stood at the top.

She looked at the two of them for a long time.

She said, "Is she asleep?"

Dajie said, "No."

※

She did not scream and she did not go and get anybody and she did not say anything to him at all about what he was doing on that landing. And she stood there for a moment and then she went back down and telephoned for an ambulance from a landline in her own front room. And then she came back up and stood at the top of the flight and stayed there until it came.

At about six she said, "Was she frightened?"

And Dajie said, "No!"

※

The ambulance came at about twenty past seven. The two men came up the eight flights because the lift is not big enough and has not been big enough since 2004. They asked him four questions and he answered all four and they wrote nothing down, and one of them, the younger one, said the thing that everybody says. Which is that she had a good age on her. He did not say anything else.

※

At about half past eight the ninth floor came out. The woman with the fish shop came down and stood on the landing and looked at the stool and the jar and the glass, and did not touch any of it.

And said, in the dialect, to nobody, that the plums were new.

She was the one who said it. He has told everybody since that he said it, and it was her.

※

Peng came at about nine. Because He Jie had telephoned the shop at seven, and because He Jie had said one sentence, which was: if he is still on that landing, get him off it.

Peng came up the eight flights and stood at the top of the last one and looked at Dajie sitting on the step.

He sat down on the step below him. Which is the same step Dajie had been sitting on for four hours and could not be. So he sat on the one below that. And he put his hands on his knees and he stayed there for about twenty minutes. He did not ask him anything.

※

At about half past nine he said, "You have to go down."

"I know."

"You have been up here since twenty to one."

"I know."

"Then why have you not gone down?"

※

Dajie said, "There is a woman in the flat below."

"I know there is a woman in the flat below."

"She has been putting her television on louder since October so that she does not have to listen to a man dying," said Dajie. "And she asked me at four o'clock to go down and tell her that the noise she has been hearing for four months is a man on the ninth floor dying, and not a dog."

※

"And you have not gone down."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I have got it wrong," said Dajie. "I have got it written down and I have got it in the wrong order, and the woman in the flat below is the wrong one."

"And I am not going to go down eight flights and tell a woman a thing that is about a different flat."

※

Peng did not say anything.

"She asked me to do one thing," said Dajie. "She asked me one thing in four months, and I have got the address wrong."

"And I am going to sit here until I have worked out which flat it is."

※

At about eleven o'clock he got up off the step and went down to the ninth and stood outside the ninth-floor flat and knocked, and there was nobody in it. And then he went down to the fourth and knocked. And the woman from the fourth floor opened the door and stood in it with a coat over a nightgown. Which is what she had been wearing for seven hours. He worked it out at about eleven.

He said, "You have been hearing a man on the ninth floor dying since October."

She said, "Yes."

"He was seventy-nine. She. She was seventy-nine."

She said, "I know."

"And it was not a dog."

※

She considered him for a moment.

"No," she said. "It was never a dog."

※

Neither of them said anything about the eight hours he had just spent sitting on a step four flights above her head.

※

He went down the forty-one steps at about a quarter past eleven, and the fog had gone. And it was the twelfth of January. And the demolition was on the fifteenth. And she had been dead for seven hours.

The dog was not on the wall at the bottom. The dog was not on the wall at the third landing.

He got the bus at about half past eleven from the stop that was moved in September. Which is the last thing she said and the only one of the fourteen words he can remember without trying. The dog was not anywhere in that lane.

※

He got home at about half past twelve and made tea and did not drink it, and sat at the kitchen table for about four hours with his hands on the bowl. He did not tell his mother.

At about five in the evening his mother came in and looked at him for a moment, and did not ask him anything, and went and made the beds.

At about half past seven he came back down and got the notebook out and turned to the back. At about seven he went up the stairs.

He wrote, under the six lines and the four lines about He Jie and the line about the roster, two more.

She put her hand on my head.

He looked at that for a while.

Then he wrote under it:

I do not know what it was for and I am not going to ask anybody.

CHAPTER 25

Twenty-Five

The paperwork took four days and began at twenty past seven in the morning.

It began with a man of about forty in a blue jacket who asked Dajie for his relation to the deceased.

"None."

"Then what are you doing on this landing?"

"I was sitting with her."

"For how long?"

"Since about twenty to one."

※

Then he asked four more questions. Dajie answered all four and the man wrote all four down. The man wrote that down.

Dajie has since said that this is the thing nobody believes about that morning. He sat on a step in a stairwell for six hours next to a woman of seventy-nine who was dead. And the first official human being to arrive had a form. And the form did not have a box on it for anything that had happened. Not one of the questions was about what had happened.

※

The four questions were these.

He gave the address of a building in Banan and a telephone number that was his mother's. Relation. Duration of attendance. Address. Telephone.

"Are you the tenant?"

"No."

"Are you the next of kin?"

"No."

"Then you are nothing in this," said the man in the blue jacket, and he wrote *nothing* under the fourth question. And that is an actual entry on an actual form in an actual office in Dadukou.

Dajie has never seen it. He would like to.

※

The two men had gone up the eight flights. They had asked the four questions. One of them had said she had a good age on her. And the other one had said nothing at all, and between them they had done the thing they do. Which is that they put the rails down and went up sideways and did not hurry. The ambulance had come at twenty past seven.

It took nine minutes. Forty-one steps. The lift has not been big enough since 2004. They took her down at about half past seven.

There is a strip of masking tape on the doors at coffin height with a thing written on it that you can only read if you already know what it says.

※

The woman with the fish shop came first. She stood on the landing and looked at what was on it and did not put a hand on any of it, and then she said that the fruit was this week's. At about eight o'clock the ninth floor came down.

Then the man from seven, He Zheng. And he stood on the landing for a few seconds and then he went back up.

Then the woman from the fourth floor, who had been in the doorway since about six.

Then the two women from the sixth who came down with their hands in their sleeves.

※

That is the fact and it is not a small one and he has never been able to explain it. In four hundred and six funerals he has stood in the corridor and watched a building come out onto a landing and look at one another. And he has never once been on the other side. Nobody said anything to Dajie.

And on that landing, on the twelfth of January, at eight in the morning, about nine people came down eight flights of stairs.

Not one of them spoke to him. Not one of them asked him why he was sitting on a step.

※

He was still on the step at nine, when Peng arrived.

※

Peng came up the last flight and stood at the top of it.

"I have been sent."

"By who?"

"He Jie. She telephoned the shop at seven. She said one sentence." Peng put his hands in his pockets. "She said, if he is still on that landing then get him off it."

"How did she know?"

"She did not know. She said it in the tone of a woman who has been doing this for twenty-six years and knows where the men are."

※

He was there for about twenty minutes and he did not ask one question, and Dajie has said since that it is the single most useful twenty minutes that anybody in this city has ever spent on him. And that it consisted entirely of a man of fifty-eight sitting on a staircase with his hands on his knees. Peng sat down on the step below him.

At the end of it Peng said, "You have to go down."

"I know."

"You have been up here since twenty to one."

"I know."

"Then why have you not gone down."

※

Dajie said, "Somebody on the fourth has been listening to it through the ceiling since the autumn."

"Listening to what?"

"Her. Through about four inches of concrete, every night, for four months."

※

Peng did not say anything.

"And she asked me for one thing at four o'clock this morning and I have not done it," said Dajie. "Because I have got the address wrong, and the wrong woman is going to get it."

"And I am not going to walk down eight flights and hand somebody a message about a flat that is not hers."

"Then sit here until you have worked it out."

"That is the plan."

"Then it is a bad plan and it is not mine." Peng got up off the step. "I will be in the yard."

※

He went down to the ninth and knocked on the ninth-floor flat. There was nobody in it and the door was not locked, and he stood in a corridor he had not been inside since November and did not go in.

He worked it out at about eleven.

Then he went down to the fourth, and a woman of about sixty opened it. She had been up since six and she had not dressed.

"Not you," said Dajie. "The one underneath you."

※

She stood in the doorway considering him.

"Then which one is it."

"Yours."

"I have lived in this one since 1996."

※

She was about sixty and she had been awake since about six. She stood in the doorway.

※

She was about sixty. She had a coat over a nightgown and her hair was not done and she had been awake since about six. She stood in the doorway.

"I know it was not a dog."

"Then I have got that wrong as well."

"No." She put her hand on the door. "You have not. I have known it was not a dog since about the second week in October. And I have never gone up the stairs."

"And it is the only thing in my life that I am ashamed of."

※

Dajie did not say anything.

"He was up there for four months."

"She."

"She was up there for four months." The woman looked at the landing above his head. "I put the television on because I could hear it through the floor. I could hear it because there is nothing between this flat and that landing except a bit of concrete about four inches thick."

"I have been in this flat since 1996. I have paid the maintenance every year."

"And in four months I did not go up one flight of stairs."

※

"There is nothing up there."

"Don't!"

"There is a stool and a jar and one glass."

"Don't do that," she said. "I have been standing in this doorway since six o'clock this morning working out what I am going to say to whoever comes down those stairs."

"And I did not think it was going to be you, and I did not think you were going to be kind about it."

※

He went down the forty-one steps at about a quarter past eleven.

Peng was in the yard with the van running. He Jie was at the counter with the receipt book.

She did not look up.

"Sit down."

※

He sat down.

"The body is at the funeral home on the Wanzhou road," said He Jie. "The cremation is on the fifteenth at two in the afternoon. Which is the day."

"And the family has not been asked yet, and the family is one man of sixty-one on the eighth floor who has not spoken to anybody about it, and a nephew in Wuxi who has been telephoned once and did not answer."

"The fifteenth is the demolition."

"The fifteenth is the demolition at nine in the morning and the cremation at two in the afternoon."

※

"And the building?"

"The building comes down at nine, and there will be nine households standing in a lane at nine o'clock watching it."

"And at two in the afternoon one of them will have a funeral." She turned a page. "You are not on the rota."

"I know."

"You have not been on the rota since the third of January."

"I know."

"Then you are not on this one either."

※

Dajie put both hands on the counter.

"I am going to do that funeral."

"No!"

"I am going to do that funeral."

"You are going to stand in this yard and be told that you are not on the rota," said He Jie.

"It is the correct decision and you know it is the correct decision."

"And you are going to argue with me for a while anyway, because you are twenty-four."

※

He argued for a moment, and then he stopped. And he has said since that the reason he stopped is that he heard his own voice in the yard. He did not argue for four minutes.

It was the voice he uses on families.

※

"It is at two o'clock on the fifteenth."

"It is."

"Then I will be there!"

"You will not be in the room."

"I will be in the building."

"You will not be in the building," said He Jie. "You will be in Dazu with your mother, or in a flat in Banan asleep, or in this lane with nine households watching a building come down."

"Those are the three places. One of them is about to happen to you and the other two are not."

※

The van was running and there was a man in it he did not know. And the two refrigerated trucks were going. And there were four people carrying things and none of them looked at him. He went out into the yard.

Then he took the gourd out of the bag and put it on the ground next to his foot and stood there with it. Because he had put it down and he did not know what to do with his hands. He stood by the shed for a few minutes.

※

He got the bus at about half past twelve.

He got home at about half past one. His mother was out.

There was nothing on the table. No cloth. No bowl. Nothing.

He stood in the kitchen for a moment and looked at a table with nothing on it.

Then he went up the twenty-nine steps.

※

Here is the account of the next four days. And it is short, and it is not about anything.

The thirteenth: nothing. He sat on the wall outside the building for about four hours in the afternoon and the dog was not there.

The fourteenth: nothing. His mother did a job in Dazu and came back at about eight at night. And made the beds, and did not ask him anything.

The fifteenth: the building came down at nine in the morning and the cremation was at two in the afternoon.

He was in neither place. He was on the third landing of a stair-street in Banan, sitting on the step with the chair on it.

He had gone down there at about half past eight in the morning. He stayed until about half past four in the afternoon.

He did not know why he went there. He has never known why he went there. Of the three places He Jie gave him he took the fourth. Which was a landing in his own building four kilometres from both of them. And he sat on it for eight hours in the cold and did not eat.

※

She came up the stairs because the lift in that building has never worked. She got to the third landing and stopped. And he was on the step in front of the chair. At about half past four his mother came home.

She stood there for a while.

She sat down on the step next to him and put her bag on the floor between her feet. And they sat there for about forty minutes in a stairwell in Banan without saying anything at all. She did not ask him what he was doing.

At the end of it she said, "Which one was it?"

And he said, "The woman on the eighth."

And she said, "Then you did the job?"

And she said the thing that closes this chapter. Which is four words long and which he has not written down and which is not in the notebook. And he said, "I did not do anything."

She said, "You sat down. That is the job."

※

He has told three different people three different reasons and all three of them were true. And the first one is that He Jie would not put him on the rota. And the second one is that he was on a landing in Banan. And the third one is that on the morning of the fourteenth, at about nine o'clock, a woman telephoned his mother from the funeral home on the Wanzhou road to ask a question about the odd-numbered layers. And he listened to his mother's end of it for about six minutes. And then he went out and did not come back until dark. ---

On the fourteenth, at about four in the afternoon, He Zheng came to the yard.

Dajie was standing by the shed. He had been standing by the shed for about two hours.

"You are not on it!"

"No."

"Nor am I!" He Zheng put his hands in his pockets. "I came to ask you a question."

"Ask it."

"Did she say anything."

※

"Yes."

"What?"

"Fourteen words about a bus."

※

He Zheng looked at the shed.

"That is not what I asked."

"It is what you asked."

"I asked whether she said anything about us." He was looking at the shed and not at Dajie. "About the building, or the notices, or the fifteenth, or my mother, or any of it. Anything at all."

"No."

"Nothing."

"Nothing."

※

"That is what I thought."

She had not. He knows she had not, and He Zheng had known she had not before he asked. And the whole of that conversation took about ninety seconds and neither of them made it shorter, and Dajie has said since that it is the only time in his life he has watched a man of twenty-three ask a question he already had the answer to because he wanted the answer to come out of another person's mouth.

※

"There is a jar of plums on the landing."

"I know."

"Somebody should have it."

"Then take it!"

"I am not going to take it!" said He Zheng.

※

He did not go to the cremation.

That is the real one. He has never said the real one to anybody.

He was not at that cremation because he could not be in a room with his own mother working.

※

He did not take it out on the fifteenth. He did not take it out on the fourteenth. On the sixteenth he took it out and looked at the two lines at the back, and did not read them. ---

He has one more thing to say about the fifteenth and it is about nine words long.

At about four in the afternoon. Which was when the cremation was finishing, he was sitting on the third landing of his own building in Banan with his back against the wall.

And he put both hands flat on the step on either side of himself. And he said, out loud, in an empty stairwell, to nobody: don't you worry about it.

That is all. He said the first one and not the second one and not the third one. And he sat there for about two minutes with his hands flat on a step. And then he got up and went home.

※

The notebook was in the bag the whole time.

Then he put it back in the bag and did not look at it for about nine days.

CHAPTER 26

Twenty-Six

The building came down on the fifteenth at nine in the morning.

It took eleven minutes.

Nine households stood in the lane and watched it. There were about thirty-one people in that lane. Four of them were crying. One of them was the woman with the fish shop. And the machine they used was not a wrecking ball and did not swing anything. And it ate the ninth floor first and then worked down.

Luo Changhe was not in the lane.

Nobody has ever established where he was.

Dajie has asked two people and got two answers, and both of the answers were that the man was in the building.

The building was empty. He was not in the building. He was sixty-one years old and he had lived on the eighth floor and he was not in the lane and he was not on the eighth floor and he was not anywhere, and at about half past nine he turned up in He Jie's yard and asked her for a funeral.

※

She gave him one.

That is the whole of He Jie and it is the only time in the book that she does something that is not for money. And she did it in about eleven seconds, and Dajie was standing in the yard when it happened and heard the whole of it.

※

"I want a funeral!"

"For her?"

"For her."

"There is no money in it."

"I know there is no money in it."

"And?"

※

He Jie put the receipt book down.

"Then you will have it," she said. "It will be at my expense. And I will tell you why, and then we will not talk about it again."

"Why not?"

"You were a client of this company in September. You are a client of it now."

"And?"

"Your brother was a client of it in November."

"And?"

"And the woman who died on the eighth floor of that building lived on a street this company has served for twenty-one years."

"And?"

"And she died nine hours before the demolition of the only building in Chongqing that has had a death in eight of its nine flats in five years."

※

"That is not a reason."

"It is the only reason I have got and it is not sentimental."

He Jie picked the pen back up.

"In about four months somebody is going to write a complaint about this company. In about a year an office in Dadukou is going to want to know why we did a funeral for no money in a building that came down the same morning."

"And you are going to say what?"

"That we did it because she was on our list." She squared the book up. "It is going to be true. It is going to be the only thing in the file that is."

※

"Then do it!"

"Then it is Thursday."

"Why not Friday?"

"Because Friday is the seventeenth and the seventeenth is the last day, and a funeral on the last day is a funeral that somebody has had to fight," said He Jie.

"Thursday is eleven days after the ninth of November and it is a Thursday and it is nothing. That is what you want."

※

Luo Changhe put both hands flat on the counter.

"That is what I want."

※

Then He Jie said the sentence that is the reason Dajie did not sleep for four days. And she said it to the room. And the room had three people in it.

She said, "Do you want us to use the man who sat with her."

※

Luo Changhe turned round and looked at Dajie for a few seconds.

"He was on the landing?"

"He was on the landing for six hours," said He Jie.

"From twenty to one until about half past seven in the morning, and he did not leave. I sent a man up there at nine to get him off it, and he was still on it."

"Why are you telling me that."

"Because it is the only thing this company knows about that woman that is not on a form," said He Jie.

"It is your funeral! You should decide."

※

Luo Changhe looked at him for a while longer.

"You were on the step below her."

"Yes."

"For six hours."

"Yes."

"Did she ask you to stay?"

"No."

"Then why did you stay?"

※

Dajie said, "Because she was talking about a bus route."

※

There was a silence in that yard of a moment.

Then Luo Changhe said, "Say yes!"

And He Jie said, "He has not been asked yet."

And Luo Changhe said, "Then ask him!"

※

That is the job.

It is on the rota. It is the third of December and the fifteenth of January and the sixteenth of January and it is on the rota in He Jie's handwriting and it says, in the column headed *attendant*, two words. And the second word is Dajie's surname and the first word is the character for the mourning.

He has seen the entry. He asked to see it, and He Jie turned the sheet round and let him look at it for a beat.

Then she turned it back.

That is the only time in the whole book that his own name appears on a piece of paper in that office.

※

The funeral was at two o'clock on the Thursday at the funeral home on the Wanzhou road, and it was eleven people. And it was the smallest funeral He Jie has done in nine years.

Luo Changhe. The nephew from Wuxi, who came, and who had not spoken to his grandmother since about 2011.

He stood at the back with his hands in his pockets.

Two women from the sixth floor. The woman with the fish shop. He Zheng, and He Jie's daughter, who came with him.

The woman from the fourth floor, who came on her own and stood at the very back and did not speak to anybody.

Peng. Lu. And He Jie herself, which she does not do.

And a man from the estate office who was not invited.

He stood outside the door of the room for the whole of it, and did not come in.

※

Dajie wore the white.

There are two words in the column headed *attendant*.

The second word is Dajie's surname. The first word is the character for the mourning.

They do the fitting in the back room at He Jie's.

Fu Jie had done it for him in November, for the blue and the white. And had put a hundred and six in a book.

On the Thursday morning she took the white off the hanger and held it up against him. She did not measure anything, because she had the number.

And she put it on him and it was the same and it fit the same. And she stepped back one pace and looked at him and said one word. Which was *hao*, which means good, and which she had not said to him once in November.

※

He stood at the side of the table with his hands behind his back.

There is a table in the room with the photograph on it and the urn behind it and a bowl and a jar. And the jar on that table was the jar of plums. And that is the only thing about the whole afternoon that anybody has ever asked him about.

He had brought it. He had gone up to the fourth-floor landing of a building that was already rubble and the jar was not there. And then he had gone to the woman with the fish shop and asked her. And she had it in a cupboard. And she gave it to him without saying anything. And he took it to the room on the Wanzhou road and put it on the table next to the photograph.

Nobody told him to. It is not in the schedule and it is not on the price list.

It is the only thing he did that afternoon that was not in the trade.

※

The daoci was read by Peng.

That is the failure and it is the whole of the failure and it took about four minutes and ten seconds.

※

Here is what happened.

He stood at the side of the table with his hands behind his back and he was supposed to do the diaozi, which is the first one. Which is the one about the road going down and the water going under, and which he has done four hundred and six times.

And he opened his mouth.

And nothing came out.

※

There is no version of this in which he made a sound and it was wrong. There was no sound. He stood at the side of a table in a room with eleven people in it and opened his mouth.

And the thing that comes out of the place it comes out of did not come out.

He has described it four times and every one of the four descriptions is the same. Which is that it was like putting a hand into a pocket that has been in the same place for twenty years and finding the pocket empty.

※

He did not try again.

That is the part. He did not try again. He stood there with his mouth open for a few seconds and then he closed it and put his hands behind his back and stood in the position. And he did not do the diaozi. And he did not do the three sentences. And he did not do the thing with the shoulder.

He stood there for four minutes and ten seconds with his hands behind his back and did not do anything at all.

※

Peng did the daoci.

He read it out of the folder in the flat voice. He read it well. It was a daoci for a woman of seventy-nine who had been born in the building behind the one that came down.

She had been in that street since 1981. She had signed six forms and torn up three. Her son had drowned in 1979.

Peng had never met her.

He had never met her. He had never been on that landing.

He did not know about the hook, or the bus route, or the glass. He had a sheet of paper with nine sentences on it, written on the Tuesday night by a man who had also never met her. And he stood in front of eleven people and read it. And it worked, because it is a clock. And a clock does not need to know what time it is.

※

At the word *rest* the room made its noise.

Luo Changhe had not cried at anything since 1988. He had stood in a lane at nine in the morning on the fifteenth and watched a building come down.

He made a sound that Dajie has never been able to put into a sentence.

And Dajie stood at the side of the table with his hands behind his back and watched it happen from four feet away.

He did not do one single thing about it, because he could not.

※

That is the failure.

He has been asked about it four times by four people who wanted to know whether it was grief. Whether he was too close to it.

Whether a man who has sat with somebody and heard them talk about a bus route can do the crying for them afterwards.

And the answer is yes. That is the answer. A professional can do it for anybody.

The trade is nine hundred years old. There are men in this city who have done the crying at their own mothers' funerals, and done it well, and been paid for it.

His mother can do it. His mother did it for a stranger in Dazu in December and had not worked in two years.

So it is not that. He has said to all four of them that it is not that. None of the four has believed him. He has stopped explaining.

※

What he has said once, to Peng, in the yard at the back of the funeral home at about five o'clock, and never again.

"Did it work."

"For them."

"For them?"

"You saw it work."

"Yes."

※

Peng put both hands flat on the railing.

"You have been standing in a corridor for three months telling me you do not know how you do it," he said.

"And that you are frightened of being good at it."

"And you have just stood at the side of the table for a woman you sat with for six hours on a step. And you did nothing at all. And the room came apart anyway."

"You did it. Not me."

"I read a piece of paper." Peng was not looking at him. "Four minutes and ten seconds. I did not do one thing in the trade."

"Then what did you do?"

"I dress people. I have never done that."

※

"Then what worked?"

"The jar," said Peng.

※

Dajie did not say anything.

"There was a jar of plums on that table. There were eleven people in that room and about four of them came off that landing."

"And there was a man of sixty-one who watched a building come down at nine in the morning and had not cried about it. He came apart at the word rest."

Peng straightened up.

"You put a jar on a table and stood next to it with your hands behind your back for four minutes. And you did not do one thing."

"And that is the best work you have ever done, and you are going to be sick about it for four years."

※

"And if I had done the diaozi?"

"Then you would have made it about you," said Peng.

"Luo Changhe would have cried at eleven minutes past two and been all right by half past. And it would have been a good funeral."

※

He took the white off that afternoon and it went back on the hanger.

Fu Jie did not say anything about it. She held it up and looked at the shoulders and hung it up. And then she said, in the doorway, without turning round, that the fitting had been correct.

※

The 16th of January, and the 17th, and the 18th. Three days in the flat in Banan.

He did not write down what happened at the funeral. There are two lines at the back of the notebook from the twelfth of January and nothing after them for nine days.

※

※

On the seventeenth, which was the day after, he went back to the lane.

There was no lane. There was a rubble field with a machine in it and a man in an orange vest standing at the edge of it. And the machine had stopped for the afternoon.

There was a sign on a pole with the name of a company on it and a telephone number and the words *no entry* in two languages.

The stair-street was still there. That is the thing he has never been able to explain to anybody. And it is the reason the whole of the rest of this book is in a stair-street.

The building came down in eleven minutes and the forty-one steps are still in the ground. There are about nine of them visible from the lane and they go up to nothing.

He stood at the bottom of them for about forty minutes with the gourd in his hand.

※

The man in the orange vest came over after a while and asked him whether he was from the office.

"No."

"Then you should not be here."

"I know."

"You have been here forty minutes."

"I know."

※

"What are you looking at?"

Dajie said, "The stairs."

And the man looked at the stairs. Which is nine steps going up to a pile of concrete, and said, "There is nothing up there."

And Dajie said, "I know."

And the man went back to the machine.

※

He has said since that he does not know why he stood there for forty minutes. The only answer he has ever been able to produce is that he was counting something and never got to the number.

He counted the steps once. There are nine.

He counted the windows in the building across the lane. There are forty-one.

He counted the number of people who came out of the lane in forty minutes, and it was four. And he does not remember any of their faces.

He went to the funeral home on the nineteenth to collect the urn. Because He Jie's office telephoned and said the family had asked for him. And the man at the desk gave him a bag and a form and asked him for his relation to the deceased.

"None."

"Then who is asking."

"Luo Changhe."

"Relation?"

"Brother."

※

He took it out to the road and stood on the pavement with it for a few minutes and then got on the bus. And he has never told anybody what he did between the funeral home and the yard. It took about an hour and a half.

When he got there Luo Changhe was standing by the shed with his hands in his pockets, and did not ask him where he had been.

※

"I have got it."

"I know."

"Where do you want it?"

"In the yard," said Luo Changhe.

※

He has said since that he does not know why the man said the yard. And that he has thought about it for four years. And the only thing he has come up with is that a man of sixty-one whose building has been destroyed will put the last of his family wherever there is a floor.

※

Luo Changhe took the bag and put it on the counter in the office of a funeral company in Jiangbei, in the middle of the afternoon, with three men in the room, and did not look at any of them.

And He Jie came out of the back with a pen and looked at it and did not say anything.

Then she said, "I will hold it here for a month."

And Luo Changhe said, "Why?"

And He Jie said: there is no wall for it yet.

"It is January and you will not find a wall in January. Come and get it whenever you have got somewhere to put it."

"It will be on this shelf and nothing will happen to it."

※

She put it on the shelf.

It was the second shelf, at about eye height, next to about nine boxes of paper.

And a bag of the plastic sleeves they use for the notices. It was there for eleven months. Dajie went into that office nineteen times in that time and never once looked at it.

※

He has said that the reason he never looked at it is that the shelf is at eye height and that a man walking past a shelf at eye height has to make a decision. And that he made the decision on the first day and kept it for eleven months.

And when he was asked, at the end of the eleven months, by a woman who was not there, why he had not looked at it, he said the true thing.

It was this.

"Because there has never been a version of me that could stand in that office and look at it and not say the four words out loud."

CHAPTER 27

Twenty-Seven

She went back to work in December. By the end of January she had done eleven jobs.

She was on a list at four funeral homes. And a woman in Dalu had started saying that the good one was back.

Dajie found out about that the way he finds out about everything. Which is that somebody told him in a shop.

※

"You are Zhou Guifen's boy?"

"Yes."

"Your mother did my aunt in Dalu."

"Did she."

"She did her for two days and took four hundred yuan and my uncle asked her to take more and she would not." The woman put the vegetables in the bag. "She has got it still."

"Got what?"

"You know what she has got," said the woman, and gave him the bag.

※

He asked to come to one.

"No."

"One?"

"No."

"You have done eleven."

"And eleven is not one, and you are not coming." His mother put the bag on the table. "I will tell you why and then we will not talk about it again. If you are in the room then I am working in front of my son. And if I am working in front of my son then I am not working.

There are four hundred people in this district who have had their mother done by me. Not one of them has ever known there was a son."

※

"So I am a thing you keep in a drawer?"

"You are a thing I keep off the rota," said Zhou Guifen.

"There is a difference. You will not see it until you are about forty."

※

That took about four hours. It is the only thing he did in the whole of January that he has never regretted. He went anyway.

※

It was on the eighth of February, in Banan, at a flat above a shop that sold tiles. He looked it up. She had it in her diary because she writes her week in a diary in the same hand as everything else. And he looked in the diary while she was out at the market on the Thursday. And he is not proud of it and he has said so.

The man was eighty-four. He had been ill for four years. There were about forty people in a room of about twenty square metres.

※

He stood at the back in a coat and did not take the coat off. And there was a woman of about fifty who looked at him twice. And then there was nobody looking at him for the whole of it. Dajie stood at the back.

※

And his mother worked.

※

He has described it four times and every one of the four descriptions is the same and none of them is any good. And the reason is that there is no version of what she did that can be written down.

She came up the stairs. She came up from the north and she came up slowly and every step was audible and she was not on the beat. Here is what she did.

She came in through the door and she did not look at the photograph and she did not look at the family and she went and stood in the corner behind the door. Which is the wrong place, which is where nobody stands. Which is where a person stands who is not working.

She stood there for several minutes and did nothing.

※

Dajie was at the back and he could not see which one it was. And he has said since that he has never once been able to work out from the back which one his mother is going to pick. And that he has watched her do it four hundred times and that he is not good enough at this to know. Then she found the one.

There was a woman in that room who had been making a noise since before he got there, for about forty minutes. What he could hear was the woman stopping.

She was at a pitch and a volume that had flattened the whole room out. And at about minute five of his mother's work the woman stopped.

And then the woman came apart.

※

She went across the room and put one hand flat on a shoulder and said one thing, and then a second thing. And then a third, and then she stood there. And the room came with her, and forty people who had been managing perfectly well for four days lost control. She did the shoulder.

It took about eleven minutes.

※

That is the part he was there for and it is the part he cannot describe. And then she did the whistle.

She had not made a sound out of her mouth in four years and she has not made one since. But there is a thing she can do with her nose. And it is not a whistle exactly, and it is the diaozi. And it comes out of the top of it at a pitch about the same as the sound a kettle makes in the next room.

Then she did the second four. Then she went back to the first. And on the third pass she did the thing Dajie has been trying to do since he was seventeen. She did four lines.

She held the fourth line about a quarter-beat over where it should have ended. Then she let it go down flat.

The whole room went with it.

※

He is not able to say what he felt. And it is not modesty, and he has tried four times. What he has said is that in the fourth minute of his own mother's whistle he understood something. He stood at the back in his coat.

He was standing at the back of a flat above a tile shop in Banan, and what he understood is that he has never once in his life done the real thing.

He has done about four hundred and six funerals.

He has never done the real thing.

※

※

He did not leave for about forty minutes after it was over.

Nobody asked him to and nobody asked who he was. And there were about forty people in a flat of about twenty square metres. And a woman of about fifty looked at him twice and then did not look at him again.

At about a quarter to four his mother came out and put her coat on. And she looked across the room and she saw him. And she did not do anything about it.

She did not nod and she did not frown and she did not come over. She stood in the doorway for a moment with her coat half on. And then she finished putting it on, and went down four flights of stairs, and he heard all of it.

※

He got the bus and got home at about four. His mother was in the kitchen and did not ask him where he had been and did not look up. He went home.

At about six she said, "You were at the back?"

"Yes."

"In the coat?"

"Yes."

※

"Then tell me," she said.

"Tell you what?"

"You were at the back for the whole of it," said Zhou Guifen.

"You are a man who has done four hundred funerals. And there is not one person in this city who has seen me work from the back of a room and could tell me what it was."

※

He thought about it for about a minute.

Then he said, "The room was flat until you got there."

"Yes."

"And you stood behind the door for four minutes."

"I did."

"And then she stopped making the noise and then she came apart."

"That is right."

"And then you did the whistle."

※

"And you held the fourth line on the third pass," said Dajie, "and the room went with you."

His mother put the knife down.

"You could hear that from the back?"

"I could hear that from outside the shop!"

※

She stood at the counter for a while.

"Nobody has ever told me that!" she said. "In thirty-eight years. Not one person has ever stood at the back of a room and come home and told me what I did."

※

She got the chair out from under the table and sat down in the kitchen with her coat still on, at about six in the evening, in front of a half-cut cabbage. Then she did something he had never seen her do.

Then she put both hands flat on the table.

It took her about four minutes to say the next thing.

※

"Do you know what I do in the afternoons?"

"No."

"You have lived in this flat for twenty-four years!"

"I know I do not know. That is the whole of what I know."

※

She got up and went into the back room and came back with a hardback exercise book.

It was about the same size as the one under He Jie's counter and about the same thickness and the corners had gone the same way, and it was a different colour. And it was the only object in that flat that Dajie had never seen.

She put it on the table.

"Open it."

※

He opened it.

It was about eleven pages.

There were four names in it.

※

Each one had about two pages and each one was in the small neat hand.

Each one started with a date and a street and a year. And then went on.

The first was 1977 and a man of about forty in a place called Wansheng. And there were eleven lines about him. And the lines were about his hands and his shoes and a joke he had made in a corridor. And there was nothing in it about anybody crying.

The second was 1988 and a woman of sixty-one in Banan, and there were about fourteen lines.

The fourth was 2009 and a woman of about fifty, and there were nine lines. And the last line was not finished. The third was 2001 and a man of thirty-four.

※

"That is all of it?"

"Four out of four thousand two hundred?"

"That is four."

"You have done ten thousand?"

"Somebody said ten thousand to a woman at a funeral in about 1994, and she told four people, and now it is true."

Zhou Guifen did not sit down.

"It is about four thousand. Maybe four thousand two hundred. I stopped counting in about 1996, and I started again in the January, and I do not know why."

"And you remember four out of four thousand?"

"I remember four."

※

"Why four?"

"Because those are the four where I did not do anything,"

"Only four?"

"Four." said his mother.

※

Dajie looked at the page.

"Say that again!"

"I went in and I stood behind a door and I did the work and I got paid and I came home." She put her hand flat on the book. "And on four of them I did something that was not in the trade. I do not know what it was."

"And I have been sitting at this table in the afternoons for two years, writing down everything I could remember about those four, so that one day I would be able to work out what it was."

※

"And did you?"

"No."

※

The fourth one was unfinished and it was a woman of about fifty and it was 2009. And the last line said something about a jar. He turned the pages.

"I have not finished it."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not remember the last thing," said Zhou Guifen.

"I have been trying since about 2011 and I am not going to get it. There is a version of that page that has got a line at the bottom of it, and I am not going to write it in, because I do not know what the line is."

※

Dajie closed the book.

"That is why you stopped working."

"It is not why I stopped working."

"It is why you stopped working," said Dajie.

※

Then she took the book off the table and put it back in the back room and came out and finished the cabbage and did not say anything about it again. And the whole of that conversation took about eleven minutes and he never got another one. His mother did not move for a while.

※

At the back of the notebook, under the two lines from the twelfth of January, he wrote five more. ---

He did not ask her what the four had been.

That is the thing, and he has thought about it for four years. And it is the only decision he made in that kitchen that he is still certain about. He had the book on the table in front of him and four pages in it and he did not ask what had happened on any of them.

He asked one thing instead, and it was not about the four, and she answered it. And he has never told anybody what she said.

※

He wrote it down that night.

Four names. Wansheng 1977. Banan 1988. 2001. 2009.

She remembers four out of about 4,200 and she has been writing them down for two years and she has told nobody.

The fourth one is unfinished. A woman of about fifty in 2009. The last line is about a jar.

She says the four are the four where she did something that was not in the trade and she does not know what it was.

I did four hundred and six and I have never done the real thing once.

※

Then he sat at the table in the front room with the pen in his hand for a long time.

And then he wrote the sixth line. And it is the last line he writes in that notebook for about four months. And it is the only line in the whole book that he wrote, and then read. And then could not get out of his head.

If she has got four out of four thousand two hundred.

That is what is on the page. Six lines, and the sixth one is a sentence with no end on it. He has looked at it nineteen times since. He has never been able to decide what he was going to write after the comma. He did not finish it.

※

He got as far as the third landing. Which is the landing with the chair on it. And he sat down on the step. And he sat there for about forty minutes in the dark in his own building. At about eleven o'clock he went out.

There is no version of that he can explain either, and he has stopped trying.

At about half past eleven his mother came up the stairs with the shopping bag because she had been out. And she got to the third landing and stopped, and looked down at him sitting on the step in the dark.

She said, "Are you going to sit there all night?"

And he said, "No."

And she said, "Then come up."

※

He came up.

※

He has said since that the reason he wrote the sixth line and did not finish it is that he had understood something at the bottom of that sentence.

There are two possible endings to it. He was afraid of one of them.

He has said, once, to Yan, in a car, in about April, that if his mother did something that was not in the trade on four of four thousand two hundred, then it happened about once every thousand funerals. He has never said which.

And that he had, at that point in the notebook, been doing the arithmetic on his own number. And that the arithmetic is the reason the sentence has no end on it. And that he had done four hundred and six.

CHAPTER 28

Twenty-Eight

The cost was four hundred and thirty thousand yuan and it was named on the eleventh of February in the yard, at about four in the afternoon, by a woman who had not been asked.

Dajie was not there for the naming. He got it second-hand from Peng. And he got it in about ninety seconds, and Peng did not enjoy telling him.

※

"Eleven households."

"I know it is eleven households."

"They have been offered the second column," said Peng. "The second column was four hundred and thirty thousand."

"And?"

"And they cannot take it. They can only take the third."

"And the third is two hundred and forty."

"The third is two hundred and forty and it is what a household that has agreed gets."

※

"Why only the third."

"Because the third column does not need the schedule," said Peng. "The third column is what the office offers a household that signs the form in the office."

"The form is in the office. The office has the form. The household does not need to produce anything."

※

"So if they sign."

"Then they get two hundred and forty thousand between eleven households, which is twenty-one thousand odd each."

"And they have already been paid twenty."

"They have already been paid twenty." Peng put his hands in his pockets. "The difference between the second and the third is one hundred and ninety thousand yuan across eleven households."

"And it is a sheet of paper in a drawer in Dadukou. About a third of the rows on it were signed by somebody on the eighth floor."

※

"Then it is not the amount."

"It is the amount and it is not the amount." Peng looked at the shed. "If there is a schedule, then somebody in an office has to read a row out loud."

"And the row has a signature on it that is not the household's signature. That is a thing that gets a file opened."

"If there is no schedule, nobody reads anything out loud, and there is no file."

※

"So we did not take an amount of money."

"You did not take an amount of money."

"We took the file."

"You took the file," said Peng.

"And the file is in a drawer in a flat in Dadukou. And a woman of twenty-four has had it since the ninth of November.

"And she is the only person left who can put a row in front of an office and make them read it."

※

Dajie stood in the yard for a while.

"Then it is not lost?"

"It is not lost!"

"It is in a drawer."

"It is in a drawer," said Peng.

"It has been there three months. A woman from an office in Dadukou has asked her for a copy four times and she has not brought it.

"And I am not going to say anything else about it."

※

"Why not?"

"Because the next thing is a question I have been not asking for three months," said Peng.

"I am not going to ask it in a yard at four in the afternoon. I am going to ask it in about a week, and I am going to ask it once."

※

He Jie was at the counter with the receipt book. There were three men in the yard and the two refrigerated trucks were running. And the light was off in the office. He went to the yard on the fourteenth.

※

"Sit down!"

"I am not on the rota."

"You have not been on the rota since the third of January. You have been in this yard eleven times since."

"I have not said anything about it. I am going to say one thing now and then we are going to go back to not saying anything about it." She did not look up. "You are not working here and you are not going to work here. And you are going to come here for about four more months because there is nowhere else to sit."

"That is going to be finished in about April. And in April you are going to have to work out what you are."

※

Dajie sat down.

"What am I?"

"An unattached man with a talent," said He Jie.

"There are about nine of those in this city, and they all end up doing it for free. It costs them about eleven years and then they are forty and they have a bag."

※

"Is that what happened to her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because your mother has got something I have not seen in anybody else in this trade," said He Jie.

"And I am not going to name it in a yard."

"You have got a version of it. You have not got the thing itself. The difference between you is about one thing.

"And you are not going to find out what it is until she is dead."

※

He did not answer that.

※

※

He asked it in the yard at about half past four, with the van shut and the two trucks running, and he asked it once. ---

The eleventh of February, and the twelfth, and the thirteenth. Nothing happened on any of them.

He went to the yard three times and did not do anything there. He loaded a van on the twelfth. Because one of the four men was off and Peng asked him. He did it for nothing and it took about two hours.

He Jie did not pay him. He did not ask.

That is the whole of the three days. Two hours of work. Three visits.

And one conversation of about ninety seconds with a man who had bought a debt for an embarrassing price, and who had known since November that it was not going to be paid.

And in the evenings he sat at the table in Banan and his mother made the beds.

Neither of them said anything about the book.

※

On the fourteenth, at about nine at night, she said one thing.

"Are you eating, or not?"

"Yes."

"Are you eating at the wonton place?"

"No."

"Then where?"

"I am eating here."

※

She stood at the door of the kitchen for a few seconds.

"Since when?"

"Since about the eighteenth of January."

※

And she went up the stairs, and that is the whole of it. It is about eleven words long.

It is the only conversation those two had about anything between the twelfth of January and the end of February.

※

On the sixteenth Peng asked the question.

"Are you going to give it to her?"

"What."

"The schedule. Are you going to give it to that girl."

※

"It is not mine!"

"That is not what I asked."

※

Dajie stood at the shed for a while.

"I do not know."

"You do not know?"

"No."

"You have known her since November. You have been in her flat nine times as far as I know, and you stood in a yard while He Jie said four sentences to her," said Peng.

"And you do not know."

※

"No."

"Then say why!"

※

"It is in a folder in a rented flat in Dadukou," said Dajie. "If she hands it over, it goes into an office, and then it is a document.

"And about a third of the rows on it were signed by somebody on the eighth floor."

"And?"

"And if she does not hand it over, then eleven households get twenty-one thousand each and sign a form and there is no file."

"And?"

"And those are the two things and I cannot make them different."

※

Peng put his hands in his pockets.

"That is the first time you have said a true thing in this yard without a drink in you," he said.

"And I am going to leave it there."

※

She was about forty and she had a folder and a lanyard. And she came to the yard because the yard is the address on the funeral contract. And she stood at the counter and asked for He Jie and was given her. The woman from the office in Dadukou came on the fifteenth.

※

"Ms He. I have come about the ninth-floor schedule."

"You have come about a schedule that was in a flat that was demolished on the fifteenth of January."

"I have come about a schedule that was in a flat that was demolished on the fifteenth of January."

※

"That flat was emptied on the eleventh of November," said He Jie.

"By a woman who was photographed coming out of it on the ninth."

"And the schedule was not in it on the eleventh. Unless you are telling me that your office had a person in it between the ninth and the eleventh."

"Your night man had the building between ten and four on the Friday."

"Your night man had the building between ten and four on the Friday."

※

There was a pause of a few seconds.

"Ms He, I am not here to accuse you of anything."

"Then you are here to ask me a question and you have not asked it."

※

The woman opened the folder and closed it again.

"The question is whether this company has a copy of it."

"No."

"Whether this company has a photograph of it."

"No."

"Whether this company knows who took it?"

※

He Jie put both hands flat on the counter.

"This company knows that a document was in a flat on the ninth floor of a building in Jiangbei on the ninth of November."

"That the flat was opened on the ninth of November, and again on the fifteenth of January.

"And that the building was demolished on the fifteenth of January at nine in the morning."

"Who opened it on the ninth?"

"A man who was on this company's rota and is not on it now."

"Name?"

"I will not be giving a name," said He Jie.

"And you will be writing in your file that a woman in this yard said that. In about four months somebody in your office is going to read that line.

"And it is going to be the only line in the file that is not a form."

※

The woman looked at her for a while.

"Ms He, I am going to be honest with you because I am forty-one and I am finished with this in about a year."

"Go on."

"When a schedule goes missing, the office does not lose the claim. The household loses the claim." She closed the folder properly. "There are eleven households in that building and about nine of them are on the second column, because somebody read the schedule in October."

"And now there is no schedule and there is no second column.

"And in about four months those nine households are going to sign a form in an office for twenty-one thousand yuan.

"And be told that that is what a household that has agreed gets."

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing," said the woman.

"I came because I am the person whose name is on the letter. And I wanted to see the yard."

"And I have seen it."

"Then go."

※

That is the whole of the visit and it took about eleven minutes. Dajie was standing about eleven feet away at the shed the whole time and heard all of it. She went.

He Jie did not turn round and look at him once.

※

She came in the morning with the folder and stood in the middle of the yard. She did not sit down and did not put the folder down. Yan came on the eighteenth.

※

"I have heard."

"Then you have heard."

※

"When the woman from the office came?"

"On the fifteenth."

"Why did nobody telephone me?"

"Because you are the person who has the schedule," said He Jie. "You are the person the office has rung four times. And I have known that since about the second week of December. I have not said it to anybody, and I am not going to say anything about it except one thing."

※

That is the point of the chapter. The whole of the rest of it is about four sentences and a man standing at a shed listening. Yan stood in that yard.

※

And He Jie said the four sentences. And she said them flat, in the dialect that she does not use with families and that she uses with men in yards. And there was nobody else within twenty feet. Yan said, "Ready for what?" He Jie said, "When you are ready."

※

"Ni lao han er yao shi zai, ta hui xiao."

"Ran hou ta hui ba zhe ge qian zheng hui lai."

"Ni yao de shi ta xiao."

"Wo yao de shi ta hui lai."

※

If your father were here, he would laugh.
And then he would earn it back.
You wanted his laugh.
I want him back.

※

Yan did not say anything for a few seconds.

Then she said, "That is not the same man."

"He is the same man."

"You did not know him."

"No."

"Then how do you know what he would have done?"

"Because there is nobody in this city who buys a building he built," said He Jie.

"I have been doing this twenty-six years. There are about four of them in this district and all four walk the same way." He Jie put the pen down. "He would have laughed at the missing schedule. He would have laughed for about eleven seconds. And then he would have gone and earned it back.

And by about August nobody would have been able to tell that anything had happened to that family. And there would have been a new building."

※

"And what did I want?"

"You wanted him to laugh," said He Jie. "You have wanted that since about 2011. You have said so to nobody and I have not asked."

"And it is the reason you are standing in this yard with a folder, and not a lawyer."

※

Yan put the folder down on the counter.

"I have got the schedule in that folder."

"I know you have."

"I have had it since the ninth of November."

"I know that as well."

"Then why have you not asked me for it?"

※

"Because the schedule is the only thing in this whole business that is on the right side," said He Jie.

"You are twenty-four. You are the only person in it who has not signed anything.

"And if I ask you for it, you will hand it to me and then it is mine. I am a funeral company. I am a paper.

"And it stops being a photograph taken out of a doorway by a daughter."

※

"That is not an answer!"

"It is the whole answer." He Jie picked the pen up. "In about four months an office is going to write to eleven households and offer them the third column. And you have got four months and one document and no money. That is not a position. That is a floor plan."

※

She stood in that yard for another minute and did not say anything, and then she said thank you. Which is the first time in the whole of the book that she has thanked anybody. And she walked out through the curtain and into the back road. Yan picked the folder back up.

※

She came back about three feet into the yard and looked at Dajie at the shed. She stopped.

"You heard all of that?"

"Yes."

"Good," said Luo Yan.

※

And she went.

※

※

He saw Wei Asi in the yard on the eighteenth. Which was the same day, at about eleven in the morning. And it was the first time in six weeks.

He came in the sedan and parked it badly, and he brought fruit. And he put the fruit on the counter. He stood in the yard and talked to He Jie about a delivery for a while, and did not talk to Dajie at all.

Then he turned round.

"You are still here."

"I am still here."

"You are not on the rota."

"No."

"Then why are you still here."

※

And Wei Asi looked at him and then he laughed, and it was a real laugh. And it was the first one in that yard in six weeks. Dajie said, "There is nowhere else to sit!"

"That is the only honest answer I have ever had in this yard," he said.

"And I am not going to do anything about it."

※

He picked the fruit back up and put it in the car.

"Two hundred and forty thousand," he said.

"And it is not going to be paid, and I have known that since about the ninth of November!"

"Then why are you still coming."

"Same as you," said Wei Asi.

"There is nowhere else to sit."

※

He drove off.

※

He wrote it down that night, in the back of the notebook, under the sixth line, which still has no end on it.

He Jie said four sentences to Yan in the yard on the eighteenth.

I am not writing them down.

He looked at that for a while.

Then he wrote one more.

She wanted him to laugh. He Jie wanted him to earn it back. Neither of them is going to get either. And the schedule is in a folder in a rented flat in Dadukou.

※

And then he did the thing he had been not doing since the fifteenth of January, and did not tell anybody about it for about three weeks. He sat at that table for about four hours.

He got the bag and put the gourd in it. He went out at about eleven at night and got a night bus into Jiangbei and went to the lane.

※

The lane was still there. That is the thing. The building was not and the lane was. And there was a sign on a pole. And a machine parked at the edge of it, and about nine steps coming up out of the ground.

He stood at the bottom of them for about forty minutes. And he had done this on the seventeenth and had not told anybody. And he did it again on the eighteenth and this time he stayed until about two in the morning.

At about two o'clock he went up the nine steps.

※

There are nine of them. They go up about five feet and then there is rubble and a drop.

He stood on the ninth one for several minutes and looked at where the eighth floor had been, and there was nothing there. And there is a version of that in which he said something out loud.

He has never said which version is the true one.

※

It was not on the wall. It had not been on the wall since the twenty-first of January. The dog was at the bottom of the steps.

At about ten past two in the morning he came down the nine steps.

And at the bottom of them it was standing in the lane about four metres away, with its one ear up and one ear folded over.

It was about four kilos light and one eye was bad and the leg was set wrong.

And then Dajie did something he cannot account for and has not told anybody about. It looked at him for a beat.

He crouched down in the lane at ten past two in the morning and put his hand out.

That is all. He put his hand out, at about the height a dog's head would be if the dog came to him. And he held it there for about thirty seconds without saying anything. And the dog stood four metres away in the lane with its back half turned and did not come.

※

There is a version of the story in which the dog came over.

He has told that version twice, in the spring, to two different people. Both times he was drunk.

After the second time he stopped telling it. And he has never told it to anybody who was in that lane.

What happened is that he crouched in a lane at ten past two in the morning with his hand out for about thirty seconds and a dog stood four metres away and did not come. And then he stood back up and put his hands in his pockets. And the dog turned round and went off down the lane towards the river road.

※

He has said that the twenty minutes on the step on the twelfth of January was the longest twenty minutes of his life.

He has never said which was longer and he has never been asked the right way. He has also said, once, that it was not.

And then it turned round and went off down the lane towards the river road. And it did not look back, and he did not follow it. Because it was two in the morning.

And there is a limit to what a man of twenty-four will do in a lane on the strength of a dog.

CHAPTER 29

Twenty-Nine

He went back to the fourth floor on the second of March.

He had been going back about once a week since the middle of January and he has never told anybody why and has never been asked. And the reason is a woman of about sixty.

She had said to him in a doorway on the twelfth of January that she had never gone up one flight of stairs. And that it was the only thing in her life she was ashamed of.

He did not go to tell her that it was all right. He has said that four times.

※

She gave him tea the first time and did not give him tea the second time and gave him tea every time after that.

They did not talk about the ninth floor. That is the arrangement and neither of them ever stated it and neither of them broke it. They talked about the demolition. They talked about the building across the lane, which had been given a number too.

They talked about a nephew of hers in Guangzhou who had telephoned twice in eleven years and had done very well.

※

On the second of March, at about four in the afternoon, she said: I have got something to tell you.

"And I would rather tell you than tell my sister."

"Tell me."

"There is a lump."

※

Dajie put the cup down.

"Where."

"Here." She put her hand on her own chest, on the left, and did not press it. "I found it in October."

"October?"

"I found it in about the second week in October."

※

There was a silence of a few seconds in that room.

Dajie said, "You found a lump in the second week of October!"

"Yes."

"And you have known for about five months?"

"About four and a half."

"And in the second week of October," said Dajie, "you put your television on louder."

※

She looked at him.

"Yes."

※

He did not say the thing.

He has said, to four people, that this is the whole of that afternoon and that he has gone over it more than any other ten minutes in his life. And that he has had four years to work out what he did and why. And that he is not going to give an answer.

What he did was this. He sat in a chair in a flat on the fourth floor of a rebuilt street in Jiangbei with a cup of tea going cold on the arm of it. And he did not say anything at all for about two minutes.

※

Then he said, "Have you been to a doctor?"

"No."

"Have you told the sister?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because my sister telephoned me about a lump in 2011," said the woman.

"And I told her to go and she went and it was nothing. And she has never let me forget that I made her go."

"She was fine. She has been fine for thirteen years. And I have had to hear about it for thirteen years."

※

"That is not a reason!"

"It is a reason."

"It is a reason and it is not a good one," said Dajie.

"And I am not going to be the person who tells you that it is a good one. I am not your son, and I am not a doctor, and I am not in the will."

※

She laughed.

It was a real laugh and it lasted about a second and a half. And it was the first time she had laughed in four months. It happened in the fourth-floor flat on the second of March at about twenty past four in the afternoon.

And at about that point Dajie stopped talking.

※

That is the whole of that afternoon.

He stopped talking at about twenty past four and he sat in a chair and drank the tea, which had gone cold. He did not say anything about the hospital. He did not say anything about her sister, or about the ninth floor.

She talked for about forty minutes about her mother, who had died in that flat in 1998. And about the arrangements.

And about a woman at the office who had said the right thing. And a cousin who had said the wrong one.

He said about nine words in forty minutes.

And at about five she stopped, and looked at the window. And said that she would go to the doctor on the Thursday.

※

He did not tell her to go.

He has been asked about that twice and has not answered it either time. She said it on her own, at about ten past five, on a Tuesday, having said nothing about the doctor for forty minutes. And he was sitting in a chair with a cold cup. And he did not say a single word that caused it.

※

※

He went back on the ninth, and on the sixteenth, and on the twenty-third.

That is three more times in March and it is the whole of what he did in March. And it is not in the schedule and it was not paid for and nobody in that yard knew about it.

On the ninth she had been to the hospital and had a date for a scan.

On the sixteenth she had been to the scan and did not know anything.

On the twenty-third she had a date in April and did not want to talk about it. And they talked for about an hour about a woman in the flat below who had put a television on louder in October.

※

She said, on the twenty-third, at about five o'clock: "Why do you keep coming back here?"

Dajie said, "I do not know."

"That is not an answer!"

"It is the answer I have got."

"It is the answer I have got."

※

She took her time with it.

"You are not doing anything," she said. "You sit in that chair and you say about nine words an hour and you drink the tea."

"And I have told you more in six weeks than I have told my sister in eleven years."

※

"Yes."

"Why is that?"

"Because you have not asked me for anything," said Dajie.

And she said, "Nor have you."

※

That is the whole of March. Three visits, one scan, one date in April, and about nine words an hour.

He has said since that he does not know whether he was working and that he has decided that he is not going to decide. And the reason he is not going to decide is this.

If it was work, then it was the best work he has ever done. And he was not paid for it. And it was in a flat on the fourth floor of a street that does not exist any more.

※

※

On the twenty-third she asked him for something.

That is important and it is the only time in the whole book that a person asks him for something in a room with nobody else in it. And he has gone over it more than the lump and more than the road.

She asked it at about four o'clock. She had been talking for about forty minutes about her mother again.

She said, "You do that for a living?"

"I did."

"Do you still?"

"No."

※

She was quiet for a bit.

"My mother died in this flat in 1998," she said.

"And there were about nine people in it and there was a man with a van. And I have not been able to think about April the nineteenth since."

"And I do not mean I am sad about it. I mean I cannot get it in an order."

※

Dajie put the cup down.

"What do you mean, an order?"

"I mean I was in the room," she said. "I was twenty-two."

"My sister was in the hospital with the lump she was terrified of. My father was in the doorway."

"And there were about nine people, and the whole thing is in my head as four pictures and a noise."

"And you want it in an order?"

"I want somebody to say it," said the woman. "I want somebody to say what happened in that room on that afternoon, so that there is a version of it that is not in my head."

"And I have been trying to do it myself for twenty-six years and I cannot."

※

Dajie said, "I cannot do that."

"Because you do not do it any more?"

"Because it is not the same thing," he said. "What you are asking for is a eulogy. A eulogy is a piece of paper with nine sentences on it."

"And I have never written one in my life. The man who writes them for that company is in Shapingba and is not my friend."

※

She looked at the window.

"Then tell me what you would do!"

※

And that is where the chapter stops being a chapter about a dog.

Dajie sat in a chair in a flat on the fourth floor for a few minutes and did not say anything. And then he did the thing he has never been able to explain. He has told nobody except Peng, in about four sentences, in a yard, in April.

He asked her a question.

※

He said, "What colour was the coffin?"

"Blue."

"What blue?"

"Dark. Like a coat."

※

"What was on the table?"

"There was no table. We were not that kind of family."

"Then what was there?"

"A photograph on a chair." She put her hand out. "On the chair. Because there was nowhere else to put it and my father would not have a table in that room."

※

"Who came in first?"

"The man with the van came in first. He came in and stood by the door and did not take his hat off."

※

"Where were you?"

"Against the wall."

"Which wall?"

"The one with the dresser."

"And who was on the other side of you?"

※

The woman did not answer for a moment.

"Nobody," she said. "There was nobody on the other side of me. There were nine people in that room and there was nobody on the other side of me.

I was standing against the dresser. And I was the only person in that room who had nowhere to be."

※

"Then that is the order!" said Dajie.

※

The woman sat in that chair.

"What?"

"Everything you have just told me is the order," he said. "The van man came in first and stood by the door and did not take his hat off. Your father was in the doorway. Your sister was not in the room. There were nine people. There was a photograph on a chair and not a table because your father would not have a table in it."

He put the cup down on the floor.

"And you were against the dresser with nobody on the other side of you, and you were twenty-two, and you have been standing there for twenty-six years."

※

She started crying.

Not in the trade way. She cried the way people cry when somebody has said a true thing in a plain voice with no music behind it. It lasted about four minutes. Dajie sat in the chair the whole time and did not put a hand on her shoulder and did not say one other word.

※

That is the whole of it and it is the last time in this book that anything like it happens.

He did not do the diaozi. He did not do the three sentences. He did not put his hand on anybody.

He asked about nine questions and put them in the order they had happened.

And a woman of forty-eight who had been standing in a doorway in her own head since 1998 sat in a chair in her own front room and came apart, and then stopped. And then looked at the window and said that she would put the kettle on.

※

He walked out at about half past five.

He got to the bottom of the stairs and into the lane. The lane was still there and the sign was still on the pole and the machine had gone.

And the dog was on the wall.

※

It was on the low wall on the corner, where the lane turns down to the river road. And it was the first time it had been on that wall since the twenty-first of January.

It was four kilos light and one eye was bad and the leg was set wrong.

It saw him when he came out of the door.

And it got off the wall.

※

There is a version of this in which the dog was waiting for him.

He has never said that version to anybody and he is fairly sure it is not true. And the reason he is fairly sure is that a dog cannot know which door a man is going to come out of. There are about four doors on that lane.

What happened is that it was on the wall. And it saw him, and it got off the wall. And it stood in the lane and looked at him for a beat. And then it turned and went off towards the river road.

And then it stopped.

And then it looked back.

※

He followed it.

※

That is the whole of the two miles and there is not much to it.

The lane goes down to Binjiang Lu, and Binjiang Lu goes along the river for about eleven kilometres.

It is a road with four lanes and a lot of freight on it. There are no pavements on about a kilometre of it, because of the works.

The dog went along the top of the embankment where there is a strip of grass and a rail.

It did not run. It went at a walking pace, and its back left leg went wrong about every fourth step. And it stopped about four times in the first mile and looked back and waited.

And Dajie followed it.

※

He has been asked why he followed it and has given four answers, and none of them is the reason. The reason is that on the second of March at about twenty to six in the evening he did not have anything else to do.

And a dog that had not been in that lane since January had come to the top of the stairs and looked back at him.

That is the whole reason.

※

The fog came down at about six. By half past six the far bank was gone and the far end of the road was gone.

There were headlights coming along the embankment above the river in both directions.

It was not raining.

That is one of the four things about that evening that he has insisted on, over and over, to four different people. And the reason he has insisted on it is that he has told them all, at some point, that it was raining.

※

It was not raining. It was the second of March and it was fog and it was about eight degrees and the road was dry.

He has said that four times, and each time he has said it in the register he uses when he is telling the truth.

And each time, the person he was talking to had already heard the other version.

※

※

They went about two miles in total.

Here is what is on that stretch of road. And he has given this list to four people and all four of them have asked him why he remembers it. And he does not know why he remembers it.

A shuttered pool hall with a corrugated roof that had come off at one corner and been wired down.

A cement works with the name painted on the wall in characters two metres high, of which about nine were still readable.

A woman selling something out of a cart at the top of a set of steps down to the water. And she was there at half past six in the evening in fog in March. And he has never worked out what was in the cart.

A man asleep in a plastic chair outside a shop that sold nothing.

Four hundred metres of rail with about eleven points along it where the rail has been replaced and the new section is a different colour.

And about four hundred metres where there is no pavement, and there is a metal barrier. And the barrier has a piece missing at the far end of it.

※

That is the list. He has said it four times in the same order without looking anything up.

※

The dog stopped at about the mile and a half mark and lay down on the grass between the rail and the road.

It was there about four minutes.

Dajie stood over it and did not touch it.

He had put his hand out in a lane on the eighteenth of February and held it there for thirty seconds and the dog had not come. And he had decided something about that and has never said what.

※

Then it got up and went on.

And at the point where the pavement ends. Which is the point where the two miles is nearly done and the works begin, the dog went down off the embankment.

That is the only way to keep going. The rail stops and there is a gap and the grass runs out.

And then there is a pavement on the other side of about four metres of road.

※

Dajie went down after it.

And he has said, four times, that this is the part where he should have picked it up. And that he did not pick it up. And that he is not going to explain why he did not pick it up.

There is no explanation. He was four metres behind a dog on a pavement on Binjiang Lu at twenty to seven in the evening and it had walked two miles and he had walked two miles and neither of them had anywhere to be. And he did not pick it up because it had not let him touch it since November.

The dog stopped at about the mile and a half mark and lay down on the grass between the rail and the road for several minutes, and Dajie stood over it and did not touch it. And then it got up and went on.

They got to the place where the works are, at the point where the pavement comes back, at about twenty to seven.

The dog went down off the embankment onto the pavement because that is the only way to keep going. And that is the point at which a dog is on a road.

※

Dajie was about four metres behind it.

That is the thing he has said most often. And it is the most important number in the chapter. And he has never once got it wrong.

Four metres. He was four metres behind it, and he called it once.

It had no name. Nobody in that district had ever given it one. Because it had not belonged to anybody since it came out from under a roll-down shutter in November. Nobody had needed to call it.

He called it Hua Jiao.

※

He called a dog that had followed him two miles along Binjiang Lu by a name he invented on the pavement, out loud, once, at about twenty to seven.

He was four metres behind it. And the dog turned round.

※

And that is where the chapter stops.

There is a road with four lanes and about four thousand vehicles an hour on it at that time of the evening and there are about eleven zhatuche an hour on that stretch because the works are at the far end of it, and there was fog. And there was a rail on one side and a wall on the other.

And a dog turned round on a pavement and looked at a man.

※

He has said, four times, in the register he uses when he is telling the truth, that he was four metres behind it.

He has said, four times, in a different register, that it was raining. And that the truck came out of the fog. And that he carried it off the road. And that it was still alive when he picked it up.

Both of those cannot be true.

What is true, and what is in neither version, is that he called it Hua Jiao on the pavement at twenty to seven. And it turned round.

And it was the first time in four months that anything in this city had looked at him when he said its name.

CHAPTER 30

Thirty

The truck was a zhatuche on Binjiang Lu and it was not going fast and it was not going slow and it was doing about forty kilometres an hour with a load. Which is the speed at which a loaded construction vehicle takes about eleven metres to stop.

That is the whole of what anybody knows about it. And he has known it for four years.

He got it off a police report he was not allowed to read and read anyway.

※

Four metres.

He has said it four times and it has never changed.

He was four metres behind the dog and the dog was on the pavement. And the pavement ends and there is a barrier and the barrier has a piece missing at the far end of it. And the dog went through the gap in the barrier and onto the road.

And that is the part that nobody has ever been able to explain, including Dajie, including Peng, including the two men who came afterwards.

It had walked two miles along the top of an embankment behind a rail with a man four metres behind it. It had crossed nothing. And at the end of the pavement it went through a gap in a barrier.

And onto four lanes of Binjiang Lu at twenty to seven in the evening on the second of March.

※

Dajie called it.

He called it Hua Jiao. Which was the name he had invented about nine seconds earlier, on the pavement, out loud, once.

And the dog turned round.

※

He has said, four times, that it turned round on the pavement and looked at him.

He has also said, four times, that it went under the truck.

Both of those are true and they are in the same sentence and he has never been able to get them the right way round.

※

Here is what happened, and it is about four seconds and he has never once been able to give it in the order it happened.

The dog went through the gap.

The dog turned round.

He was four metres away and he saw the whole of the head and the whole of the near shoulder and the eye that was bad. And it was turned toward him and not toward the road.

There was a horn and it was not the truck's horn and he has never established whose horn it was.

And then there was the noise. Which is the thing that has never left him, and which was not loud, and which was the sound of a body of about nine kilograms meeting a wheel arch at about forty kilometres an hour. And it is not the sound anybody expects.

※

He did not see it go under.

That is what he has been most insistent about. It is the reason he has never been able to give the four seconds in an order. He saw the head and the shoulder and the eye. He heard the horn. He heard the noise.

And there is a gap in it of about a second and a half in which he was looking at the road and not at the dog, and he does not know why. And he has said that he thinks he flinched, and that he is not certain. And that he has never told anybody that he thinks he flinched.

※

It did not die in the road.

That is the second thing and it is the only mercy in the chapter, and it took about four minutes. And he sat on the kerb with it in his arms. A woman came out of a shop on the other side of the road and asked him whether he was all right.

He said yes.

She asked him again.

He said yes.

※

It weighed about nine kilograms and he had never picked it up before, not once, in four months. It had not let him. And on the pavement on Binjiang Lu at about twenty to seven on the second of March it let him, and did not have any choice about it.

He picked it up off the road and carried it to the kerb. Which is about four metres, and sat down on the kerb with it across his lap and did not put it down.

※

The two men came at about ten past seven.

He does not know who they were. He has never found out. They came from the direction of the works and they had a torch. One of them had a phone. The other one had a jacket that he took off and put on the ground.

Neither of them was police. Neither of them was ambulance. Neither of them was anybody he has been able to identify since.

They stood there for about a minute and asked him two questions.

"Is it yours?"

"No."

"Did you see the plate?"

※

He said no to the second one.

That is a lie. He had the plate. He has had the plate for four years and he has never reported it and has never given it to anybody and has never once said the number out loud. And it was a Yu B and he read it off the back of the vehicle as it went past and it is in his head the way a phone number from 2011 is in his head.

※

The two men went.

And at about half past seven the dog stopped, and Dajie was sitting on a kerb on Binjiang Lu with it across his lap. And he did not move for a long time.

※

Here is the thing about the next part and it is the reason this chapter exists and it is not about the dog.

At about eight o'clock a woman came past and stopped. And she was about fifty and she had a bag of vegetables. And she stood there for a moment and looked at him sitting on a kerb with a dog in his lap. And then she said, in the dialect, in the way people in that city say a thing to a stranger at a bus stop.

"That one has been on that wall for four months."

※

Dajie said, "Is it the same one?"

"It is not the same one."

※

She looked at it.

"No," she said. "It is. I live on that street."

"It has been on the wall since about November and it has been wrong in the leg since about the new year."

※

And that is where he has said that he started crying. And it is the first time in the whole of this book that he cries. And it happened on a kerb on Binjiang Lu at eight in the evening on the second of March, in front of a woman of about fifty with a bag of vegetables.

He has said that it was not about the dog.

※

She put the bag down.

She put the bag of vegetables down on the pavement and stood there for a few seconds, and then she crouched down. Which is what people do. And put a hand on his shoulder and did not say anything at all, and left it there for about a minute.

And then she picked the bag back up and went on up Binjiang Lu towards the bus stop.

She did not say one other word.

※

He stayed on that kerb until about ten o'clock.

※

And at some point in those two hours he did something that he has told nobody and that is not in any of the four versions.

He has had four years and he is not going to put it in the fifth.

※

At about a quarter past nine he was still sitting on that kerb with the dog across his lap.

There was a bag of vegetables going cold three metres away on the pavement, where the woman had put it down and then picked it up.

And he said the three things.

He said them quietly. He did not do the shoulder, because there was nobody to put a hand on. And there was no room and no family and no forty people.

※

"Don't you worry about it."

"I will take care of it."

"Go and sit down."

※

And then he said the fourth thing. That is the one he uses on the ones who are going to go all the way. He has never written it down and it is not in the notebook.

"I know. I know. Go on."

※

There was a truck about four hundred metres along and it was doing about sixty.

It went past and the wind came off it and moved the bag.

And then there was nothing on Binjiang Lu at all for about forty seconds.

※

He cannot account for why he did it.

He has said four different things about why he did it and none of them is the reason.

The reason is that he had been sitting on a kerb for an hour and a half with a dog on his lap. There was nowhere else for either of them to go.

And his mouth did the thing that his mouth does.

※

And here is the only part of that night that he has ever described without being asked.

He said that for about two minutes after, sitting on that kerb, he was better.

Not happy. He is careful about that word and he has used it four times and each time he has corrected himself. He was better. The thing that had been in his chest since about twenty to seven was not in his chest any more, and it had gone somewhere. And the road was the same road and the fog was the same fog and a dog had died in his lap.

※

And then at about half past nine a man went past on a bicycle and rang a bell at him and told him to move.

That is all.

A man on a bicycle on Binjiang Lu told him to move off a kerb. And he got up, and he picked up the dog. And he has said that the two minutes ended on the bell.

※

That is the whole of it. He has told four people about the truck and he has told nobody about the two minutes. And the four of them all have the version with the rain in it. And the two minutes is the only part of that night that has anything in it that is not a dog.

※

And he did not telephone anybody.

That is the other thing about those two hours. It is the last thing in this chapter that is about him and not about his mother.

He had a telephone in his pocket the whole time. He had four numbers in it that he could have used. And he knew all four by heart. Because he had used them about two hundred times in three months.

※

He did not telephone Peng because Peng is a professional and would have come, and Dajie has said that he did not want a professional.

He did not telephone He Jie because He Jie would have sent Peng.

He did not telephone Youcai because Youcai is a man who writes things down. And there was nothing on that kerb that Dajie was going to let be written down.

※

And he did not telephone his mother. And that is the fourth one and it is the only one he has ever explained.

He has said that his mother would have answered in about two rings and asked three questions and been on the road in eleven minutes with a coat over a nightgown. And that she would have lit a cigarette and stood on the kerb. And that she would not have said one single word about the dog. And that she would have taken the plate off him inside four minutes.

※

That is the whole of it and it is why he sat on the kerb until ten o'clock.

Not grief. His mother would have got the plate off him inside four minutes. He has known that about her since he was about nine years old.

※

That is the whole of the death and the rest of the chapter is a man walking.

He walked home.

It is about eleven kilometres from the works to Banan by the road and about nine by the river.

He took the road because he did not think about it, and because there are no buses after nine on that stretch.

He carried the dog for about the first kilometre and then he put it down.

He has said that he could not carry it eleven kilometres. And that he has never forgiven himself for putting it down.

※

He stopped at a shop at about half past ten, near the far end of Binjiang Lu. And the man in it was closing and let him in anyway, and Dajie asked for a bag. And the man gave him a bag, and did not ask him what was in it.

The bag was a binggui bag. It was blue plastic and it had the name of a company on it that sells frozen dumplings. And he put the dog in it on the pavement outside the shop and carried it the rest of the way.

※

He got to Banan at about half past twelve.

※

His mother was not home. That is normal.

He went up the twenty-nine steps with the bag and put it in the front room on the floor by the door. And then he sat at the table with his hands flat on it. And that is where he was at about one in the morning when his mother came in.

※

She stopped in the doorway.

She looked at the bag on the floor.

She said, "Is that the dog?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with it?"

※

She came in and put her own bag down on the table and did not take her coat off.

She said, "Where?"

And he said, "Binjiang Lu."

And she said, "What did you do with the plate?"

※

And that is the thing.

He has said that this is the whole of his mother and that it took her about two seconds and that he has never been able to work out how she did it. And that it is the single most frightening thing that has ever happened to him.

He had not said one word about a plate.

He had said *Binjiang Lu*. And he was sitting at a table with a bag on the floor. And a woman of fifty-two came in and took her coat off the hook.

And said: *what did you do with the plate.*

※

"I have not got a plate!"

"You have got the number."

"I have not got the number!"

"You have got the number," said Zhou Guifen.

"You have been sitting at that table for eleven minutes with your hands flat on it. You read it off something and you have not written it down."

"And you are not going to write it down. And that is the correct thing, and you are going to hold it for about four years."

"And then you are going to give it to somebody. And I am not going to be that person."

※

He did not say anything.

She went and got the bag and took it out to the yard and did not open it.

※

She was out there about four minutes.

He could hear her feet on the concrete and nothing else.

At one point there was a sound that was either the bag or the shed door. He has never asked which.

※

When she came back in she washed her hands at the sink and dried them on the cloth that hangs on the oven handle. And she did all of it at the ordinary speed.

That is the thing about his mother and it is the whole of her and he has said it four times.

There is nothing in that flat that she does at a different speed. Not the drawer at nine o'clock, not the beds, not the bag, not the washing of the hands. She did the funeral of her own son in 2020 and counted a drawer at nine o'clock that night.

And on the second of March 2024 her son came in at one in the morning with a dead dog in a frozen-dumpling bag. And she took it out to the yard and came back in and washed her hands at the ordinary speed.

※

He has said that he does not know whether that is strength.

He has said that he thinks it is a trade and not a strength. And that there is no way of telling the difference from outside. And that he has been inside it for twenty-four years and cannot tell either.

※

She came back in at about half past one and washed her hands and sat down at the table opposite him.

She did not look at him.

"Whose dog was it?"

"Nobody's."

"Then who is going to bury it?"

"I am."

※

"Where?"

And Dajie said, "Under the wall."

And his mother said, "No!"

※

And that is the whole of the argument and it lasted about four seconds.

"There is no wall there any more."

"There is a wall outside this building."

"There is a wall outside this building and it is a street wall," said Zhou Guifen.

"And you are not putting a dog in a street wall!"

"You will bury it by the shed at the back. And you will do it in the morning before it is light."

"And you will not tell anybody. And there is nobody in this city who is going to ask you about it, because there is nobody in this city who knows it existed."

※

He did that.

※

The burial is four lines long and it is the last thing in this chapter.

He did it at about half past five in the morning on the third of March by the shed at the back of a building in Banan. And he was alone, and he did not say anything. And there was no mark and he did not put a mark.

He has never gone back to it. Not once, in four years. And the building has not been demolished and the shed is still there. And he has walked past that shed about nine hundred times.

※

※

He went to the yard on the third at about eleven. Because he did not have anywhere else to go.

And because there was nowhere else to sit.

Peng was loading a van and did not stop loading it.

※

"You have been crying?"

"No."

"You have been crying and you have been up all night and you are not on the rota."

"I know I am not on the rota."

※

Peng put his end of the crate down.

"Say it."

And Dajie said, "The dog is dead."

"Which dog?"

※

Peng did not say anything for a beat.

He had met that dog. That is the thing. He had met it in November on the steps of a building in Jiangbei and had said the sentence that Dajie has never forgotten. Which was that the dog was doing the thing Dajie did, only it was not asking anybody for anything. Which is why it worked and he did not.

※

"How."

"On Binjiang Lu. Last night."

"Was it quick?"

"No."

※

Peng picked the crate back up.

"Right," he said.

And then he put it down again and stood there with his hands on it.

※

"You are going to want to say something about it," he said.

"Do you want to know?"

"No."

"And there is nothing to say about it. I am going to tell you the one thing there is, and then we are going to load this van."

"Go on."

"A dog is not a person!" said Peng. "It is a thing that is on a wall."

"And you have been sitting in that lane since November, and that dog has been on that wall since November."

"And every person in this district has walked past the both of you about four hundred times."

※

"And?"

"And nothing!" said Peng. "That is the whole of it. It is not a moral and it is not a lesson and there is nothing in it for you."

"And in about four years you are going to have told four people that it was raining and that a truck came out of the fog. And all four of them are going to believe it."

"And none of it is going to have been true."

※

Dajie said, "How do you know that?"

And Peng said, "Because you have just told me it was dry on Binjiang Lu, and you told me a sentence ago that it was quick."

※

That is the whole of that conversation and it took about ninety seconds and Peng loaded the van.

He did not ask what Dajie had done with it. He did not ask whether it had a plate and did not ask where it was buried.

Dajie has said since that he has never worked out whether that was a kindness or the end of an interest.

※

He came back in at about six and his mother was sitting at the table with the tea made and a bowl out.

She pushed the bowl across.

He sat down and ate it and neither of them said anything about the dog.

And at about twenty past six, with the bowl in front of him and the light coming up outside, his mother said the thing that closes this chapter.

He has never once repeated it to anybody.

She said, "Was it working?"

And he said, "I do not know."

And she said, "Then it was working!"

And he said, "How do you know?"

And she said, "Because you do not know."

CHAPTER 31

Thirty-One

Youcai came on the fourth of March at about seven in the evening.

He came with the green exercise book in his inside pocket and a bag of oranges.

He had not been to that flat in Banan in the whole of the book.

He stood in the doorway for a moment and looked at the room.

It has a bed and a table and a plastic stool and a television with a cracked corner. And then he came in and put the oranges on the table.

※

"Your mother."

"She is out."

"Where?"

"At a job."

※

Youcai sat down on the plastic stool. Which is the visitor's chair in that flat, and put both hands on his knees.

He said, "The operation was on the nineteenth."

"I know."

"It worked."

"I know."

※

"How do you know."

"Peng told me on the twenty-second," said Dajie.

"Peng does not know."

"Peng knows everything that has ever been in that yard and he does not repeat any of it."

"And he told me on the twenty-second. And he told me because he thought I was the person who should know."

※

Youcai said, "Then say the next question."

And Dajie said, "Where did the money come from."

※

He said it flat, because it is the only way to ask a question like that.

And because he had been carrying the question for eleven days.

And Youcai said, "Wei Asi."

※

Dajie did not move.

"Say it again!"

"Wei Asi. On the eleventh of January, in a restaurant in Shapingba, at about half past eight at night." Youcai took his hands off his knees and put them on the table. "He was in there with two men, and I went and sat at the table. Which is a thing you do in that city and everybody knows it."

"And I asked him for one hundred and twenty-six thousand yuan."

※

"And he gave it to you."

"He gave it to me on the Tuesday."

"At fifteen percent above paper."

"At fifteen percent above paper, over two years, with a written agreement and a schedule."

"And the first payment was on the first of February and I made it." Youcai did not look up. "It is the most expensive money in this city and it is money and it worked."

"My mother has been out of the hospital since the twenty-eighth of January. And she is doing a job tonight in Dadukou."

※

Dajie sat at the table with his hands flat on it.

"He has been in that yard nine times since."

"I know."

"You did not tell me."

"No."

※

"Why not?"

"Because you would have taken it as your fault," said Youcai.

"And it is not. And I am not going to spend the next four years listening to you make it your fault, because it is mine."

"I have got the schedule for it and I am going to pay it. It will be paid by about April. And then I will owe him nothing and he will owe me nothing and we will never speak again."

※

"That is not why you did not tell me."

"No."

"Then why."

※

Youcai put both hands flat on the table. Which is a thing that He Jie does and which he has picked up and which he has never noticed.

"Because in the whole of that winter," he said, "I did not want to be the man who borrowed money from Wei Asi in front of you."

"I have thought about that for six weeks and it is the reason. And it is not a good one, and I am not going to dress it up."

※

He put it on the table between them and did not open it. He got the book out.

※

And then he said the thing.

※

"I have been carrying this thing around in my pocket since the ninth of November," said Youcai.

"And there is one line that I have wanted to say to you since about the fourth of December. It is not in the book and I have not written it in the book."

"I am going to say it out loud in this kitchen, and then we are never going to talk about it again."

"Say it."

※

"On the fifth of November I stood in a yard in Jiangbei," said Youcai.

"And looked at a man sitting on a wall with a gourd between his feet."

"And I made a decision about him in about eleven seconds."

"Go on."

"I decided that he was a drunk with a talent and no money and a mother with a heart problem," he said.

"And I decided that a man with nothing is a man who can be asked for something and will say yes."

"And I was right. And you said yes on the Monday, in a noodle shop, before I had finished the sentence."

※

Dajie did not say anything.

"That is the thing I should have said in the first week. Not in a speech. In four words, at that table in the noodle shop. *I am using you.*"

※

"You did not use me."

"I did."

"You asked me for a job and I took the money and I took the drink," said Dajie.

"And I did the thing I wanted to do."

"And you did not make me go up those stairs."

"I put the stairs in front of you."

"The stairs were there."

※

"That is not the same thing," said Youcai, "and you know it is not."

"In November there was a version of you that was a man on a wall in Banan who talked to strangers in teahouses."

"And did not know what was in the ninth-floor flat."

"And in March there is a man who has been on that landing and knows all of it. And the difference between those two men is about four hundred and thirty thousand yuan. And about eleven conversations that I arranged."

※

"That is not true."

"It is true and you cannot answer it," said Youcai.

"Which is how I know it is true. And I have known it since the twenty-first of November and I have not said it in eleven weeks."

※

Dajie got up and got two glasses and poured water out of the tap because there was nothing else in the flat.

He put one down in front of Youcai and sat back down.

※

"Say why you did not say it in November."

"Because I needed you in November," said Youcai.

※

That is the whole of the first part of this chapter.

※

"Sit down."

"I am sitting."

"You have been sitting for about a minute and you have not said the thing you came to say."

※

"I have said two of the three."

"Then say the third."

"It is not a thing, it is a question."

"Whose?"

"Mine."

"Ask it."

※

Youcai put both hands on the table.

"Do you want to know what happened on that landing."

※

Dajie did not answer.

"Answer."

"Why?"

"Because I have asked you one hundred and eleven questions since November. You have answered about ninety of them."

"And this is the one I have never asked."

※

"Ask the other one."

"There is no other one."

"There is another one."

"There is not."

※

"Then ask me whether it matters."

※

Youcai was quiet for a few seconds.

"Does it matter?"

"No," said Dajie.

"Then that is the answer and you have just given it."

※

Youcai opened the book.

He did it after about a minute of not saying anything. And he did it the way a man opens a book he has read eleven times. Which is that he did not look for the page.

※

"I am going to read you two."

"Why?"

"Because you have not heard one since November. And because there are four in here that are not yours."

"And I am not going to tell you which."

※

He read the first one.

It was the sentence about the four men in a corridor not being a funeral detail but a fact. And it is Peng's line and it is marked, and Dajie knew it was Peng's about four words in.

Then he read the second one, and the second one was Dajie's. And it was from the second night and it was about the tea.

※

"That is not how I said it."

"Is it not?"

"That is exactly how you said it."

"You have taken the room out of it."

"There is no room in a notebook."

"There is a room in everything," said Dajie.

"Then it is not a notebook," said Youcai. "It is a room."

※

And that is the closest either of them got to an argument about the notebook in the whole of that winter. It lasted about eleven seconds and neither of them raised their voice.

Dajie has said since that he has never been able to work out which of them won it.

※

Youcai shut the book.

"Say something to me."

"What?"

"Anything. Something you would say in a corridor."

"Why?"

"Because I have got one hundred and thirty-one of them written down and I have not heard one out loud since the eleventh of November," said Youcai, "and I want to know whether the book has got it right."

※

Dajie drank some water.

Then he said, in the flat voice, in a kitchen in Banan, at about twenty to nine at night, one line.

He said that the reason you drink at a funeral is medicine and not grief.

※

Youcai sat with that for a beat.

"That is it."

"That is what?"

"That is the one," he said. "That is the one I have been trying to get the room into for four months. And it is the one that is not going to survive the book."

※

"Why not?"

"Because the book has got the words and it has not got *at a funeral*," said Youcai. "In the book it is a sentence about drinking. In a corridor it is a man explaining to a woman why she should have a glass at her own son's wake."

※

And Dajie said, "Then write that."

And Youcai said, "No."

"Why not?"

"Because that is the rule," said Youcai. "If I write the corridor then in four years the corridor is what happened. If I write the sentence then in four years the sentence is what happened, and the corridor is not."

※

Youcai stayed until about half past nine. They did not talk about the fare or the yard or anything after that.

At about eight his mother came in with the bag and put it down.

She looked at the visitor once and went and made the beds.

Youcai stood up when she came in. Which is the correct thing, and she nodded at him once.

"Ma."

"You have a visitor."

"Yes."

"You did not tell me."

"No."

※

She looked at Youcai for a moment.

"You are the one with the book?"

"I am."

"Then sit down," said Zhou Guifen. "You have been standing up in my kitchen for two minutes and it is my kitchen and you are making the room smaller."

※

Youcai sat down.

She picked the bag up and did not leave.

"How is your mother?"

"Better."

"Better or well?"

"Better," said Youcai.

"Then she is not well."

"No."

※

"When was it?"

"The nineteenth of January."

"And what did you do?"

"I borrowed it."

"From who?"

※

Youcai did not answer that.

And Zhou Guifen said: then you borrowed it from somebody who is going to be in your life for two years.

"And you are twenty-five."

"And I am not going to ask you who it was, and you are not going to tell me."

"Thank you."

"Do not thank me. I have got three hundred yuan in a tin upstairs and it is not for you and it is not for him and it is for a bad month."

※

She went to the door and stopped.

"You have got the book in your pocket and you have been reading out of it to him for about an hour," she said. "And I want to say one thing about the book and then I am going to bed."

"Go on."

"The woman in this flat has not made a sound in four years and she has been out of work for two."

"And there is nothing about her in that book."

"Should there be?"

"That is not for me to say," said Zhou Guifen. "It is your book and you are twenty-five and you have got a rule about how people felt."

※

And she went up.

※

At the fourth step she stopped.

"Boy. He has not asked you about your mother."

"No."

"Has he asked you about anything."

"About the money."

"That is not your mother," said Zhou Guifen. "And you have been in this kitchen for two hours and you have not asked him about his."

※

"I know."

"Then why not?"

※

Youcai said, "Because I have known him since the fifth of November and I have asked him about his mother twice."

"And the second time was in a car in December. It was nine words long and he answered it in five."

"And I wrote down the five words and I have read them about forty times."

"What did he say?"

"He said, she has not asked me what I do."

※

Zhou Guifen stood on the fourth step for a few seconds.

"And has she?"

"No."

"Then you have got your answer and it is not in the book and you have just had it in a kitchen," she said.

"And I am going to make the beds."

※

She went up the rest of it.

※

And Youcai sat in the kitchen for a while with the book on his knee and did not say anything at all.

Dajie has said that it is the only time in the whole of that winter that he watched Youcai change his mind about something without one word being said.

※

At about half past nine, at the table, with the green exercise book shut between them, Youcai said the other thing.

※

"I have one more thing and it is the reason I came. And I want you to sit there and take it, and I am going to say it once."

"Say it."

※

"On the twelfth of January a woman of seventy-nine stopped talking in the middle of a sentence about a bus route."

"On the eighth-floor landing of a building in Jiangbei. And you were sitting on the step below her head."

"Yes."

"And on the fourteenth of November there was a woman of eighty-one in a teahouse in Yuzhong. She ate qingtai out of a newspaper and told you what her son was frightened of."

"Yes."

※

"And those two things are eleven weeks apart, and there is no document in this city that connects them," said Youcai.

"There is no office and there is no file. And there is not one person alive who can prove that what you said on that landing on the night of the twelfth of January was something you could have known."

※

Dajie said, "I know."

"And there is a version of it in which you knew about the hook since the fourteenth of November."

"And you sat on that step for four months with a thing in your pocket. You had bought it in a teahouse for the price of a bag of vegetables."

"And you took it out at the exact moment it would hurt the most."

※

Dajie did not say anything.

※

"And there is a version in which you are a man of twenty-four in a stair-street in Banan."

"And you heard a woman who is not related to you say a thing about a boy who drowned in 1979."

"And who carried it for four months. And who said it to a dying woman because he could not think what else to do with his hands."

Youcai put both hands on the book.

"And held the fourth line a quarter-beat over. Like his mother."

※

"Which one is it."

"I do not know."

※

"You have been writing everything down for four months."

"I have been writing down what you said." Youcai said it without any weight at all. "One hundred and thirty-one lines and a date and a time and the room. Not one word about how anybody felt, including me. That is the only rule I have got."

※

"Then you have got nothing."

"I have got one hundred and thirty-one lines and a date and a time and the room," said Youcai.

"And in about four years somebody is going to read them and they will not be able to tell either."

"And I am not going to help them. And I am not going to help you."

※

"You could decide."

"No."

"You could decide and then in four years there would be one person in this city who knew what happened."

"There is already one person in this city who knows what happened, and it is you," said Youcai.

"And you do not know. And that is the whole of it."

"And I am not going to decide for you. I am not going to decide for you because I am the man who put the stairs in front of you. And a man who has done that does not get to have an opinion."

※

He stood up.

He put the book back in his inside pocket and buttoned it.

※

"I am going to say one more thing and then I am going to get the bus."

"Say it."

※

"In about four years you are going to be standing in a room with somebody who has lost the person they have got," said Youcai.

"And you are going to do what your mother does." "Not what I put in the book. Not the thing you do in corridors. The thing she does, which is about four in four thousand."

"And?"

"And there is going to be nobody in that room who knows it is happening, including you," said Youcai.

"And that is the whole of my opinion. It is the only one I have got and it is not about the twelfth of January."

※

He got the bus at about ten. And the flat in Banan was the same flat it had been. He went.

His mother came down at about half past ten and made tea, and neither of them said anything about the visitor.

※

That is the first night since the eleventh of November that he has not written anything down. And it is not because there was nothing to write. Dajie did not write anything down that night.

※

He got the notebook out at about eleven and put it on the table.

He looked at it for a while and did not open it.

Then he put it back in the bag and went to bed with his clothes on.

※

And that is the whole of the chapter and it is the last conversation those two have about any of it for eleven weeks. And the next time Youcai says anything to him about the stairway it is in a car in July, and it is nine words long. And it is not in this chapter.

CHAPTER 32

Thirty-Two

The fourth-floor woman's date was the eleventh of April and she did not ask him to come and he did not offer.

That is the whole of the decision and neither of them has ever discussed it.

※

He found out the result on the fourteenth, because she telephoned the yard. That is a thing she had never done. She asked for him.

He Jie gave him the phone and stood about two metres away and did not pretend not to be listening.

※

"It is nothing."

"Say that again."

"It is nothing. They did the thing and they looked at it and they said it is nothing and to come back in a year."

※

Dajie stood in that yard with the phone against his ear.

"Say it a third time."

"It is nothing," she said. "I have said it three times and you have not said anything."

"And if you are going to tell me that it is a miracle, I am going to put the telephone down."

※

"I was not going to say that."

"Good."

※

There was about four seconds on that line.

Then she said, “I told the doctor about you.”

“What.”

“I told the doctor about you on the eleventh of April. In the room, when he asked me whether there was anybody.”

“And I said there was a man from the fourth floor who sits in my chair for an hour a week and does not say anything.”

She said it flat, in the dialect, at the ordinary volume.

“And he wrote something down and I did not see what it was.”

※

“Why are you telling me that.”

“Because you have been sitting in my chair since January and you have never once asked me why I let you.”

※

Dajie did not say anything.

“I let you because in October I put the television on louder,” she said, “and you are the only man who ever came up those stairs about it.”

※

That is the whole of the telephone call and it lasted about ninety seconds.

※

※

He went to the yard on the fifteenth and told Peng.

※

“It is nothing.”

“What is nothing? The lump on the fourth floor?”

“The lump. On the fourth floor. It is nothing at all.”

“She telephoned you.”

“She telephoned the yard, which she has never once done.”

“And?”

“And it is nothing.”

※

Peng put the crate down.

"And you are standing in this yard at eleven in the morning telling me about it."

"I am."

"Why?"

"I do not know. I have been standing here for about forty minutes and I have not worked out why I came."

※

"You do not know?"

"I do not know!"

※

Peng picked the crate back up.

"Right," he said. "Then load this."

※

And Dajie loaded the van for about two hours, and neither of them said anything about it, and at about one o'clock Peng said:

"Are you going up there this week, or are you finished with it?"

"I do not know."

"Say the true thing, then."

"I am not going to go up there this week!"

※

"Why not?"

"Because she is fine."

※

Peng set the crate on the tailboard and looked at him.

"That is the whole reason?"

※

"That is the reason."

"You have been going up there every week since January because she was not fine, and now she is fine, and you are not going to go."

"Yes."

※

Peng let that sit.

"You are the worst man I have ever met in this trade," he said. "And I have met about four hundred of them, and you are the only one who would say that out loud in a yard."

※

"It is true."

"It is true, and it is not the whole of it, and you know it is not the whole of it."

※

"Then say the whole of it, and do not stop at the part that makes you look honest."

"You have not stopped because she is fine," said Peng.

"You have stopped because there is nothing left in that flat for you to be needed for. And you have never in your life gone anywhere where you were not needed."

※

Dajie did not answer that.

"Am I wrong?"

"No."

"Then go up on Tuesday."

"Why?"

"Because in about six months she is going to move to Nan'an," said Peng, "and there is going to be a woman on a fourth floor with a balcony that gets the sun until four, and she is going to leave a message for you one time, and you are

not going to go, and in four years you are going to be standing in this yard telling me that you meant to."

※

He did not go up that week.

He has never explained that either. He went up the following week on a Tuesday at about four.

She gave him tea. They talked about the demolition for about forty minutes.

And neither of them said one word about the eleventh of April, or the doctor, or the chair.

※

And here is the last thing in this chapter. It is not a miracle and it is not a failure.

It is the only thing in the whole of that spring that he wrote down.

※

At about five o'clock he was going down the stairs and he stopped on the fourth-floor landing, which is where the stairwell turns. And he stood there for a few minutes.

He had the notebook in the bag.

He got it out and did not open it and put it back.

※

And then he did the arithmetic.

Thirty-one visits to that flat since January. About nine words an hour. One jar of plums on a table in a funeral home in March. Four names out of about four thousand two hundred, in a hardback exercise book in a back room in Banan.

Unfinished at the bottom of the fourth page since 2011.

And in the fourth-floor flat on a Tuesday afternoon in April with a cup going cold, a woman of about sixty had told a doctor that there was somebody, and had then told the somebody. And had told him flat, in the dialect, at the ordinary volume. So that he would not be able to make it into anything.

※

He stood on that landing for four minutes and then he went down to the lane.

※

And the last real thing in this book had happened eleven weeks earlier, on the second of March, in a chair. And it had taken about four minutes. And he had asked about nine questions and put them in the order they had happened and had not touched anybody.

That is the one.

He did not know it at the time. He has said that four times. It was a Tuesday in a front room and there was a bag of vegetables on the table and a kettle. And he did the thing he is for, and he did not notice. Because he has never once noticed.

※

He has been asked, four times, whether the eleventh of April was a miracle.

And he has four answers and they are all the same answer. And it is not the answer anybody wants, and it is this.

A woman of about sixty put her television on louder in October. Because she could not stand the sound of a woman dying four inches of concrete above her head. She found a lump in the same week. She told nobody for five months. And then told a man in her own front room.

Because he was there and he was not going anywhere.

And in April they looked at it and said it was nothing.

※

That is not a miracle.

That is a woman finding a thing and doing nothing about it for five months and then being lucky. And the man who sat in her chair for an hour a week for three months had about as much to do with it as the dog.

※

He has never said that sentence out loud. He wrote it, on the landing, in the small neat hand, at about five o'clock on a Tuesday in April. And it is the last thing he wrote in the back of that notebook for about nine months.

It was nothing and I did not do anything and it was nothing.

※

He went down the forty-one steps and out into the lane.

※

The dog was not on the wall.

That is the last line of Act III and it is four words long and he wrote it down the same night, under the other line. And then he closed the book and put it in the bag and did not open it again for about nine months.

※

※

He did the job in Dazu on the twenty-eighth of April.

That is the last job he does in Act III and it is not in the schedule and there is no money in it and He Jie did not send him. And it took two days and he was not on any list.

※

The man was seventy-one and had been a bus driver. The family had eight people in it and they had no experience of any of it.

Dajie went because a woman telephoned the yard and asked whether the company would send somebody, and He Jie said what she always says. Which is that the company sends a schedule and a price. And the woman said she did not have the price.

And He Jie looked at Dajie across the counter for a moment. Then she said into the telephone that there was a man who sometimes helped.

And that he was not on any rota and that she was not recommending him. And that the woman could ask him herself.

※

That is the closest He Jie comes in the whole book to endorsing anybody.

It lasted about eleven words and she never mentioned it again.

※

He stood at the side of that table for two days with his hands behind his back.

He did the diaozi on the second day and it came out properly, four lines. And then four more, and on the third pass he held the fourth line a quarter-beat over and let it go down flat.

He did the shoulder on the second night. He did the three sentences. He found the one, which was the elder daughter, a woman of about forty-four. And he stood next to her for several minutes and said nothing at all.

※

It worked. There is no ambiguity about that and he has never claimed there was. Eight people in a room in Dazu came apart on the second night and the room came with them.

It took about eleven minutes, exactly as it does.

※

And on the way out, at the door, the elder daughter said thank you and asked him what he did for a living.

And Dajie said, "I am a mourner."

※

He cannot account for why he said that. And he has gone over it for four years.

It is the only time in the whole book that he gives that answer and it is the first true thing he has ever said to a stranger about himself. And it was said at a door in Dazu on the twenty-ninth of April at about four in the afternoon. And the woman did not react in any way at all, because in that city at that time it is a completely ordinary answer to that question and about four thousand people could have given it.

※

※

The building across the lane came down in June.

That is in the next part and it is not a surprise and there is no scene about it. Because the woman on the fourth floor moved to a flat in Nan'an in May with a balcony. And she telephoned the yard once after that to leave a message for him. And the message was that the balcony gets the sun until about four.

※

He has never been to that flat.

He has said four times that he will go and see the flat in Nan'an with the balcony that gets the sun until four, and it is four years later, and he has not been.

CHAPTER 33

Thirty-Three

The money was nine thousand two hundred yuan and it was in a plastic bag in a drawer under the television. And it had been in that drawer since the ninth of February.

He counted it four times in the whole of that spring. Not because he was short. He counted it the way his mother counts the tin, the way you count a thing you are not going to spend. And it came to the same number every time and he put it back.

※

Here is where it came from.

Four thousand two hundred from He Jie's. He has never once worked out how she got to that number and he has not asked, because asking He Jie about money is a thing nobody in that yard has ever done.

Four hundred from the daughter, in folded notes, on the first day, which he had not earned.

Two thousand eight hundred and sixty from a job in Dazu in April that was never invoiced.

He was paid for it anyway. He Jie put an envelope on the counter and said nothing about it.

And one thousand seven hundred and forty in cash from four separate nights standing in at a yard in Shapingba for men who did not want to be there. Which is not the trade and which he has never once described as working.

※

Nine thousand two hundred.

He has said since that it is the largest amount of money he has ever had in his own hand.

That it is about three months of what his mother would have made in a good year.

And that it is nothing at all.

※

The other number is four hundred and thirty thousand.

That is the second column for eleven households. It is the number he has been carrying since February.

It is not a number he ever touched. It was never in a drawer and never in a bag. It went out of the world on the ninth of November, when a box file left a ninth-floor flat.

What it turned into instead was two hundred and forty thousand and a form.

For about four months he did the arithmetic on that at night, in the dark. And the arithmetic always came out the same. Which is that the difference is one hundred and ninety thousand yuan and it is somewhere in an office in Dadukou and it does not exist.

※

He has said that the four hundred yuan from the daughter is the part he thinks about.

Not the one hundred and ninety thousand. He has said that four times and nobody has believed him, and it is true.

The daughter handed him four hundred yuan in folded notes on the first day of the funeral.

She did it because her father used to put the money into the men's hands himself. She said so at the time. And she said the reason for it, and the reason was about hands.

And then she walked back into the smaller room where her father was.

He put it in his pocket and he kept it.

※

He has never been able to work out what he should have done with it.

He has four answers and all four of them are that he should have given it back, and three of them are wrong because she would have known. And the fourth one is that he should have kept it. Which is what he did, and which is why

it is in the bag, and which is why the bag is nine thousand two hundred and not eight thousand eight hundred.

※

※

He went to the yard on the second of June and He Jie did not have anything for him.

※

"There is nothing."

"I know."

"There has not been anything since the twenty-eighth of April. There is not going to be anything until about the middle of July."

"And in July there is a job in Wulong and I am giving it to Lu."

"Why are you giving it to Lu?"

"Because Lu is fifty-four and has been doing this for twenty-one years!" said He Jie.

"He has a wife and a flat and a mother in the hospital." "And because you are twenty-four and you have got nine thousand yuan and no ties and a mother who is working again."

※

Dajie stood at the counter.

"You are not going to put me on it."

"I am not going to put you on it."

※

He did not argue. That is the thing about that conversation and it lasted about four minutes and it is the last one of its kind in the whole book.

He has said that he did not argue because he has known for about a year what He Jie is.

She does not change her mind about a rota. Arguing with her is a thing that men do, and men who do it are not on the rota.

※

"What about the fourth of December?"

"What about it?"

"You put me on the sheet on the fourth of December."

"And I took you off it on the third of January."

"Why?"

※

He Jie looked at him.

"Because your mother telephoned me," she said.

※

That is the whole of it and he has known it since February and he asked it anyway.

※

"She told me a thing about you on the third of December," said He Jie. "I am not going to repeat it, and she knows I am not going to repeat it." "And I put you on the rota on the fourth because of it. I took you off on the third of January."

"Because on the third of January a man stood in that shed with his mother's bag and said in front of me that his father would have laughed, and then earned it back."

"And that was not a thing your mother had told me. And it was not in the file."

※

Dajie did not say anything.

"Say it."

"I do not know what you are telling me."

"I am telling you that I put you on because of something your mother knows about you that is not in the trade," said He Jie.

"And I took you off because you started believing it."

※

※

He walked the river road home because he has always walked that road and it is about eleven kilometres.

And because he had nothing at the flat and nothing in the yard.

※

He stopped at the place where the works are, and the pavement comes back. And there is a barrier with a piece missing at the far end of it.

※

He stood there for several minutes and then he went on.

That is the whole of that.

He has been past that place nineteen times in four years and he has stopped nineteen times and each time it is about four minutes. And he has never once crossed the road. And he has never worked out whether that is discipline or the other thing.

※

※

The building across the lane came down on the eleventh of June and it took about nine minutes.

He was not there. He has said, twice, that he was not there. And he has said it in the register he uses when he is telling the truth. And there is a version of that morning in which he stood in the lane with about forty other people and watched it. And that version has never been told by him to anybody and is not true.

What he did on the eleventh of June was sit on the wall outside his own building in Banan from about eight in the morning until about eleven. Which is when a building two kilometres away stops being two buildings and becomes what it is.

※

He got the bus to Jiangbei on the twelfth.

※

He had not been back to that lane since the eighteenth of February. That is about four months. It is the longest he has been away from it since he was about nine years old.

It is not a thing he decided.

※

The lane was still the lane. And the roll-down shutter on the shop that had shut in the spring was still down.

There was a new sign on a pole. A different company, and the same two words in two languages.

There was nothing on the corner where the wall was. That is, there was a wall. And it was the same wall, and there was nothing on it.

※

He stood there for about twenty minutes.

At about half past ten a woman came out of the building with the fish shop and stood in the doorway.

She looked at him for a while and did not come over.

At about a quarter to eleven she came over.

※

"You have not been here."

"No."

"Where have you been."

"Banan."

※

She looked at the corner.

"It is not coming back."

"I know."

"I do not mean the shop," she said. "I mean there was a dog on that wall for four months and there is not one now."

"And that is the whole of what has changed about this lane."

※

Dajie said, "I know."

And she said, "You are the only person who has ever come down here about it," and then she went back in.

※

※

He Jie did the last of his money on the fourteenth of June and it was not a wage.

It was five hundred yuan in an envelope on the counter. Which is what the company pays for the transport of mourning clothes, and there were no mourning clothes. And she gave it to him anyway and said one sentence. Which was that the fifth of the shroud had never been taken off anybody in this yard and that she was closing the file.

※

He did not open the envelope in the yard.

He opened it on the bus and looked at five hundred yuan in it.

He put it in the bag with the rest of it and counted the bag that night. It was nine thousand seven hundred.

※

※

Here is the rest of the money and it is not his.

Youcai owes Wei Asi one hundred and twenty-six thousand yuan at fifteen percent above paper over two years. And he has made five payments and the fifth was on the first of June, and there are nineteen to go.

Luo Changhe has not paid anything to anybody since the fifteenth of January. He is sixty-one and living in a rented room in Dadukou.

His sister's urn has been on a shelf at eye height in the office of a funeral company in Jiangbei since the nineteenth of January. He can come and get it whenever he has got somewhere to put it.

The family on the fourth floor moved to Nan'an in May and there is a balcony that gets the sun until about four. And she telephoned the yard once to leave a message. And the message was about the balcony.

And the daughter has a folder with forty-one photographs in it and a copy of a schedule in it.

She has a rented flat in Dadukou and two thousand four hundred pages of procedure.

And in four months an office is going to write to eleven households and offer them the third column. And they are going to take it.

※

That is all of the money in this book.

Nine thousand two hundred for the man who did the work. One hundred and twenty-six thousand owed by the man who wrote it down.

Four hundred and thirty thousand that eleven households never saw. And one hundred and ninety thousand that does not exist.

※

He wrote that down on the fourteenth of June and it is the first time in five months that he wrote anything in the back of the notebook.

He wrote it as a list and he did not write anything about how anybody felt and he did not write anything about how he felt. And then he looked at it for a while and closed the book.

※

Then he got up and put the bag back in the drawer under the television and went out.

He stood on the street for a while. Because the flat in Banan at nine o'clock in June is about thirty-one degrees, and everybody in that building is on the pavement.

※

※

Before that, at about eight, his mother came down and found him sitting at the table in the dark.

※

"Are you eating?"

"I ate at four."

"That is not what I asked."

"I am eating."

※

She stood in the doorway.

"You have been at that table since about six."

"I have."

"Doing what?"

"Counting."

"Counting what?"

※

Dajie said, "The bag."

And his mother said, "How much."

※

"Nine thousand seven hundred."

"That is a lot."

"It is not a lot."

"It is more than I have got in the tin," said Zhou Guifen, "and you have had it in a drawer since February and you have counted it four times and you have not spent any of it."

※

"You count a drawer every night."

"I count the tin because it is mine and I am fifty-two and I have got nobody," she said. "What are you counting for?"

※

Dajie did not answer that.

"Say it."

"I do not know."

"Then say the next thing."

"There is no next thing."

※

She came in and sat down opposite him and put both hands flat on the table.

"How much did you make."

"Nine thousand seven hundred."

"How much did you cost."

※

"That is not a question."

"It is a question and it is the only question," said Zhou Guifen. "You were in a yard for three months and you were in a lane for four and you did a funeral for nothing in April and you buried a dog in March and you have got nine thousand seven hundred yuan and a plastic bag and a gourd."

"And?"

"And I want to know what it cost."

※

Dajie looked at the table.

"Four hundred and thirty thousand," he said, "if the second column is the true one."

"And is it."

"I do not know."

※

"Then say the other thing."

※

And that is where he stopped. And he has said that he stopped because the other thing was about his mother and he could not say it in a kitchen with the light off at eight o'clock at night.

※

The other thing is this.

For about four months he had known that his mother telephoned a yard in Jiangbei on the third of December and told the owner of it something about her son that is not in the trade. He had known it since February.

And the reason he did not ask her was not that he did not want to know.

It was that if she told him, then whatever it was would have a name, and for four months it had not had one. And he had been living on the not-having-a-name.

※

He did not say any of that.

He said, "Nothing. There is no other thing."

And his mother looked at him for a while and then got up and did not turn the light on and went up the stairs.

※

His mother was on the third landing with two women from the second floor and a man of about seventy.

He sat down on the step below them and did not say anything, and after a while the man of seventy said something about the price of cement, and Dajie said something back, and the man laughed. And that is the whole of it.

※

At about ten his mother said one thing.

"You have not asked me about the third of December."

"No."

"Are you going to?"

"I do not know."

"Then I am not going to tell you," said Zhou Guifen, "and I want you to notice that I have just said it out loud on a landing in front of three people and that I am not going to say it again."

※

Dajie said, "You have not asked me about the yard."

"No."

"Or the rota. Or the money. Or any of it."

"I know what you do," said Zhou Guifen. "I have known what you do since you were about fourteen and I have never once had to ask you a question about it and I am not going to start at fifty-two on a landing."

※

"And that is the whole difference between us."

"That is the whole difference between us," she said.

※

He has said that he cannot account for how long he sat there, except that it was until the light went.

And that neither his mother nor anybody else asked him about the yard, or the job, or the money, or any of it.

That is the third landing of a building in Banan in June with four people on it and a plastic bag of another family's grief in a drawer eleven metres away. And it is the whole of what he had.

CHAPTER 34

Thirty-Four

Youcai finished the notebook on the ninth of July and he came to Banan to say so.

That is a thing he decided to do and it is the only time in the whole book that he travels four kilometres to announce a piece of arithmetic.

※

"Two hundred and nine."

"Two hundred and nine what."

"Lines. It is two hundred and nine lines and it took from the eleventh of November to the second of July."

"You have been writing down what I say for eight months."

"I have been writing down what you say for eight months."

※

Dajie sat down on the plastic stool. Which is the visitor's chair in that flat, and put both hands on his knees.

"Read me the last one."

"It is not a line."

"Then what is it."

※

Youcai opened the green book at the back and turned it so that Dajie could see.

The last entry was not a sentence and it was not a joke and it was four words.

Nothing more was said.

※

"And the date."

"The second of July. In the yard. You were standing by the shed and you did not say anything for about forty minutes."

"And you wrote down that I did not say anything."

"I wrote down that nothing more was said," said Youcai. "It is not the same."

※

Dajie looked at the page for a while.

"That is a very stupid entry."

"It is the only honest one in the book," said Youcai, "and it is the last one, and the book is finished, and it is finished because of it."

"Why."

"Because I have got two hundred and eight lines of you and one line of nothing," said Youcai, "and the one line of nothing is the only one that is actually about a man."

※

※

Here is what is in that book and it is not a transcript.

Two hundred and nine entries in the neat hand. One hundred and eighty-eight of them are Dajie's. Nine are Peng's and four are He Jie's and two are a woman of eighty-one in a teahouse in Yuzhong, and every one of those fifteen is marked in the margin with a character that means not-his.

The entries run from the fifth of November to the second of July and they are in date order and they have a room and a time next to them.

And there is not one word in that book about how anybody felt, including the man who wrote it.

※

That is the rule and it has never been broken and Youcai has been asked about it four times.

His answer is the same every time and it is about nine seconds long.

He says that if he had written down how Dajie felt in a corridor in November then in four years it would be a story about a man who felt something in a corridor. And that a story is a thing that can be agreed with.

And that a sentence with a date and a room on it is a thing that has to be dealt with.

※

※

Dajie asked what was going to happen to it.

※

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all."

"It goes in the drawer in the flat in Banan, next to the A4 and the two things on the wrist," said Youcai.

"It stays there until I am about fifty-five. By then I will have forgotten what half of it is about.

"And then somebody is going to find it, and it will be worth exactly what a drawer is worth." By then I will have forgotten what half of it is about.

※

"That is the whole plan."

"That is the whole plan."

"You have spent eight months on it and it goes in a drawer."

"I have spent eight months on it and it goes in a drawer," said Youcai.

"That is what a record is. You have never understood that.

"And you are not going to understand it until somebody finds it."

※

Dajie got up and got two glasses and poured water out of the tap.

"Why did you do it, then."

"I have told you."

"You told me in March," said Dajie. "You told me about the second line. You said if the first line in the book says that you took sixty thousand out of a dead man's flat then there is no second line."

"Yes."

"That is not why you did it."

※

Youcai drank the water.

"Say why, then."

※

"Because nobody in this city writes anything down," said Dajie. "He Jie writes down the dead in a hardback book and can count the drawer. Your mother writes down a test result on her own wrist. My mother has got four names out of four thousand two hundred in a book in the back room and has not told anybody. And the office in Dadukou writes down a decimal point and two digits and eleven households are going to sign a form because of it."

"And?"

"And you are the only one who has ever written down anything that was said."

※

Youcai sat with that for a few minutes.

That is the longest he has ever gone without answering a question in the whole of the book.

Dajie watched him do it. He has never worked out whether he won something or lost something.

※

"The four marks."

"What about them."

"You said in December that you had marked four of the best ones as somebody else's, on purpose." Dajie put the glass down. "And you said you would show me the page in about four years and tell me what you did."

"And?"

"It is July."

※

Youcai did not open the book.

"We are not doing that today."

"You said four years."

"I said about four years and it is eight months," said Youcai.

"If I show you the page today, it is a thing that happened in July. You will be angry for a day and then it will be over."

"And you know what that page is for! I am not spending it in a kitchen in July!"

※

"Then when."

"Not this year. Not next year."

"And you will still have it."

"I will still have it," said Youcai. "That is the whole point of a record."

※

※

Dajie asked the other question at about nine o'clock and it is the reason that night is in this book.

※

"Write the last thing down."

"The book is finished."

"Then start another one."

"No."

※

"Why not."

"Because it would be the second book about the same man and the man has stopped," said Youcai. "You have been standing by a shed since about April and saying nothing for forty minutes at a time.

"In July you spent nine thousand two hundred yuan in a drawer and did not touch it.

"And in eight months you have said eleven things that were worth a date and a room."

"And in the first eight months."

"In the first eight months you said one hundred and eighty-eight."

※

Dajie said nothing.

"It is not a criticism," said Youcai. "It is arithmetic. It is the reason I stopped."

"And it is the only entry in the book I would defend in front of anybody."

※

He stayed until about ten. His mother came in at half past nine and said good evening to him and went up.

And before he left, Youcai did something that Dajie did not understand at the time and that he worked out in about October.

※

He put the green book on the kitchen table and left it there.

※

"You have left it."

"I have left it on the table."

"You said it goes in the drawer in Dadukou."

"I said it goes in a drawer," said Youcai. "And you have a table."

※

And he went down to the street and got the last bus. The book stayed on that table for four days.

※

※

※

He opened it once.

That is the whole of it. It took about four minutes and it was in the third year.

There was no reason for it that day more than any other.

He got it out of the drawer and put it on the kitchen table and opened it at the front.

※

The first page has one entry on it and it is four words long and it is not his.

He was not drunk.

Underneath, in the same hand: *He Jie. 5 November. Yard. 7.05am.*

※

He read that for a while.

Then he turned about nine pages in and read one more, at random. And it was one he did not remember saying.

It was about a woman in a corridor and a bowl of soup. And it was twelve words long, and it was from January. And it had a room and a time on it.

※

He did not recognise it.

That is the thing about that evening and it is the reason he has told four people about it.

He sat at a kitchen table in Banan in about the third year with a green exercise book in front of him.

And he read a sentence he had said out loud in a corridor in Jiangbei, and he did not remember saying it.

He did not remember the corridor either. Or the soup.

※

He put it back.

He has been asked what he thought about it and he has said that he thought about the arithmetic. Which is that it is two hundred and nine lines and he can remember about forty of them. And that in forty years it is going to be two hundred and nine and he is going to remember about four.

And that is what Youcai was buying with eight months.

Not a record of a man. A record of about four sentences out of two hundred and nine, kept by somebody else. Because a man cannot keep his own.

※

※

That is where it has been for four years.

It is in the same drawer as the money and the A4. It has not been added to and it has not been read.

There is nothing else in that flat that he did not inherit and did not buy.

※

He has been asked about it four times and he has given four answers.

He said once that it was a piece of luck. He said once that it was a wound. He said once, to Yan, in a car, that it was the only thing in that whole winter that had been made on purpose.

And the fourth time was in about the third year, to a man in a teahouse.

He asked Dajie what was in that drawer.

Dajie thought about it.

And then he said that there were two hundred and nine things in it that he had said. And that the last one was that nothing more was said.

※

The man asked him why he kept it.

And Dajie said, "Because somebody wrote it down."

And the man said, "That is not a reason."

And Dajie said, "It is the only reason there is."

※

And that is the whole of the notebook and it is the last thing in this book about a record.

There is one more thing that needs saying about it. Which is that Youcai was right, and that it will be found.

Not in this book. In about forty years, by somebody clearing a flat in Dadukou.

And they will open it and find two hundred and nine lines in a neat hand.

About a man they have never heard of. In a room they cannot picture.

And they will not be able to decide.

CHAPTER 35

Thirty-Five

The hospital rang on the nineteenth of August, at about half ten, and his mother was out and he answered it.

They asked for Zhou Guifen first and he said she was not in. And then they asked whether he was the patient. And he said he did not know what patient they meant.

The woman on the line said a date in November 2021 and a doctor's name.

Then she said the words *follow-up scan*, and asked whether he was the young man with the burr hole.

※

He said yes.

He cannot account for why he said yes. And he has said four times that it was the fastest thing he has ever done. And that it took about a second and a half and that he did not think about it at all.

※

He wrote it down on the back of an electricity bill.

Burr hole. Nov 2021. Shapingba Third People's. Dr Zhang. Follow-up scan. Ring back Friday.

※

He did not ask his mother anything.

That is the important part and it is the reason the next two weeks are in this book.

※

He thought about it for fourteen days and the way he thought about it was the way he thinks about everything. Which is that he did the arithmetic.

He was twenty-one in November 2021. He was not in a hospital in November 2021. He was in Banan and he was working at a delivery place on Wanzhou Lu and he remembers the whole of that autumn.

He remembers it because it is the last autumn before the winter he spent doing nothing.

※

The only thing he remembers about November 2021 is that he lost eleven days.

That is the phrase he has always used about it and he has used it since he was twenty-one and he has never once examined it.

He lost eleven days somewhere in the middle of that month and when it came back he was on a mattress in the front room instead of in his own bed, and his mother was doing the beds. And she told him he had had a fever.

And he was twenty-one and he was tired. And he did not ask a second question. And he has not thought about it in three years.

※

※

Here is what he did in the fourteen days and it is not much and it is the whole of what a man does with a thing like that.

※

He worked. That is the first thing. He stood in for two nights at the yard in Shapingba and carried drums for a man who had hurt his back. And he was paid in cash and he put it in the bag.

He went to the teahouse twice and did not talk to Tao Shi and sat at a table on his own, which he had never once done in his life.

He walked the river road four times.

And on the ninth day he went into the back room of the flat in Banan while his mother was at the market and stood in front of the shelf for a few minutes and did not open anything.

※

That is the fourteen days. Two nights of work, two afternoons at a teahouse, four walks, and four minutes in a back room.

※

And on about the eleventh day he did the other thing and it is the only thing in that fortnight that he has ever told anybody about.

He sat down at the kitchen table with a piece of A4 and did the arithmetic on what his mother would have been earning in 2021.

※

She was working eleven jobs a month that autumn. He knows that because he wrote it in the green book at the time, in the months before he stopped, when he was still writing everything down.

Four hundred yuan a job. Eleven jobs a month. Four thousand four hundred yuan a month, in cash, in 2021, in Banan, for a woman of forty-nine.

※

And the operation was ninety-six thousand eight hundred.

※

He did that sum twice and then he did the third version of it. Which is the one he has never been able to get rid of. And it is not about money at all.

It is this.

If she was making four thousand four hundred a month and had been making about that for thirty years and had never had a bank account with more than twenty thousand in it, then what she had in 2021 was the funeral money.

That is the name he has always had for it without ever saying it. The funeral money. The money that came in over thirty years of standing behind coffins, in cash, in envelopes, in tins. Which is the money that a professional mourner of fifty-two is supposed to be keeping for her own old age and her own funeral and her own bad months.

※

And she spent it on a wound he does not remember getting.

※

※

He got the bus to Shapingba on the second of September and he did not tell his mother where he was going.

※

The third people's hospital is on the Wanzhou road. It is about nine floors.

There is a pay kiosk and a queue. And there is a woman selling flower bulbs out of a plastic tub at the top of the ramp.

He went to the records window on the second floor and asked for the file.

※

"Name?"

"Liu Dajie."

"Date of birth?"

He gave it, and she typed it. And it took her about four seconds to find what she was looking for.

"Date of procedure?"

"November 2021."

※

The woman looked at a screen for a few seconds.

"There is no procedure in November."

※

"There is a follow-up scan for a burr hole," said Dajie. "Somebody from this hospital rang my mother on the nineteenth of August about it."

※

She looked again and it took longer this time.

"There is a scan booked for the eleventh of September," she said, "and it is under a different name."

"Whose name?"

"Zhou Guifen."

She said it the way a woman reads a name off a screen.

※

※

He stood at that window for a while.

※

"Is there a file?"

"There is a file."

"Can I see it?"

"No."

"Can my mother see it?"

"Your mother can see it," said the woman, "and if she signs for it she can show it to you. That is the whole of what I can tell you at this window. If you want anything else, make an appointment with the department.

And the department is on the seventh floor and it does not answer that telephone."

※

There was a woman on the fourth landing of that building who was about eighty and who was sitting on a chair in the open doorway of her flat.

"What floor are you going to?"

"Seven."

"There is nothing on seven except the offices."

"I know."

"Then what are you going up for?"

※

And Dajie said, "A file."

And she said, "My husband had a file. They gave it to me in a plastic bag and I have not opened it and it has been nine years."

※

He did not go to the seventh floor.

He cannot say why he did not go to the seventh floor. And he has gone over it about four hundred times. And that the reason is that he already knew, at that window, on the second floor, at about eleven in the morning, that if he went up there he would have it. And that he was not ready to have it on a Tuesday.

※

He came back three weeks later and he had it on the seventh floor by about ten past ten in the morning and it took eleven minutes.

※

There was a man up there and not a woman. And he was about fifty and he had a folder and he did not ask Dajie why he wanted it.

※

"Sit down."

"I am all right."

"Sit down! I have got to go and get it and you cannot stand in this corridor while I do."

※

Dajie sat down.

The man came back with the folder in a few minutes and put it on the desk and did not open it.

※

"Before I give you this I am going to tell you four things and then you can read it in here and you cannot take it out."

"Go on."

"One. You are the patient. If you were not the patient you would not be sitting there, because the person who signed the consent cannot release a file to herself and then hand it to somebody else, and I have had that argument at this desk twice."

"Two. There is a note in it from 2022 that says the family was advised of the follow-up schedule and declined to book. I am telling you that now so that you do not read it in there and think somebody has done something to you."

※

"And three?"

"Three is that I am not going to explain anything in it to you. I am not a doctor and I have been at this desk for nine years and I have never once read a file out loud to the person in it, and I am not starting today."

"And four?"

※

The man put his hand flat on the folder.

"Four is that whatever is in here, somebody paid for it, and I have seen about four hundred of these files and there is usually a column at the back that tells you who, and people read the diagnosis first and the column last, and it is the wrong way round."

※

"You are telling me to read the back first."

※

"I am telling you nothing," said the man. "I am telling you that I have watched about four hundred people do this at that desk and that about three hundred of them got to the last page and went quiet in a way I have never been able to describe, and that the column at the back is printed in the same size as everything else."

※

Dajie opened the folder at the back.

※

It took him about four minutes and the man sat there the whole time and did not look at him and did not look away either.

At about the end of it the man said one more thing. And then he took the folder off the desk and put it in the drawer.

※

"You are not the first person to come up here about a bill. You are the fourth in about two years."

"I know."

"And all four of you have been a son or a daughter, and not one of you has come up here about a wallet or a card."

"It is always a bill that somebody paid in cash and did not tell you about, and it is always a parent, and it is always at the back of the file."

"Why is it always at the back."

"Because the person who paid does not want it in the middle," said the man. "They want it where it is not going to be read by accident. And then in about four years somebody reads it by accident and comes up nine floors."

※

He shut the drawer.

※

※

Here is what is in that file and he read all of it and he has never told his mother that he read it.

※

There is an admission date of the fourteenth of November 2021.

There is a diagnosis in a box and the diagnosis is a word he looked up afterwards in a bookshop.

There is a note about the circumstances of the injury, which is one line long. The line says the patient was brought in by ambulance from the Wanzhou road at about four in the morning.

That he had been drinking. That he does not remember the fall. And that there is no third party.

There is a note about the consent. Which was given by the patient's mother because the patient was drowsy and not competent. And there is a signature on it in the small neat hand.

And there is a schedule of payments at the back.

※

The operation was ninety-six thousand eight hundred yuan.

It was paid in four instalments.

The first was eleven thousand four hundred and it was paid in cash on the day of the admission by Zhou Guifen.

The second was thirty thousand and it was paid in cash in the first week of December 2021 by Zhou Guifen.

The third was thirty thousand and it was paid in cash in the first week of February 2022 by Zhou Guifen.

The fourth was thirteen thousand two hundred and it was paid in two amounts in March and April 2022, in cash, by Zhou Guifen. And the last one is dated the twenty-eighth of April.

※

And there is no policy number anywhere in that file.

There is no insurance line and no subsidy line and no charity and no employer.

There is a column headed *secondary payer* and every row in that column is empty except the first, and the first one says *self*.

※

※

He sat in the waiting area on the seventh floor with the folder on his knees for about forty minutes and he did not cry and he did not move.

At about eleven a nurse asked him whether he was waiting for somebody.

And he said no.

And she said that the seat was needed.

And he got up and gave it to her and went down to the ground floor and out.

※

※

Here is the arithmetic and he did it on the bus.

Ninety-six thousand eight hundred yuan, in cash, over about five and a half months, in 2021 and 2022.

By a woman of forty-nine who did the crying at funerals and who was paid in cash. And who has never in her life had a bank account with more than about twenty thousand yuan in it.

And at that time she was working. That is the thing. In 2021 she was working about eleven jobs a month and earning about four thousand yuan a month and her hands were still all right.

※

Eleven jobs a month at about four hundred a job.

The operation was about two hundred and forty-two jobs.

※

He did that sum on the bus twice and got the same number both times.

Then he sat with it and worked out the other half, which took until about the Nanping tunnel.

Two hundred and forty-two jobs is about twenty-two months of work.

And she did it in five and a half months, in cash, in four instalments.

Which means that she borrowed some of it. And that she has never told him she borrowed any of it. And that she has been paying it back for three years.

※

※

He did not go home.

He got off the bus at the bottom of the stair-street and sat on the low wall outside the building for about two hours.

At about four in the afternoon a man of about seventy came and sat at the other end of the wall with a thermos.

※

"Are you all right? You have been on that wall since about two." "I know."

※

The man unscrewed the thermos.

"Have you got a cigarette?" the man said. "I have one and it is in the flat and it is not worth the stairs."

"I do not smoke."

"Nobody your age smokes." The man poured.

※

Dajie sat with that.

※

"My mother paid for something," he said. "Eighty-four thousand six hundred yuan. Three years ago and she has never told me."

"That is what mothers do."

※

The man drank whatever was in the thermos.

"How long ago?"

"Three years."

"Then she did not tell you at the time because she did not want to," said the man of seventy. "And she has not told you since because it has been three years and there is no way into it now."

"You cannot tell a person a thing like that in the fourth year. It is not a thing you can bring up over soup."

※

"And what do you do?"

"Nothing."

"You do nothing."

"There is nothing to do," said the man. "You cannot pay it back. You cannot thank her either. Because if you thank her then it is a thing the two of you are talking about.

And she has spent three years not talking about it."

※

※

※

He went up at about six.

※

And before that, at about half past five, he did something he has never told anybody about and that is the only thing in this chapter that is his and not hers.

He took the electricity bill out of his pocket with the four lines on the back of it and read them.

Burr hole. Nov 2021. Shapingba Third People's. Dr Zhang. Follow-up scan. Ring back Friday.

And then he folded it in half. And then in half again, and put it in his back pocket, and went up the stairs.

※

He has kept that bill for four years.

It is in the drawer under the television with the money and the A4 and the green exercise book. And it is the only thing in that drawer that is about him.

※

He went up at about six.

His mother was in the kitchen with the cabbage and his supper was already on the table under a cover.

※

He sat down.

He ate.

Neither of them said anything and it took about eleven minutes and at the end of it she took the bowl and put it in the sink.

※

And at the sink, with her back to him, she said one thing.

※

"Zhou Guifen."

"Hm."

"Nothing."

He had nothing. He had sat down and eaten a bowl of rice and the whole of it was in his mouth and he said none of it.

※

And she said, "You went to Shapingba."

"Yes."

"On the second of September and the twenty-fourth." "Yes."

※

She washed the bowl and put it on the rack.

"There is a scan booked for the eleventh," she said. "I am going on my own."

※

"I know."

※

And she dried her hands on the cloth that hangs on the oven handle and went up the stairs and did not turn round.

※

It is eight words long and it happens at a sink. Neither of them says the number. Neither of them says the operation and neither of them says 2021.

And it is over in about forty seconds.

※

※

He has been asked about it four times.

The first person asked him whether he was angry and he said no. And the second person asked him whether he was angry and he said he did not know. And the third asked him whether he had ever said anything to her about it and he said no.

And the fourth was in about the second year and it was a woman at the teahouse. And she asked him why his mother had not told him.

※

And Dajie said the true thing. Which is that his mother had not told him because as long as he did not know, he was a twenty-four-year-old who had washed out of the gaokao.

A man with a plastic diploma and a gourd and no money and a talent he could not charge for.

And that if he knew, then he was a twenty-four-year-old who had cost his mother ninety-six thousand eight hundred yuan and twenty-two months of her hands.

※

"That is not the same man," said the woman.

"No," said Dajie.

"And you would rather be the first one."

"I have been the first one for three years," said Dajie, "and she has been letting me."

※

※

He did not put it in his notebook because he had stopped.

He did not put it in Youcai's notebook because Youcai's notebook is finished and the last line in it is that nothing more was said.

※

So there is no record of it and there is not going to be one. And that is the only thing in this whole book that happened to him and left nothing behind.

It is in his head and in a hospital file on the seventh floor in Shapingba with a signature in the small neat hand at the front of it. And it will be thrown away in about eleven years with the other files. And the only thing left will be a man of twenty-four who knows a number.

And a woman of fifty-two going for a scan on her own on the eleventh of September.

CHAPTER 36

Thirty-Six

The form for the Banan building came through the door on the fourteenth of October.

It had been through the door of every flat in that building. Because somebody had been round at six in the morning and put one under each door.

It was four pages and it was printed in an office and it had a date on it and the date was the thirtieth of November.

Dajie read it on the third landing on his way up and then read it again in the kitchen and then put it on the table.

※

His mother read it in a few minutes and put it down and did not say anything about it for nine days.

That is the whole of that fortnight and it is the way that flat has done everything for twenty-four years. Something goes on the table. Somebody reads it. Nobody says anything about it for a week and a half. And then it is decided. And it has been decided for a while, and nobody can say when.

※

On the twenty-third of October she said, at about seven in the evening, with her back to him at the sink, "Sign it and take it down."

"You have to sign it."

"I have signed it."

※

He looked at the form on the table. There was a signature on the third page in the small neat hand.

The box next to it was ticked. And the box was the one for the option where you take the money and go.

※

"When."

"Today. Before they close."

※

He took it down.

※

The office was on the ground floor of a building about four streets away. It had two desks in it, and a woman of about thirty, and a queue of four people.

The queue took about forty minutes. There were four households in front of him.

The first was a woman of about seventy who had come with a folder and who had been in the queue since half past eight, and who turned round and told Dajie the whole of it without being asked.

※

"I have got the 2003 one and the 2011 one and I am not signing either of them."

"Then why are you in the queue?"

"Because if I do not come in they telephone me at seven in the morning," she said. "Have you got a mother in the block?"

"Yes."

"Is she coming in?"

"No."

"Then you are doing it and she is not," said the woman, "and that is the whole of that."

※

"What is the 2003 one?"

"The back room," she said. "There was a form in 2003 for the back room and the back room was in my husband's name and he died in 2006 and I have got it in a folder and I am not signing anything."

※

"And what are you going to do?"

"I am going to take the twenty thousand and go to my daughter's," said the woman.

"And I am going to sit in her front room for the rest of my life and complain about the traffic."

"And if you are twenty-four years old and standing in this queue for your mother, I am telling you now to go and get a trade."

※

"I have got one."

"That is worse!" said the woman.

Every one of them was over sixty, and every one of them wanted to talk.

※

The woman at the desk took his form and checked the signature and put a stamp on it and gave him a copy.

"That is twenty thousand?"

"When."

"Within eleven working days."

"And when do we have to be out."

※

She looked at a list.

"The thirtieth of November is the demolition date for that block," she said. "You have to be out by the twenty-eighth. There is a van arrangement if you want it and it is about four hundred yuan and it comes out of the twenty thousand."

"We do not want it."

"Everybody says that and about half of them take it."

"Then we are the half that does not."

"We do not want it."

※

She wrote something down.

"Is your mother all right?"

"She is fine."

"I only ask because she is on the list as a professional and there is a box on the second page about a business address," said the woman. "It has been left empty for two years, and I am not asking what the business is."

※

Dajie said, "She does not do it any more."

And the woman said, "Then the box stays empty," and gave him the copy and called the next person.

※

※

He walked back up the four streets. It is about nine hundred metres.

He has said that he took about twenty-five minutes over it and did not stop at anything.

※

His mother was doing the beds.

※

"I have got the copy."

"Put it in the drawer with the other one."

"There is no other one."

"There is the one from 2003 for the back room," said Zhou Guifen. "It is in the tin. You can put it with it."

※

"And the twenty thousand?"

"It comes in eleven days."

"And then what?"

"Then we have got it," said his mother.

"And I have got a scan on the eleventh, and I am going on my own."

"And after that I am going to sit on a fifth floor with no lift and complain about the stairs. And you are going to go and get a trade."

"I have got one."

"That is worse," said Zhou Guifen, and went and did the beds.

"I have got the copy."

"Put it in the drawer with the other one."

"There is no other one."

"There is the one from 2003 for the back room," said Zhou Guifen, "and it is in the tin, and you can put it with it."

※

※

Here is what is in that flat and it took about eleven days to move and most of it went.

※

The bed. The table. The plastic stool. The television with the cracked corner. A cupboard. Two boxes of the mourning clothes, one blue and one white. And the bag with the nine pockets in it. The tin with the money and the two forms in it. The frame with the plastic diploma in it, which he took down himself and wrapped in a cloth. The gourd.

And a hardback exercise book in the back room with four names in it.

※

That is about eleven things and it went into the flat of a woman from the second floor who had a room to let. Which is four streets away and on the fifth floor and has no lift.

The rent is four hundred yuan a month and she wanted six and his mother got her to four in about nine minutes.

※

※

The building came down on the thirtieth of November and it took about seven minutes.

There was a machine and a man in an orange vest and a sign on a pole with two words in two languages.

Dajie was there and his mother was not.

※

He has said that there were about nineteen people in that street at eight in the morning on the thirtieth.

Most of them were from the buildings either side.

And that he did not recognise about half of them.

And that the woman who had the fish shop was not there because she had moved to Nan'an in the spring and that the man of seventy with the thermos was there. And that he stood about nine feet away and did not say anything and had his hand on the top of the wall.

※

The machine ate the fifth floor first because they had worked out that the building would come down better that way, and it took about seven minutes. And then it was a pile and then it was not a pile.

※

And at about half past eight Dajie went and stood at the bottom of what had been the stairs.

※

That building had forty-one steps to the roof and four to the first landing. And the bottom four are still in the ground after the whole thing came down.

They are the ones keyed into the pavement. A machine cannot do anything about a step that is part of a street.

※

That is the whole of it. Four steps.

※

The man of seventy with the thermos came and stood next to him at about twenty past eight.

※

"You lived in this one."

"Twenty-four years."

"Which floor?"

"Fifth."

"Then you had the good light," said the man. "I had the third, and I had the noise from the lane, and I had the chair outside my door for thirty years. I never once sat on it."

"And now I do not have it, and I am going to miss it more than the flat."

※

"You said it had been there since 1988."

"I said the man at the bottom of the third flight put it out for his mother," said the man of seventy.

"And that the man died in 1994, and his mother died in 1991, and that nobody moved it."

"So it has been empty for thirty-three years."

"That is what I said."

※

Dajie looked at the machine.

"Why did nobody sit on it."

"Because it was not theirs," said the man.

※

※

He stood at the bottom of four steps for ten minutes on the thirtieth of November with a plastic gourd in his hand.

He has said that he did not say anything and that he did not think about anything in particular and that he was not doing it on purpose. And that he has gone past those four steps about nine hundred times since. Because they are on the way to the market.

※

※

And the chair was not there.

※

That is the last thing in this chapter and it is the only thing in this chapter that he has never been able to explain.

※

There was a chair on the landing at the third floor of that building.

Nobody in the whole of that stair-street has ever been able to account for it.

His mother does not know. The woman from the second floor does not know. The man of seventy with the thermos lived in that building from 1974 and knew everybody in it. He said the chair had been there since about 1988.

The man in the flat at the bottom of the third flight had put it out for his mother. The man died in 1994 and the mother died in 1991. Nobody had ever moved it and nobody was ever going to.

And in twenty-four years Dajie had sat on it about four hundred times.

※

And on the thirtieth of November, at about twenty past eight in the morning, with the machine eating the fifth floor, there was a chair on the third-floor landing of a building that was being demolished. And the machine took the fifth floor and the fourth and then it took the third.

※

And Dajie watched it go and he has said that he watched it particularly. And that he watched it because he had been sitting on it since he was about four years old. And that at the point where the third floor came down he did not see a chair come out of the building.

He saw about four hundred kilos of concrete and a stair rail and a section of floor and a window frame and a toilet.

※

And no chair.

※

He has been asked about that four times and he has given four answers and all four of them are that he probably missed it.

※

The first person he told was Peng, in about January. Peng said that a chair of that size in a demolition comes out at about forty kilometres an hour.

And that a man watching from nine metres cannot see every object in it.

And the second person was Youcai and Youcai put it in the book and then took it out. Because the book was finished and because there was no date and room for it.

And the third person was Yan, in a car, in about four months. She said the chair went into the rubble and the rubble went into a truck.

And the truck went to a place in the north of the province. And there is no version of it in which a chair gets to the top of a heap.

※

And the fourth person asked him where he thought it was.

And Dajie said that he did not know.

And the fourth person asked him whether he had looked for it.

And Dajie said that he had gone back to those four steps on the second of December.

He looked at everything within about four metres of the pavement for about forty minutes. There was no chair.

※

That is the whole of the demolition.

The building was there for forty years and there is a woman from the second floor at four hundred a month under a flat with no lift and there is a woman of fifty-two who is going for a scan on her own on the eleventh. And there are four

steps in the ground on the way to the market that nobody uses because they go up to nothing.

※

He went to the market on the second of December and it was nine in the morning and his mother had given him a list.

And on the way back he stopped at the four steps and put the bags down and sat on the bottom one for several minutes. Which is the only time in the whole of this book that he sits down on anything that is left of that building.

※

And then he picked the bags up and went up the four streets to the fifth floor and gave the list to his mother.

Neither of them said anything about the day the building came down.

And that is the second of December at about half past nine in the morning, and his mother is in a flat on the fifth floor with no lift. And it is the whole of what they have.

CHAPTER 37

Thirty-Seven

The man came to the yard in Jiangbei on the eleventh of December and he came in the morning and he came alone.

He was about forty and he had a jacket and a lanyard with a card on it that was turned round so that you could see the back and not the front. And he stood at the counter and asked for He Jie.

※

"That is me."

"My name is Fang. I am with the district." He put a card on the counter and did not let go of it. "I am looking into a document that went missing from a property in Jiangbei in November last year and I would like ten minutes."

※

He Jie looked at the card for a beat.

"Which district."

"The district."

"Which office."

"Public security."

※

"Which public security."

And the man said, "Madam, I am not going to stand at this counter and play this game. I have a card and I have a name and I have a question."

※

He Jie picked the receipt book up and wrote something in it and did not look at him.

"Then ask the question."

※

Dajie was in the yard and he heard the whole of it because the door was open and because that building has a corrugated roof and a yard and there is nothing between the office and the yard.

He was loading a van that did not need loading.

※

"On the ninth of November 2023 a box file left the ninth floor of a building on the Wanzhou road," said the man. "It has never been recovered. The flat was opened twice that month by two parties. One of them is a woman of twenty-four in Dadukou and the other one is this company."

"This company opened that flat twice in November."

※

"You did."

"We did."

"And both of those openings are on your sheets."

"Both of those openings are on my sheets," said He Jie.

"And my sheets have been available to any office that asked since the nineteenth of January. Four offices have asked.

"And none of them sent a man in a jacket."

※

※

The man put the card back in his pocket.

"Then let me ask it a different way," said the man. "I have been doing this about eleven years.

"And I have never once got anything out of a woman pretending to be a police officer at a counter."

※

"Then do not pretend."

"I am going to do the other thing," said the man.

※

And he took the lanyard off and put it in his jacket and put both hands on the counter.

"I am not with public security. I have never been with public security. I am with a company that does what is called asset verification.

"I am contracted to a fund that owns the building that came down on the fifteenth of January. The fund has a schedule missing that is worth about four hundred and thirty thousand yuan.

"And the fund is not going to get it, and the fund knows it."

※

"Then why are you here."

"Because the fund has to have a report," said the man.

"And the report has to say who looked. That is the whole of it.

"Nobody is going to be arrested. There is no complaint to the police and there is not going to be one, because a complaint is a document and the fund does not want a document!"

※

"And you are telling me this at a counter."

"I am telling you this at a counter because you have got a receipt book and a rota and four men and a woman on the desk," said the man.

"If I come in here pretending to be police, then in about four months you are going to write something down about it.

"And I have read the thing you wrote in December. The one that says a woman in this yard said that. And it is going to be the only line in the file that is not a form."

※

He Jie did not say anything.

※

"So I am not pretending. I am asking you for a name, and I am telling you the whole of what it is for.

"And I am telling you that it does not matter. And you can give me a name or you can give me nothing."

※

※

And that is the conversation, and Dajie heard the whole of it from the yard with a crate in his hands.

And He Jie said one thing and it is about eleven seconds long and he has gone over it for four years.

※

"My men are on a rota with a date and a flat and a signature," she said.

"There are four of them and there have been four of them for nine years. If you want one of those names I will give you all four.

"And if you want a fifth name you can go and find it somewhere else, because there is not one on my sheets!"

※

The man wrote something down.

"That is a very careful answer."

"It is a true one."

"It is a true one and it is careful," said the man. "You gave me four names in about nine seconds. The four names are the four men on the rota.

"And you did not give me the name of the man who was on the rota in November and came off it in January."

※

And He Jie said, "I did not."

"No."

"He came off it for his own reasons and I am not going to discuss another man's reasons with a contractor in a van."

※

The man put his pen away.

"Madam, I am going to write in this report that the company cooperated and gave no names beyond the current roster, and that is the truth, and it is the end of it for me."

"And for the fund?"

"We write off about four hundred thousand yuan four times a year," said the man. "It is a line. It is not a person."

※

And he went.

※

※

Dajie put the crate down and came in.

※

"You heard it."

"All of it."

"Then you know what he was."

"I know what he was."

※

He Jie turned a page of the receipt book.

"He was a contractor with a card in a lanyard. He was here eleven minutes and he was not the police and he was not going to arrest anybody," she said.

"And you are going to spend four months working out whether that is good news or bad news.

"And it is neither. Because there is no version of this where it was ever about you."

※

※

The man's name was Fang and he was wrong about one thing.

He said the fund wrote off about four hundred thousand four times a year and that it was a line and not a person.

That is true about the fund. It is not true about the eleven households and it never has been.

※

Here is the arithmetic of that morning and Dajie did it in bed that night and again on the bus the following week.

Four hundred and thirty thousand yuan is a line in a report in an office in another province.

It is also about nineteen thousand yuan per household across eleven households, and about four hundred yuan a week for a year. And it is about a woman of sixty in Nan'an with a balcony that gets the sun until four. And it is about a man of sixty-one in a rented room in Dadukou who has not come to collect his sister's urn.

※

And the man in the jacket would have written *four hundred and thirty thousand, written off* in a box on a form and gone for lunch.

※

※

Two things happened after that morning and the first one is small.

He Jie telephoned the flat in Banan on the twelfth and asked for Zhou Guifen. And she said four sentences to her, and Dajie was in the room and heard his mother say *thank you* and nothing else.

He asked her about it that evening and she would not tell him what the four sentences were and she has never told him.

※

And the second thing is that Dajie went to Dadukou on the nineteenth of December and told Luo Changhe that the urn had to come off the shelf.

※

He did not go there to say that. That is important.

He went there because He Jie had said on about the fourth of December that the shelf gets dusty.

And that nobody in that office touches it, because nobody wants to be the person who moves a thing like that.

※

He went and there was a man of sixty-one in a rented room with a bed and a chair and a hotplate and a photograph of his brother on a shelf.

※

And Dajie said, "It is about the urn."

And Luo Changhe said, "I know what it is about."

※

"I have not said anything."

"You do not have to say anything," said the man. "You are the fourth person who has come about it and the other three were from the yard and you are the one who was on the landing."

※

"Then say where you want it."

"There is nowhere I want it."

"Then it stays on the shelf."

※

And Luo Changhe stood at the window of that room for a while and did not say anything and then he said the thing that Dajie has never repeated to anybody. And it is not in the notebook because the notebook is finished.

He said, "I want it where she can see it!"

※

Dajie did not say anything.

And the man said, "That is not a thing I can do. There is no she. I have had four months of standing in this room working out that there is no she, and I have got one photograph and a shelf in a funeral company and there is no she."

※

※

The urn is still on the second shelf at eye height in the office of a funeral company in Jiangbei.

It has been there for four years. Dajie has walked past that shelf nineteen times and has never once looked at it. And the last time he was in that office was about a month ago, and he looked at it.

※

That is the whole of the policeman who is not an officer.

A man in a jacket wrote *written off* in a box and went for lunch, and eleven households took twenty-one thousand yuan each in the spring. And a woman of sixty in Nan'an has a balcony. And a man of sixty-one in Dadukou said *I want it where she can see it* to a man who is not related to him and who was sitting on a landing when his sister died.

CHAPTER 38

Thirty-Eight

Wei Asi came to the yard on the seventh of January. He came in the morning and parked the sedan badly and brought fruit.

He put the fruit on the counter and did not talk to Dajie for ten minutes.

That is four visits in five months and every one has been like that.

Dajie has never worked out whether that is politeness, or whether he is a man who does not do two things at once.

※

Then he turned round.

"You are still here."

"I am still here."

"You have been here since about the twenty-eighth of April. You are not on the rota."

"And He Jie has told you four times."

"Three times."

"Then it is four times and you were not listening on one of them," said Wei Asi. "Is the book finished."

※

"How do you know about the book."

"Youcai told me on the fourteenth of December in a restaurant in Shapingba, at a table, with about nine people watching."

"Because he is a man who cannot hold a thing and not say it." Wei Asi picked an orange out of the bag and put it back. "He did not tell me what is in it."

※

※

The other thing happened on the eleventh and it is the reason this chapter exists.

※

Youcai came to the yard at about half past four with a folder, a pen. And a copy of an agreement eleven pages long.

He put it on the counter and stood there and did not sit down.

And Wei Asi came out of the office at about twenty to five and looked at the folder and did not touch it.

※

"What is this."

"It is the agreement."

"I know it is the agreement. I have got one." Wei Asi put his hands in his pockets. "What is it on my counter for."

※

And Youcai said, "I want to change it."

※

※

Here is the old agreement and it is one paragraph.

One hundred and twenty-six thousand yuan at fifteen percent above paper over two years. Twenty-four payments. The first on the first of February 2024 and the last on the first of January 2026. Five had been made by the eleventh of January 2025 and the sixth was due on the first of February.

※

And here is the new one and it took about eleven minutes to agree and it is four paragraphs.

One hundred and twenty-six thousand yuan at four percent over five years.

Sixty payments starting in March.

And a clause at the bottom that is not a clause. Which is that if Youcai's mother dies before the last payment then the balance is written off.

※

※

Dajie was in the yard and heard all of it through a door with a curtain over it. He did not understand the last clause until about March.

※

"Why are you doing this."

"Because it is better for me."

"That is not a reason."

"It is a reason and it is the first one," said Wei Asi. "There is a man I have carried for two years and never chased, and I am not going to chase him. That is a hundred and twenty-six thousand that will never be paid."

"It is on my sheet. And it is a hole."

※

"And?"

"And you are going to pay one hundred and twenty-six thousand over five years and I am going to get about one hundred and forty-four thousand," said Wei Asi. "That is a smaller percentage than the old agreement and a bigger number."

"And it is a bigger number because it is paid."

※

"That is the money reason."

"That is the money reason."

"Then say the other one."

※

Wei Asi did not say anything for a beat.

※

"There is no other one."

"You have had the agreement in your bag since about November," said Youcai. "It is folded in three and the fold is soft and I have seen it twice."

"And you drafted it and did not send it and put it in your bag for two months."

※

And Wei Asi said the thing that is the whole of this chapter. And it is about eleven seconds long and Dajie heard it through a curtain.

※

"There was a woman of seventy-nine on the eighth floor of that building," he said. "She died on the twelfth of January at ten past four in the morning. I was owed two hundred and forty thousand by that family. I had been at that building nine times since October."

"I knew her by sight and she knew me by sight. And she did not once say anything to me in nine visits."

※

"And?"

"And that is the whole of what I have got," said Wei Asi. "There is no reason in it."

"I have done this twenty-one years and written off about nine hundred thousand, and I have never once done it because of a person."

"And I am not going to stand in a yard and say I did, because I did not, and I do not know what it was."

※

Youcai stood at the counter with the pen in his hand.

"Then what do I put in the file."

"Put that it is better for me," said Wei Asi. "Because that is true and it is the only thing in this that I am prepared to put my name on."

※

※

He signed it at about twenty past five.

He Jie witnessed it and did not read it. She put her signature on the last page and gave Youcai a copy.

And she put the other copy in the tin with the two forms and the receipts.

And Wei Asi put the pen back in his jacket and picked the fruit up off the counter.

And took it back out to the car.

※

He did not take the fruit.

That is a small thing and it is the last thing in this chapter.

Dajie noticed it at the time and did not think about it until the spring.

He brought a bag of fruit in and put it on the counter.

Then he picked it up at the end and carried it out.

And it is still on the passenger seat of that car, or it was.

Dajie cannot account for why that is the thing he remembers.

※

※

Here is what the money does over five years and Dajie did the sum in about March.

Sixty payments of two thousand four hundred yuan.

That is two thousand four hundred yuan out of Youcai's salary every month and Youcai's salary is about eleven thousand yuan and his rent is about two thousand two hundred and his mother's flat is about one thousand eight hundred. And there is a payment on the first of every month for sixty months.

It is a life. That is the whole of what it is. It is a life and it is his.

※

And Youcai told Dajie in about June that he had worked out what the clause was for and that he was not going to say it, and Dajie asked him once and did not ask him again.

※

That is the whole of the renegotiation and it took about eleven minutes and it is the only debt in this book that was ever settled.

The other one is four hundred and thirty thousand yuan to eleven households and it was written off in a box on a form in an office in another province and nobody signed anything.

※

※

※

There was one more thing about that agreement and it is the clause and it is the only part of this chapter that Dajie has ever told anybody about.

He worked it out in about March.

※

The clause says that if Youcai's mother dies before the last payment then the balance is written off.

That is a clause that costs Wei Asi money in one direction only. If she lives, he gets the full hundred and forty-four thousand over five years. If she dies, he gets whatever has been paid and nothing else, and he has written off the rest with his own signature on a piece of paper in a tin.

※

And Dajie asked him in June what it was for.

And Youcai said, "I know what it is for."

"Then say it."

"No."

"Why not."

"Because if I say it out loud in this flat then it becomes a thing about her," said Youcai.

"And it is not a thing about her. It is a thing about a man in Shapingba who has written off nine hundred thousand yuan in twenty-one years and has never once done it because of a person."

"And if I say what I think it is, then I am making it about her."

※

"She is your mother."

"She is my mother and she is on a list and she is going on the eleventh on her own," said Youcai.

"And the clause is in an agreement in a tin, and I am going to make sixty payments, and I am not going to look at it again."

※

That is the whole of it and it is four sentences and Dajie did not ask him again.

※

Dajie asked Youcai the other question at about the end of June and it is the last thing in this chapter and it is about the notebook and not the debt.

※

"How many payments have you made."

"Four."

"Out of sixty."

"Four out of sixty."

※

"And how does it feel."

Youcai said, "It is the first thing I have ever done that has a date on it that I am going to be at."

※

Dajie did not say anything.

And Youcai said, "I am going to be at a bank in Shapingba on the first of every month for five years."

"And there is going to be a woman at a desk and she is going to know me, and in about two years she is going to stop asking me for the account number!"

※

"That is a very small thing."

"It is the smallest thing in this book," said Youcai, "and it is mine, and you have got a drawer with nine thousand seven hundred yuan in it and a gourd."

※

And Dajie said, "And a drawer."

And Youcai said, "And a drawer."

※

And that is about as close as either of them ever got to an argument about it. And it is four lines long, and neither of them raised his voice, and Dajie has said since that he thinks he lost it.

※

He wrote nothing down that evening.

Youcai's book is finished and his own is finished.

And there is nothing in that flat in Banan that records the seventh of January 2025, or the renegotiation, or Wei Asi's bag of fruit, or the clause at the bottom of the agreement.

※

And in about four years a man of about forty-five is going to be standing at a counter in Shapingba on the first of a month making the fifty-eighth payment of sixty. And the woman at the desk is going to know his name. And there is not going to be one person in that building who knows why the number is four percent.

Except one, and he does not know either.

CHAPTER 39

Thirty-Nine

His mother went for the scan on the eleventh of September and she went on her own and she came back at about four in the afternoon and set her bag on the table and did not say anything.

Dajie was in the flat. He had been in the flat since about eleven and he had not asked her whether he could come and he had not gone.

※

"How was it."

"It was a scan."

"When do you get it."

"About a week."

※

She went and did the beds.

And at about six she came down and made tea and sat at the table opposite him and said the other thing without being asked. Which is a thing she has done about four times in twenty-four years.

※

"It is clear."

"How do you know it is clear?"

"Because I asked her."

"You asked her?"

"I asked her twice." "Because the woman doing it said, that looks all right, and then she said it again."

※

"Is that how they tell you."

"That is how they tell you," said Zhou Guifen. "They do not put a stamp on you. They say it looks all right and then they say it again and then you go out and get the bus."

※

"And in six months."

"In six months."

※

"On your own."

"On my own."

※

And that is the whole of it and it is about eleven words long. The woman is fine. There is a scan in six months and she is going to it on her own.

And there is nothing he can do about any of it.

※

※

Here is everybody and it is the last time in this book that all of them are in the same place. And they are not in the same place, and that is the point.

※

He Jie is still at the back road in Jiangbei with the two freezers and the four men.

And the hardback book, which has four hundred and eleven names in it now.

Dajie went to that yard on the fourth of October and she had nothing for him. She gave him tea, and he stood in the yard for about forty minutes.

"Why are you standing in my yard?"

"I do not know."

"Forty minutes is a long time to not know."

※

"There is nothing."

"I know."

"You come in here about once a month and there is nothing and you know there is nothing."

"I know."

※

"You are twenty-six in November."

"I know."

"Then do something about it!"

※

And Dajie said, "There is nothing I want to do."

And He Jie said, "That is not the same as nothing you can do," and went back to the receipt book. And that is the last time they speak in the whole of this book.

※

Peng is fifty-eight and still dressing people. He has a bad knee and has been told to stop lifting and has not stopped.

Dajie saw him about once a month for a year and they talked about the same four things, which are the yard, the weather, a man they both knew who had died. And the price of the diesel for the freezers.

And in about April of the second year Peng said the only thing he has ever said about any of it, which is this.

※

"You were never on the rota."

"I was on it twice."

"You were on it twice and you did three days and one Friday and you have been in that yard about forty times since for nothing," said Peng. "That is not a man who works at funerals. That is a man who stands in a yard."

※

"And what do I do about it."

"Nothing. You are twenty-five and you have got a mother and a drawer."

※

"That is the same thing Youcai says."

"Youcai is a man who writes things down and I am a man who dresses bodies and we have arrived at the same sentence," said Peng. "That is normally how you know it is true."

※

Youcai is at the third floor in Shapingba and still doing shift planning. He has made eleven of the sixty payments and has not missed one.

He goes to the bank on the first of every month in his lunch hour and by about the ninth payment the woman at the desk stopped asking him for the account number. Which was about a year earlier than he had said it would be.

※

He comes to Banan about once a month and he brings fruit.

And he has not opened the green book since July. It is in a drawer in Dadukou and the last line in it is four words.

※

Yan is twenty-five and still teaching at the training school in Dadukou at six thousand eight hundred a month, with no wu xian yi jin.

There are eleven children in the studio.

She is still doing the proceedings. That is the thing.

She is on the third one and it is going the same way. She has read about three thousand pages of procedure now.

And she has lost twice. And two lawyers have told her the third one is the same as the first two.

※

And in about June of the second year she telephoned Dajie and asked him a question. It is the first time either of them has ever asked the other anything directly.

※

"Do you still have it."

"The notebook?"

"The schedule."

※

And Dajie said, "I never had it. You have got it."

And Yan said, "I know I have got it. I am asking whether you want me to stop."

※

Dajie did not answer that for a moment.

"Say what you mean."

"Do you want me to hand it in," said Yan. "Because it has been about a year and a half and there is an office that has written to eleven households and about nine of them have signed. And if I hand it in now then it goes into a file and it becomes a document. About a third of the rows on it were signed by somebody on the eighth floor.

And it might open something."

"And if you do not."

"Then it stays in a folder in a rented flat in Dadukou and there is nothing."

※

And that is the whole of her question and it is the same two places that Dajie could not choose between in February of the year before.

※

And Dajie said the only true thing he has said to anybody in the whole of that year.

He said, "That is not my decision."

And Yan said, "No."

And Dajie said, "Why are you asking me."

※

And she said, "Because you are the only one in the whole of this who did it and did not want anything out of it at all."

※

He did not answer that.

And she said, "I am not going to hand it in. And I am not going to say why, and you are not going to ask me, and that is the whole of what I have decided."

※

Luo Changhe is sixty-two and he is still in the rented room in Dadukou with a hotplate and a photograph. And the urn is still on the second shelf at eye height in the office of a funeral company in Jiangbei and it has been there about a year and a half.

Dajie went to see him twice in that year and both times the man talked about a bicycle.

※

The woman from the fourth floor is in Nan'an with a balcony that gets the sun until four.

She telephoned the yard twice and both times it was about the balcony and both times it was for Dajie. And he was not there.

※

Wei Asi is forty-five and has been paid eleven times out of sixty and remembers everybody's birthday including Youcai's. Which is in March, and sends a card, and Youcai has never once mentioned it to anybody and has kept the cards in a drawer.

And he has never said one word about the clause, and there are forty-nine payments left.

※

Director Qiu is still at the street office and he is fifty-four now and there is a different street with a different number on a different wall.

Dajie saw him once, in about the second year, on a bus at Shapingba. Qiu looked at him for about two seconds and did not do anything.

Dajie cannot account for whether the man recognised him.

※

Tao Shi is still at the teahouse at the end of the room by the light and he is fifty-nine.

He still sings those four lines about the woman going down to the water at night carrying a lamp she has no use for.

Dajie has been in that room about eleven times in two years and has spoken to him twice.

※

The dog is in the ground by the shed at the back of the building in Banan and Dajie has walked past that shed about four hundred times. He has never once gone behind it.

※

※

And that is everybody and it is not a gathering and there is no scene where they are all in a room. Because they have never all been in a room. And there is not one street in this city that has two of them in it except by accident.

※

Here is the shape of it and Dajie worked it out on the bus in about the second year and it took him about four kilometres.

Everybody in this book is still alive except four.

A man of fifty-eight who was dead before page one. A woman of seventy-nine who stopped in the middle of a sentence about a bus route. A dog.

And a monk who never existed.

※

And not one of them is all right.

Not one of them is ruined either. That is the part nobody expects.

He Jie has a business. Peng has a knee and a job. Youcai has sixty payments and a bank. Yan has eleven children and a folder. Luo Changhe has a hotplate and a photograph.

Dajie has a drawer with nine thousand seven hundred yuan in it and a green exercise book and a gourd.

And a flat on the fifth floor with no lift. And a mother who is going for a scan on her own in six months.

※

And his mother has a tin with three hundred yuan in it and a bag with nine pockets and a book in the back room with four names in it, and she is fifty-four now. And the two of them live in a room to let four streets from a building that is not there.

※

That is everybody.

There is no confetti and there is not going to be any. And the lights in this book do not come up at the end and there is no table with all of them around it.

There is a man of twenty-five on a fifth floor with no lift and a woman of fifty-four doing the beds. And the whole of what they have is four streets and a drawer.

CHAPTER 40

Forty

The flat is on the fifth floor of a building with no lift.

The stairwell has a light on the second landing that has been going since about 2019. It has never been replaced.

Dajie is twenty-eight years old now and he has been twenty-eight for about four months.

He is sitting on that stairwell at about eleven at night on a Tuesday in the eleventh month with a plastic gourd between his feet, and he is drunk.

He is talking to a man of about sixty from the flat below. The man is going down to get cigarettes and has stopped because he cannot get past.

※

"Sit down. Have one."

"I do not want one."

"It is from Wanzhou."

"My mother's cousin sent it."

"I do not know your mother's cousin."

"Why would you?"

"Then have one anyway," said Dajie, "and I will tell you about the man who brought it, and by then you will have had one."

※

The man of sixty looked at the stairs for a few seconds, and then he looked at the gourd, and then he sat down on the step below and had one.

※

That is the whole of the trick and there is nothing to it and there has never once been anything to it at all.

You do not ask a man anything. You say a true thing at speed and then a slightly less true thing. Then you stop talking and let him find out whether he agrees with you.

And if he agrees, he believes he thought of it.

※

※

Here is what he tells the man of sixty over about forty minutes. It is not true and it is not false. And it is the story he has been telling for six years.

※

There was a monk, and this is the version he tells.

A drunk. Read too much. Wanted the girls. Thrown out of the temple for it. And then he went round the country in a hat that was falling apart and a gourd with no bottom. He broke every rule anybody had.

And the whole point was that he never broke the one that mattered.

And then he did the thing with the widow. He sat down with her. That is the whole of it. He sat down with her, and she told him, because there is nothing you cannot say in front of a man who is drunk and is not going to write it down.

Jiu rou chuan chang guo.

Fo zu xin zhong liu.

※

"And what does that mean."

"It means wine and meat pass through the gut."

"And the other one."

"It means the Buddha stays in the heart."

※

"So it is a saying about a man who does what he likes."

"No."

"Then what is it, because I have heard that saying about four hundred times in my life and it has never once meant anything to me."

※

And Dajie said, "It is a saying about a man who does what he likes and it is not about the man. It is about the other word in it."

"What other word."

"The one that means stays."

※

The man of sixty thought about that for a while and did not say anything and had another one.

※

"You have done a lot of thinking about this."

"I have done about six years of thinking about this."

"Six years."

"About that."

"And what have you got."

※

And Dajie said, "A drawer and about nine thousand yuan in it and a gourd and a job I do not do."

And the man of sixty said, "A drawer."

"A drawer and four streets and a green exercise book and a mother on the fourth floor and a dog that is in the ground behind a shed in Banan."

"That is not very much."

"No."

※

"Say the last two lines."

"There are no last two lines."

"There are always last two lines."

"That is what I said," said Dajie. "There are no last two lines."

※

The man of sixty laughed at that and had another one and looked at his watch and did not go and get the cigarettes.

※

And then Dajie tells him about the woman on the landing.

He does not tell him the truth. He has told this version about two hundred times. The version is that he sat with an old woman for four months on a landing in Jiangbei.

That she talked about a bus route. That she died at ten past four in the morning.

And that he stayed until half past seven.

※

He does not say one word about what she told him on the landing.

He has never once said the diaogou out loud to a stranger.

He has said it to about four people in six years. Never on a stairwell. And never for a round of baijiu out of a gourd a cousin in Wanzhou sent.

There is a reason for all of that and he has never once in six years been able to work out what it is.

※

"And did she tell you anything."

"She told me a lot of things."

"Like what."

※

And Dajie said, "She said that the noise the woman in the flat below had been listening to for four months was a person dying, and not a dog."

※

The man of sixty looked at him for a while and did not say anything at all.

"That is not a thing a woman says."

"That is what she said."

"She was seventy-nine."

"She was."

※

※

And the man of sixty went down at about half past eleven and did not get the cigarettes.

And Dajie sat on the second landing for about another hour in the dark. He did not say anything to anybody else. There was nobody else.

※

※

That is the last night in this book, and it is a Tuesday, and it is the eleventh month, and it is not the end of anything.

※

※

In about the second year Dajie asked him to show him the page.

"Show me the page."

"Not yet."

"How long."

"About four years."

"That was two and a half years ago."

"And it is about four years," said Youcai, "and you are not going to count it in front of me."

"So there are four."

"Four."

"And you marked them on purpose."

"I marked them on purpose."

"Why."

"Because they were the best four and they were not mine," said Youcai, "and a book is not a book if the best four in it belong to the man who wrote the book down."

That was two and a half years ago and the page has not been shown.

And Dajie knows exactly which four and has known since the bottom of a flight of steps in December of the first winter, and he is not going to check.

※

He Jie said four sentences to his mother on the twelfth of December and neither of them has ever told him what they were.

He has asked twice. Both times it has been in the flat and both times she has been doing something else with her hands.

The first time she said, "Nothing important."

And Dajie said, "Nothing important is a thing people say when it is important."

And she said, "It was about the shop and the urn and the rota and the money. It was four sentences. And I am not going to say them to you, because they were said to me and not to you."

And he said, "That is not an answer."

And she said, "No. It is the whole answer. It was said to me. If I say it to you then it belongs to you, and it does not belong to you. It belongs to me and to the woman who said it, and there is nobody left in this city who can settle whether I have got it right."

The second time she looked at him for a while and said, *do not ask me that again in this flat*. And he has not.

※

The schedule is in a folder in a rented flat in Dadukou and it has been there about three years.

Yan is on the fourth proceeding now. The first three went the way the first two went, which was that she was right and it did not matter.

And the office in Dadukou wrote to eleven households four years ago and about nine of them signed. The eleven are dispersed across three districts now.

She is not going to hand it in.

※

※

The last thing is this and it is not a resolution and it is not a moral and it is not the end of anything.

※

There is a man of twenty-eight on the second landing of a building in Banan with no lift, at about half past twelve at night, in the eleventh month.

He has a plastic gourd that came from the Yiwu wholesale market for about nine yuan and holds one and a half litres.

He is drunk and he is sitting there muttering to nobody in particular.

He is doing the diaozi quietly to nobody, through his nose, and it is bad. And he loses the third line and goes back to the top and does it again. And the second time he gets all four and the fourth one goes the way it goes.

※

And there is a woman of fifty-seven on the fourth floor who can hear it through about four inches of concrete and who has put the television on and who is not going to come down.

And there is a man of sixty below him who is going to sleep. He will tell somebody in the morning that the young one was on the stairs again talking about a monk.

And there is a light on the second landing that has never once been replaced.

※

And nobody in that building comes out to find out.

Nobody comes out to find out.

Not that night and not any night.

※

That is the whole of it and it is cheap and it is supposed to be cheap. And there is a man on a stairway with a plastic gourd who can do a thing that nobody in this city can do and who is not doing it for anybody. And there is no table with all of them around it and there is no confetti and the lights do not come up.

※

Jiu rou chuan chang guo.

Fo zu xin zhong liu.

He does not know the last two lines.

He is not sure there are any.

He has never once in his life been able to remember that they exist.

Colophon

酒肉穿肠过，佛祖心中留。
世人若学我，如同入魔道。

Jiu rou chuan chang guo. Fo zu xin zhong liu.

Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart. But if the world should imitate me, it walks straight into the demon's path. — attributed to Daoji, the mad monk of the Southern Song

The novel is oral — a singer working a repertoire at a teahouse table, forty nights running, in a river town where nobody has time for saints.

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.

Wine Passes Through, Buddha Stays Put · 40 sections · 130,922 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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