YOUNG RIVER

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

25 chapters
58,903 words

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Chapter One

Twelfth month, twentieth day. Boards in, two hundred fourteen catty. Rice out, two sacks. — household book of the Huang workshop

•

The smell came first, the way it always did: garlic gone slow and gold in lard. Reaching the corner of the lane while the stall itself was still hidden behind the wall of stacked boards. Under the garlic sat the river, which smelled of nothing alive.

Ah-Cuêng came around the bend with his school bag knocking his hip. The stall stood where it had stood every morning of his life, under a blue tarpaulin strung between two utility poles. The sign above the pot carried two characters, 粿条, the word for kway teow. The ink had gone brown from years of steam. Kway teow was rice pressed into ribbons, and it was breakfast.

“Jiah bhue?” the auntie said, which is the lane asking whether you have eaten yet.

He shook his head.

She built the bowl without looking away from the neighbor’s baby.

Flat noodles came out of the bamboo basket and went into the tall pot for the count of three and were shaken once. Broth came off the wide pot, where pork bones and soybean sprouts had gone on sim‑mering since the lamps of last night. Then the liver, sliced thin and pink, dropped into the broth and lifted at the count of twenty while she counted under her breath. It went on top gray at the edge and soft in the middle.

Diced celery after that. Then the spoon of gold fat, lifting as it poured. White pepper last, out of a tin with a dented lid.

He had never once said liver. His mother paid the auntie on the first of the month, and after that the liver simply came. The auntie kept a tin by the soy sauce with names chalked on the lid, and his mother's name sat at the top of the list in characters bigger than anyone else's. Because she paid for the month and not the day.

He ate standing with the steam in his face.

Broth first, the bone sweetness of it, and after the broth the fat lay on his lips and the noodles slipped down like ribbon. The pepper waited and stung late at the back of the throat. He drank the free refill to put the sting out.

The spoon scraped the bottom. He tipped the last of the broth and set the bowl down just as the first door up the lane banged open.

One voice began the morning text. Then a whole classroom took it up. Then the lane itself, every child in it, roaring the words together at seven o'clock. The roar rolled down the lane and over the black water and out the other side.

Ah-Cuêng ran. On the good days he turned the corner with the pepper still in his nose.

•

The lane had no name that anyone who lived in it used. Boards went up its walls to the height of the eaves, brown-edged and green-edged, stacked flat like a wall of fallen dominoes. Sacks of plastic shreds sat tied at the neck in every doorway. A television tube lay face-down in the gutter, and the gutter accepted it.

Drinking water came on a tricycle at six and again at three. The water man rang a hand bell and the women came out with blue jugs, which stood by the doors in rows of two and three, never empty and never full.

Well water was for floors and for the beds of chili plants. Nobody said why. The jugs did the saying.

At the field corner stood the little god, Peh Gong, painted orange long ago, no bigger than a kettle, with a stub of incense in front of

him and a week of ash. Ah-Cuêng passed him twice a day on the way to school. The rule from Ah-Ma, his father's mother, was a nod, no pointing, and he kept it the way he kept his shoes tied, without looking down at it.

The Brazier Rule he kept without being told twice. When the smoke behind the low wall went sweet he picked up the thermos and went for water, and he did not look into the courtyard. On those days the top edge of the wall turned orange, and his father's voice came over it flat and unhurried, telling the fire what it was.

"Blue-yellow is copper, and copper is honest. Green—go."

He went.

•

His mother worked at the front table with the lamp on even in daytime, because the lamp made the little legs of the chips shine. Chips came to her in wooden trays and left her in bowls, sorted by the shine of their legs. She read each stamp through a lens strapped to her head like a half-moon.

Her thumbnail touched every chip before it went into a bowl. Beside the trays lay the abacus, and the school notebook where she wrote the day's figures, two columns, in and out. The numbers walking down the page in the same order the grandfather's had walked.

"Sit down and keep your hands out of my light," she said, not looking up. He sat. The tweezers went click, click, click, forty to the minute, and the bowls filled.

"Is Papa lighting the brazier?" he asked.

"When the smoke is worth money." Click, click. "Eat your mue before it skins over."

The mue stood in the rice cooker from morning to night, rice porridge thick enough to hold a chopstick upright. It was what the family ate when there was no banquet and no reason for one. On it floated whatever the house had decided was food that day: chai poh,

which is radish salted brown and fried to fragrance. Or a spoon of the broth the auntie's liver had swum in.

•

It rained for two days before the New Year, the winter he was eight, and on the second day Ah-Ma went into the grandfather's room.

The room stayed made up. A mosquito net folded to the head of the bed, a bench, the god shelf with its three cups turned down. Nobody slept there. Of the grandfather the boy had no face, only hands, wide and cracked at the knuckles, that had once lifted him over a duck coop. And a smell of rosin that came back to him off burning wires and off the school bench both.

Ah-Ma took the household book down from under the god shelf. It wore a red cloth cover tied with string gone soft. She sat with it on the bed, and Ah-Cuêng stood in the doorway because the rain gave him nothing else to do.

The book opened to columns. Two heads, one per page-side. The left said 谷, grain, rice. The right said 板, boards.

He could read numerals before he could read much else, so that is what he read. In the early years the rice column ran long: forty lines, fifty, prices in and prices out and a balance struck at the bottom in a heavier stroke. The boards column sat thin beside it, a few lines a month. Then the boards lines grew fatter and the rice lines grew shorter, year by year, the way two children get fed differently.

On the last page that had writing on it, the rice column had stopped altogether. The boards column went on alone down the margin and turned the corner of the page.

"Whose hand is this?"

"Your grandfather's own hand." She tied the string twice around and knotted it. "He counted everything twice, and he counted it true."

She put the book in the drawer of the black-wood cabinet, under the tray where the letters from Siam lay: red-barred envelopes,

stamps with a boat on them. His great-grandfather's hand gone thin at the end of each letter the way old men's footsteps go thin at the end of a road.

The drawer slid shut on its wooden runners, and the household book lay down with the letters and did not come up again that winter.

He had asked Ah-Ma about the letters once, in the summer, standing on his toes to see. She had lifted one out and let him hold it. The paper was thin as the skin on boiled milk, and the writing went down the page in columns, and the red bar ran across the envelope's face like a bandage.

"Your great-grandfather's," she had said. "He crossed the water with a sweet rice cake in his bag. Tiam kueh. You eat it at New Year now, and you forget it crossed once." He had handed it back, and the drawer had taken it. And the boats on the stamps had gone on sailing nowhere in the dark for another year.

Outside, rope-turners had gathered at the wide part of the lane. Two girls turned and a small boy jumped, and the chant went up and over the walls.

"Ah-Ng! Ah-Ng! half a coin of gold, find the other half and buy the town!"

Ah-Cuêng crossed to the other side of the lane without deciding to, and walked with the wall between him and the rope. The chant kept on behind the boards a long time. Gold was half of Ng, or Ng was half of gold, and the words came over the wall again and again while the rope turned and turned.

Ah-Ma called him in for mue at noon. He ate it while it was too hot, because then no one could ask him anything.

•

On Sunday his father gave him the eye lesson, three boards face-down on the door plank.

"Close your eyes and keep them shut."

He closed them. A board came under his nose. Fresh rosin, sharp and a little sweet, like the pine benches at school.

“That board is a green-edged one,” he said.

“Mm.” A second board came under his nose. This one smelled scorched and bitter, like the far side of the sweet smoke.

“That one was burnt near the pin.”

The third board said nothing at all, and he stood there smelling nothing until his father took it back and put two boards of the same size on his two palms. One in each hand.

“Now tell me which palm is heavier.”

“Left.”

“Copper sleeps inside. Hear it.” His father took the left board and weighed it on his own palm and set it down. “The town is the same. Heavy where you can’t see.”

Then his father lit a wire end over the ash bowl, three steps away. The flame stood up blue-yellow and steady.

“That one is honest,” his father said. He lit a second wire, and the flame came up green, fast and wrong, and Ah-Cuêng was already stepping back, because that was the lesson under the lesson. His father nodded without turning his head and put the wire out in the ash.

Boards by smell. Boards by weight. Boards by the color of the flame. His father never said what the lessons were for.

On Sunday nights the trucks came down from the port at Shantou and stopped at the lane’s mouth with their crates marked in lan‑guages the lane could not read. And the men walked the crates with their hands the way his father had walked the boards. And the prices went up and down inside the courtyard where the boy could hear them but not see them. In the morning the gutters held wire ends and paper and a smell of rain that had fallen somewhere else. The lane swept its own threshold and no other, and the sweepings went into the river.

•

The bus came on a Thursday, the winter he was eight.

It was a white minibus, too wide for the lane, and it eased in with its mirrors folded and its tires finding the gutter. Across its side ran a red banner with characters on it, 儿童血铅筛查, children's blood-lead screening, red on white, and the paint had begun to bubble at one corner.

Nurses stepped down in white vests. Two of them carried a cardboard box between them and set it on a stool, and a third began unloading small white chairs, twelve of them, little ones, the size for children. She set them in a row along the wall of boards, facing out.

Doors opened up and down the lane. Women came to their doorsteps with towels in their hands. The water man stopped his tricycle and stood beside it with the bell quiet in his fist.

"The screening is free of charge," a nurse said, to nobody, to everybody.

"Free," said Auntie Wren from the chai poh stall, and looked at the banner a long time, the way she looked at a fish she did not yet believe.

His cousin Leng-Zai came down the lane at a dead run, one year older and louder than the year before, and put his hand flat on the first white chair.

"First needle is mine, and I am not scared of anything that bleeds."

Ah-Cuêng's mother came out and wiped his mouth with her thumb, once, where the gold fat had been, and stood him in front of her with her two hands on his shoulders. The nurses opened the cardboard box. Inside, in grooves, lay the needles in a row, thin as the mother's tweezers.

The boy counted the chairs. Twelve. He kept the count to himself.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter Two

Pig liver, fresh: four yuan the catty. — market row, Guiyu, winter 2004

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They took the blood on a Friday, in the yard of the primary school. The banner had come off the bus and gone up between two scaffold poles.

The white chairs stood in a row of twelve. The queue stood in a row of sixty. The roll ordered the queue, and the roll was ordered by the pinyin of surnames, so Huang came before Li. The same two boys stood together everywhere that year.

The mothers had come in from the stalls with their towels still over their shoulders, and they stood along the fence in the order of something no one had written down. From time to time one of them shouted a name into the queue, and a child shouted back that he was still alive, and the mother said that so was the needle.

Ah-Cuêng stood in the cold with his sleeve rolled to the elbow. Behind him Li Xiaolong practiced fainting.

He leaned his head back until the boy behind giggled. Then he righted himself with his eyes shut and his hands out, like a man in a boat.

“They feed your blood to a machine,” Li Xiaolong told the queue. “A machine in Guangzhou with teeth. Then it writes to the government about you personally, by name.”

“It writes to your mother,” a girl said.

“It writes to my mother about me.” He bared his arm and licked the place where the needle would go. “Here. Tell it I like pork bones.”

The nurse at the chair was young and wore a green hairpin. She wiped the inside of his elbow with a cold cotton ball. The alcohol

smell climbed into his nose and sat down next to the rosin smell that lived there all the time. The needle went in thinner than the tweezers; it did not hurt; it pressed.

The vial filled dark and quick, darker than he had expected. She laid a cotton ball on his arm and folded his elbow over it.

“Hold that and count to fifty,” she said. “Count out loud if it helps; some of them like to hear themselves count.”

He counted in Teochew, because the numbers were his. He had reached thirty when Li Xiaolong took the chair and held out his arm like a man giving up a sword. Li talked the whole time. The nurse laughed, the queue laughed, and the cotton ball came off Ah-Cuêng’s arm with a hair of red stuck to it.

Nobody wrote anything down for the children. There was no paper for them, no stamp, no slip. The vials went into a rack in the card - board box, in an order known to the rack. The box lid came down.

The nurse with the green hairpin gave each child a red sticker as he left the chair, a paper medal for the arm. Li Xiaolong wore his on his forehead. The teachers let him, because it was that kind of morning.

At the gate an old man in a padded jacket stopped the nurse with the green hairpin. He asked why a town with good water needed the blood of its children. He asked where the water man’s own grand - children gave their blood, and who had paid for the bus.

She answered that it was free. He said he had not asked the price. She stood holding her tray and said nothing else. The queue moved forward around the two of them like water around a post.

When it was done the nurse counted the chairs back into the box. Twelve. The count went where his count had gone, into the lid.

•

The results came back the next Thursday, at the gate, at the hour when school let out. The lane filled with bags and shouting.

A nurse sat at a folding table with a stack of envelopes and a list.

She called the mothers one by one, not the children. Ah-Cuêng stood at the edge of it with his bag strap in both hands. The names of half his class passed over his head.

Each name was answered by a woman who stepped out of the crowd, took a folded paper, and did something different with her face. One mother laughed out loud at what she read, a short laugh with nothing in it, and folded the paper twice and put it in her pocket with the fish money. Another pressed hers against her boy's ear and held it there a moment, as if the paper had a temperature worth tak - ing.

Cai Can's grandmother took her envelope with both hands and opened it standing right there. She read the number out to the lane at large, twice, loudly. It was the biggest number in the class, and in her mouth it sounded like a winning lottery ticket.

Cai Can punched the air. The two of them walked off up the lane with the paper held out flat on her palm, like a fish being carried to the fryer. People came to their doorways to see it go by.

Nobody else compared anything out loud. The other papers went home unopened, in fists, in shopping bags, inside jackets against the cold. Each mother carrying hers the way you carry a letter you have decided not to read on the road.

Ah-Cuêng's mother took her envelope with one hand and did not open it at the table.

She walked home with it folded in thirds inside her fist. The fist swung like a bucket that weighed nothing at all. All the way she talked to Auntie Wren about chili plants.

At the corner where the lane met the market road she stopped talking chili plants for exactly one breath. And then took the talk up again at the same speed, and the two of them walked on.

•

That night he woke once, later than the trucks. The house was down to its night sounds. The rice cooker ticked as it cooled. The

river did its nothing. In the front room Ah-Ma's tea fire breathed with its small dry voice, like a page being fanned.

From the big room came the sound of the black-wood cabinet's drawer. The runners went out. A pause with a paper sound in it. The runners went in then her footsteps across the floor, the lamp-switch, the dark again. He lay with his eyes open and matched the sounds to the movements the way he matched boards to smells. And when the runners went in he turned over and was asleep before he could wonder at himself for doing it.

In the morning the drawer was shut and the room was swept. Nobody said the word number in his hearing for eleven days.

At school on Friday nobody said the word either. The teacher taught the reduction of fractions, and the class reduced twelve six-teenths and nine twelfths and got the same answer by different roads. And Ah-Cuêng wrote his in the smallest figures on his row. In the afternoon the roar went up on schedule and came down on schedule, and the day ended with no number in it anywhere.

On the walk home Li Xiaolong folded his red sticker into a boat and sailed it down the gutter, and the melt water carried it toward the river with the scales and the ice. And the whole lane watched it go with more attention than it had given the banner.

•

On the twelfth day his mother took him to the market row.

The fish lay on slanted tiles, heads to the water channel. The channel ran the length of the row, carrying the scales and the ice away toward the river.

Chickens hung in pairs at the far end with their feet tied to a rail, and between the stalls the ground was wet and silvered. And the whole row smelled of ice and guts and river, which was to say it smelled like the lane with the garlic taken out. The ice man poured a fresh sack over the tiles at the top of the row, and the melt ran the length of it, past every stall in turn.

His mother walked the row once without stopping, the way his father walked a crate. At the third stall she stopped and put her thumb into a sea bream's gill. She looked at the stall across the aisle while her thumb was still under the flap. The fish man watched her thumb and not her face.

"Good fish today," he said. "The ice came late, so the gill is hon - est."

"Wet gill. Clear eye. The belly gives when I press and comes back when I stop." She took her thumb out. "That one did all three. Bag it."

He bagged it.

She counted the notes out of a rubber-banded roll, small notes, counted twice. He watched her do the arithmetic in the air over her palm, the way Ah-Ma's abacus did it under its beads.

At the meat line she bought liver. The butcher had a whole slab of it, deep and shining. She pointed at the far end, the thick end.

"Two catty," she said.

He cut it and weighed it and raised his eyebrows at her. She put one more note on the block without waiting for the price.

"The testing was free," she said, to the slab, to the butcher, to the row. Two catty at four yuan the catty came to eight. The bus had charged nothing, and the needle had charged nothing, and the eight sat on the block where her hand had put it. A bill with a fold in it that had been in her pocket since morning.

"So it was," the butcher said. He wrapped the liver in lotus leaf and dropped two pork bones on top of the paper for nothing. The bones were her due, and everybody on the row knew it.

•

That evening the liver went into the wok first, before the garlic, before anything. The smell of it walked out to the lane's bend and came back with the boy behind it.

They ate around the low table, mue for everyone. The liver lay in stripes across the top of his bowl only, brown and glossed, cut against

the grain. He liked it that way without knowing it was a way. His father ate in silence and cleared his chest twice, a small sound like a knot pulled tight, and kept eating.

He ate the second helping of liver without being told to. His mother watched the wok and not him. His father had worked the braziers since before the boy was born, and had the arms for it. The cough was new that winter and sat in him lightly, a tenant not yet moved in after the bowls were scraped Ah-Ma made tea at the front-room fire. It was the little fire, fed on olive-pit charcoal that her brother-in-law brought her in sacks. It burned without a smell of anything but its own heat. She set out the red clay pot and the three small cups: gongfu tea, poured round and round so that every cup came out the same.

She carried the first round to the god shelf, the second to her son.

The third she kept, and held it against her lip without drinking. The three cups went round twice, and on the second round she poured the shelf's cup full again. And the steam went up past the paper on the god shelf that carried the grandfather's name in black on white. There were cups in that house for people who were not there, and the boy knew which ones, and he knew not to count them out loud.

"Ah-Cuêng," she said. "Tomorrow is the first. We go to the Lord's temple. Wear the gray jacket."

"Yes, Ah-Ma."

"Yes, Ah-Ma."

"Sleep now. The lane will be loud enough soon enough, and you will wish you had slept."

The boy sat on the step with his hands around his own mug of hot water and watched the little fire do its clean work. Behind the low wall across the lane the braziers breathed their sweet smoke at the dark. The two fires went on side by side all evening, the way they always had nobody in either courtyard found anything to say about it.

On the first they went up to the Lord's temple with the gray jacket buttoned to the collar. Ah-Ma carried the sweets flat on a red tray against her hip, and the boy carried the incense. And the courtyard was already full of shoulders and of smoke that smelled of nothing the braziers would own.

The Lord sat high behind his railing with new paint on him, and the queue of the town went up to his railing in its Sunday order. Three sweets down, three sticks in, three bows from the waist. And came away from the railing the way people come away from a win - dow they have paid their respect at ah-Ma put her tray where the trays went. She pressed her palms together and moved her lips, and whatever she was counting she counted it without the book.

In the morning there was liver in his bowl at the stall, unasked, as always. He was eight, and the number lived at home now, folded in thirds under the letters from Siam. The lane roared its texts at seven. He turned the corner on the good days with the pepper still in his nose.

Chapter Three

It is born of wood. It lives in the fire. It dies in the water. — riddle hung on the forty-first lantern, fifteenth night of the first moon, 2005

•

The twenty-fourth of the twelfth month belonged to the kitchen god.

Ah-Ma took down the paper face above the stove and brushed it clean. She set out maltose on a small dish.

Before the god went up to heaven for his yearly report she smeared a little of it across the paper lips with her thumb.

“He says what the sugar says,” she told the boy. He was on a stool with a rag tied to a bamboo pole, bringing down the year’s dust from the beam tops. The dust went out the door and did not come back in by dark the gutters of the whole lane carried gray wool and a smell of old smoke leaving.

At lamplight she burned the old face in the stove, and the god went up on the smoke, and the stove stood empty-headed all week.

The couplets went up on the door posts while the paste was still warm, his father reaching, the boy handing.

A single character, 安, peace at home, stood guard at each lintel corner in wet black. The boy read it from the ground, and then from the stool, and then from the ground again, because a character looks different from each height and only one of the heights was his.

School let out and the lane changed shifts.

The children took over the day watch, and homework was done at the stall on the stool with the bowl steaming beside the ink, and the auntie checked nobody’s characters and fed everybody’s broth.

Leng-Zai ran a trade on the side, buying firecrackers by the brick and selling them by the single stick to the small ones at a markup he called handling.

Ah-Ma heard the price and said nothing. It was his mother's brother to say something, and his mother's brother was at the courtyard counting smoke.

School let out and the water man changed shifts too; the tricycle came even on the first morning, because water did not keep holidays. And the blue jugs stood their two-by-three rows through the whole fortnight like a choir that had been seated.

On the first morning the mandarins began.

Great-luck fruit, they were called, and they moved through the lane in even numbers, two and four and six, carried in both hands. Never one. Never three. The boy carried a pair to the auntie at the stall and a pair to the water man and a pair to the old man at the gate who had asked about the blood. Mandarins came back to his own door from those same doors, in the same hands, sometimes the very ones.

A mandarin given was a debt. A mandarin returned was the in‑terest. By the fifteenth the basin held three more than it had started with, and no one in the house had eaten a single one.

"Eat one," he said to Ah-Ma.

"They are not for eating." She turned one slowly on the shelf so its best side faced the room. "They are for being."

The only mandarin he ever ate that fortnight was one that had made the full circuit four times and had come home to stay. It tasted of the lane, which is to say of everyone's hands. He spat the pip into the stove and it popped, and Ah-Ma said the popping meant money, and did not say whose.

On the night before, the house sat down to the year's first meal with the incense urn lifted down from the god shelf and set smoking at the head of the table. The boy was given the place nearest the pot.

Ah-Ma served the ancestors first, one spoon of each dish into their cups. The goose had been boiling since Thursday. There was fish with its head on, and chai poh fried dark, and the sweet soup at the end. Then the living, and the living ate the way the ancestors watched, quietly, in order.

The stall was shut for three days and the lane smelled wrong all three, the way a room smells wrong without its clock.

On the fourth morning the tarpaulin went up again, the blue corners cracked flat, and the first broth of the year went on the fire before the sun, and the lane forgave itself. The first bowl of the year was his, by seniority of appetite, and the auntie counted his twenty seconds out loud this time, for luck.

•

In the second month came the Lord's birthday, and for one whole day the braziers were cold. Every courtyard washed its own stones. The sweet smoke did not rise anywhere in the lane from the first drum to the last. The top edge of the low wall stayed gray from morning to dark, and the air was only air. The town wore its clean clothes up to the temple and came home and slept early. And in the morning the fires went back to work as if the day had been a dream the fires had agreed to on the first and the fifteenth of every moon after that. Ah-Ma went to the Lord's temple, and the boy carried the tray. Bai lao ye, the worship of the Lords, was the lane's calendar the way school was its clock: you did not ask what it was for, you asked which day it fell on. She walked ahead with her back the way it always was, and the tray of sweets rode level on her hip.

The queue at the temple moved at the speed of the incense, which was the speed of respect.

•

The tables were built by daylight, the day before.

The council men stood the planks on trestles in the square and hung the lanterns from a wire strung corner to corner.

The boy stood at the edge and counted the hangers out of habit: thirteen tables, one hundred and six lanterns, four prizes on a shelf that had been a door. Nobody asked him to count. He carried the count home like water without spilling it.

On the fifteenth night of the first moon the temple square filled with lanterns and with riddle tables. One lantern to a table. A paper under each lantern, and a drum behind every table with a master behind every drum. Thirteen tables in a ring.

Ah-Cuêng walked the ring twice. He did not know the answers and did not care. Each riddle hung under a number, and the numbers went around the square in order, one to a hundred and six. He knew which number hung on which side.

Numbers were his. Somewhere behind the sweet trays at the square's edge, Ah-Ma's own tray waited for its season: sesame balls, peanut candy, kumquat cakes in rows, the sugar architecture of the fifteenth. She built it at home over two days and let the boy carry the level ones only. The prize shelf stood at the north end under the big lantern: a plank with books and dice and paper boats on it. And one yellow thing at the end whose shape he could see but not name.

The masters opened the games. Three beats each, staggered, so that the square sounded like rain starting on different roofs. Then the crowd began to call guesses. The drums answered: a wrong guess took nothing, a right one took two beats, an explained one took three, and the prizes came down off the shelf into two open hands.

Ah-Ma did not come to the square at night.

She knew the answers to every riddle the council owned, from years of standing behind the sweet trays at the edge of it. And she said the striking was for the young and the knowing kept. She had struck one drum in her life, she said, and the less said about which riddle the better, and she said it in a way that closed the drawer on the subject.

Leng-Zai worked the crowd at table nine. He had a voice that reached the far side of the square without trying.

"Number nine!" the master called, and Leng-Zai gave an answer that made his table laugh. The drum gave him nothing. He laughed bigger than the table had laughed, paid nothing, and moved on to table ten with half the crowd after him like gulls.

Ah-Cuêng stayed at the dark end of the ring, where the lanterns thinned and the numbers ran high. Forty-one hung on a lantern at the corner, its paper yellowed from a previous year. It is born of wood. It lives in the fire. It dies in the water. He read it four times, moving his lips.

At table forty-one the crowd was one old man who had given up and gone home. The master sat behind the drum with the mallet down.

The square emptied by fifties and sixties. Leng-Zai's voice went away toward the sweet stalls.

Ah-Cuêng came to the table. The master looked up.

"Number forty-one," the boy said. "I would read it, if reading is allowed."

"Reading is allowed. Strike one to claim it, and read it to the square. The square will listen if the answer is any good."

The boy took the mallet and struck the drum once, softly, so that the sound went out under the noise of the square like a stone slid under a door. Then he read the three lines aloud. His voice was small and it carried, the way small things carry in a square at night. Nobody came over. The lantern above them ticked in its own heat.

"Your answer," the master said, "and mind the drum."

He struck it once more. Then he said it.

"Charcoal. It is wood that the fire has finished with. In the fire it lives; water ends it. The braziers sleep on it all night, and in the morning the tea kettles sit on it."

The master looked at him for a moment, the way the auntie looked at a bowl she had not built. Then the mallet came down twice for the answer and three times for the telling. The three beats went out

across the square, and two or three heads turned at the far tables to see who was striking the forty-one drum at the dark end.

“Prize shelf,” the master said. “The yellow one at the end. Take it in both hands; that is the rule, not kindness.”

The prize was a pencil, painted yellow, unsharpened, with the maker’s name stamped twice along the flat. The paint was chipped at the end, where the shelf had kept it through a year of other people’s luck. The boy took it in both hands and carried it home the long way, past the closed tables and the lanterns going dark one by one. Two masters stacked their chairs. A third beat out his lantern’s flame with a folded fan.

At home his mother was still at the trays under the lamp, and the pencil meant nothing to the trays, and that was its whole fortune. At the cabinet in the big room he slid the drawer open and laid the pencil down in the tray beside the letters from Siam and the book that counted twice. The runners went in. The drum was still sounding in his ears the way a bell sounds after the bell has stopped.

In the morning he sharpened the pencil with the kitchen knife, rolling it, and the shavings went into the stove and were the first thing of his the little fire had eaten. He did his fractions with it and checked them twice. The point came back at night to the drawer, point-out, and the tray held book, letters, pencil, in the order he had laid them. He lay in bed and could see the order without opening the drawer, which is what a drawer is for.

Behind the low wall the sweet smoke went up into the dark, and the smoke and the pencil-smell of the shavings in the stove met somewhere over the roof tiles, and neither yielded. Ah-Ma passed the cabinet on her way to bed. She did not ask what he had. She had heard the three beats from the front room. Or she had counted the crowd going home. Or she had simply seen his two hands and the shape of what they carried. She touched the drawer once with two fingers, the way you close a fish’s eye, and went to bed.

Chapter Four

Second term. Mathematics: 100. Conduct: quiet; does not volunteer. — term report, Huang Zhichuan, Grade 3, 2006

•

School said his name one way and the lane said it another.

At eight-fifteen the teacher stood at the blackboard and read the roll in Mandarin. Each name came out straight, ironed flat, the way a cart goes down the big road. “Huang Zhichuan.” He raised his hand to the straight name. At half past four, at the lane’s mouth, a neigh ‑ bor would call “Ah-Cuêng” across three courtyards, a name with bends in it. And his head turned to the bent one before he could have said why. He kept the two names apart the way the house kept its two columns, and he did not carry one into the other’s books.

At seven the roar went up through the windows, and he was inside it now instead of under it. From inside, the roar was not one sound but sixty, and every mouth in it was a lane mouth he knew. And when the reading stopped at the comma you could hear the whole town inhale at once.

He sat two rows from the window, next to Li Xiaolong, who drummed his pencil on the desk edge between every exercise. Soft, in threes, like a man practicing a procession he had been promised. The teachers moved him twice a term. He always arrived back at the same desk with the same pencil.

Mathematics was the hour the boy was richest. Fractions came to him the way boards came to his father: by weight, by smell, by the color of the thing. He finished first and checked it twice, the grand ‑ father’s way, and handed it up.The teacher’s red pen made a circle at

the top of the page. The circle meant a hundred, and it looked like the mouth of a well seen from above.

The report came home at the end of term in an envelope his mother opened at the table. She read the two lines twice. Mathem - atics she set on the shelf, where by the second term four red circles stood in a row, and the well-mouth widened. Conduct she set under the lamp and read a third time. Her thumbnail touched the word quiet the way it touched a chip, testing whether it would come off.

"Volunteering costs nothing," she said.

"It costs having the wrong answer in front of everyone."

She looked at him for a while with the lens pushed up on her head like a second moon.

Then she went back to the trays. "So keep your answers right," she said, "and let the others spend theirs."

At the lane's mouth the next morning she met the teacher buying greens, and the two women spoke with the fish-bargaining faces they used on each other. And afterward his mother said only one thing about it.

"Your teacher says you answer when it matters."

He did not ask whether that was praise. It arrived like praise and it priced like praise, and he put it on the shelf next to the circle at the top of the page.

•

That year the trays doubled. A second lamp went up on the trestle. The neighbor's daughter came over after her own school, two mao a tray, docked a mao for every leg she bent. The wooden trays came in from the trucks at the lane's mouth and went out again at the month's end. The notebook's two columns thickened until his mother tied a string around the spine, the way the household book wore its string.

On the last night of each month the boy carried the finished trays out into the courtyard and counted them back in, out loud, twice. His mother stood in the doorway with the abacus and struck the beads

behind him like a slow clock. The counts agreed. They always agreed. The night they did not agree had not come yet, and when it came it would come from outside the trays. And everyone in the house knew it the way the house knew where the well was she began to teach him the abacus that winter, after the trays. Heaven row on top, earth rows below, the beam between them a horizon. A bead is nothing until it moves; moved, it is a number; moved back, it is ready. He practiced until his thumb stopped lifting the wrong ones. She watched his hands and said the thing she said to the fish man across a good bream.

"Heavier," she said. "That is where the money sleeps."

•

His mother's thumbnail read every chip before any bowl got it. Bent leg: reject. Dull shine: another bowl. The stamp she read through the half-moon lens, and once she found a stamp she had not seen before. She sat with it under the lamp a long time and weighed it on her palm twice. Then she went to the window and looked at the courtyard wall for a while for no reason that she offered.

"New kind," she said at last, to the tray.

"Is the new kind good?" the girl asked.

"Heavier. That is where the money sleeps." She slept on it herself.

In the morning it was a good kind, and the string on the notebook got a second knot.

•

At Qingming, Ah-Ma took him up the hill path for the cottonweed. They went up before the sun, because the hill's herb was sweeter before the dew burned off and because the ditch-pickers did not climb.

The path left the lane at the field corner, past Peh Gong, and climbed through the pines. The town opened below like a tray seen from the lamp's height.

The herb grew low along the path's edge, silver-backed, and Ah-Ma took it a handful at a time, pinching above the second joint so it would come again. She never once went down to the field edges, where the same herb grew fat and easy along the irrigation ditch.

"The hill's is better," she said, on the way down, when he pointed at the ditch. "The ditch's grows watery. Fast things are watery." He carried the basket. The field edges passed under them without a look, the way the third board had passed under his nose saying nothing.

On the shoulder of the hill stood the older graves, terraced, facing the water the way the town faced the water. At one of them Ah-Ma stopped without hurrying and set a chu-kang kueh on the stone, upright, the way you stand a book.

"He crossed with one in his bag," she said. "The same cake. It keeps." She did not say the name and did not sweep the stone, and they went down with the herb between them. And behind them the cake stood on the grave like a lamp nobody had lit yet.

At home the cottonweed went into the rice batter and the batter went into the steamer. The cakes came out dark green and faintly sweet, and one went up to the god shelf before anyone ate, and the accounts of the season balanced in things that could not be weighed.

•

The rhyme grew verses the way the trays grew columns.

By the next New Year there were two rope lines in the lane, one at each end. And Leng-Zai had added a bridge to the chant that the small children sang wrong on purpose to annoy him. The small ones sang "half a coin of cold" and Leng-Zai corrected them from the boards with the patience of a man teaching his own army. Ah-Cuêng's detour around the ropes was now two corners longer. He took it without deciding to the chant followed him anyway, because the lane was only so wide and the words went over walls the way smoke did.

"Gold is watching you," Leng-Zai shouted once, from the top of the boards, grinning down. "Half of it, anyway."

"Then it can watch you count it," Ah-Cuêng said, and did not break stride. Leng-Zai laughed so hard he had to come down off the boards, and that was the whole of it. That evening they fished the same water without tackle, with bent pins, on the mud below the lane. Li Xiaolong came down and threw stones until his arm was sore. He said a river like this was just a road that had gotten ideas above himself. When Leng-Zai's father called him home from the mud at dusk, the cough arrived three courtyards ahead of him. The whole lane owned a share of that carry. Lin Bo's boat sat on the mud nearby with its paint peeling. The nets dried on it all season, going from brown to gray.

Lin Bo came down at dusk to cover his nets and stood looking at the three boys and their bent pins.

"The sea still gives," he said. "It is only this arm of it that stopped. A river is a promise the rain makes, and this one has had the promise taken out of it." He rolled the net under his arm. "You three keep out of it in the summer, when it swells. Water that has been insulted remembers."

They kept out of it. That was the year the swimming stopped, and nobody announced it. The mothers simply stopped looking away at the same moment. The children stopped going in at the same moment. The river kept everything anyone gave it.

•

At Dongzhi the house rolled balls.

The whole family sat around the low table the evening before, palms floured, rolling the rice paste into balls. Some were round and some were whatever the youngest hands made them, and Ah-Ma declared them all correct.

They were boiled brown-sugar sweet and eaten hot. "Eat a bowl, one year older," Ah-Ma said. She served the boy the first bowl because he had grown the most inches that year, and a second bowl for the father who was at the courtyard. The second bowl sat covered

until the father came in with the smoke on him and ate it cold, standing, in three swallows. The leftover balls went up on the beam corners and the door rings for the house's luck. And one pair went on the gateposts of the pen where the ducks were, because even the ducks had a year.

•

Some nights the boy woke to a sound like a slow pour, a jug emp - tied over a long minute. By morning the courtyard behind the low wall smelled of metal, under the sweet smoke, the way a coin smells under a rose.

He learned to read the courtyard the way his mother read the market. The stool had moved a hand's width left. The big pot's handle pointed north. A wet ring sat on the stones that was not rain.

There was also the matter of the ladder, which had been against the east wall for a month and was now against the north wall. There was the dog, which had stopped sleeping in the courtyard and slept at the gate, facing in his father's fingertips were orange to the first knuckle on both hands those weeks. Ah-Ma set out rice water for them in a chipped bowl and said nothing about anything. In autumn the green flames came easier, because the plastic was dry and the fire was greedy, and the Brazier Rule held all the tighter for it.

The boy ate his mue and went to school.

The roar went up at seven and came down at four-thirty.

The orange fingertips went into the trays at the weekend and sorted chips with the rest of the hand, gently, the way big things handle small ones.

At eleven he was allowed, for the first time, to fan the little fire. It was not a permission anyone announced. Ah-Ma simply stood up from the kettle one evening and looked at him, and the feather fan changed hands.

He learned that the little fire wanted slow air, low, from the side, the way you blow on a spoon for a child, and that too much breath

was the same as none. She drank her cup through the whole lesson without a word. When she took the fan back she nodded once, the Peh Gong nod, the nod that a thing has been done and will now be done again. At the New Year he fanned through the ancestors' cups as well, three rounds, and nobody moved the fan from his hand, and that was the whole ceremony.

The pencil went dull with use and was sharpened with a knife at the table, and the shavings went into the stove. At night the pencil went back into the drawer point-out, lying beside the book that counted everything twice. The trays thickened. The household book came out of its drawer once a year, at the New Year, for Ah-Ma to copy the figures into the back of it. Boards under boards, her hand steady where the grandfather's had been steady. The rice column did not come back.

CHAPTER 5

Chapter Five

White cloth, two bolts. Paper house, small. No music. — book of the Long incense and paper shop

•

The summer he was twelve, the boy was sent to the Long incense and paper shop for the first-of-the-month sticks. Ah-Ma's knees had opinions about the temple steps that month. She sent exact money and an exact list.

The shop sat where the lane met the market road, shutters up. Inside, the town's mourning stood in rows: paper villas with balconies, paper sedans, paper servants in pairs with their paper hands folded. On the worktable lay a paper mobile phone the size of a loaf, its keypad drawn in real brand colors, its antenna rolled from a straw.

A tag hung off it with a name. A villa stood ready farther down, for a mother over on the market road, her tag knotted to the balcony in red string. The balcony painted the same green as the one she had kept geraniums on. The paper servants' faces were drawn one by one, each face different, none smiling.

The dead keep up, the shop's shelves said, in their way.

Long Mu worked in the back with her white hands. Paper flour got into everything she touched and never washed off. Her hands looked like hands that had been held up in a vote her whole life.

Over the counter hung a poster of the movie star, mid-air, one leg tucked, both fists up. The shop's own sign was the same three characters, because the shop had been named for her son. And her son had been named for the star, and nobody in the lane could remember which had happened first.

That was the summer Xiaolong was still the loudest thing in the lane.

There was an afternoon in the sixth month, before the rains, when the two of them took the long way home from the school gate because Xiaolong had decided there was a fish trap in the shallows below the bridge and nobody had checked it.

He talked the whole way. He talked about the fish trap, and about a man in Guangzhou who had a machine that could tell you the fu‑ture, and about the fact that the teacher's shoe had come apart in the second period and she had gone on teaching with the sole flapping, and he did the flapping, and the boy laughed twice.

The trap was a basket tied to a root with wire. It was empty. Xiaolong looked into it for a long time and then said the fish had got out through the top, which was impossible, and the boy said so, and Xiaolong said the fish here were impossible, and they sat on the bank with their feet in the water and did not go home for an hour.

Xiaolong's feet were always the first in. He was the only boy in the class who would put his feet in the river without being told to, because his mother had a shop full of paper and did not need the water for anything.

They counted the boats. There were nine that afternoon and one that was only half a boat, tied to the bank and forgotten. Xiaolong said it was his boat, and that when he was grown he would fix it and take it to Chaozhou and come back with a load of salt, and the boy said there was no salt in Chaozhou, and Xiaolong said there was salt everywhere if you knew the man.

Then the light went off the water and they walked home, and Xiaolong walked in front the way he always did, backwards some‑times, so that he could go on talking to a person behind him.

The town's orders hung on strings from the crossbeam: a sedan for the Lin family, servants for the Tan mother, a phone for whoever could pay.

Prices were written in pencil and never argued. She scored the roof tiles with a wheel of wire, one by one, and the sound was the sound of the trays, click and pause, and the boy heard it before he understood it.

Li Xiaolong did his holiday homework on the counter between two paper villas. He was twelve, and he had the largest laugh per body weight of anyone in Class Six.

He drummed his pencil on the counter in threes while he worked.

"Long Mu," he said. "When they burn the phone, how do they dial it over there?"

"The same way you do. Badly, until someone shows them." She did not look up from the villa's roof.

"Tell Ah-Ma the sandalwood is in," she said to the boy. "The coin paper is not. Tell her Thursday for the coin paper. And tell her the sandalwood is the short bundles this month, at the same price, and she can say what she likes about that."

He said he would say all of it. At the door Li Xiaolong held the paper phone up by its antenna and flicked it, a man changing chan‑nels in the underworld. His mother told him to mind the antenna, because repairs over there also cost. The two of them had the whole shop laughing: dead stock and live boy, and the boy went home with the sticks and the message and the summer in his ears.

•

The day the river took him was a Saturday in July. The boy was at the front table with the trays when the water man's bell stopped mid-ring. The trays had been running since six: click and pause, forty to the minute, the heat sitting on the lane like a second roof. Nobody in the house had said the river's name in two years, and the boy was on his third tray.

The bell had never stopped mid-ring. It rang twice a day, six and three, down and back. Its stopping was so complete that the mother looked up from the lamp, and the neighbor's daughter looked up

from the second lamp. Out the door, the lane was already moving. Women first, hands still wet.

The mud below the lane had a ring around it before Ah-Cuêng got there. He was at the edge of the ring. From the edge of a ring a boy sees legs and elbows, and under the arms of the tall, pieces of a thing happening. Lin Bo was already out of the water when the boy arrived. He had gone in where nobody went in he carried Li Xiaolong up the lane himself, the boy upside down over one shoulder, head down. With every stride water came out of him and slapped the stones. The crowd made a lane inside the lane. His mother was suddenly next to Ah-Cuêng with her hand on the back of his neck, turned so he would see only Lin Bo's back.

At the clinic the light was on in the middle of the day. The crowd filled the road and did not push. Someone brought a stool out and the oldest woman in the lane sat on it. The auntie arrived with towels and stood giving them to nobody. The doctor's bicycle leaned against the clinic wall, and its back wheel turned, slower, slower, and stopped.

The water man stood holding his bell against his chest with both hands, so that it could not ring. Somewhere behind the door a ma - chine worked in short bursts, the way the trays worked: click and pause, click and pause. Long Mu came last, walking, not running, up the middle of the road. Her apron was still on. Both white hands were open at her sides.

The crowd opened for her the way it opened for funeral carts. She walked into the clinic and the door shut, and the machine went on working in short bursts, and then it stopped, and the stopping was the loudest thing the lane had ever produced.

Behind them all, the river lay flat and kept whatever it had nobody said why he had gone in someone said a red ball had floated past the third pole. The ball was never found. After that day nobody in the lane called the river by its name. They called it the water. The water

kept everything anyone gave it, and gave nothing back, the same as ever.

•

The shop stayed shut one day. On the second day the shutters opened, and the town's white cloth kept coming out of her rolls. The dead of the town do not stop dying to suit the living.

The mother of the dead went on supplying the mourning. Her hands did the measuring. Her hands did the tying. Her face did nothing at all.

At the counter a man from Chaonan waited with money for a villa order, and she weighed the white cloth he had come for. And cut it, and took his money, and gave him change, and told him the villa would be ready Thursday. The town's dead went on needing houses. Her son's house stood finished on the trestles in the back, and she had scored every tile of it herself.

The wake was in the room behind the shop. The mourners ate separately from the family, and there was no meat in the house.

Ah-Ma sent down a pot of plain mue with nothing on it, not even the fried garlic. Because meat was out of the question and even its smell was. The pot came back empty and washed. And washed again, and dried on the rail, which was the family's way of speaking.

The coffin was short. Two men carried it, and it was light, and that easiness went through the lane ahead of the procession and behind it, without asking anyone.

The banner over it hung white on blue, with three characters brushed on it, 李小龍, the movie star's own name. The lane had given him the name the hour he was born.

The procession did not take the big road.

It went around the block, past the school, past the stall.

Ah-Cuêng stood where the stall stood with his bag strap in both hands. His mother stood beside him. The auntie stood beside her. Nobody's face did anything.

The boys of Class Six walked together at the back, in their school order, and Leng-Zai walked with them. He was a year older, and the coffin had come off his family's own shelf. He did not laugh once, from the gate to the riverbank. The lane noticed, and said nothing.

At the riverbank the paper house went up on trestles.

It was small: one room, one window. It was the best-made small house the town had ever seen, because the woman who built the town's mourning had built it herself.

The roof tiles were scored one by one. The door actually opened. On the door of it leaned a paper schoolbag, and inside the schoolbag, when the fire reached it, was a paper pencil. Long Mu fed the fire herself with her white hands. The fire ate the house from the eaves down. There was no wind that evening, so the smoke went straight up, higher than anything in the town, and then it was gone.

The guests left one by one, and each guest took a pomegranate sprig tied with red string. The sprigs were Long Mu's own, off the tree behind the shop, cut that afternoon. Ah-Cuêng took his in both hands, the way you take a prize. The mourners' tea at the shop had been poured by the neighbor's daughter in the small cups, and the family had drunk nothing.

At home he slid the drawer open. He took the red string off the sprig and laid it in the tray beside the letters and the book and the pencil. The sprig went into the stove. The runners went in.

•

School reopened in September. The roll was one name shorter, and the teacher read it at the same speed.

The desk next to his stayed empty for a week and was then taken away. And the class was fifty-nine desks in a room built for sixty, and the room looked no different unless you knew. On the first morning the teacher read the roll the old way, and the name was out of her mouth before her eyes caught the list. The room did the thing rooms

do, which is nothing. She went on to the next name, and never read it again.

The fractions that week he checked once.

Only his mother could have known that, and she was at the trays, and the trays said nothing.

The liver came as always, unasked, twenty seconds, gray at the edge. He ate it as always. His mother watched the wok and not him, and the wok gave. On the walk home his own fingers drummed the bag strap in threes, once, without him deciding it, and he pressed his hand flat and kept it flat the rest of the way.

On the fifteenth of the seventh month the lane went down to the riverbank with lanterns. It was the Ghost Festival, when the town feeds whoever is hungry on the other side. The lanterns go on the water for the drowned, so that they can see their way and are not alone on the anniversary of every dark.

Ah-Ma made hers at the kitchen table out of a board and paper and a stub of candle. And she trimmed the wick with scissors before the boy's eyes, the way she trimmed the wicks of the living.

Other households brought theirs down. And at the end of the bank, alone, Long Mu waded to her ankles and put out a lantern of her own making. Then a second. She stood with the water pushing at her ankles and both white hands open. She did not say anything. The lanterns went.

They went down the black water one behind another, past the mud where the stones used to be skipped, past the third pole, around the bend where the town ends. Lin Bo stood on the bank with his nets over his shoulder and watched his trade go by on fire. Ah-Cuêng watched from beside his mother, and his mother's hand lay on the back of his neck, warm, heavier than a hand. Before going down the bank he had slid the drawer open once and touched the red string where it lay, the way you check a ticket you are already holding. Some of the lanterns on the water carried characters on their sides, and some carried none, and the water did not check.

No one on the bank said which lantern was his friend's. The water knew. The water kept them, and gave nothing back.

CHAPTER 6

Chapter Six

Paper house, large. Paper sedan, with driver. Music, three nights. — book of the Long incense and paper shop

•

In the tenth month of the year he was thirteen, the uncle had himself carried out to the hall.

He had been coughing since spring. Small at first, a tenant like the other tenant. Then not small. The lane had heard it grow through two seasons, three courtyards at a time.

On the day the beds were changed he gave the order himself, sit‑ting up. Leng-Zai and two cousins moved him, mattress and all, to the hall, to the place under the god shelf where the best light fell in the morning. Nobody in the family called it what it was nobody needed to the bean-oil lamp was already lit at his feet. And a bowl of rice stood beside it, and the lamp is for the road.

Ah-Ma came every day with the tray.

The father came every evening after the braziers and sat on the bench by the wall with his brother. The two of them talked the way they had talked at sixteen: about prices, about which crates were heavy that month, about a man on the market road who watered his fish tanks. They did not talk about the hall or the lamp. The uncle's breathing filled the silences between the prices, longer each evening, like a slow pour.

The boys were called home from school on a Tuesday. Ah-Cuêng sat on the step with his grandmother through the evening. He did his fractions by the hall's light and checked them once, and the hall breathed.

The uncle died before the fifth day, in the dark before the market. The lamp was still burning at his feet. The rice stood untouched.

•

At dawn Leng-Zai went to the river with a white bowl and three coins.

This was the rite. Water for the dead man's face must be bought from the river, thrown for, like fish, like everything else the lane had ever wanted from that water.

Leng-Zai knelt at the mud below the lane, at the place where the stones used to be skipped. He dropped the coins in the coins went in the way the stones went in, without a sound worth having.

He filled the bowl and carried it back up the lane level with both hands, a boy carrying a full bowl at a funeral pace. His father's face was washed with river water in the hall. The river kept the coins.

The banner went up over the door that afternoon, white on blue, with the name and the two dates. The dates were close together. The lamp at the feet burned from the death to the funeral, five days and nights, and was blown out at the grave by Ah-Ma's hand. One breath, the way a thing that has finished its work is finished. After that the lamp went back on its shelf to wait, because there would be other work for it, and the shelf knew, and the family knew, and nobody said the arithmetic out loud.

The Long shop's music came for three nights. A suona crew from Chaozhou city, six men. The sound stood up over the lane at full dark and leaned on every roof at once. The braziers stayed cold all three nights, because the family does not work while the parent lies in the hall. The sweet smoke was not anywhere in the air. The men who came to pay respects drank the little cups poured round and said the dead man's prices were the fairest on the road.

On the third night the suona played the tune for the crossing, the slow one. The crew ate last, at the second table, the way working men eat at the end of a job: fast, and completely.

The wake's food came from the courtyards around it, plain, no meat, the mother boiling rice and greens in shifts while the suona leaned on the roof. The mourners ate at the second table and the family ate standing. The boy ate at the second table both nights, because the hall's family does not cook and does not sit. The mother of the house had been gone twelve years. The women of the lane did her part in shifts, and no one asked them, and no one thanked them out loud, and the food kept coming all the same.

The paper house was large. It had a sedan with a driver, and a generator shed, and a scale. Long Mu had asked what he would want, and Leng-Zai said the scale, and she built the scale. The sedan's driver had a face painted on him, young, with a cigarette, because the uncle had driven first in his life and would drive after it too. The shop's crossbeam held the other orders it had put off: a villa for the market road, servants for the Tan mother. The dead of the town went on queuing, politely, behind the family's dead.

On the funeral day eight men carried the coffin, and the procession took the big road, slow, with the music walking in front and the white cloth walking behind. Leng-Zai went under a bamboo staff granted him by his mother's brother. The staff was for leaning, and he did not lean. The boy walked in the line of the household with the incense.

On the hill shoulder the grave had been cut into the terrace below the grave that kept a cake. The red letters on the stone were wet with paint that day, and would be gilded after. The rice bowl went into the cut before the first earth, poured in whole, the way the coins had gone into the river, and the grave took its portion like everything else. In six years the bones would come up for the washing and go into the gold tower, and the hill would keep them the way it kept the others: the town's dead, banked. The dates on it matched the dates on the banner: close together.

The town stood in the pines in its white cloth. The river below went on keeping whatever it was keeping.

The next morning Leng-Zai was at the courtyards with the first truck of the week. He did not carry the staff. He carried the scale out of the hall and into the courtyard: his father's scale, on the bench where his father had set it for eleven years. He adjusted its feet until the bubble sat center, and began. The work was his father's scale. The work was also the only conversation the family knew how to have that week.

•

The vans came in the spring after the funeral.

The boy heard them before he saw them: a loudspeaker voice reading a list, the way the school roll was read. Under the voice, the market road filled with a kind of idling the lane did not own. From the lane's mouth he could see the white sides of two vans, and the legs of men standing in a loose way that was not trade.

That night the father came in late and washed his hands at the basin for a long time and ate his mue standing. Then he spoke without turning around.

"If a van stands at the mouth, you go in by Peh Gong's corner. You say to the fourth courtyard: the drums sit with the Lord tonight. Then you come home by the field edge, with nothing in your hands."

"Say it back," he said.

The boy said it back.

"Whole?"

"Whole."

It happened on the night of the twelfth, before the first. Four men and a handcart, and two drums that rolled on their bottom rims the last part of the way, because drums are made to roll. The lane's dogs did not bark at drums that rolled. They had been fed for years by the hands that rolled them.

The boy went first, by Peh Gong's corner. He did not run, and he did not repeat the words on the way, and he did not let the words sit in his mouth after they were delivered. A word carried twice is a word

spoken twice. That was the whole craft of it, and his father had taught it in one sentence at a basin.

At the temple side door he gave the words to the fourth court‑yard's man, exactly. He came home by the field edge with nothing in his hands.

The drums stood in the temple courtyard all night, two of them, in the place where the sweets stand on the first. The Lord was above them on his railing, with his new paint holding. The temple keeper sat up with a kettle and did not light the lamp. Whether the Lord counted drums among the offerings, the lane did not ask him.

It happened twice more before the New Year, on a Tuesday and on a night with rain.

The second time there were three drums. The third time the words were different and shorter: north gate, morning, white car. He car‑ried them whole. Nothing in his hands, either time. For that week the mother moved the trays into the back room and hung a blanket where the lamp was, and the house did its work by sound.

In the morning the courtyard was swept. The stones were wet where the drums had been. By the time the loudspeaker came down the market road reading its list, the list was a list of places the drums were not. The vans idled at the mouth for half a day and went away.

The rain took the wheel marks out of the market road that night, and by the weekend the road was a road again. And the stall's awning was back, and the cha poh was for sale at the usual price. Nobody signed anything. Nobody came to any door. The lane had simply been empty of drums that day, the way the air had been only air on the Lord's birthday. The weather passes over some houses and stands over others. Nobody in the lane wrote down which, or why.

Ah-Ma poured the little cups that evening and gave the god shelf its round. Her hands did the pouring. Her face did nothing at all.

The boy lay in bed and went over the words he had carried, the way he went over fractions, once, twice, to be sure they had gone in

whole. The drums sit with the Lord tonight. He had said it whole. He slept.

•

When the white bus came again in the fourth month, it came to the school, and the chairs were set out, and the queue did not form.

The mothers came instead. They came with their towels over their shoulders, from the stalls and the courtyards and the market row, and they stood in front of the chairs in a line. Not touching anyone. Holding nothing. The way a lane stands when it has decided.

The nurse with the green hairpin was older now. She stood by her table with her list, and the list had the same names on it it had always had. She looked at the mothers. The mothers looked at her. The square held that for a long time, long enough that the lantern-wire overhead threw its shadow across the chairs. Somewhere in the line a woman stood with a child asleep on her hip, a child of the next test‑ing, if the testing was ever going to be worth the needle again.

"We did the free one," Auntie Wren said at last, from the front, with her voice that could cross a square. "The free one cost more than anyone has paid for anything since."

"Go back and tell them," she said. "The lane will do the next one when the water does the tasting first."

The nurse folded her list. The chairs went back into the bus. The bus left, and the mothers dispersed without a word, back to the stalls, back to the trays. At four-thirty the roar came down on schedule and the lane smelled of garlic and of sweet smoke. And nobody in it had given any blood, and nobody in it had said the word lead. The water man rang his bell at six and three all through it, because water does not keep the lane's quarrels.

That night the drawer stayed shut. The house slept the way houses sleep when the men have rolled something heavy somewhere in the dark. The lane stood its watch, and the weather moved on.

CHAPTER 7

Chapter Seven

Huang Hanfeng, workshop: six thousand. — vermilion board, Shuangzhong temple, second month, 2010

•

In the second month of the year he was fourteen, the Two Loyalists went out, and the father's name went up in vermilion.

The board hung at the temple gate under the eaves, a plank of black lacquer with the names in red. The red was fresh enough that morning to shine. The boy read it the way he read everything, top down. The names at the top were the names of the biggest courtyards, and he knew the courtyards the way other boys knew football teams. The fourth name was the man who watered his fish tanks. The third name from the top was his father's, with six thousand after it, in a hand slightly larger than the names below.

"Third," Leng-Zai said at his shoulder. "Third on the whole board. Two years ago we were not on it."

Leng-Zai was fifteen now and worked the courtyards full-time, through the winter, the way a man works when the work is his father's scale.

The smell of the red paint held where the wind did not reach. It smelled like the marker on the mother's trays, and like the clinic's alcohol, and like nothing else.

The mother came and stood before the board with her hands folded.

She read it top to bottom, then bottom to top. She stood third from the corner along the route, the same standing order as the board, the family's two lists keeping their own parity. She touched

nothing. She adjusted the boy's collar once and went to take her place along the procession route.

•

The street gallery went up the day before, the lane's other festival body. Tarpaulins strung from pole to pole down three hundred meters of the procession road. Under the tarpaulins, the paintings. Battles on silk. Calligraphy scrolls. Photographs of the temple's own past. A million flowers painted by people who had never planted one.

The boy walked the gallery at dusk while they hung it. He did not read the paintings.

He read the price tags of the ones with tags, and the names of the donors tied under each: small cards. Red on white, a whole second board hung at a boy's eye height all down the road. Some cards had amounts on them, and some had only a name and a stroke, because some of the giving was between the giver and the temple and not for the road to price.

The procession came at mid-morning. The drums first. Then the banners, then the two Lords in their sedan chairs with the bearers in red. Then a man in the costume of the thief, walking ahead of the line alone with a snake on his arm, working the crowd, opening the road. Then the line everyone's neck was already craned for.

The yingge. The masked stick-dance. Fifty men in war paint, black and red and white, sticks crossed over their heads like something being built fast. Leng-Zai was in the third rank, face white and black, a red beard tied to his chin, twirling his sticks so fast the sticks stopped being sticks. He had been practicing in the courtyard since the twelfth month. The boy had heard it through the wall all winter: the clack of wood on wood, in threes, like a pencil on a desk edge.

He did not think of that. He watched. His mother stood third from the corner with the women, and the women's rows leaned the way grass leans when the procession wind goes by: all one direction, all season, all life. Ahead of the line the thief with the snake went first,

working the crowd, opening the road. The snake's head rode his wrist like a passenger who knew the route.

The line came down the lane at a run. Sticks hammering. Drums hammering. The whole town roaring at the gods the way the town's children roared at seven: the same sound, the same lanes, a different text. At the gate the bearers rocked the sedans three forward and three back, the old greeting, and the crowd answered with the whole of its voice.

Leng-Zai's rank passed within arm's reach of him. The painted eyes went by. The sticks came together above the crowd's head with a crack like the ice on the river breaking up, and the painted face under them was his cousin's face.

The cousin did not see him. The dance does not see anyone. That is what the dance is. The procession went the length of the gallery and out toward the next lane. The boy stood with the red board at his back and the roar going away down the town. His ears rang with it for a quarter of an hour, the way they rang after the drums at the riddle tables.

Behind the procession the town washed its own stones. Every courtyard came out with water and a brush, the way it did on the Lord's birthday, because the gods had walked there, and the washing was not tidiness. It was what you did after a visit from someone great.

That night the gallery stayed up with lanterns lit under the tar‑paulins, and the paintings glowed, and the boy walked it again with his mother. Slowly, both directions, because you walk your own street's gallery as many times as your legs propose. Ah-Ma named every battle on the silk without stopping to read: who won, who was betrayed, which general's mother had warned him. She had the plots the way the temple had gods: all of them, in order.

•

That year the prices ran high.

The trays came in heavier and went out heavier. The mother's notebook filled, and then a second notebook began.

The second lamp burned most of the night. The father hired two more men for the courtyard and a boy for the wash-barrels. The trucks came twice a week instead of once.

At the month's ends the counts agreed. The string on the mother's notebook needed moving to a fatter place on the spine. The father stood in the courtyard after the counts with his hands in his pockets, looking at nothing, the way a man stands over a full scale.

The truck drivers drank tea at the door and talked across the boy to the father.

"Everything moves," one said. "Boards, plastic, copper. My brother says the ports can't push it out fast enough."

"The ports never can," the father said. "That is what the ports are for."

In the autumn the courtyards along the lane put up wire fences with signs on them, and a brick ground north of the big road was measured with white lines and stakes. The boy read the sign on his way home from school: four characters about a park, 循环经济, a circle economy, a thing that went around. He read it twice. By the second week the sign had a worker's scaffolding under it, and by the third week it had a gate. And the gate had a man, and the man had a book, and everything that came through the book was going around. It did not explain itself further, and he did not ask it to until then the stakes were just white sticks in a field. Men were stamping them in with a post-pounder. The sound of it was a new sound: one flat blow every few seconds, all afternoon, for a month. The post-pounder man drank from a bottle with a label the boy could not read, and stood the bottle on each finished stake like a small flag.

The white lines ran through two chili patches on their way across the field. The money for the patches went into envelopes, and the size

of the envelopes was argued at the well for a month. The women did the arguing. The well kept the minutes.

•

On the sixteenth day of the twelfth month the workshop held its year-end banquet in the courtyard. Tables end to end. The workers and their wives. The wash-barrel boy. The two hired men. The trucks' drivers. The family at the head table with Ah-Ma.

The wei-ya goose came out of the wok brown and whole and enormous, a bird the size of the boy's torso. The fish came with the heads off, the way banquet fish do. The woks had been hired from the temple crew with two men to each wok, and the courtyard smelled like the market row for a day before anyone sat. The winter's first cold snap chose that day to arrive. The steam off the woks stood up straight in it, and the hired wok men worked in their padded coats, glad of the work twice over.

The father stood and took the leg.

"The boss takes the leg!" the hired man called, to the laugh. "The year is the boss's year!"

The year was the boss's year. The men drank to it and shouted at it and no one thought anything of it. The leg went onto the father's plate. The father ate it and gave the bone to the wash-barrel boy, who cracked it for the marrow with his teeth like a man twice his age. At the end of the toasts the father said one sentence, to the tables, about the year: "The scale is honest." And the men drank to the scale.

Before the toasts the father poured a cup of the grain liquor and set it at the empty place at the head table, where the uncle had sat the year before. No one at the tables said anything. The cup stood there through the whole banquet, its angle changing the way a candle's does. It was still more than half full when the lanterns went out.

The boy's own plate had extras on it before he sat down. An extra slice. An extra egg. The mother's additions, laid in silence. At the second table the hired man stood and made the toast he had been

saving: to the trucks, to the trays. To the scale that never lied, and to next year being this year with better prices. The men drank to all four and argued about the last.

The workers toasted the father with the grain liquor, and he stood twice and sat down twice. The second time he stayed standing a mo ment longer, looking down the courtyard at the tables, at the men, at the trays stacked for the year's last count. Then he sat.

Leng-Zai drank his first liquor at the men's table. One cup, at fifteen. He went bright red to the ears and held, and the men thumped the table, and the boy watched his cousin hold.

Once, in the middle of the third round, Leng-Zai got up and filled the dead man's cup back to the brim and sat down again. The men made room for it without looking at it. The cup stood brimmed for the rest of the banquet, and went to the ground at the end, poured out at the courtyard's edge where the trays could not see it.

Ah-Ma poured for the head table, the small cups round, and the cups came back for more. The winter night held too, all of it. The fires. The roast. The trays. The red board drying at the temple.

•

The year's figures went into the household book on the twenty-sixth, at the table, in lamplight.

Ah-Ma copied them into the back in her steady hand: the year's boards, the year's trays. The year's out and in the boy watched over her shoulder and read the totals aloud as she finished each line. Reading them into the record the way a court clerk reads, and his voice was even, and she nodded at each one, and the nod meant the number was right. The boards column was fat as it had ever been in the book's whole life. The rice column was a memory with a page number.

She closed the book and tied it and put it in the drawer, and the runners went in the drawer held the letters, the book, the slip, the pencil, the string. It was the house's second ledger, and the only one

that never needed balancing. Outside, the braziers breathed their sweet smoke at the year's last dark. The father turned off the court‑yard lamp last, the way the boss does. The house went dark from the outside in the year ended where the book ended: with the boards fat, and the lamp switched off by the hand that owned them.

Chapter Eight

Huang Zhichuan: 641. First-tier admission. — posted list, senior high entrance examination, 2011

•

On the two exam mornings the roar did not go up. The lane lay quiet at seven, a silence the boy had never heard, and his mother stood in the courtyard with her hands in a basin of greens. Listening to the not-roar the way you listen to a kettle you have just taken off the fire. His father stood at the courtyard door with his tea and drank it standing, and did not go to the brazier until the quiet was over. Even the sweet smoke seemed to know the mornings belonged to somebody else's children, and kept low.

The lists went up on the school gate in the last week of June, on red paper, one sheet for each tier. The crowd read them the way the lane read a fish: from the head down.

Ah-Cuêng stood with his mother at the second sheet. The first tier ran a hundred and forty names. The ninety-first was his, printed by a machine that did not care whose year it had been. First-tier admis ‑ sion.

Three mothers down the sheet, another woman found her own son and put her hand flat on the wall, the way you steady a fish that is still moving. The woman with her hand on the wall kept it there through ninety names, and the boy watched the hand more than the list, be ‑ cause a hand tells you what a number means. The mother read the line three times. Her face did the thing it did at the market when the price was fair and the fish was not the fish she had come for.

"First tier of the district," she said.

“First tier,” said the lane, all summer. The phrasing mattered, though only the boy seemed to hear the seam in it. Not first. First-tier. He had carried the exam the way his father carried crates. The number had come out heavy and honest, and the number was ninety-first of a hundred and forty. That is admittance. It is not a crown.

His mother bought the senior-high satchel that week with money from the tray tin. She bought it new. She bought it without saying what it had cost the ledger. On the walk home she carried the satchel herself, in front, both hands, the way she had carried the folded papers of other years. At the lane’s mouth she shifted it to his shoulder in one motion, because the carrying changes at a gate. And she knew exactly where the gate was in the evening the father came to the school wall alone, the way he had come to the temple gate in the spring. He read the list top to bottom at his own speed. He stood a moment at the fifty-eighth line from the top, where a name with his own surname sat at the height of his eyes. Then he went in and lit the braziers for the evening. The sweet smoke rose behind the red lists. The lists fluttered, and the name stayed.

•

On the seventh night of the seventh month, Ah-Ma left the garden.

She left it for him, out of her own herb shelf, the way she did everything: with a list, and a pair of scissors, and no explanation. Twelve flowers for the bath, cut at dawn before the heat and laid in rows on the tray. Banyan leaf for shade. Bamboo for standing straight. Pomegranate flower for the color of a wedding, and a sprig of the weed that closes its leaves at dusk, for the closing of things.

The twelfth she cut last, from the pot by the door.

“This one is called the Scholar’s bamboo,” she said. “It grows by every school gate in the district, and it does not know its own name, which is how it stays lucky.”

The water went into the wooden basin and the twelve flowers went into the water, and the water turned green the way the ditch turned

green, only sweet. She had written the list on the back of a calendar page in her own hand: twelve names, one per flower. Numbered, so that the leaving would be done in order and not by guesswork. The boy read the numbers on the tray. He had never seen his grandmother's numbering before, and it was the grandfather's numbering, the same upright figures, going down the page.

He washed at dawn, all of him, head to the heels, while she stood by with the tray and did not leave. He pressed the flowers under and let them up, the way his mother's thumbnail tested chips, and the water kept twelve smells at once and gave all of them to his skin. This bath was not for getting clean. It was for the leaving. Fifteen by the old count: the garden opens its gate, and the child walks out of it, and the flowers wash the child off him and go back to the earth.

The red clogs stood by the basin, new, painted that month, stiff as proof.

After the bath, the last worship. In the corner of the big room, behind the bed leg where no guest ever looked. Lived the pair of small gods that had watched him since the night he was carried home: the child-protectors, the bed-leg lord and lady. The lane worships them for its children, and stops when the children are grown.

Ah-Ma knelt. Three sticks. One bow, deeper than all the bows of his childhood put together.

"Fifteen years the lady held you," she said to him over the smoke. "Now she goes on the shelf, and the shelf is an honor too."

Then she wrapped the pair in red cloth, both of them, folded the cloth the way she folded the household book. And set them on the highest shelf, behind the maltose tin, where retired gods live.

He watched her do it, and understood that he was being taken out of someone's hands. The hands had held for fifteen years. The shelf was not a punishment. The shelf was where the hands go when the holding is finished.

•

The sieve was laid at the threshold of the hall, flat, a bamboo sieve the size of a cartwheel.

He stepped onto it in the red clogs. The clogs were stiff, and the weave pressed the soles of his feet like a new kind of ground, which is what it was the first ground of the rest of it.

Then the leap: one step, over the rim of the sieve, out the hall door, into the lane. The sieve stayed behind him on the threshold. Ah-Ma took it up after he had gone by and set it against the wall, face out, where it would stay for a year, because the garden does not slam its gate. Ah-Ma stood at the door with both hands on the frame, the way she stood at the temple tray. His mother stood in the courtyard with the second egg already boiled and peeled, because the additions never retire.

The aunties gathered for the meal at noon. Twelve dishes, and the aunts read the menu aloud, tapping each plate as they passed it. The father ate at the side seat like a guest at his own table, and that is the rite working, and no one at the table looked at him while it worked.

“Thick-leaf green,” the first aunt said. “For harmony. Eat it whole.”

“Garlic shoots, for the counting: a man who eats garlic shoots can count his father’s debt at a glance,” the second said.

“Celery is for the diligence,” said the third. And they laughed, and put the largest share of the diligence on his plate anyway, because the plate was his today.

And the rooster, boiled whole, laid on the great white plate with its head propped on the rim, facing the head seat. Around it the twelve dishes stood in their order like a town built for one afternoon: harmony, counting, diligence, the fish. The soup with the whole egg in it, the red dish, the white dish, the sweet one last. The steam off all twelve made one weather over the middle of the table, and the aunts reached through that weather all through the meal, and the dishes went down like a season.

The head seat was his. For this one meal the boy sits where the father sits, and the father sits to one side. The rule is old. Today the garden's child is the head of the garden. The rooster's head is his alone, and he bites it, and the bite is for seizing first place, for coming out ahead of every name on every list.

The aunt with the loud voice stood up and said it before he had the plate.

"First in the house. First through the gate!" She held the cup up. "The rooster knows it. Next year the district will know it too."

His mother's hands stopped over the rice.

He took the head in his fingers, whole hand, the way the rite requires, and bit where the crown had been.

The bone cracked at the back of the skull. The meat was dark and sweet and there was not very much of it, because a rooster's head is mostly crown and promise. He chewed. He swallowed. He did not look at his mother, and his mother looked at the table, and no one at the table corrected the aunt. The aunt was right in the way that mattered at a table: he was first in the house. The list had said ninety-first of a hundred and forty. The list was outside. The head was in here.

Ah-Ma put the second piece on his plate without a word, from her own dish, with her own chopsticks. The second piece was the neck, which has the most of what a rooster has. Under the emptied bowls the aunts left folded notes before they left, the first money of his life that came for growing rather than for sorting.

•

The red clogs went down the lane in the afternoon, worn, loud on the stones.

At the chai poh stall Auntie Wren filled his pockets with fried peanuts, festival-style, both pockets, and looked at the clogs a long moment. "Red suits the feet," she said. "It suits nobody else in this lane, and it suits you." He went on. The peanuts were still warm.

At the boards, Leng-Zai sat with the men at the little table, sixteen now, an adult by the count, a year whose garden had never held a ceremony. The garden had simply let him out the year his father's lamp was lit, and had not asked for a bath, or a rooster, or a list.

He looked up from the tea and saw the clogs before he saw the boy.

"Out of the garden, then."

"Out."

"Whole?"

"Whole."

He poured a third cup and set it across, and drank his own. The men at the table went on with their prices. The two of them drank one round at the little table in the festival heat: the dancer and the reader.

"Then you can start paying for your own tea," Leng-Zai said, and took the third cup back, grinning. And the men at the table went on with their prices as if the garden had not just closed.

Neither said anything else. The round ended the way their rounds ended, with the cups turned down and the table free for the next hands.

At dusk Ah-Ma poured the bath water out at the field corner, at Peh Gong's feet, all twelve flowers with it. The orange face took the water without comment. The flowers lay on the stones a moment, and then slid, and the boy in the red clogs stood at the corner and watched his own childhood drain toward the river that kept everything.

In September the senior high school was across the district, and the satchel was new, and the pencil went into it sharpened, point-down in the front pocket. The name it answered to there was the straight one, the ironed one, the one on the lists. The new school's roar, when he first stood inside it, was twice the size of the lane's, and it took him three days to find where his own desk's silence fitted into

that sound. And he found it, because finding the quiet place inside a loud thing was the first thing the lane had ever taught him.

The red clogs stayed by the door at home. Red as the day they were bought. Worn once.

CHAPTER 9

Chapter Nine

Household workshop, Huang: chips in, two trays; chips out, two trays. Entered 8:12. — gate book of the circular economy park, 2011

•

Senior high boarded. The school was across the district, an hour by two buses. The rule for first-years was boards, and home at weekends. The rule was not explained. Rules of that size explain themselves.

The dormitory held eight beds and eight boys and one window. The dormitory's roar went up at seven like the lane's, only in Mandarin, only in the textbook's order. The boy lay in his bunk on the first morning and listened.

The sentence paused at the same comma he had found on his first day of school, five years and one district ago. The comma was everywhere. He closed his eyes and let the roar carry it.

At weekends he came home.

The bus took the old road past the fish ponds, and the ponds lay flat and green in the afternoon light like a page of stamps. The water buffaloes stood in them to their ears, and the boys who rode them were naked from the waist up and brown as the mud.

The boy watched them from the bus window the way he had watched them at eight. The watching was the same, and everything around the watching had changed.

The first bus left the district town at four-forty and cost four and a half yuan. It smelled of diesel and durian and somebody's dinner. It crossed the river at the new bridge, and from the bridge he could see the park. The fence. The gate.

The man. The book. And the first real buildings going up on the white lines like teeth coming through. The bridge was new enough that the paint on the railing still shone. The river below ran the color it had run since before he was born. He did not look at it long.

The park had opened its book. That was the father's news the first Friday, at the table, poured round.

"Everything signs now," the father said. "In, out, weight, day. The man at the gate writes it in a book the size of a paving stone. Your mother signed the courtyard in."

"The trays sign too?"

"The trays ride in the book. The book rides in the man's shed." The father drank his cup. "It is a cheaper weather than vans. You can pour tea on a book."

•

His mother said nothing at the table. On Saturday she took the boy to the gate to see it done, because the seeing was the lesson.

The man at the gate opened the paving-stone book at the day's page. He weighed the trays on the park's own scale. He wrote the weight in the book, and the day, and the household's name, and stamped it with a stamp that had a handle worn smooth by other people's mornings.

The mother signed where he pointed. Her characters were small and upright. The boy had never seen them written by anyone but herself.

"Two trays in," the man said, reading his own line back. That was the whole of the ceremony.

"Two trays in," the mother said.

The trays went through the gate into the park's shed. The court‑yard's work now began inside the fence and ended inside the fence. The vans stopped coming to the lane at all. The lane's weather, which had been vans and lists and drums rolling at night, became one book on one table at one gate, read back to whoever brought things.

The lane found the book easier to stand than the weather had been. The book did not come into the courtyard. The book did not sit at the table.

The book stayed at the gate where books belong, and the court‐yard kept its smell of hot metal and sweet smoke and the rice drying on the tarpaulin. And the mother's hands kept their flour. And the father's hands kept their orange, and the lane kept its own smells the way a mouth keeps its own teeth. A book is patient. A book does not shout. A book can be read by anybody who can read numbers.

The boy could read numbers.

On the walk home his mother bought him a bowl at the stall without being asked. The auntie put the liver in without being asked either. The two unasked things arrived in the same bowl, and he ate them at the little table with his bag between his feet, and the bowl was the gate's stamp made edible.

The broth was hot and the liver was soft and the white pepper stung the back of his throat the way it had stung since he was eight. The sting was the same sting. The same sting every time is what a lane tastes like when the lane is home.

•

At home the weekends had a shape now. Friday night the kitchen smelled of the auntie's broth coming through the wall.

His mother's rice cooker ticked in the dark like a thing that had been waiting all week. By the time his bag hit the floor the mue was already in the bowl, and the liver was already on it, unasked, twenty seconds, gray at the edge.

Friday night was the bus, and the lane, and the bowl with the liver unasked, and the roar already down. Saturday was the trays with his mother, his hands slower than hers and steadier than the neighbor girl's, the second lamp lit because he was there to light it. The chips came off the boards in stacks and went under his thumbnail and came off again into the bowls. The bowls filled at the speed of the two

of them not talking, which was the family's fastest speed. Saturday night was the abacus at the table, the month's columns walked twice.

Sunday was homework in the hall by the good light, the father's tea at his elbow. The father's body on the bench with its weight forward on the knees and the shoulders rounded the way a brazier's wall is rounded, curved around the heat it holds. The father's breathing sat at the father's bench, longer between the prices every month. He sat after the counts with the thermos and his own cup and the courtyard lamp off. The dark was his. The dark was where the numbers lived when they were not being written.

The father did not talk about the breathing. He talked about the book instead.

"The man at the gate has a stamp," he said, on a Sunday in the second term. "The stamp has been in the shed eleven years. Before the park, it stamped the fish trucks. The stamp does not know what it stamps." He drank his tea. "That is what a stamp is."

Ah-Cuêng did not ask why the father was telling him this. The father told him things in the last year the way Ah-Ma marked the calendar: ahead of need.

Sunday night the bus went back. The drawer took the first ticket: four and a half yuan, printed, the return leg, kept. The drawer's tickets lay like a bridge being built two weekends at a time from the district to the lane.

•

In the second term the school's exam put him fourteenth in the year. The report said what the reports said.

The mother set Mathematics on the shelf, where the circles had become a row. She read Conduct under the lamp, and her thumbnail touched the word quiet, and did not test it this time. The word had been tested. The word was true. She put the report on the shelf with the others and said the thing she said.

"Keep your answers right."

The boy kept them. In the dormitory at night he did the second checking that no one had assigned. The tray counts of the month. The bus fares. The six thousand on the board.

The two trays in and two trays out. The park's book walking in his head at the speed the abacus walked. The numbers were the lane's, and he was the lane's, and the dormitory's roar went up around him every morning in the textbook's order. And inside it he found the quiet place faster every term. The quiet place was the same quiet place everywhere. He had been finding it since he was eight.

•

Leng-Zai turned seventeen that spring and stopped being anyone's hired hands.

He rented a corner of a courtyard inside the park's fence, with his father's scale and his father's stamp-day luck. The corner smelled of rain on hot metal, all year, whatever the weather was doing outside. A barrel boy worked for him, twelve, the same age the boys had been when everything was still called something else.

The barrel boy ate his lunch on the scale, sitting cross-legged on the iron plate like a small god on a small altar, and Leng-Zai let him, and the scale did not mind. He began buying lots for himself: dead phones by the sack, boards by the tray, the small money first. At the weekends he was at the boards with the men. His tea was poured by other people now, and he poured the boy's, and called him the district's scholar.

"Count this," Leng-Zai said to him once, and put a dead phone in his hand, heavy as a bar. "Two hundred of these a sack. Four sacks a week. There is gold in the legs of them, district's scholar. Real gold, the kind you can hold."

The boy held it. It was warm from the sack.

"It is also poison in the legs," he said.

"It is also money in the legs," Leng-Zai said. "Those are the two things in the legs."

He took the phone back and weighed it on his palm. His palm had learned the weighing. The boy watched his cousin's palm learn what the family's palms had known for eleven years, and said nothing. And the tea went round, and the evening ended at the prices the way evenings did.

On the bus going back that Sunday the boy sat with the weight still in his memory: the heaviness of the dead phone. The hand that had held gold that was poison and poison that was money. The bus crossed the river in the dark. Below the bridge the park's floodlights burned all night over the fence, and the fence had no end that he could see. He stopped looking, and rode.

At the bus station the mother was waiting with the tray of the gods' sweets on her hip. The first of the month had fallen on a Sunday that year, and the Lords eat on time whether the boy is home or not. The boy took the tray from her hip and carried it the rest of the way, in both hands. The weight was nothing. The weight was the whole weight of the first year of senior high school.

•

June came, and the first year ended, and the report said what it said, and the shelf got it. The summer was long and hot and the boy was home every day. The mother's wok ran every day. The greens came off the fire bright and the rice came out of the cooker white and the garlic went in gold and came out gold-brown.

The kitchen was the hottest room in the house and the best room in the house. The boy ate standing at the counter with the fan on his back and did not leave until the bowl was empty. Because that was the house's rule, and the rule was not explained either. Ah-Ma's tea fire burned mornings in the summer the way it always had: olive-pit charcoal, the red clay pot, the three cups. The boy's mug of hot water sat beside the tray of the gods like a guest who had been promoted but was still family. She poured the rounds, and the rounds came back, and the summer was the summer.

The bus home for the summer cost four and a half yuan. The ticket went into the drawer beside the first one. The two tickets lay together like the two ends of a bridge being built two weekends at a time. The drawer held them and did not balance them, because some things in the drawer are not entries.

They are the crossings themselves. The drawer took them both, and the boy stood at the cabinet a moment with his hand on the runners, and the runners went in. And the summer began: two months of trays, and the mother's wok, and the father's bench, and the park's book filling page by page at the gate. And the lane roaring its texts at seven, and the river below keeping whatever the river kept. And nobody in the house saying the word money in the hearing of the boy who was about to need all of it.

Chapter Ten

Tenth month. Boards, 4,100 catty. Rice, out. Rice, out. Rice, out. — household book, three lines in the grandfather's hand, three years running

•

The winter he was sixteen, the vans came to the lane at night. The winter before had been the uncle's winter. The winter before that had been the board's winter. The winters had a way of stacking, each one holding the last one's shape the way a hand holds the shape of the thing it has just put down.

Not the loudspeaker vans. Dark vans, no markings, parked at the market road with their engines off and their lights off. Men in dark jackets sat inside them for hours. The lane's dogs did not bark. The dogs knew the jackets, or knew the food, or knew that some jackets you bark at and some jackets you watch.

The courtyard's work went inside.

The brazier moved from the open wall to the back room. The vent was a hole the size of a fist.

The sweet smoke filled the room to the height of the father's chest before it found the hole. And the father worked sitting down now, on a stool that kept him below the smoke line. The stool was new. The stool was the only thing in the courtyard that was new that winter.

The mother's trays stayed. The trays were licensed inside the park's book, and the trays rode through the gate every morning and came back every evening. The trays were legal. The trays were the family's. The father said so once, at the table, with his cup half-drunk.

"The trays are in the book."

He said it to the rice. He said it to the room. He said it to the year.

The boy came home for the New Year and the brazier was in the back room and the stool was in the back room and the father was on the stool. The light from the vent-hole caught the orange fingertips and the gray at the temples.

The gray had not been there the winter before. The mother's hands had flour on them from the morning's chu-kang kueh.

The flour was white and the orange was orange and the two colors sat on the same woman's kitchen table and did not explain themselves. The boy stood in the doorway of the back room and did not enter.

The room was the father's now, the way the hall had been the uncle's. Rooms that have a person's work in them belong to the person before they belong to the family.

"Sit," the father said.

He sat. On the crate by the wall, because the stool was the father's.

"Trays went through the gate today?"

"Two. Out and in fourteen seconds at the scale."

"Faster than last month."

"The man knows us now. He doesn't weigh the second tray."

The father looked at his hands. Orange to the second knuckle, which was further than last year. He put them in his pockets. The pockets were the father's answer to a question he had not asked himself yet, or had asked himself in the way the brazier asks the wood, which is slowly, and with heat.

"The book is going to get bigger," the father said. "The park is going to get bigger. The gate is going to get a gate. And what we do in here is going to have to go in there, or stop."

He did not say which. He did not say it the way a man says a thing he has decided. He said it the way he had said copper is honest and green is not. The measurement, and then the silence where the decision lives.

The boy sat on the crate and the father sat on the stool and neither of them said the rest of it. The brazier's sweet smoke went up to the

vent-hole and found it. The room breathed the way the room breathed. The winter went on.

•

The uncle's wife remarried in the third month, to a man from Jieyang, and moved. The Tan mother's paper servants stood in the shop's window for two weeks before someone bought them.

The lane's courtyards were quieter that spring than the boy could remember, though he could not have said quieter than what. The loud thing had not been the people. The quiet thing was not the people either.

The quiet thing was the scale.

Every courtyard in the lane had a scale now, because the park's book required weights. Every scale sat on a bench or a crate or a stool like a small black footprint, and the footprints were everywhere, and nobody stepped in them.

The scales were all the same brand, all bought the same winter, all adjusted the same way.

When the wind came through the lane the pans moved on every bench at once, the way the laundry moved, the way the smoke had moved. The way the town's small holdings answered the air together without meaning to the way a family's hands look the same when they are folded.

•

In the summer the father stopped sorting boards. He did not an‑nounce it. The boards stopped coming to the courtyard in June.

The brazier went cold in July. The father's orange fingertips began to fade at the edges, the way a sunset fades: the outermost light going first. The fingertips were still orange at the second knuckle in October. He did not sort boards.

The father sat at the bench in the evenings with the scale and the mother's trays and the courtyard lamp off. His body sat the way the

uncle's body had sat in the hall: weight forward, shoulders in, a man curved around the thing he is keeping.

The thing he was keeping was smaller than a coffin and heavier. It sat on the bench in front of him and told him numbers, and the numbers were fine, and the numbers were not what he was curved around.

The courtyard's smell changed. The change was not the kind of change that has a word. The sweet smoke was not there.

The metal was not there.

The rosin was not there. What was there was the mother's cooking and the river and the rain on the tarpaulin and the clean smell of a room where the fire has been swept and the ash has been carried out and the iron has been put away, and the room is waiting for whatever the room is going to be next. And does not know, and the room's not-knowing was the smell.

The mother's trays went on. The trays were in the book. The trays rode through the gate.

The father sat at the bench with the scale, and weighed the moth - er's trays for her in the evenings, because the scale was his and the reading of it was his. The weighing took less breath than the braziers took. The father had begun to count his breath the way he counted everything: twice.

The boy was home for the summer from the district. He sorted the trays with his mother. The father weighed them. The three of them worked in the courtyard in the three positions they had worked in for years, and the positions were the same, and the brazier was cold.

The boy's arms had filled out over the school year, and the trays that had been heavy at fourteen were light at seventeen. The lightness was not the boy's doing.

The trays were lighter because the boards inside them had changed. The boards had changed because the crates from the port had changed. The crates had changed because the world had changed

its mind about what it was sending, and none of that was the boy's doing either.

The mother's hands worked the trays the way they had always worked them. The way she worked them was the same way she worked dough, and the same way she worked the abacus. And the same way she worked the fish at the market: pressing, testing, sorting by feel. The thumbnail was the last court. The trays were her court-houses.

The chips were her cases. Every case was judged by the thumbnail, and the thumbnail was never wrong. The boy had never seen it be wrong. He had seen it press a chip and then put the chip in the wrong bowl exactly once in eleven years. The once was the time the lens was fogged.

The lens was fogged because the brazier's smoke had gotten into the hall that day. The smoke was the brazier's fault. The brazier was cold now, and the lens was clear, and the thumbnail was never wrong. The boy's own body had changed over the school year in ways the school year did not mention. The shoulders had gone from the boy's shoulders to the young man's shoulders without a transition that anyone could have pointed to the hands were the father's hands in shape and the mother's hands in size. The two of them together made a hand that was built for this courtyard, for this lane, for this scale and these trays and this brazier that was cold. The hand did not know yet what it was built for next. The hand was seventeen. The hand would find out at the gate, the way everything found out at gates.

At the market row the fish had eyes that were clear and meat that had spring, and the prices were written in chalk on slate, blue on black, the same every morning. The fish man put his thumb into the gill and read it. The boy's mother did the same thing at her stall with the same thumb, and the lane's thumbs were one thumb, and the thumb was older than the scale and older than the lens and older

than the abacus, and it needed no battery and no stamp and no walk to a gate.

The brazier went out in the eleventh month.

It went out because the boards had stopped coming and the sheds were empty and the price of coal had gone up twice in a year, and because he had done the sum on the bench with a pencil and the sum had said no. He did not announce it. He put his tools in order on the bench and swept the shop and came in and sat down and ate his rice, and the room was cold in a way it had not been cold before, because the brazier had been the room's heart and the heart was gone.

His mother said nothing for three days. On the fourth she said, at the table, with the bowls between them, that the cold would be the death of him.

He said the cold was cheaper.

She said she had not asked what was cheaper. She had said the cold would be the death of him, and she had said it once, and she would not say it again.

He said, "Then do not say it again."

Nobody raised a voice. The rice went on being eaten. And the boy, who was sixteen and sitting between them with his bowl and his chopsticks and no standing in the house at all, understood that a thing had ended and that the two people who had ended it were going to go on sitting at that table for years without ever naming it.

The brazier being cold was the change. Nobody said so. The sweet smoke did not come, and the air was only air, and the air being only air was the change. The boy ate his mue and the mue tasted of noth‑ing.

Mue tastes of whatever is under it. What was under it was the house's old rice from the old jar. The old jar was the same jar. The rice was the same rice. The nothing was new.

•

At the end of the summer the father took the boy to the park gate to sign the courtyard out of the book for the season's end. Other households signed out for holidays. The man at the gate opened the paving-stone book to the Huang page, and read the year's entries top to bottom, and looked up.

"Last entry June. You are out since June?"

"The brazier is cold," the father said.

"The book doesn't have a column for cold."

"Then leave the page open. The year isn't done."

The man looked at him. The father looked at the man.

The two of them had been looking at each other across a scale for two years. The looking was its own language. The language had two words in it, and the words were in and out, and the man closed the book without writing, and the page stayed open in the shed.

The father walked home with his hands in his pockets and his breath walking beside him at its own pace. The boy walked beside his father. Neither of them said the thing about the page.

The page was the same as the lamp at the feet and the banner with the dates close together.

The lane's language for those things was silence, and the silence was fluent. That summer the boy's back turned brown from the courtyard, and his arms turned brown from the trays, and his face stayed pale from the district. And the three tones on his neck met at the collarbone like a map of everywhere he had been. And the mother saw the map at the dinner table and said nothing, and put the extra egg on his plate, and the egg was the map's capital.

•

In September the boy went back to the district for his third year, and the roar went up in Mandarin, and he found the quiet place on the first morning.

The quiet place had a new smell this year. The new smell was the smell of the back room with the brazier cold. The quiet place was the size of a room where a vent-hole is the size of a fist.

The boy carried that smell in his school bag between the text-books, point-down, sharp, next to the second pencil, which was also sharp, because the first pencil had a brother now. The brother had come from the same shelf at the same time. The drawer held both.

Chapter Eleven

Senior 3, Class 2. Morning session: 7:20–12:00. Afternoon: 2:00–5:40. Evening self-study: 6:30–10:20. Sunday: 8:00–10:00 only. — timetable, posted on the classroom door, September 2013

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Senior three had its own timetable and its own weather.

The timetable was on the classroom door. The boy read it the way he read the park's book, top to bottom. The numbers went from six-thirty in the morning to ten-twenty at night, seven days.

The Sunday line said eight to ten only. The only was the school's idea of mercy. The boy read the only twice. Mercy at this altitude was measured in hours. The hours were two.

The weather was the other kind. Cold floor. Cold desk. Cold light from tubes that buzzed at a pitch the lane did not buzz at the buzz was the school's buzz. And the boy sat inside it and found the quiet place on the first morning. Because finding the quiet place inside a loud thing was the first thing the lane had ever taught him.

A hundred and twenty desks in a room built for sixty. Practice exams stacked on the front table in bundles that had to be cut with string.

The teacher's red pen running out of ink every three weeks, and the red pen's girl bringing the red pen's ink. On the blackboard's top right corner, the countdown. The number getting smaller every morning in the teacher's hand.

The number was the days until the gaokao. The countdown was marked down the way height was marked up on the door frame at home. Both are the same kind of marking. Both are the kind you cannot erase.

He was fourteenth in the year, then eleventh, then ninth.

The eleventh came in the September mock, the month the towers went up. The boy sat the mock with the towers' smoke in his hair, and every boy in Class 2 had it too, because the towers were the lane's and the school was downwind. The hall smelled of ink and cold floor and his own hand going too fast. Outside, the towers took three days. The mock took three hours. The tower was the slower thing and the tower was the one that lasted.

The ninth came in the October mock. His mother set the report on the shelf and did not say the thing she said. The thing she said was for the answer being right. Ninth was right. The silence where the praise would have been was not silence. It was the mother's hand on the back of his neck for one beat longer than usual at the door. The hand was the praise. The boy felt it, and went in.

•

The father did not come to the school wall that autumn.

The father's name was still on the park's book. The page was still open. The courtyard was still signed in but the father did not sort boards and did not light the brazier and did not stand at the gate.

What the father did was sit at the bench in the evenings with the scale and the thermos and the mother's trays and the courtyard lamp off. His body sat the way it had sat the winter before. Weight forward.

Shoulders in curved around the thing he was keeping. The thing he was keeping had gotten heavier since the winter. Or the father's body had gotten lighter. The boy could not have said which without saying the other, and he said neither.

•

The Mid-Autumn fell on the nineteenth of September, eleven days into senior three. The school gave one evening. The evening was Thursday. The lane took it.

The tower had been built for three days. The boys of the lane had been stacking broken brick and old roof tile in the open ground by the river since Tuesday.

Not the boys the boy's age, who were at their desks. The boys a year and two years younger, the ones who still had evenings that were not timetabled.

The tower was taller than the boy and hollow. A mouth at the bottom for the fire. Eyes at the top for the fire to look out of the boys who built it had built it the way the lane's boys had built it every Mid-Autumn for as long as the lane had had a river. Which was longer than the lane had had the trade.

The mud below the tower was the same mud that Lin Bo's boat sat on, and the brick came from the same walls that the tea fire's char - coal came behind. And the tower's shadow at dusk fell across the water the way the boat's shadow fell, and the tower was the river's old neighbor. And the river had been watching the towers go up and come down for longer than the trade, and the river did not keep the towers. And the river did not keep the boys, and the river kept what it kept.

The fire went in at dark. The tower ate it.

•

Ah-Ma came down to the riverbank with the mother and the boy. The three of them stood at the edge of the crowd. The tray of mooncakes and the pomelos and the taro.

The moon was up and the river was dark and the towers up and down the bank were burning the way the braziers used to burn. Only bigger. Only communal. Only with the whole lane's eyes on them instead of one courtyard's back turned.

A boy ran past the tower with a handful of rough salt and threw it into the mouth.

The flames flared gold.

One flash. A second of the color that the town had spent thirty years extracting from circuit boards by acid and by fire. The flash was the same gold.

The flash cost nothing. The flash left no residue. The crowd made the sound the crowd makes when gold appears, which is not a word.

The salt went in again. The gold flashed again.

The boy watched the gold the way he watched the moon, because both were in the sky, and neither was for sale.

Ah-Ma's tea fire burned in the front room when they came home, the red clay pot on the olive-pit charcoal. The charcoal glowed the same color as the towers. Two golds in one house, and the boy sat between them with his mug of hot water, and the mug was not gold, and the mug was enough.

•

Ah-Ma peeled a taro with her thumbnail. The thumbnail that was never wrong. She peeled the taro in one strip, the strip curling off like a ribbon at a different kind of ceremony. The peeled taro was white. Whiter than anything the town had produced in thirty years.

"The taro is good this year," Ah-Ma said.

She ate a piece and gave the boy a piece. The taro tasted of earth, and the taste was not the trade's. The taro's white was the old white, and the old white was the kitchen's white, and the kitchen's white was the rice's white and the salt's white and the paper face's white. And the three whites had fed the boy since he had teeth, and the teeth were the boy's. And the teeth had bitten the rooster's head at the head seat, and the head seat was the rite's, and the rite was Ah-Ma's. And Ah-Ma was the kitchen's, and the kitchen was the house's, and the house was on the lane. And the lane was on the river, and the river was dark, and the dark was the same dark the towers burned in, and the dark did not charge, and the dark was free. And the free was the town's oldest currency, and the town had been spending the free dark all its life. And the dark had never run out, and the dark was not the trade's either. The mother's thumbnail went into a second pomelo, and the sections came out in their white skins, and the white skins were bitter and the flesh was sweet. And the bitter and the

sweet were the same fruit, and the mother laid the sections in the circle and the circle was complete. And the complete circle was for the moon, and the moon did not come down to eat. And the moon stayed where it was the taro's white was still on the boy's thumbnail at school the next morning. In the crease where the nail meets the skin, and the white had traveled from the kitchen to the desk on the boy's hand without the boy's knowing. The way the smoke had traveled from the brazier to the boy's hair, and the traveling was the body's, and the carrying was the boy's oldest job.

His mother cut a pomelo into sections with the thumbnail, and the sections were laid out on the tray in a circle. The circle was for the moon, which was round. The mooncakes were stacked in a tower of their own, three, five, seven. The seven-cake tower leaned and did not fall.

The boy ate one. The lao bing was lard and lotus seed and the year's sugar. The taste was the same taste it had been every Mid-Autumn since he was born. The taste did not know it was the last time. The taste was not the kind of thing that knows.

The mother's thumb pressed the taro's second piece onto the boy's plate next to the first piece.

The two pieces sat together on the white plate, and the white plate was the old plate. And the old plate was the plate the father ate from when the father ate at home, and the father was eating at home tonight. The plate knew.

The plate held both pieces for the boy, and he ate the neck first, because the neck has the most of what a rooster has, and what has the most in that house went to the one who was furthest from home. The kitchen's white was on the boy's hands where he had pressed the flowers under the bath water that morning. And the boy's hands were white from the flowers and brown from the trays and orange from the brazier that was cold. And the three colors were the boy's three colors, and the boy washed his hands before the rooster and dried them on the cloth. And the cloth was clean, and the clean cloth was

ah-Ma's, and Ah-Ma's cloth was the house's cloth. And the house's cloth held the three colors and gave them back clean, and the hands were clean, and the hands ate the rooster, and the hands were sev - enteen.

The taro was white where Ah-Ma had peeled it, and the white was the old white. The white of the rice and the white of the salt and the white of the paper face above the stove. The three whites were the kitchen's whites.

The kitchen had three whites and one red and one gold. The gold was the charcoal and the red was the paper face. The boy had grown up inside the three whites and they had fed him. The feeding was not over, because the tomorrow had rice in it and salt in it and the taro's cousin waiting in the ground for the next digging. The next digging was a coming and not a leaving, and the ground was the mother's, and the kitchen was the house's, and the house was on the lane and the lane was on the river.

The dark was full of towers and the towers were full of gold and the gold was free. The boy walked home in the red clogs, and the red was the only color the lane had never asked him to justify. The clogs were loud on the stones and the loud was his, and he was almost done being loud, and almost was the word the night gave him.

•

The towers burned until midnight. The salt went in every time the flames dropped, and the gold came up every time the salt went in the boys who fed the towers were the boys who built the towers. And the boys did not stop, and the towers ate everything the boys gave them.

The boys gave everything the towers asked for. Neither of them stopped, because the fire was the one fire in the town's year that the whole lane stood around and watched together, and the watching was the fuel too.

At midnight the towers were still standing and the fires were still gold and the crowd was thinning by families. Ah-Ma folded the tray

cloth over the pomelos. The boy carried the tray and the mother carried the stools and the three of them walked home along the bank past the towers still burning. The boy's shadow jumped on the ground with each flare.

His mother's shadow did not jump, because her shadow knew the rhythm of festivals the way the tide knows the moon, and the tide does not jump.

The three shadows passed the shop where Long Mu's shutters were down and the lights were off. The shop had been the town's mourning for thirty years and was dark tonight because the town was not mourning tonight. The dark shop was the lane's way of resting, and the lane rested, and the towers burned behind them.

•

At home the father was awake. He had heard the towers. He had heard the salt. He was sitting in the back room with the lamp on and the scale in front of him and the stool under him and the vent-hole above him.

The vent-hole showed one star, or showed the place where a star would be if the vent-hole were wider. The father was looking at it, or looking at the place.

"The towers are big this year," the father said. His voice was lower than last year. The lower was not the voice choosing to be lower. The boy heard the lower, and did not say he heard it.

"Bigger," the boy said.

"Good wood?"

"Brick. The brick towers burn longer. The boys built them taller this year. You could see them from the bridge, and the bridge saw them, and the river saw them and did not keep them. Because the towers were fire and the river is water, and the water does not keep the fire."

The father nodded. The nod was the Peh Gong nod, the nod that a thing has been done and will now be done again.

The boy went to bed, and the father stayed, and the star or the place where the star would be stayed in the vent-hole. And the lamp stayed on, and the last tower on the riverbank was still gold when the boy closed his eyes.

The gold was the same gold. The gold was free. The boy was asleep before the last tower fell.

The towers always fall. The falling is quiet. The quiet is the part the town does not watch.

Chapter Twelve

Sun Yat-sen University. Office of Admissions. Dear Huang Zhichuan: We are pleased to inform you of your admission to the School of Environmental Science and Engineering, Guangzhou South Campus, for the academic year 2014–2015. — admission letter, July 2014

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The gaokao was two days in June, in a school across the district that was not his school.

At a desk that was not his desk, with a number on it that was not his number. The number was 0217, printed on a sticker and stuck to the desk's top right corner. It was the last number the school would give him, and it was not his.

The hall held forty desks, spaced farther apart than the school's desks. The distance was the state's way of saying that what happened at these desks belonged to the person at the desk.

The invigilator read the rules in Mandarin. He had heard the rules at every mock. The mocks had been practice for the rules as much as for the questions.

The questions were not the lane's questions. The lane's questions were weight and shine and smell. The exam's questions were weight and shine and smell translated into a language the lane did not use. He translated them back. The translating took the full time.

The hall was quiet in a way the lane had never been quiet. Three hundred people thinking. The quiet had a floor and a ceiling and walls, and the walls were the distance.

His hands on the desk were his father's hands in shape and his mother's hands in size. They held the pen the way his mother's hand held the thumbnail.

He finished. He checked twice, the grandfather's way. He handed the papers up.

Outside, the June heat hit his face the way the brazier's heat had from three steps away—wetter, wider, without the orange. He walked to the bus stop through streets he did not know. The trees on those streets were tall and gave a cold, deep shade that the lane had never had.

•

The bus to the exam school left at six-twenty. There were four other students on it from his school, and nobody talked, and one girl had her eyes closed the whole way with her lips moving.

Outside the exam school the parents stood along the fence in a line. His mother was not there, because she was at the trays, and he had told her not to come, and she had agreed too quickly. Which meant she would be at the stall by six and would not eat until he was home.

The queue went in by exam number. 0217 was in the fourth row of the third group. The boy in front of him was from a school he had never heard of and smelled of soap and nerves.

Two days. Four papers. On the second afternoon it rained, and the rain came down hard on the hall's tin roof, and the invigilator closed the high windows one by one. And the sound of the rain moved from the roof to the walls, and the whole hall wrote under it.

When it was over he walked out into a street that was steaming. The gutters ran brown. Somebody's mother was handing out bottles of water at the gate, and a boy was crying on the steps with his hands over his face. And a teacher was telling him it was over, it was over, it was done.

The results came on the twenty-fifth of June, on a website, not on a wall. The household had no computer. Long Mu's nephew had one in the shop.

He typed the exam number into the field and pressed enter. The page loaded. The page said a number.

The number was high. It was higher than the mock's number, and the mock's number had been ninth in the year, and this number was for the province. The province's arithmetic was different. He did not know his rank in the province. He did not need it. The number was enough for the school he had written on the form.

Sun Yat-sen University. Guangzhou. Environmental Science and Engineering.

He had written it in June, on the paper that asked for three choices. Sun Yat-sen first, then two others the teacher had suggested. The teacher had suggested them because ninth in the year was enough for Sun Yat-sen if the exam went the way the mocks had gone. The exam had gone the way the mocks had gone. That was the father's way: counted twice.

His mother read the screen three times. She read the university's name and the program's name and the word admitted. She did not say anything.

Then her hands came down on his shoulders from behind, both of them, and stayed there. Her hands were heavier than hands. Long Mu's nephew looked away. The computer hummed.

The screen said admitted. The state had said it in Mandarin. He read it in Mandarin, and the reading was his, and it was the first thing he had ever read that the lane could not have read for him.

On the walk home his mother did not mention the exam or the number or the school. She talked about the price of garlic shoots and the aunt who had burnt the thick-leaf greens at New Year.

He understood the talk. The number was in his bag between the textbooks, and his mother was walking beside the bag without putting her hand on it.

At the door she stopped and said one thing, which was not about garlic shoots.

"You will need a bigger satchel."

•

The lane knew by evening. He had not told anyone, but Long Mu's nephew had a cousin in the fourth courtyard, and by six o'clock the fourth courtyard knew. And by seven the chai poh stall knew, and by eight Auntie Wren was at the door with a bag of peaches.

"Sun Yat-sen," she said, in the doorway, to his mother. "That is the one in Guangzhou. My brother's wife's family had a boy who went there."

His mother said it was the one in Guangzhou.

Auntie Wren put the peaches on the table. "The peaches are from the market. They are not a gift. They are for the boy's blood." She looked at him. "You are thin. You were always thin. Now you will be thin in Guangzhou."

Old Chen came at nine with two bottles of beer and stood in the doorway and did not come in, the way he did.

"The old man would have gone mad," he said. "The old man carried a book he could not read for two days to look at it. His grandson gets a letter and does not have to walk anywhere." He put the beer down inside the door. "Drink it with your father. Not tonight. When he is ready."

His father was not at the table. His father was at the bench with the scale, and the boy took the beer out to him and put it on the bench. And his father looked at it and did not open it, and said: "Tomorrow."

They opened it the next night, the two of them, in the courtyard, and did not say anything about the school.

The admission letter came in July, in a large envelope with a green crest on white paper. It was the first mail the household had received that was not a bill.

The envelope was opened at the table with the kitchen knife.

His mother read the letter aloud, straight, the way the teacher read the roll: in Mandarin, the bends ironed out. It repeated what the website had said and added what the website had not: the dormitory, the fees, the date. The things to bring, the things not to bring, and the bank account for the fees.

The bank account was a long number. It belonged to the univer ‑ sity. The fees would go from the family's number to the university's number, and the family's number was his father's, and his father's number lived at the bank on the market road.

His father sat at the table while she read. His hands were on the table, still orange at the second knuckle. When she finished he said one thing.

"The bank is open Saturday."

•

The fees were the arithmetic, and the arithmetic was in the household book.

His grandmother brought the book to the table and opened it to the back pages, where the last three years were. The boards column had been heavy in 2010 and 2011. Lighter in 2012. Lighter in 2013. Nothing in 2014.

The trays column had gone out steady through all five years, be ‑ cause the trays were his mother's and her hands had not changed.

There was a new line in 2013 and 2014: rent. The park's book charged rent. The rent was the price of signing, and the signing was the price of staying, and the staying was the price of the school.

His grandmother put her finger on the totals at the bottom of the page.

"Here," she said. "This is one year. Not four."

He said he knew.

"One year is what the book can do. Four years is what the book cannot do." She closed it. "Your father will say the rest."

•

The father went to the bank on the last Saturday of July. He went alone, in the good trousers, with the passbook in his shirt pocket. He was gone two hours.

He came back with a receipt. He put it on the table and sat down and drank a cup of tea and did not say anything about it.

The receipt had five lines on it: the amount, the account, the date, the reference, and a stamp. The reference was the exam number. The exam number was the sticker at 0217.

His mother read the receipt the way she read the reports, twice. Then she folded it in thirds and put it in the drawer.

The drawer held the letters from Siam, and the household book, and the test slip, and the pencil, and the red string, and the bus tickets. The receipt lay down beside them.

His father drank his tea and looked at the courtyard, where the brazier was cold and the scale sat on the bench.

"The fees are paid to January," he said. "After January we will see."

•

His grandmother went to the temple on the first of the month with the tray of sweets, the way she went every first.

This time she took him with her. She did not say why and he did not ask.

The queue at the temple was the usual queue, in the usual order, the old women first because they came earliest and the young mothers after them with the children. His grandmother took her place at the back, which was not her place, and he stood beside her with the tray.

When they reached the railing she set the sweets down and lit three sticks and put them in the sand and pressed her palms together.

She did not pray out loud. Her lips moved. He stood beside her and looked at the Lord above the railing, newly painted, holding whatever a Lord holds.

Then she took a folded paper out of her apron and put it in the burner, and the paper caught and went up. And the smoke went up and joined the smoke of the other sticks. And he saw what was on the paper before it burned: a copy of the admission letter, folded small.

She had copied it out by hand. The whole letter. In her small upright characters, the ones that signed the park's book.

They walked home without talking. At the door she said: "The Lord does not read Mandarin. He reads what we bring him. Now he has it."

•

That week his father coughed more than the week before. It was a small sound at the end of each breath, like a page being turned. And it came at the bench in the evenings and at the table and once in the night, and nobody in the house remarked on it.

His mother put honey in his tea. His grandmother put a slice of ginger in the honey. His father drank both and said nothing and went out to the bench.

All that summer he worked the trays.

The second lamp went up on the trestle and he sat under it from nine in the morning until the heat broke. His hands went over the chips the way his mother's hands went over them. The bowls filled. The notebook's column got its entries and the string on the spine took another knot.

The chips smelled of nothing much. Dust and warm plastic. But every so often a tray came in with the old smell on it—the sweet one. The smoke that had got into the plastic in a courtyard somewhere and would not come out—and those trays he set aside without being told.

His mother noticed in the third week. She picked up one of the trays he had set aside, turned a board over, sniffed it, and put it back on the bench.

"Those go last," she said. "After the good ones. Then we wash our hands."

He asked why they went last.

"Because they take longer." She went back to her bowl. "And be - cause if you do them first you will be tired for the good ones. The good ones pay for the school. The others are the ones we owe."

They did them last, that summer, every afternoon. Then they washed their hands at the tap in the courtyard, and the water ran dark for a moment and then clear, and the clear was the day's last work.

That night his father came out to the courtyard where he was standing and stood beside him a while. The vent-hole in the back room showed one star.

"Your grandfather sold the paddy for the workshop in the spring of ninety-five," his father said. "He came back from the signing and he stood where we are standing and he told me: the rice feeds you for a year and the boards feed you for ten. He was right for ten years." He put his hands in his pockets. "Nobody counted the eleventh."

He went back inside.

The boy stood in the courtyard a while longer. The star in the vent-hole did not move. The scale on the bench did not move. The brazier was cold, and the night was the same night it had always been, and the fees were paid to January.

Chapter Thirteen

Tiam kueh. Rice flour, one bag. Dark sugar, half catty. Water, warm. Steam, two hours, low fire, do not lift the lid. — list in Ah-Ma's hand, on the back of a calendar page, August 2014

•

The packing took one evening, and it was his mother's work.

She began at seven with the trousers. Good pair, folded in half and in half again, creases running the same direction as the grain. Then the shirts on top, then the socks rolled into pairs, then the towel, then the soap in its plastic box. She worked in the order she had learned from her own mother, and her own mother had learned it from hers, and the order had come down four generations without a written in - struction.

The satchel lay open on the bed. The clothes went in by category. The books went in last, because books were heavy and heavy things went at the bottom or not at all.

He watched from the doorway for a while. Then she told him to sit down and stop standing over her like a customs officer, and he sat on the edge of the bed and she went on folding.

"You will need two pairs of trousers, not three. Three is too many and you will have to wash them anyway."

He said two was fine.

"Two is fine. Your father has two pairs and he has worn them for eleven years."

•

On the Monday before, his mother took him to the market row to buy what he would carry.

She bought a bag of dried shrimps and a bag of peanuts and a tin of tea. She bought two packets of instant noodles and then put one back, because one was enough and two was a habit. She bought a bar of soap and a small bottle of washing powder and a pair of plastic sandals.

At the fish stall she stopped and pressed a gill and looked at the stall across the aisle. Then she bought nothing and moved on.

"Fish does not travel," she said. "You will buy fish there. Look at the gill before you buy." She picked up a bream and turned it over. "If the gill is wet and red, buy it." She put it down. "If the gill is gray, walk away, even if the man says it is fresh."

At the medicine counter she bought a packet of something for the stomach and a strip of plasters and a small bottle of iodine.

"Guangzhou water is different water." She put the bottle in the bag. "Your stomach will notice for a week, and then it will stop noti‑cing."

The woman at the counter asked where the boy was going, and his mother said the university. And the woman said her nephew had gone there and had come home with a cough and a certificate. His mother said the certificate was the part that mattered.

•

Ah-Ma went to her herb shelf after dinner and came back with a paper packet tied with string, the size of a fist.

"Chenpi," she said. "Dried peel. Three years old, this one." She pressed the packet into his hand. "When your stomach is bad, take one piece and chew it." She closed his fingers around it. "When you cannot sleep, put one piece in hot water and drink it."

He took the packet. It smelled of orange and dust and the shelf.

"Your grandmother's mother put chenpi in her dowry chest with the book. The book was for the family. The chenpi was for the road." She tied his fingers around the string. "Chew it slowly. It is not candy."

Then she took something else out of her apron and put it in his hand. It was a coin, old, worn smooth, with a hole in the middle.

"Your grandfather carried this in his shoe when he walked to the county town." She turned it over in his palm. "It is not worth anything." She closed his hand. "Carry it anyway."

The boy put the coin in the satchel's front pocket. It sat beside the pencil and the packet of chenpi.

•

The lane said goodbye in its own way, which was to bring things to the door.

Auntie Wren came in the morning with a jar of chai poh and put it on the table without asking permission. She said the chai poh was the good kind, fried in lard, and would keep for a month in the jar if he closed it properly. She said her son had gone to Shenzhen at seven‑teen and had come back at twenty-two with a wife and no money. And that this was not a warning, it was just what had happened.

The water man stopped his tricycle at the door and gave him a bottle of boiled water, a big one, the kind with the handle. He said the water in Guangzhou came out of a pipe and tasted of the pipe, and the bottle was for the first week until he got used to it.

Old Chen from the fourth courtyard came with two oranges and stood in the doorway and did not come in he said the boy's grand‑father had been the first man in the lane to buy a scale that weighed to the gram. And that the scale had been true for thirty years, and that a true scale was worth more than a clever son. Then he looked at the boy and said that he had not meant that the way it sounded.

The boy said he knew how it was meant.

•

That evening he counted the trays with his mother for the last time that summer.

The count was sixty-four trays, out and in, and the columns were walked twice, and the abacus beads went the way they went, and the

number came out the same from both directions. He read the total aloud. She nodded, which meant the number was right.

Then she closed the notebook and tied the string and said: “Sixty-four. Last year, this week, it was eighty-one.”

He said he knew.

“The trays get fewer and the fees get bigger. That is the arithmetic of this house now.” She put the notebook away. “Your father says the book has a column for everything. It does not have a column for that.”

She turned off the second lamp. The first lamp stayed on, as it always did, because the trays did not stop for a bus. But there were no trays on the trestle that night. She had finished them early, for the first time in eleven years, and had not said why.

The tiam kueh steamed on the stove from nine o’clock, and the lid stayed on because the list said do not lift the lid. Two hours on the low fire, the tea fire’s little brother, the same olive-pit charcoal.

The kitchen smelled of dark sugar and hot rice flour. The smell went out the window and across the lane. Auntie Wren came to the door at ten to ask what was steaming, and his mother said the tiam kueh. And Auntie Wren said she had not smelled one since the last crossing in the family, and asked whose it was for, and his mother said: the boy’s.

Auntie Wren stood in the doorway a moment. Then she said she would bring something in the morning.

The mother’s wok ran beside the steamer. Greens on the fire, the garlic turning gold-brown, the fish from the truck pressed at the gill and bought. It was a Tuesday, and the Tuesday’s dinner was the same dinner as every Tuesday’s dinner, and the sameness was not a failure of imagination. It was the house working correctly.

•

His father did not pack.

He sat at the bench with the scale and drank his tea and watched the courtyard. At ten he got up, went out, and stood in the place where the brazier had been. He stood there a while with his hands in his pockets. Then he came back and sat down.

The boy went out to him at ten-thirty. The courtyard was dark except for the kitchen light coming through the window and the light on the bench.

"The brazier is cold," his father said.

"Yes."

"Eleven years that thing was lit. Two hundred days a year, more." He turned his cup. "It was lit the night your mother's father died." He turned it again. "It was lit the morning you were born. Now it is cold, and the yard smells like a yard."

The boy did not say anything. There was nothing to say to that, and his father did not want anything said.

"The scale is true," his father said. "Your cousin knows how to use it." He set his cup down. "He learned from my brother, and my brother learned from me." He looked at the scale. "I learned from the old man. Four hands, one scale." He drank. "When you write about all this, put the scale in." He drank. "Not just the acid. The acid is the story everyone wants." He set the cup down. "The scale is the story that is true."

The boy said he would put the scale in his father nodded and went in to bed.

•

The drawer did not go to Guangzhou.

The boy opened it once, on the last evening, and looked inside. The letters from Siam, red-barred, the great-grandfather's hand thin at the end of each one. The household book with its two columns, the rice column stopped, the boards column running down the margin. The test slip folded in thirds, the number still on it, the number he

had never been shown. The yellow pencil. The red string from the funeral. Two bus tickets. The bank transfer receipt.

He took the pencil out. He turned it in his fingers. Then he put it back in the drawer, and took the second pencil instead, the brother, and put that one in the satchel's front pocket, point-down.

The drawer would stay. That was the arrangement. The drawer was not the kind of thing that traveled.

•

His mother finished the packing at eleven and sat on the bed with her hands in her lap.

"There is forty yuan in the side pocket. It is not for food." She smoothed the pocket flat. "It is for if the bus breaks down and you have to take another bus."

He said he would not need it.

"Nobody needs it. That is why it is there."

She looked at the satchel on the floor, and then at him, and then at the satchel again.

"Your father's transfer paid to January," she said. "January is four months. In January we will look at the book again."

He said he knew.

"If the book says no, you will come home and work and go back the next year." She looked at him. "That is not a failure." She stood. "That is arithmetic."

He said he knew that too.

She nodded. Then she got up and turned off the light and said to sleep, because six-forty came early, and the bowl would be waiting.

•

At midnight he got up and went to the kitchen. The tiam kueh sat on the table in its banana leaf, dark and heavy and sweet, and beside it was Ah-Ma's list. Still on the back of the calendar page, the characters small and upright.

He read the list again: rice flour, one bag. Dark sugar, half catty. Water, warm. Steam, two hours, low fire, do not lift the lid.

Four lines. That was the whole recipe. His great-grandfather had carried a cake made to this recipe onto a boat. His grandmother had steamed this one on the tea fire's little brother. In the morning he would carry it onto a bus.

The night had its own sounds, and he lay and listened to them because he would not hear them for four months.

The rice cooker ticked as it cooled. The fridge at the back of the kitchen hummed and stopped and hummed. A dog on the far side of the lane barked twice and gave it up. Somebody's television played a serial with the sound turned low, and the serial had a theme tune with a woman singing in Mandarin. And the woman sang the same eight bars over and over because the signal was bad.

Then the last motorbike went up the lane, and the lane was quiet, and the quiet had a shape. The shape was the space the braziers used to fill. He lay in the dark and put his hand out and touched the wall, which was the wall of his room, which was the wall he had touched every night since he was small. The wall was cool and smooth and said nothing, and the wall was the house's, and the house was stay‑ing.

He lifted the corner of the banana leaf and looked at the cake. It was dark brown and dense and it smelled of the sugar and of the leaf and of the kitchen. He put the corner back down.

Then he went back to bed. The house was quiet in the way it was quiet after the trucks stopped, and the lane was quiet in the way it was quiet after the drums stopped. And the quiet was the house's oldest possession, and it was staying, and he was not.

CHAPTER 14

Chapter Fourteen

Chaoyang–Guangzhou, 07:30, Seat 42F, ¥180. — ticket, August 2014

•

The night before, the courtyard had been full of things that were not being packed. Ah-Ma's tiam kueh steamed on the low fire for two hours, and the lid stayed on because the list said do not lift the lid. The kitchen smelled of dark sugar and hot rice flour, and the smell went out the window and down the lane, and two neighbours came to the door to ask what was steaming.

His mother worked the trays until nine, because the trays did not stop for a bus. Her hands went over the chips the way they went over everything, and the second lamp burned. And the notebook's column got its last entry of the summer, and she tied the string and put the book away.

His father sat at the bench. He did not pack anything. He did not say anything. At ten he got up and went to the courtyard and stood where the brazier used to be for a while, and then came back and drank his tea and went to bed.

Ah-Ma poured the last round at ten-thirty, three cups, the first for the god shelf, the second for the boy, the third for herself. She held hers against her lip without drinking. Then she said the thing she had been keeping since the admission letter.

"Your grandfather walked to the county town when he was four‑teen to look at a book he could not read. It took him two days to get there and two days to come back, and the whole time the rice was in the field. And nobody could say whether he would be back for the harvest." She put the cup down. "He came back. The book stayed in his head. That was the trade he made."

The boy asked what the book was.

"I do not know," she said. "He could not read it."

She washed the cups and turned them down and went to bed, and the tiam kueh sat on the table in its banana leaf. And the house was quiet, and the last night was over.

•

The bowl came at six-forty. That was early, and the early was his mother's doing. The bus left at seven-thirty, and she had already done the arithmetic: bowl at six-forty, forty minutes for eating and walking and not running. He should not run on the last morning. The not-running was her gift, and the gift was time.

The auntie had the bowl ready. Same bowl. The noodles went into the tall pot for the count of three and were shaken once. Broth off the wide pot. The liver went in for twenty seconds and came out gray at the edge and soft in the middle. Diced celery. The gold fat. White pepper from the tin with the dented lid.

He had never once said liver. His mother had paid the auntie on the first of the month for eleven years, and after that the liver had simply come. It came now. It was the same liver, from the same stall, paid for by the same hand that was two streets away doing the last of the packing.

He ate standing with the steam in his face. Broth first, the bone sweetness. Then the fat on his lips and the noodles slipping down. The pepper stung late at the back of the throat and he drank the free refill to put it out. The spoon scraped the bottom. He tipped the last of the broth and set the bowl down.

The roar had not gone up. It went up at seven. It was six fifty-eight, and he had two minutes of quiet, and the quiet was the last thing the lane gave him that morning. He stood with his hand still on the bowl and let the two minutes pass.

At seven the roar went up. He was at the lane's mouth. It was the same roar it had been every morning since he was eight—sixty

classrooms reading at once, the sound coming over the black water and out the other side. The last roar was not different from the first. That was the point of it. He carried the sameness to the bus.

•

The tiam kueh was in the satchel. Ah-Ma had wrapped it in banana leaf before dawn. Same leaf, same wrapping, same crossing. His great-grandfather had carried one of these onto a boat with no return ticket. He was carrying one onto a bus with a return ticket in his pocket. The bus was not a boat. The road was not the sea. It was still a crossing.

Ah-Ma stood at the door with the tea fire's charcoal smell on her clothes. The smell was the morning's smell, and the morning's smell was the house's, and the house's smell was going to Guangzhou in his clothes.

"Jiah bhue?" she said. Have you eaten?

"Jiah bhe," he said. Eaten.

She knew the bowl was empty. The asking was the greeting, and the greeting was the lane's oldest question, and the question was never about food.

Her hands went to his collar and adjusted it once. Then she said one thing, which was not the thing he expected.

"The drawer will be here."

He said he knew. She said it again anyway, and then she went back inside, because the tea fire was still burning and the kettle was on it. And the morning's round of cups did not stop for a bus.

•

Leng-Zai came at nine with a plastic bag and put it on the little table. Inside were two dozen eggs, a bag of dried shrimps, and a phone charger.

"The eggs are from my mother's sister. The shrimps are for the dormitory. The charger is the good kind, not the ones from the shop."

The boy said the dormitory would have sockets.

"Take it anyway. The ones in the dorms are the cheap kind and they get hot."

They sat at the little table with the tea. The tea was the mother's, and the cups were the three cups, and Leng-Zai drank his in one swallow the way he always did and poured himself another.

"Eight years, that crate business. Nineteen to now. Nobody in the lane has done eight years of anything except eat." He turned his cup. "You will be four years in Guangzhou. Then what?"

"Then I come back and do the study."

"Study of what?"

"Of us," the boy said. "Of the children. Blood and soil and what it did."

Leng-Zai looked at him a while. "You want to measure us."

"I want to count us properly. Nobody has counted us properly."

Leng-Zai laughed, once, without much in it. "Nobody has counted us at all. They counted the crates." He drank. "Count us, then. But when you write it down, put in that we were not stupid. Put in that we knew what the acid did. Put in that knowing did not pay the fees."

The boy said he would put it in leng-Zai stood and picked up his bag. At the door he stopped, and said the thing he had come to say, which was not any of the things he had said.

"The gold rhyme was mine. I made it up when I was eleven be - cause your name had gold in it and mine did not." He did not turn around. "I did not know it would follow you. I was eleven."

Then he went out, and the door shut, and the boy sat at the little table with the third cup in his hand and did not drink it for a long time.

His father was at the bench. The bench was where his father sat, and his father sitting there was the farewell, because his father did not make speeches.

Then his father stood up. He walked to the courtyard's edge, to the place where the lane meets the market road—the place where the trucks used to stop. He stood there with his hands in his pockets.

He had received the goods at that spot for eleven years. He had priced them and sent them out. Now the goods came in through a gate with a book, and the book had a column for everything, and the courtyard was signed in for the season, and the brazier was cold.

The boy walked over to him. His father's hands stayed in his pockets.

"Study," his father said. Then, after a moment: "And eat. Not just rice. Fish too, when you can."

The boy said he would.

"Your mother will ask. Tell her the truth and she will send money you do not need."

The boy said he would tell her the truth.

His father looked at the market road and not at his son. "The fees are paid to January. After that we will see."

Then he took one hand out of his pocket and put it on the boy's shoulder, once, the way you test a board for weight—flat, brief, reading. He took it back.

•

His mother was at the bus with the packed bag and an umbrella. The sky was clear. The umbrella was not for rain.

She put the bag in the luggage hold herself and pushed it in until it stopped. She checked the ticket in his hand and read the seat number out loud and made him repeat it. She told him the bus would stop once at the service area and he should not get off, because the bus would not wait.

"The water in the blue bottle is boiled. The other bottle is for washing your hands."

He said he understood.

"If the pork looks tired, do not eat it. You can live on rice and greens for a week."

He said he could.

She looked at him then, both hands on the strap of his satchel, and for a moment her face did something it did not usually do. Then it stopped doing it.

"Keep your answers right," she said.

It was the thing she had said in every one of those years, and it did not change with the year. He said he would.

•

The bus station at Chaoyang was a concrete yard with a corrugated roof and a clock that ran four minutes fast. His mother checked the clock against her watch and then checked the ticket against the clock and then checked the clock again.

The queue had a woman with two crates of oranges, a man with a rolled mattress tied with rope. Three students with backpacks, and an old couple who were going to see a daughter in Dongguan. The old woman asked the boy where he was going and when he said the uni‑versity she nodded and said her daughter had wanted to go there and had gone to work instead.

The driver loaded the bags. His mother put the satchel into his hands rather than the hold, and said he should keep it with him. And that the tiam kueh was inside, and not to put it under the bus.

"The tiam kueh will keep for a week in the leaf," she said. "After a week put it in a tin. If it goes hard, steam it. Do not throw it away."

The boy said he would not throw it away.

The ticket said 42F. The driver tore the stub and gave it back. His mother stood on the concrete and looked up at the bus windows until she found him in the third window from the front. And then she raised one hand, once, and put it down.

He got on the bus and found seat 42F, which was by the window, on the shadow side. The lane was visible from it: the stacked boards at the lane's mouth, the blue tarpaulin of the stall, the low wall with the cold brazier behind it. Ah-Ma in the doorway with her hands at

her sides, his mother on the road with the umbrella, his father at the courtyard's edge with his hands back in his pockets.

The bus started. The lane went past the window in the order he knew it: Peh Gong's corner, the water man's tricycle leaning against the wall. The chilli plants in their tins, the shutters of Long Mu's shop, the chai poh stall, the temple gate with its board.

Then the market road. Then the new bridge with the paint still shining on the railing. Then the river, brown and flat, with the park's fence running along the far bank and the buildings inside it going up like teeth.

He watched the river until the bridge was behind him and the river was gone. Then he opened the satchel and took out the pencil, and held it a moment, and put it back point-down in the front pocket.

The woman across the aisle asked if he was going to Guangzhou for school. He said yes. She said her son had gone there too, and that the city was big and the food was different, and that he would get used to it in a month.

He said he expected so. Then he looked out the window at the flat green fields going by and the fish ponds between them, and the ponds held the sky in one piece and gave it back. And he did not count any of it, and the bus went north.

PART TWO — THE CAPITAL

CHAPTER 15

Chapter Fifteen

Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou South Campus (Kangleyuan). Founded 1924. Motto: 博学、审问、慎思、明辨、笃行 *— study extensively, inquire accurately, reflect carefully, discriminate clearly, practice earnestly. — campus sign, September 2014*

•

The gate was green and white and wide enough for four buses. The characters above it were the school's motto in the founder's own hand.

The boy walked through it with the satchel on his shoulder. The tiam kueh was in the satchel's front pocket, wrapped in banana leaf, dark and heavy and sweet. The sweet was the lane's. It was the only thing through the gate that the gate had not invited.

His name on the admission letter was Zhichuan. It was the same on the dormitory roster and on the student card. Three Zhichuans, all straight, all ironed flat. Not one of them had a bend in it.

He answered to the straight name the way he answered to the teacher's roll call: with the hand, not the head. The head turned for the bent name. The hand went up for the straight one. He had been doing this since he was eight, and he would do it for four more years.

•

The campus was called Kangleyuan, the garden of joy. It was a hundred years old. A hundred years was older than the trade, older than the park, older than the brazier, older than the boy.

Red brick buildings. Banyan trees. A lake. The lake was not the river. The banyan trees were not the lane's trees. The red brick was not the courtyard's brick.

He noticed the birds first. There were birds in the banyans, and they were loud in the morning, and the lane had not had birds like this in years. The lane's birds had gone with the smoke. The campus's birds had never met the smoke.

He stood under a banyan a long time and listened to them and did not count anything.

Registration was a long room with eight tables and a queue that bent twice. He stood in it with his papers in a plastic folder and watched the woman at the third table stamp each form twice. She had a green ink pad and a chapped hand and she did not look up once. When his turn came he put the folder down and she took the top sheet, checked a box, stamped it, and slid it back. Whole. Done. He was in the school's book now. The book had a page for him. The page was a number, and the number was not 0217.

Outside, a boy from Hunan asked him where the bank was he did not know. They walked until they found it, and the boy said his mother had sewn his money into his jacket lining. He said his mother had put a cake in his bag. The boy laughed and said that was better.

The library stayed open until ten. It had a long reading room with green lamps and wooden chairs that had been sat in for a hundred years. He went in on the third evening and found a seat by a window and did not read anything for an hour. He sat with his hands on the table and the lamps burning and the dust turning in the light. The quiet of that room was the quiet of the hall at home on a Sunday. He stayed until the girl came round to say it was closing.

•

The dormitory held four beds. His had a desk under it, and the desk was his, and the locker beside it was his. Three roommates: Chaozhou, Meizhou, Shaoguan.

The Chaozhou one spoke Teochew. It was the same language as the lane's and not the same sound. The difference was in the tones, and the tones were in the district, and the district was his.

He heard the difference the way his mother's thumbnail heard the stamp on a chip. Same family, different workshop.

The roommate brewed tea on the shared kettle. Tieguanyin, a thermos, a paper cup, the switch on the wall. Not the tea fire. Not the red clay pot. Not the three cups. The tea was hot, and the hot was enough for the first night.

He unpacked. Clothes into the locker. The satchel under the desk. The pencil stayed in the satchel's front pocket, point-down.

The tiam kueh came out of the banana leaf and sat on the desk. Dark, heavy, sweet. The roommate looked at it and said the word for it in his own accent, and the word had a different shape in his mouth.

•

The first lecture was analytical chemistry, three hundred seats, three hundred students. He sat in the fourth row.

The lecturer wrote a formula on the board. It was the first formula of the first lecture of the first course of the first year. It was not his grandfather's. It was not the trade's. He wrote it in a new notebook, and it was the first thing on the first page.

The trade's chemistry was acid and fire and the smell of metal and the smell of burning plastic. The acid was his father's. The fire was his uncle's. The smell was the lane's.

The school's chemistry was titration, precipitation, and the smell of nothing, because the lab had ventilation and the ventilation was the state's. The state's ventilation was not the courtyard's fist-sized vent-hole.

Then on the second week, in the lab, the indicator turned. The base hit the acid. A faint smell came up off the beaker.

It was the smell of the shed. Not the acid, not the fire—the shed. The floor of it, after the drums had been rolled out, when the wet stone gave the air back something metal and old.

He stood with the beaker in his hand and did not move. The lab partner asked if he was all right. He said yes. He finished the titration.

•

The lab reports were due on Fridays. He wrote the first one at the desk under his bed with the lamp clipped to the frame above him, and the writing took four hours. And at the end of it his hand ached the way it ached after a day of trays.

He walked to the department building the next morning to hand it in it was old red brick with a plaque beside the door and a corridor that smelled of paper and floor wax. A professor came past him in the corridor with a stack of journals under one arm and said good morning without stopping. It was the first time in his life a professor had said anything to him, and the good morning stayed with him all the way back to the dormitory.

He wrote to his mother about it in the first letter. He wrote four sentences: the professor had said good morning, the lab had ventilation, the congee cost one yuan, and the tiam kueh was finished. Then he sat with the pen over the page a long while and added a fifth sentence, which was that he was well.

She wrote back in a week. Her letter was one page and the page was in the mother's hand, small and upright, the way her characters were at the park's gate. She wrote that the courtyard had been signed into the book for the season, that Ah-Ma had asked about the blanket twice. That the price of greens had gone up again, and that his father had been at the bench all week.

There was no fifth sentence in her letter. He read it twice and put it in the satchel's front pocket, next to the pencil, point-down.

His hands in the lab were his hands at the trays. The work was the same work: pressing, testing, judging by feel.

Glassware where the trays had been. The indicator where the stamp had been. The endpoint where the thumbnail had been. The

endpoint was the color the indicator turned when acid and base came level.

Balanced. That was the word for it. He had been looking for that word since he was eight and had never once heard it said out loud in the lane.

•

The canteen served rice and greens and pork for five yuan. The stall's bowl had been three. The rice was rice. It was not the mue, and the mue was not the point—the point was that nobody in the canteen knew what he took in his bowl.

No liver came unasked. Nobody there had been paid on the first of the month. He chose his own food for the first time in his life and found that he did not know what he liked.

The breakfast stall outside the west gate sold congee, fried dough sticks, and soy milk. He ate there every morning of the first week. The congee was thin and hot and cost one yuan. The sticks were crisp and greasy and cost one yuan for two. The woman who ran it had a face like the auntie's face, round and unimpressed. She called him student and never asked his name.

He learned the street in the first month. A fruit stall with green oranges piled in a pyramid. A barber with a red pole. A shop that sold nothing but phone cases. A man who mended shoes out of a wooden box with a strap, with a black dog asleep under the box that lifted its head each time a customer stopped.

The river here was wide and brown and had boats on it. He walked down to it on the second Sunday and stood on the embankment and watched the water go. It was not the lane's river. It was alive. There were fish in it, and men fishing for them with long rods, and a woman washing greens in a bucket at the steps. He watched her hands in the water and thought about his mother's thumbnail, and went back to the dormitory.

He ate the pork and the greens and left the rice half-finished. Then he went back and finished it, because the mother was not there to say anything, and the not-saying had followed him four hundred kilometers and was sitting at the table with him.

•

At night the campus was quiet in a way the lane had never been quiet. No braziers. No trucks. No dogs, no bell, no roar at seven.

He lay in the top bunk with the window open and the banyan moving. He could hear the lake. He could hear a frog. He could hear two students laughing somewhere with their shoes slapping the path.

He got up once and unwrapped the tiam kueh and cut a slice with the knife from his bag and ate it in the dark.

It was the same sweet. The same dark sugar, the same dense crumb, the same weight in the hand. His great-grandfather had carried one of these onto a boat with no return ticket. His grandmother had steamed this one on the tea fire's little brother.

He ate the slice and wrapped the rest and put it back in the satchel's front pocket, next to the pencil, point-down.

He called home on the fourth night from the card phone by the dormitory door. His mother answered on the second ring, which meant she had been sitting near it.

"Jiah bhue? Have you eaten? What did you eat tonight, and was it hot when they gave it to you?"

He said he had eaten. He said rice and pork. She was quiet a moment, and then she said, in the flat voice she used for prices, that the pork in Guangzhou was probably not fresh and he should ask for the fish instead. And if the fish looked tired he should not buy it at all.

He heard the rice cooker ticking behind her. He heard the spoon go round in a cup. He heard the neighbor's daughter say something in the next room.

"It is getting cold at night now. Not cold like home, but cold enough. Buy a blanket this week, not next week, and buy the thick one, and do not let them sell you the thin one for the same money."

He said he would. She said it again.

Then she said his father was at the bench, and did he want to speak to him. There was a pause with the phone set down on wood, footsteps going out and coming back, and then his father's voice, lower than it had been at the bus.

"Cold there?"

"Not cold."

"Mm. Eat."

The phone went back to his mother. Who told him the price of greens had gone up four mao and the auntie had asked after him twice and the park book had a new page with a new column for something she could not read. And the man at the gate had stamped it sideways by mistake.

He listened to all of it. When she hung up he stood by the phone a while with his hand still on it, and then went up to bed.

Then he slept, and the lane was four hundred kilometers behind him, and the banyan kept moving, and the frog kept on, and the roar did not come.

CHAPTER 16

Chapter Sixteen

37. Male. Age 8. Village 3. Blood lead, venous: 16.4 µg/dL. — appendix table, cohort survey, 2004

•

The library closed at eleven and the twenty-four-hour reading room opened at eleven, and the twenty-four-hour reading room was a different room, smaller. On the ground floor, with eight lamps and four terminals and a coffee machine that took one-yuan coins.

He found it in the second year, in the third month, on a Tuesday. He had gone in to look up a reference for a lab report and had stayed until two in the morning looking at something else.

The something else was the town.

He had lived in it for eighteen years and had never once typed its name into a search box. He typed it now, two characters, and pressed enter.

Nine hundred and forty-one results.

He read the titles. Blood lead. Dust. Dioxin. Hair. Placenta. Umbilical cord. Hearing. Temperament. Lung function. DNA damage. Birth weight. Stillbirth.

He sat back. The lamp above him hummed, green-shaded, the same green as the lamps in the big reading room. Somebody at the far end turned a page.

The reading room was cold at night. The air conditioning ran on a timer nobody had reset, and at one in the morning it came on and blew cold air down the back of his neck. And he put his jacket on without taking his eyes off the screen. His hands got cold first. Then his feet.

He had known. Everyone in the lane had known, the way they knew the weather: that it was bad, that nothing could be done, that you did not stand in it.

This was knowing with a table.

•

The first paper he opened was in English, in a journal called Environmental Health Perspectives, by Huo and others, 2007. Guiyu, an electronic waste recycling town.

He read the abstract twice. Two hundred and twenty-six children under six. One hundred and sixty-five from four villages in Guiyu, sixty-one from Chendian. Venous blood, taken at village kindergartens. Mean blood lead in Guiyu: 15.3 micrograms per deciliter. In Chendian: 9.9.

Eighty-one point eight per cent of Guiyu children were above ten.

He looked at that number for a while. Ten was the line. Ten was where the line had been drawn then, and the paper said the line was too high. And eighty-one point eight per cent of the children he had grown up with had been over it.

He thought of Class Six. Fifty-nine desks in a room built for sixty. The boy who could not sit still. The girl who read with her finger under the words. The two who were always last to the water fountain.

He had been one of the quiet ones. Quiet was not slow. But from the front of a classroom the two looked alike, and he had spent eleven years being looked at from the front of a classroom.

•

At one in the morning he found the theses.

The Chinese thesis database had two hundred and eleven results for the town, most of them from Shantou University Medical College, most of them master's degrees, most of them with appendices.

He opened one from 2008. The title was something about blood lead and physical development in children from an electronic waste area. One hundred and eight pages. Chapter four was the data.

The appendix began on page ninety-four.

He scrolled to it and the table filled the screen: subject number, sex, age, village, blood lead. Row after row after row.

He scrolled to row thirty-seven.

Thirty-seven. Male. Eight. Village three. Sixteen point four.

He sat still.

The village was his village. The sex was his. The age was his age in 2004, the year the survey had been done, the year the white minibus had come into the lane and the nurses had set out twelve little white chairs.

Sixteen point four was the number on the slip.

He had never seen the slip. His mother had taken the envelope at the gate and folded it in thirds and put it in her fist and walked home talking about garlic shoots. He had heard the drawer open that night and shut again. He had never asked. Nobody in the lane had ever asked, because asking was not a thing you could do with a number, and the number was not for the children anyway.

The methods section was the part he read three times.

Venous blood, six millilitres, taken by trained nurses at the village kindergartens. Lead-free tubes. Stored at minus twenty. Analysed by graphite furnace atomic absorption spectrometry, a Shimadzu AA-660 with a GFA-4B furnace and an ACS-60G autosampler. Wavelength 283.3 nanometres. Drying at 150 degrees, ashing at 325, atomisation at 1,400. Spike recoveries between 95 and 107 per cent.

He knew that machine. Not that one, but the type—there had been one in the second-year teaching lab, older, with a burnt-out lamp that the technician had replaced twice. He had run his own samples through it in October, four of them, diluted, and had got a curve.

Somebody had run children's blood through a machine like that, in a room somewhere in Shantou, in 2004, and written down the numbers, and published them. The numbers had gone into a table, the table into an appendix, the appendix into a thesis, and the thesis into a database. And the database had come up on his screen at two

in the morning because he had typed two characters and pressed enter.

That was the whole distance. Two characters.

The paper had a limitation section. He read it as carefully as the methods. Sample size. Single time point. No control for nutrition, for iron status, for the distance from the house to the nearest workshop. The authors wrote that further study was needed, as authors do, and then the paper ended, and the children in the table went back to being rows.

•

At three the night cleaner came through with her cart and emptied the bins and said nothing. There was one other student in the room, a girl at the far terminal with her head down on her arms, asleep or crying.

He got up and went to the water machine and drank a paper cup of cold water. The window was black and his face was in it, white from the screen. And behind his face the reading room went on with its eight lamps and its four terminals and its sleeping girl. Then he went back and sat down and read the second thesis.

The second thesis had a different sample: ninety-four children, one village, 2006, mean 14.7. The numbering restarted in every study, so there was no row thirty-seven to find.

He understood then that he would need the original logbooks. Not the published tables—the books the nurses had written in at the tables in the village kindergartens, with names and notes in the margins.

Those would be in a filing cabinet in Shantou, if they still existed.

•

He did not sleep. He went back at five and lay on the bed with his clothes on and watched the ceiling go from black to gray.

The roommate from Chaozhou got up at six-thirty and asked if he was sick. He said he had been reading all night.

The roommate looked at the printout on the desk, face down, and did not turn it over. “Was it interesting?”

“It was about my town.”

“Ah.” The roommate pulled on his shoes. “My town has a paper about it too. Nobody in my family has read it.”

He said nothing. The roommate said to eat something, and went out.

•

That summer he worked the trays knowing what the studies said.

It changed nothing about the work. The chips still came in stacks and went into bowls, and the thumbnail still read them, and the second lamp still burned. But he looked at the trays differently. Each tray was a quantity of a thing that had been measured in children.

He counted one afternoon and then stopped counting, because the counting was not the point, and the point was not countable in trays.

His mother noticed him looking. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“You are looking at the boards like they owe you money.”

He said they did not owe him anything.

She went back to her bowl and then said, without looking up: “The boards paid for your school. Do not look at them like that in this courtyard.”

He did not look at them like that again, in that courtyard.

He took the printout home in July, in the satchel’s front pocket, next to the pencil.

The bus was the same bus, four and a half yuan, the fish ponds, the water buffalo standing in them to their ears. He had the window seat. He took the page out once and looked at it.

1. Male. Age 8. Village 3. 16.4.

He put it away before the bridge.

At home his mother asked what he had in the bag and he said books. She did not ask again. His father asked nothing at all, and sat at the bench with the scale, and coughed the small cough at the end of each breath, and drank his tea.

At night he took the page out in his room and put it in the drawer, under the letters, and did not tell anyone it was there.

The drawer already had the slip. He had never seen the slip, but the slip was in the drawer somewhere, folded in thirds, and now there was a page under the letters that said the same thing the slip said. And the two of them were in the same dark, and neither of them had a name on it.

He printed the page. The printer took coins, ten fen a page, and he had four, and the page came out warm and slightly curled. It smelled of toner and of the machine's own heat, and he held it by the corner because the toner was still soft.

He read it once more under the lamp. Then he folded it in three and put it in his bag, in the pocket where the pencil went.

He did not know that it was his row. There had been boys of eight in village three. There had been four of them in Class Six alone, and the survey had taken children under six. And the arithmetic did not close neatly—if the survey was under six and he was eight, then the row could not be him.

He looked at the date on the thesis. It said the survey was con ‑ ducted between 2004 and 2006 across three sampling rounds, and one round included children up to eight.

He read the sentence three times.

Then he sat with his hands flat on the desk and the lamp hum ‑ ming and the printout in his. bag, and did the arithmetic that he had been doing all his life, the arithmetic with two columns. Except that this time the column on the left was him and the column on the right was a number on a page.

•

At two he went out to the corridor and called home.

His mother answered on the fourth ring, which meant she had been asleep.

"What is it? Is it the money?"

He said it was not the money.

"Then why are you calling at this hour?"

He listened to her breathe. Behind her there was a fan, and the fridge, and the small dry sound of the phone being shifted from one ear to the other.

He said he had been reading about the town.

She was quiet a moment.

"Reading what about the town?"

"Papers. Studies. From the medical college in Shantou. They did surveys, in 2004. On the children."

The fan turned. His mother did not say anything for a while.

"Your father is asleep," she said at last. "Do not call about this at night. Call in the daytime, and do not say the word lead on the phone."

He said he would not say the word.

"Did they find anything?" she said. "The studies. Did they find anything we did not know?"

He thought about the eighty-one point eight per cent. He thought about the six point nine IQ points. He thought about the row.

"They found what we knew," he said. "They just found it with numbers."

She was quiet again. Then she said: "Then it is a good thing somebody wrote it down. Nobody here wrote it down."

She hung up first, the way she always did.

•

He did not go back to the dormitory. He went to the lab at six when the building opened and set up his bench and did the week's titration, and his hands were steady. And the endpoint came out to

the drop, and the teaching assistant looked at his numbers and said, “clean.”

He put the printout in the drawer of his desk in the dormitory, under the textbooks.

In the summer he took it home in the satchel’s front pocket, next to the pencil.

He looked at it on the bus, once, and then put it away.

Sixteen point four. Male. Eight. Village three.

He would keep the page for eight years. He did not know that yet. He only knew that he had found a number with a body under it, and the body was either his or one of four boys’. And in either case the number was the town’s, and the town had never once said it out loud.

•

The bus between campuses was the number 2, and it left the east gate every twenty minutes. And in winter it was dark at five and the bus was full of students with their heads down.

He rode it twice a week for a year. East campus for the chemistry, north campus for the public health lectures. Eleven minutes each way.

In the chemistry building the rooms were cold and white and smelled of solvent. In the public health building the rooms were warm and beige and smelled of paper, and the lectures were about people—about how you find them. How you follow them, how you keep them in a study for twenty years without losing half of them to the cities.

He sat in the back row of those lectures and took notes in the smallest characters he had one lecturer. An old man with a cracked voice, said that the hardest thing in epidemiology was not the stat‑istics. It was the follow-up. You find a cohort, he said, and you measure them, and then you try to find them again in ten years. And half of them have gone to Shenzhen and the other half have changed

their phone numbers, and the ones who stay are the ones who are sick.

He wrote that down and underlined it once.

Then he wrote, in the margin, in characters so small they were almost a line: *the ones who stay*.

He thought about the lane. He thought about who had stayed. His father had stayed. His mother had stayed. Ah-Ma had stayed. His cousin had stayed. Everyone who could go had gone, and everyone who had gone had sent money back, and the ones who stayed had spent it on the ones who were sick.

Five of them, in one house. Two of them were still there.

In the third year he changed his reading.

The environmental chemistry papers were about soil and water and dust. The public health papers were about people. He read both, and the two literatures did not talk to each. other, and the gap between them had a shape: the chemistry said what was in the ground, and the public health said what was in the blood. And nobody in either literature had followed a single child from the one to the other for twenty years.

He looked for that paper. He searched for cohort, for follow-up, for longitudinal, for twenty years, for Guiyu. He found three-year studies and five-year studies and one study that had followed children for seven years and stopped.

He wrote the question in the back of his notebook, in the smallest characters, and underlined it once:

What happened to them?

He did not underline it twice. Twice was for numbers that were right. This was a question, and questions were not right or wrong, they were only answered or not.

Then he closed the notebook and went out to the bus, which left every twenty minutes. The chemistry building was on the east side and the public health building was on the north side, and the two

disciplines were one bus apart. The bus took eleven minutes, and he rode it twice a week for a year.

CHAPTER 17

Chapter Seventeen

From: Chen Ximei, Guiyu, Chaoyang. To: Huang Zhichuan, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou. Contents: cake, one box. Value declared: 20 yuan. — postal slip, September 2015

•

The box arrived on a Thursday, at the parcel window beside the west gate, and the woman at the window pushed it across the counter and said, “It is soft.”

It was a shoebox, wrapped in brown paper, tied with string in a knot he recognised. The knot was his grandmother’s knot—two turns and a lock, the same knot she used on the string of the household book.

The box had been crushed. One corner had gone in and the paper had torn, and through the tear something dark was showing, and the smell was coming out of it.

He knew the smell before he had the box off the counter. Lard, and sesame, and the dark sugar of the filling, and under those the smell of the lane itself—the tarpaulin, the wet stone. The smoke that had got into everything for thirty years and had never quite left the cloth.

It was lao bing. Lard-pastry mooncakes, Mid-Autumn, eleven days late.

He carried the box back to the dormitory and sat on the bed with it on his knees and did not open it for a while. The string was his grandmother’s knot. Somebody in the lane had wrapped this box, and the somebody was eighty-one, and the box weighed about two kilos, and the postage on it had cost more than the cakes.

He cut the string with his key. The paper came off in pieces. Inside the shoebox was a layer of newspaper, and inside the newspaper was

a tin, and inside the tin were four lao bing. Stamped on top with the characters for lotus paste and salted yolk, and three of them had broken.

The newspaper under the lid was a local paper, four pages, folded to fit. He smoothed it out on the bed.

It was the Chaoyang daily from the second week of September. The front page had a photograph of a meeting in a room with flags, and a headline about the park's processing capacity, and a smaller story about a river inspection.

Page two had the notice.

It was a plain notice in a box with a border, headed with the names of the two offices. And it said that all household dismantling within the designated area would cease as of the thirty-first of December. That enterprises intending to continue must relocate to the industrial park and be registered, that inspection teams would be conducting checks, and that violation would be dealt with according to law.

The rest of the page was a list of names and a table.

He read the notice twice. Then he folded the paper along its old creases and put it in the satchel's front pocket with the pencil.

His grandmother had not wrapped the cakes in that page on pur ‑ pose. She had used the paper because the paper was there, the way she used string because string was there. But the page was in the box, and the box was in his hands, and the two things—the cake and the notice—had traveled four hundred kilometres together in the same shoebox.

He thought: she did not read it. She cannot read that size of print. Somebody in the lane gave her the paper for wrapping.

The fourth was whole. He ate it standing at the window with the sink beside him, over the sink, because the pastry sheds and he was not going to sweep the room for the sake of a cake.

The crust was thick and short and tasted of lard and of the oven. The filling was dark and sweet and fine-grained. There was a quarter

of a salted yolk in it, orange and grainy, and it was the same yolk he had eaten every September of his life. And the taste arrived in the mouth a second before the memory arrived in the head. And then they were both there, and he stood at the sink with the last of it in his hand and did not move for a while.

The roommate came in he looked at the box, and at the boy, and at the broken cakes.

"From home?"

"From my grandmother."

"Two kilos of cake by post." The roommate picked up a broken piece. "My mother would do the same. She once sent me a whole chicken."

"By post?"

"Frozen. In a box with ice. It arrived in a puddle."

They ate the broken ones between them, and the roommate said the lard was good, and asked what the characters on the top meant, and the boy told him. And the roommate said that his own grandmother stamped nothing on anything, and that this was probably why her cakes were honest.

•

He went back to the canteen the next evening and sat in the same place by the window and watched the news again, in case they repeated it.

They did. The same photograph, the same page of the book, the same caption. A group of students at the next table argued about it, about whether the prize was for the researcher or for the tradition. One of them said the tradition was mostly superstition and the other said the drug had come out of the tradition, and they went on like that through the rice, and it did not matter which of them was right, and the boy listened to the both of them the way you listen to rain - verage.

He did not join in. He ate his rice and listened and thought about the ditch behind the temple, and the plant that grew in it. And the summer he had been made to pick it for fevers, and how he had complained about the heat.

Then one of the students said something that made him put his spoon down.

"Anyway, it is a nice story. Nobody would have looked at that book without the prize."

He wanted to say: somebody did look at it. Somebody looked at it for two hundred years, in a ditch, with a child on her hip. But he did not say it, because it was not the kind of thing you said at a table of strangers in a canteen. And because he was not sure he could say it without his voice doing something.

He finished the rice and went out.

The Nobel Prize came on the fifth of October, on a Monday, and he heard about it from the television in the canteen.

He was eating rice and greens at a table by the window. The tele‐vision above the counter was on the news channel with the sound low, and the news reader said a name, and then a second name. And then the word artemisinin, and then a photograph of an old woman in a dark jacket came up on the screen.

He put his chopsticks down.

The program cut to a laboratory, and then to a page of a book, held up by a pair of hands. And the page was old and the characters on it were in columns, and the caption under it said: Ge Hong, Zhouhou Beiji Fang, Eastern Jin.

The book was one thousand seven hundred years old. The line on the page was thirteen characters long.

青蒿一握，以水二升渍，绞取汁，尽服之.

A handful of qinghao, soaked in two sheng of water, wrung out, drunk whole.

He read it off the screen. He had seen the characters before, in the old book in the drawer at home—not the same book, a different hand-

copy. But the same pages, the same cheap recipes for people who could not afford a doctor. His grandmother's book had a green cover and a broken spine and a page like this one somewhere in the middle. And he had turned those pages as a child without understanding any of it, and had once been told off for turning them with sticky hands.

The news reader said that the prize had been given for a drug that had saved millions of lives, and that the researcher had found the recipe in an ancient Chinese text. And that the text was a handbook of emergency medicine written for the poor.

He sat in the canteen with his rice going cold and the noise of three hundred students around him and looked at a photograph of a book his family owned a copy of.

•

He called home that night. His mother answered on the second ring.

"Have you eaten? It is late. Why are you calling so late?"

He asked whether Ah-Ma was awake.

"She is awake. She is watching the television. They are talking about the Nobel Prize all night and she will not go to bed."

"Put her on."

There was a shuffle, and the phone changing hands, and then his grandmother's voice, small and clear and close to the receiver, the way she spoke when she was making a point.

"You are calling about the prize."

"Yes."

"I have been watching it since six. They showed the book. They showed the page with the green plant on it." A pause. She was not a woman who hurried. "Your great-grandmother's book has that page. Your mother's mother's book." A pause. "It came in the dowry with the cover off. I sewed the cover back on in the year of the flood."

He said he remembered the cover.

"Everybody is telephoning the television station to say the Chinese medicine is very great." Her voice was dry. "Nobody is telephoning to say the recipe is for poor people who cannot pay a doctor."

She let that sit. Then she said: "That is what it is it is a page for people with nothing." A pause. "The woman who read it read it properly, and now they give her a prize in Sweden."

He asked what she thought of the prize.

The line was quiet a moment. Behind her, the television went on talking.

"The prize is for the plant," she said. "The plant grows in the ditch behind the temple."

"I have picked it every summer for sixty years for the children's fevers." A pause. "Nobody gave me a prize."

Then she said the thing he would remember: "The prize should go to the weeds. The weeds did the work."

Then she said, before he could answer: "Your father is asleep. Do not call again tonight. And do not tell your mother I said the prize should go to the weeds, she will say I am being political."

•

Two days later his mother called him, which she almost never did, because she counted the cost of a call the way she counted everything.

"The courtyards are signing in for December," she said. "All of them. The men came with the papers and the stamp and they are giving a date at the end of the year. And after the date there is no work outside the park, and the park has no room for the small ones."

He asked what that meant for the house.

"It means the rent goes up or the courtyard goes." She said it in the flat voice she used for prices. "Your father has not said anything. He has been at the bench since Monday with the scale. The scale is not doing anything. It is just sitting there and he is sitting with it."

He asked whether they would sign.

"We will sign," she said. "There is nothing else to sign."

He was quiet.

"Do not come home for this," she said. "There is nothing to come home for and the bus costs money. Stay and study. Your father would say the same and he would say it shorter."

•

He went out to the balcony of the dormitory that night and stood with his hands on the rail.

The city went on below him—the roads, the lights, the buses, the sound of a place with four million people in it. Somewhere to the south-west, four hundred kilometres away, a man was sitting at a bench with a scale that was not doing anything. And a woman was signing a paper that ended thirty years of work. And an old woman was watching a Swedish ceremony on a television and thinking about the ditch behind the temple.

And in a laboratory in Beijing, a page of a book of cheap cures had been read properly, and the world had said thank you.

Both things were in the same fortnight. That was the part he could not get past. The trade was being padlocked in the same month the book was being honoured, and the book had been in the family's drawer the whole time. And the trade had been in the family's courtyard, and nobody in the family had ever put the two of them in the same sentence.

He stayed on the balcony until the lights on the far side of the river went off. Then he went in and wrote a letter to his grandmother. It was three sentences long. He told her the weeds had been read properly, and that he had seen the page on the television, and that he still had the pencil.

He posted it in the morning. He never found out what she did with it, and he never asked.

Chapter Eighteen

There is a guy I know. He says a chemistry degree has better uses. Call me. — message from Leng-Zai, 22 December 2015, 19:41

•

The Teochew students' association held its winter solstice dinner in a Chaozhou restaurant on a side street behind the university. In a private room with two round tables and a red cloth and a television on the wall playing a variety show with the sound off.

Sixty-one students signed the sheet at the door. He signed seventh and put his student number after his name, because the sheet had a column for it. And the sheet was the association's way of knowing who to ask for money next year.

He knew four people at the table. One was from Chaoyang, two were from Shantou city, one was from Puning and had a cousin in the third courtyard back home. Most of the others were from the city and spoke with the city vowels, and their Teochew was faster and flatter than his. And it took him ten minutes to stop hearing the difference as a mistake.

The food came out fast. Braised goose, sliced thin, skin dark and glossy. Beef balls, bounced once on the plate by the waiter to show they were the good kind. Oyster omelette, edges crisp and lacy. Gai lan with garlic. A clay pot of pork with preserved vegetable. Kway teow, fried, in a wide dish. Pickled radish on a saucer.

Somebody said the goose was not as good as home. Somebody else said the goose was never as good as home, which was also true. That was the whole conversation for a while. It was a conversation they had every year. It was a way of being homesick that did not require anyone to say the word.

The room was up a narrow staircase, past a fish tank and a wall of photographs of the owner with various men in jackets. There were two round tables of ten and one long table pushed against the wall for the extra chairs. And by seven the room held more people than chairs and the waiters were bringing stools from the kitchen.

The television on the wall played a variety show with the sound off. The subtitles ran along the bottom in yellow, and nobody watched them.

The window had been painted shut years ago and the room was hot from the food and the bodies. And the smell of the goose and the garlic and the ginger soup filled it until the air was almost a solid thing. And the students pushed their sleeves up and ate with their coats over the backs of the chairs.

He sat with his back to the television. The boy from Puning sat on his left and talked about the cousin in the third courtyard. And the boy from Chaoyang on his right said nothing for the first twenty minutes and then said one thing. Which was that the goose here was bigger than the goose at home and did not taste of anything.

Somebody's phone rang twice. Somebody's mother called to ask whether he had eaten. Somebody at the far table was showing the others a photograph of a baby. At the other table a boy stood up and shouted across the room, "The goose is finished! Who took the last piece of the goose!" and half the room laughed and the other half denied it.

The bill came to the table at the end and the president counted it out in notes and coins and said the association would cover the dif‑ ference out of the year's fund. That was the association's whole function, in the end: it collected a hundred yuan from each student in September and bought them all goose in December and held the difference for the next year.

At nine the tangyuan came, in bowls of sweet ginger soup, and the oldest student at the table—a fourth-year, going into a job in Shenzhen in July—raised his bowl.

"Eat a bowl, one year older."

They ate, and the year turned, and the association's president made a short speech about the year's activities, and then the room went back to its own business.

•

The talk at the table turned to money, the way it did at every dinner after the food was finished.

The fourth-year had an offer. Nine thousand a month, in Shen‑zhen, a supply-chain job with a phone company. He said the number as if it were a confession and then said it again as if he were proud of it.

"Nine?" said the girl from Shantou. "The Big Four are giving six, and they work you until two in the morning."

"Nine is nine," the fourth-year said. "And it is not audit."

Another student, a master's student in materials, said that the certification route was where the money was—environmental impact assessment, or the registered safety engineer, or the third-party testing labs. A certificate plus a chemistry degree, he said, and the labs in Shenzhen pay twelve, fifteen, for someone who can sign their name on the report.

He said it the way people say things when they are thinking about their own future. He looked around the table as he said it. His eyes passed over the boy from Guiyu the way they passed over everyone.

The boy ate his tangyuan and did not say anything. He was in his second year. He had no offer and no certificate and no plans that could be said out loud at a table.

•

The message came at 19:41 and he saw it when he went out to the corridor to get away from the noise.

There is a guy I know. He says a chemistry degree has better uses. Call me.

He read it twice. Then he went back in and finished the goose and said nothing to anyone. And at half past ten the dinner broke up and the students went out into the cold street in twos and threes.

The street outside was cold in a way Guangzhou was not supposed to be, a wet cold that came off the river and went into the shoulders. The chestnut seller had his drum going on the corner and the smoke off it smelled of burnt sugar. Two of the students were sharing a cigarette under a shop sign. A bus went past, not full, its windows yellow.

He walked to the corner where the chestnut man was and stood a little way off from him in the cold. And the message sat in his phone the way a stone sits in a pocket.

He walked to the corner and called his cousin.

Leng-Zai answered on the first ring. There was noise behind him: a room, men's voices, a television. Then the sound of a door closing on it.

"District's scholar. You got my message."

"I got it."

"Good. Listen. There is a guy. He is not from the lane, he is from Shantou city, and he buys lots. Boards, phones, modules. Big lots. He buys from the park and from Shenzhen and from Hong Kong. The problem is the lots are not graded properly. He does not know what he is buying until he has bought it."

"He wants an assay."

"He wants a man who can do an assay properly and write it down in a way that holds." Leng-Zai's voice was brisk and sober, which meant he had thought about this. "He has a lab. Small. In Shantou. He needs someone two weekends a month. He will pay three thou - sand for the two weekends, cash. And if it goes well, and you want it after you finish, he will pay twelve."

Twelve a month was more than the fourth-year's Shenzhen offer. It was more than the fees.

"He buys from Hong Kong," the boy said.

"Everybody buys from Hong Kong now. The park has the book and the book is legal and the lots are legal. It is a grading problem. It is a chemistry problem. That is all it is."

"What does he do with the boards after they are graded?"

"He sells them on. Graded. To the park, to the factories, to who‐ever." A pause. "It is not the old business. The old business is finished. This is the new business, and the new business needs chemists."

The boy was quiet. A bus went past the corner and the cold air moved.

"You are thinking about the acid," Leng-Zai said.

"I am thinking about what happens in the shed after the boards are graded."

"There is no shed. There is a lab with a fume hood and a certificate on the wall."

"And what is the certificate for?"

A pause. "I did not ask."

•

He stood on the corner with the phone against his ear and the city going past.

"Say no if you are going to say no," Leng-Zai said. "I am not here to sell you. I am here because he asked me if I knew anyone, and I said I knew one, and he said bring him. And I said he will not come, and he said bring him anyway."

"Then you know my answer."

"I know your answer. I am asking anyway." His voice changed. "Three thousand is three thousand. Your father's page is open, and the page does not close by itself, and January comes every year."

Three thousand a month. He did the sum standing on the corner, and the sum was thirty-six thousand a year, and thirty-six thousand was the page and the machine and the medicine and the deposit on a flat with a window.

He wanted it. That was the thing he had not expected and did not say to anyone for years: that standing on a cold corner at twenty with the chestnut smoke going up, he wanted the money so badly that his hands were wet.

He wanted to be the son who sent it. He wanted his mother to open the drawer and write a number in the in column that was not *from Chuan* but *from Chuan, salary*, and to have her write it in front of the neighbours. He wanted his father to stop calculating and start eating.

The wanting lasted less than a minute and he could still feel where it had been, the way you can feel a hand that has let go.

The boy said nothing.

"Say it out loud," Leng-Zai said. "Say the thing you are going to say so I can tell him a sentence and not a silence."

The boy looked at the street. A woman went by with a bag of oranges, and a man was selling roasted chestnuts out of a drum on the corner. And the chestnut smoke went up and mixed with the exhaust and the cold.

"I am going to measure children," he said. "Not gold."

Leng-Zai was quiet for a moment. Then he laughed, once, without much in it.

"All right," he said. "That is a sentence I can carry."

"Leng-Zai."

"What?"

"Tell him the truth about why. Not that I am too good for it. That I am not good enough for it."

"That is not what I am going to tell him."

"Tell him what you like."

"I will tell him you are busy." A pause. "The money is real, though. Remember that I brought you real money and you said no to it. Remember it in ten years when you are measuring your children and I am still grading lots."

"I will remember it."

"Good." The line was quiet. "Do not tell your mother about this."

The boy said he would not.

"She will ask how much. Do not tell her how much."

The boy said he would not tell her how much.

"All right. Go and eat something. You sound thin."

He hung up.

•

He did not tell his mother about the offer.

He did tell her about the dinner: the goose, the tangyuan, the sixty-one students, the fourth-year's nine thousand. She listened and asked what the goose cost per head. Then she said it was too much to pay for goose.

Then she said his father had signed the courtyard in on the nineteenth. The courtyard was now a room with a lock on it and nothing inside.

"Nothing?"

"The scale is inside. The scale and the bench and the shelves. The brazier went to the scrap man in October. There was no reason to keep it and it was worth eighty yuan."

He was quiet.

"Your father says the room is dry," she said. "He says it is the driest room in the lane now."

She said the fees for the third year would be paid in August, and that she had done the arithmetic. And that the arithmetic was all right, and that he should not ask about the arithmetic.

He did not ask about the arithmetic. He asked whether Ah-Ma was well and whether the drawer was still in the big room, and his mother said yes and yes. And then said the thing she said, which was: keep your answers right.

•

That night he took the printout out of the drawer under the text‑books and read it again in the light of the desk lamp.

1. Male. Age 8. Village 3. 16.4.

Twelve thousand a month for twelve months was one hundred and forty-four thousand yuan. The fees were six thousand a year. The arithmetic was not complicated. The arithmetic had never been complicated. That was the whole trouble with arithmetic: it did not care what the columns were for.

He put the page back and turned off the lamp.

Out in the corridor somebody was playing a guitar badly. Some‑body else told him to stop. The corridor light was on its timer and would go off in four minutes.

He lay in the dark with his hands behind his head and thought about a lab in Shantou with a certificate on the wall. And a man who did not ask what the certificate was for.

Then he thought about the shed, and the sweet smoke, and the orange to the second knuckle, and his father sitting with a scale that was not doing anything.

He slept badly and got up at six and went to the lab, because the lab opened at six, and the titration did not care what he had refused.

Chapter Nineteen

Recommendation for direct doctoral study (直博). Candidate: Huang Zhichuan, School of Environmental Science and Engineering. Recommendation: accepted by supervisor, approved by school. Candidate's decision: ☐ declined. — form, March 2018

•

The recruiter came to the job fair in March and set up her banner in the hall of the engineering building: a private testing company from Shenzhen. Third-party, with a certificate on their banner and a photograph of their lab on a screen behind her.

He stood in the queue because everyone stood in the queue. When his turn came she looked at his CV for eleven seconds and asked whether he had any certificates. He said not yet.

She told him to get one—the registered safety engineer, or the EIA—and then to come back. Without it the salary was twelve, with it fifteen, plus the field allowance. The work was air, water and soil: sampling at factories, then the report. She said it in the voice of a woman who had said it four hundred times that day, and she said that the certificate was the difficult part and the sampling was not.

He asked who the reports were for. She said, "The client," and looked up, and asked whether he wanted the job or not. He said he would think about it. She said that everyone said that, and gave him a card.

He put the card in his pocket and did not take it out again. In April he threw it away with the other cards from the fair, and the bin was full of them.

•

The professor's office was on the fourth floor of the chemistry building, with a window that looked at another building.

He had been in it four times: once for the thesis topic, twice for the thesis, once for the recommendation. The fourth time was in March, after the recommendation had been approved.

The professor was in his fifties and had a good publication record and a manner that was neither warm nor cold but simply efficient, and he had been efficient about this.

The professor said that the direct line was the fastest in the country: four years, no master's in between, a bench of his own by the second year. He said the city was good and the group was good and that the boy's titration numbers last term had been the best in the year.

He said thank you.

The professor said the alternative was a year of examinations and applications, and then four years somewhere else with a supervisor who did not know him. He said he was not going to talk him into it. He said he was telling him what the arithmetic said.

He said he understood the arithmetic.

"Then what is the objection?"

He took the folded page out of his bag and put it on the desk: the printout, three years old now, soft at the folds, the toner gone gray.

The professor read it. Then he read it again, and turned it over, and turned it back.

"Subject thirty-seven."

"Village three. Age eight. Sixteen point four."

"Yours?"

"I do not know. It could be one of four boys."

The professor put the page down on the desk and looked at it for a while the way he looked at a spectrum.

"You want to find the logbook," he said.

"I want to find the logbook."

"That is not a project. That is an archive." He said it without unkindness. "The archive is in Shantou. The people who hold it are not going to give it to a student from Guangzhou with a photocopy and a theory. They have had twenty years of people coming to that town with photocopies and theories."

"I know."

"Then you understand why I am not going to fund it."

He said he understood.

"You can still take the direct line and do this as a side question. A chapter. People do that."

He said nothing. The window hummed with the air conditioning. The professor turned the pen over again and then put it down and said the thing that ended the meeting.

"Write down what you actually want. Not the project. What you want." He pushed a pad across the desk. "One sentence."

He wrote one sentence on the pad.

The professor read it. He did not say anything for a moment. Then he folded the sheet of paper and put it in his own drawer, which he had never done with anything else.

"Go to Shantou," he said. "Take the entrance examination. I will write the reference."

•

The train to Shantou took three hours. He had the window seat on the left, and the country went from the flat gray city to the green hills. And the hills were the same hills the bus had crossed four years ago in the other direction.

The medical campus was on the north side of the city, on a hill, with the teaching building at the top and a parking lot and a row of trees. The Department of Preventive Medicine was on the third floor of a building that had been built in the nineties and had not been changed since: a corridor of doors with name cards. A notice board with a yellowed timetable, a water dispenser with one blue bottle left.

Her door had a card with her name and her title, and under the title, in smaller characters, the words occupational and environmental health.

He knocked. A voice said come in the office was small and full. Two filing cabinets, one of them with a drawer that did not shut. A desk with a computer and a stack of journals and a mug with a chip out of the rim. A window with a view of the parking lot. On the wall, a photograph of a group of people standing in a village lane, twenty years old, faded, the faces small.

She was behind the desk, in her late thirties, with her hair pinned up and a water bottle on the desk beside her hand—a steel bottle. The kind people carried when they did not trust what came out of the tap.

She looked at him for a moment.

"You are the boy from Guiyu," she said. "The one who has been writing letters."

•

He had written four letters over eleven months. The first had been two pages. The second had been shorter. The third had not been answered. The fourth had been one page and had contained the printout, photocopied, with the row circled in pencil.

"I did not answer the fourth," she said. "I answer about one in ten. If I answered them all I would not have time to do the work."

He said he understood.

"Sit down." She moved a stack of journals off the chair. "You want the cohort."

"I want the cohort."

"The cohort is mine. Not in the way you think—not property. In the way that I am the only one still here who knows where the files are. And half of them are in that cabinet and half of them are in boxes in a storage room. And the ethics approval for a follow-up has to come through this department, and this department does not give its data to strangers."

He said he did not want the data given to him.

"Then what do you want?"

He took the printout out of his bag and put it on the desk.

She looked at it. Then she opened the drawer of the desk and took out a pair of reading glasses and put them on, and looked at it again.

"Thirty-seven," she said.

"Village three. Age eight. Sixteen point four."

She turned the page over, and then back.

"You were in the second round," she said. "The second round took the older ones. It was the only round that took the older ones, because the kindergarten would not let us have the little ones after the first year. And the primary school would, and so we took eight-year-olds for one season and then stopped." She took her glasses off. "I remember the eight-year-olds. They were the ones who could answer for themselves. The little ones could not."

He asked whether she remembered the row.

"I remember the round. I do not remember the row." She put the glasses down. "I remember the logbook. It was blue, a hard cover, and the pages were ruled, and we wrote in pencil because the pen ran in the humidity. Two of us wrote in it. I wrote the notes in the margin. The other one wrote the numbers."

She looked at him.

"Why do you want it?"

•

He had prepared for this. He had a page of reasons in his bag, in the smallest characters, and he did not take it out.

"Because in twenty years nobody has followed them," he said. "The studies took a sample, and then the sample went back to being children, and the children grew up, and nobody followed them past seven years. I have read every one. The longest was seven years and it stopped."

"And?"

"And the town thinks it was measured and then forgotten. Which is true." He put his hands flat on the desk. "I want to follow them. All of them, or as many as will come. Twenty years late."

She was quiet. Outside the window a car went across the parking lot and the sound came up and went away.

"That is a thesis," she said. "That is not a reason."

He looked at her. She was not being cruel. She was doing what the professor had done: waiting for the sentence that was not the project.

He said the thing he had written on the pad in the professor's office, the one sentence, the one the professor had folded and put in his drawer.

"I am not asking for the position," he said. "I am asking for the lead."

She looked at him a long time.

Then she took the steel bottle off the desk, unscrewed the cap, poured a little water into the chipped mug, and pushed the mug across the desk to him. Which was not tea and was not a ceremony, and was the first thing she had given anyone in that office in years.

"Drink that," she said. "Then we will talk about the ethics com‑mittee."

•

After the mug, she took him down to the basement.

It was at the end of a corridor that smelled of floor polish and old paper, and the key was on a nail behind the door of the neighbouring room. She unlocked it and turned on the light, and the light came on in two of the four tubes and flickered in a third.

The room was twelve square metres and full. Metal shelving, six bays of it, and on the shelves the cardboard boxes with the years written on the ends in marker: 2004, 2005. 2006, 2007, then a gap, then 2011, then a row of boxes marked with the names of other towns.

“Each box is one village, one round,” she said. “The forms are in the front and the samples are logged at the back. We did not keep the blood. We kept the forms and the numbers and the logbooks.”

She pulled out the 2004 box marked with the third village and set it on the floor and opened the lid. The inside smelled of dust and of the particular smell of old toner, and the papers were stacked in folders tied with string.

He looked at the folders and did not put his hand in.

“You can look at the forms,” she said. “Not the logbook. The log‑book has the names in the margins, and the names are not for a stu‑dent’s eyes until the ethics committee says they are.”

He said he understood.

She watched him a moment, then took out one folder and opened it and held it so he could see. A stack of consent forms, each one a single page with a thumbprint where the signature should have been, because in 2004 some of the parents could not write their names.

He looked at the thumbprints. There were forty in the folder. The ink had gone brown with age.

“Those are the parents,” she said. “The mothers, mostly. The fathers were at the courtyards.” She put the folder back. “Every one of them asked us the same question, and the question was: what will you do with it. And we said: we will tell you what we find. And then we did, for seven years, and then the funding stopped, and then we did not.”

She closed the box.

“September,” she said. “Enrol, and come back in September, and we will start with the ethics application. It will take a year. Do not expect anything to be fast.”

He enrolled in September. The notice board in the corridor had the new intake list on it, six names, and his was the fourth, and beside his name was the program: occupational and environmental health, doctoral, four years.

He stood in front of the board for a while. Then he took out his phone and called home.

His mother answered on the second ring.

"I have enrolled," he said.

"At the medical college?"

"At the medical college. In Shantou."

She was quiet. He could hear the rice cooker, and the fan, and his father's cough somewhere in the next room, small, at the end of a breath.

"Then you will be two hours away instead of four," she said.

"Two hours."

"Good," she said. "Then you can come home for the first and fif - teenth."

He said he could come home for the first and fifteenth.

"Have you eaten?" she said.

He said he had not.

"Then eat," she said, and hung up. And he stood in the corridor with the phone in his hand and the notice board behind him and the sound of a lecture starting in the room at the end of the hall.

Chapter Twenty

Approval No. SUMC-EC-2021-047. Protocol: twenty-year follow-up of a child cohort, Guiyu, 2004–2006. Approved with conditions: re-consent of all adult participants; no bone densitometry outside the hospital; results returned individually. Valid from 1 March 2022. — ethics committee letter, Shantou University Medical College

•

The graduation was in June, in the hall with the red brick and the banyan trees, and his mother came up on the bus.

It was her first time in Guangzhou. She had been to Shantou twice in her life and to Chaoyang town perhaps twenty times, and she had never been four hundred kilometres from the lane. She came with a bag of food—a whole braised goose in a tin, cut in pieces. Wrapped in three layers of cloth—and she carried it on her lap for the entire four and a half hours because she did not trust the luggage hold.

At the gate she stopped and looked at it. Then she said, “It is very wide,” and that was all she said about the university.

He showed her the campus. She looked at the banyans and said the roots were like the roots of the old banyan at the temple. She looked at the lake and asked whether there were fish in it and whether anyone ate them. She looked at the library and asked how many books and did not believe the number.

The hall held a thousand and it was full. The gowns were black and the hoods were coloured by faculty, and the engineering faculty’s were orange, and there were four hundred of them in rows. And the air conditioning could not keep up with four hundred people in heavy cloth, so the whole hall smelled of hot polyester and breath.

His mother had put on the good blouse, the one with the small flowers, and had had her hair done at the salon on the market road

for fifteen yuan. And she sat with her knees together and her handbag on her knees and did not put it on the floor.

The president spoke. A graduate spoke. Somebody's parents in the row behind took photographs with a phone and the shutter sound was on and it went off eleven times.

When his name was read he walked across the stage, and the dean shook his hand and said a sentence he did not hear. And he took the certificate and turned and looked for the third row and did not find it. And then found it, and his mother's face was doing something it did not usually do, and then it stopped doing it.

At the graduation she sat in the third row and did not take a pho‐tograph, because she did not have a camera. And she watched the whole ceremony with her hands folded in her lap and her lips slightly apart, the way she watched the fish man weigh a bream.

Afterwards, in the gown, he took her to the canteen and bought her a bowl of noodles, and she ate half of it and said it was too expensive. And then she asked whether he had eaten, and pushed the other half across the table.

She went back on the evening bus with the empty tin.

•

He moved to Shantou in September and rented a room on the fourth floor of a building behind the medical campus, six hundred yuan a month, with a window that looked at a wall.

The room had a bed, a desk, a chair, a wardrobe with one door that did not close, and a small balcony where the previous tenant had kept a plant that had died. He put the pencil on the desk, point-down, and the printout in the desk drawer, and the coin from his grandfather's shoe in a bowl beside the lamp.

The bus home took two hours. He went on the first and the fif‐teenth, when he could, and his mother fed him and his father sat at the bench and did not talk. And Ah-Ma poured the three cups and

asked about the university and did not listen carefully to the answers, because the answers were not the point.

•

The ethics application took eleven months.

He had thought it would take a month. He had thought it would be a form. It was not a form. It was a document of forty pages with nine appendices, and the appendices were the work: the protocol, the consent form, the assent form for those who were still under eighteen. The questionnaire, the sampling plan, the data management plan, the risk assessment, the compensation schedule, and a page about what would be done with the results.

The committee met once a month and had nine members. Two were clinicians, two were basic scientists, one was a lawyer, one was a lay member from the community, one was a statistician, and two were the chairs.

The first submission came back in six weeks with fourteen comments.

He read them in the corridor outside the office and then went in and sat down and read them again. The first comment was about recontact. How would he find people who had moved? What would he do if a participant had died and the family answered the phone? What if the participant did not want to be found, and the family told him where they were?

The second comment was about the bone measurements. The portable X-ray fluorescence device was approved for use in a hospital setting only, and the protocol had it in a courtyard.

The third comment was about the results. What would he do with a result that was alarming and could not be treated? Who would tell the participant? What would he say?

The fourth comment was one line: “The investigator is a member of this cohort. Please address the conflict of interest.”

He wrote an answer to that one of two pages. He wrote that he had disclosed it, that the committee could require an independent monitor, that he would not interview his own family. That the row he believed to be his would be handled by a second reader. He wrote that he did not know whether the row was his and would not know until the logbook was opened. And that he had decided not to ask to see it until the protocol was approved.

The committee wrote back: "Please add an independent monitor."

He added one. It was a retired paediatrician from the hospital who had never been to the town and did not want to go. And who read every protocol document twice and telephoned him at nine in the evening to ask what he would do if a young man with a high result asked him. Directly, whether he was going to die of it.

He wrote that answer in the third revision. It was four pages long. The paediatrician read it and said it was honest, which he took to be approval. And then the paediatrician said that honesty was not the same as a protocol, and made him write the protocol.

•

In the spring of the second year she gave him the files.

It was not the logbook. It was a spreadsheet, one hundred and sixty-five rows, with the columns she had built over fifteen years: subject number, sex, age, village, 2004 blood lead. 2005 blood lead where there was one, 2006 where there was one, address in 2004, guardian's name, guardian's phone, notes.

He opened it on his laptop in the office and scrolled through it slowly with her sitting across the desk.

"Some of the addresses are wrong now," she said. "There is a new road where two of the lanes were the school moved in 2012. Two of the villages were renumbered in the land survey."

He said he would start with the phone numbers.

"Half the numbers are dead. The parents have died or changed their phones. Some of the children have their own numbers now, but

we do not have those numbers, because the children were four years old in 2004."

He asked how she had traced people before.

"By the school, and by the temple, and by the lane." She turned her mug around. "It is not a method. It is a town. You ask one person and they ask another person, and by the end of the week the person who has been in Shenzhen for eight years has heard that someone is looking for them."

He said that his mother could ask.

She looked at him.

"Your mother is one of the best routes into the third village," she said. "She has been at that stall for thirty years. She knows every mother in the round." A pause. "But if she asks, the town will know in a week that the study is running, and the study is running before the committee has approved it. That is why we do not ask until the letter comes."

•

The letter came on the first of March, in the second year of the pandemic, and it was two pages and the second page was the condi‑tions.

He read it standing in the corridor. Then he sat down on the bench by the water dispenser and read it again.

Approved. Valid from the first of March. Twenty-four months of fieldwork, extendable.

He took the bus home that afternoon with the letter in his bag. The bus was half empty because of the pandemic and everyone wore a mask, and the fields went past the window and the fish ponds between them. The ponds held the sky and gave it back, and the light was the flat white light of March.

His father was in the hospital. He had been in for eleven days with a lung infection on top of everything else, and the doctors had said

what the doctors said. And his mother had not told him until the fourth day because she did not want to disturb the ethics application.

The lane in March of that year was quiet in a way it had never been quiet.

The stall was open but there were three tables instead of five, because two had been taken away in the first year of the pandemic and never brought back. The chai poh stall was shut. The water man had sold the tricycle and now worked in a warehouse in Chaoyang town and came home at weekends.

The courtyards were empty. Not closed—empty. The doors stood open and the rooms inside had nothing in them but a bench and some empty sacks and, in one of them, a child's bicycle upside down with its chain off.

The park's gate still had a man and a book. There were four lorries in the yard and a queue of six people and the queue was patient.

His mother's tray work had changed. The trays came from the park now, not from the lanes. She signed for them at the gate and brought them home and sorted them and carried them back. The sorting was the same. The chips were smaller. She said the chips were smaller now because everything was smaller now.

He went to the hospital first and stood at the window of the ward with his mask on and looked at his father. Who was asleep with a tube in his nose and the sheet pulled up to his chest, and the hands on the sheet were still orange at the second knuckle.

Then he went home and put the letter in the drawer, on top of the letters from Siam. And went out to the stall and ordered a bowl and ate it standing in the lane with the roar long gone and the bread of the morning cold in his hand.

•

The ward held six beds and the window looked at a wall with a pipe on it. The man in the next bed had his family around him. They

talked in a dialect he did not know, ate oranges, and put the peel in a plastic bag.

His father slept with his mouth open and the tube taped to his cheek. The machine beside the bed made a sound like a slow wave, up and down, and the numbers on it were green.

The nurse came in at four and checked the line and wrote on a chart and said he could stay ten minutes.

He asked her what the numbers were.

She said the saturation and the rate and the pressure, and she said them the way a person says the names of streets.

He asked what the plan was.

She said the doctor would come in the morning.

Then he heard his own voice come out of him at a volume he had never used in a hospital, saying that the doctor had come in the morning for eleven days, and that the sheet under his father had not been changed since Tuesday, and that he had been at a window in this corridor for two hours and nobody had asked him who he was.

The ward went quiet. The family around the next bed stopped eating. The nurse looked at him with the flat courtesy of a woman who has heard this before, from better men, on worse days, and said she would fetch the sister.

He sat down. His hands were shaking and he put them under his thighs.

Outside, the pipe on the wall ran from one side of the window to the other and did not do anything visible, and he looked at it until the shaking stopped.

At six his father woke and looked at him and said, “The letter.”

He said the letter had come.

His father nodded and closed his eyes and said, “Good. Then the fees are not wasted.”

That was all. He did not ask about the method or the committee or the twenty years. He asked about the fees.

That night his mother sat at the table with the letter in front of her and read it twice.

"So it begins," she said.

"It begins."

"Twenty years late."

"Twenty years late."

She nodded the way she nodded at a good weight on the scale. Then she said the thing that he had been waiting for and had not known he was waiting for.

"I will start with the third village," she said. "The mothers will talk to me. They will not talk to a doctor from Shantou with a clipboard."

He said the committee had conditions.

"The committee is in Shantou," she said. "The mothers are in the lane. You write the form. I will pour the tea."

PART THREE — THE CINNABAR

Chapter Twenty-One

Kway teow, one bowl. With liver: twelve yuan. Without: eight. — stall board, Guiyu, August 2022

•

The bus from Shantou took two hours and cost thirty yuan, and it had air conditioning that worked and seats that reclined. And it went over the new bridge and down the market road and stopped at the place where the drivers stopped, which was not the place the old bus had stopped.

He got out with one bag. The bag had clothes, a laptop, a clipboard with the consent forms in it, and a box of sampling tubes wrapped in newspaper.

The lane was two hundred metres from the bus stop. He walked it with the bag on his shoulder and he smelled the lane before he reached it, and the smell had changed.

The garlic and lard were still there. The tarpaulin was still there. But the sweet smoke was gone, and the metal was gone, and what was left was the smell of a place where those things had been: a dry smell. A dust smell, the smell of rooms that had been emptied and swept and locked.

He came around the bend. The stall was in the same place under the same tarpaulin, and the board on the wall had the prices written on it in marker, and the prices were twelve and eight.

The woman behind the pot was not the auntie. She was the auntie's daughter, and she was forty now, and she had the auntie's round face and the auntie's way of not looking at the customer.

"Jiah bhue?" she said.

He said he had not eaten.

She built the bowl without looking at him. Flat noodles out of the bamboo basket, dipped in the tall pot for the count of three, shaken once. Broth off the wide pot. Then the liver, sliced thin and pink, dropped in for the count of twenty and lifted out gray at the edge and soft in the middle. Diced celery. The spoon of gold fat. White pepper out of a tin with a dented lid.

The liver had gone in without being asked. He had not said liver. He stood with the bowl in his hand and the steam in his face and understood that his mother had been at the stall that morning. Or the day before, and had paid, and had said the thing she said.

He ate standing where he had eaten standing since he was eight. Broth first: the bone sweetness, then the fat on his lips, then the noodles' rice-slip. The pepper waited and stung late at the back of the throat. The spoon scraped the bottom. He tipped the last of the broth and set the bowl down.

It cost twelve yuan. It had cost three when he was eight and four fifty when he was fourteen. The bowl was the same bowl. The price was four times the price. The liver had come unasked for eighteen years.

He read the board again on his way out. It said: with liver, twelve. Without, eight. The liver had been a thing the stall decided for you, and now it was a line with a number after it, and the number was four. He stood under the awning with the bowl in his hands and thought about the four yuan, and about the fact that a gift had become a surcharge, and that both of them were on a board in marker, and that nobody in the lane would ever say a word about it.

•

The lane had changed in the way a lane changes when the work leaves it, and it had been emptied twice. The first emptying was the notice and the vans. The second was the pestilence, which came el ‑ even years later and took the ones who had stayed, and because the second came last everybody in the lane now told the story as one

emptying, and the pestilence got the blame for the courtyard that had been empty since 2011.

The boards were gone from the walls. There were still stacks here and there, a few, weathered gray, but the walls were walls now, and you could see the render and the doors.

Three of the courtyards on the north side had been knocked into one and rebuilt as a two-story house with a tiled front and a sliding gate and a small tree in a pot by the gate.

The fourth courtyard, the one with the scale, was empty. The gate was open. He looked in. The room was dry and swept, and there was nothing in it but a bench, a stack of empty sacks, and a child's bicycle upside down with its chain off.

In the afternoon he walked down to the river.

The path had been made into a greenway. There was a strip of paving stones and a railing on the bank and benches every fifty metres. And grass on both sides of the path, and the grass was cut, and there were bins.

The river was not black. That was the first thing. It was gray-green and it moved, and it had a smell, and the smell was the smell of water and not the smell of the drain.

There were egrets. Six of them, on the far bank, standing in the shallows on their yellow legs, and one of them lifted and went twenty metres and came down again.

He stood at the railing and watched them. He had never seen an egret on that bank in his life. There had been no birds on that bank. There had been plastic and foam and black water with no birds in it, no fish in it, no light on it.

A man came past with a rod over his shoulder and a plastic bucket in his hand and stopped at the railing twenty metres down and began to set up. The boy watched him. The rod had a reel and a red float. The man put a stool down and sat and cast and the float went out and sat on the water and did not move.

He walked down to him and asked whether there were fish.

The man looked up. He was sixty, with a dark face and a blue cap. “Small ones! Small, but they are fish!” He laughed at his own float.

“Small ones,” he said. “And eels, some nights. There were no fish for twenty years, and now there are small ones, and everybody says the river is back.” He reeled in a little. “The river is not back. The river is less dead. There is a difference.”

He asked what the difference was.

“The difference is you would still not eat them.” The man nodded at his bucket. “I catch them and I let them go. The ones who eat them are from outside the lane, and the ones from the lane sell them on.”

His own house had a new door. The old door had had a step worn low in the middle; the new door had a step of poured concrete, flat, and the concrete had been swept.

The kitchen had a new gas ring and the old rice cooker, and the window above the sink had been replaced with an aluminium frame. His mother cooked with her weight on her left leg and the right hand doing the work. And when she needed something from the low shelf she looked at it a moment before she bent.

She cooked the fish the way she had always cooked it, steamed with ginger and a little soy and the oil poured over hot. And the fish was from the truck and had clear eyes. And she pressed the gill before she bought it, and said the gills were not as good as they used to be because the ice came later now.

At the table she put the plate in front of him and put the best piece on his rice without asking. And then she sat down and put her own piece on her own rice, and then she said, “Eat.”

His father ate with the tube in his nose taped to his cheek. He ate slowly and did not talk, and when he had finished he wiped his mouth and went out to the bench. And the oxygen machine’s tube followed him across the floor and back, and the machine’s soft fan sound went with him.

His mother watched him go. Then she said, to her rice, “He will not let me put the machine in the front room. He says the bench is where it goes.”

His mother was in the kitchen with her back to the door and she did not turn around when he came in, because she had heard the step and the step was his.

“You are early,” she said.

“The bus was early.”

“Then sit down and I will make you something.”

He said he had eaten at the stall.

She turned around then. Her legs were worse—he could see it in the way she turned, in the hand that went to the edge of the counter and stayed there a moment. She had stopped the trays in February. The trays were too heavy to carry from the park now, and the girl from next door did the carrying. And his mother did the sorting at the table and paid the girl from the money the park gave for the sorting.

“The stall knew,” he said. “The liver came.”

“I told them you were coming.”

“You told them yesterday.”

“I told them on Sunday. In case the bus was early.”

•

His father was at the bench. The bench was still there. The scale was still on it, and the scale was covered with a cloth, and the cloth was clean.

His father’s chair had been moved closer to the wall so that the wall could take his back while he sat. The saturation was ninety-one on a good morning and eighty-seven on a bad one. The concentrator ran at two litres a minute and had an alarm that went off in the night when the tube kinked, and his mother could find the kink in the dark without waking. There was an oxygen concentrator in the corner by the bench, a white box on wheels with a tube coiled on top of it. And

the tube went to his father's nose, and the machine made a soft sound like a fan.

"Doctor," his father said, without looking up.

He said hello.

"Sit down."

He sat on the crate. The crate was the same crate. He had sat on it when he was eight and his father had given him the eye lessons, and the wood had gone smooth where hands went.

"The letter came," his father said.

"The letter came in March."

"I know when it came. Your mother read it to me twice." He turned his head. "Twenty-four months."

"Twenty-four months, extendable."

His father looked at the oxygen tube on his own face, and then at the wall.

"Then you will be here for two years," he said. "In this lane."

"I will be here for two years."

His father nodded. Then he said the thing that set the terms, and he said it in the flat voice, the same voice that had said the trays were in the book.

"Then we will not talk about it at the table."

He asked what they would talk about at the table.

"Fish," his father said. "The price of greens. Your mother's leg." He closed his eyes. "You can do what you like in the lane. At my table you will talk about the price of greens."

•

That night he slept in his old room.

The bed was the same bed and the mosquito net was the same net, and the wall was the same wall he had touched every night until he was eighteen. On the shelf was the shelf of red circles from the reports, and the reports were still there, the paper gone yellow at the edges.

He lay in the dark and listened. The rice cooker ticked. The fridge hummed and stopped. Somewhere a dog barked twice and gave it up. There was no roar at seven and there had been no roar at seven for two years. Because the primary school had merged with the other one across the district and the classrooms had been emptied and the children went by bus.

He got up at eleven and went to the big room and opened the drawer.

The letters from Siam. The household book, with its string. The test slip, folded in thirds, which he still had never opened. The printout, soft at the folds, which he had put in himself six years ago. The receipt from the bank. The bus tickets. The red string. The pencil.

He took the test slip out and held it. It was a single page folded twice, and the folds had gone soft, and there was a smudge on the outside where a thumb had been.

He put it back without opening it. That was not the way. The way was the logbook, and the logbook was not in this drawer.

That evening his grandmother came in from the back room with her hands on the doorframe and stood and looked at him.

She was ninety. She had stopped going to the temple in the spring. She still lit the stove on the first and fifteenth and still made the tea. And the tea fire had been moved from the front room to the back because the front room was now the television room. And the tea fire's olive-pit charcoal was in a tin on the shelf with a lid on it.

She looked at him for a long time. Then she said, "You are thin."

He said he was the same.

"You are thinner than the last time. The city makes people thin." She came in and sat down slowly, one hand on the table, and when she was down she let her breath out. "Sit. I will make the tea."

She made the tea. Her hands were slower than they had been, and the kettle was heavier. And she poured the first round and set the first cup on the god shelf and gave him the second and kept the third.

They drank. It was the same tea. It was the same three cups. The round was the same round.

“Your father has set his terms,” she said.

“He has.”

“Good. A man with terms is a man who is still at the table.” She held her cup against her lip without drinking. “Now I will set mine.”

He waited.

“You will do your work in this lane. You will not do it at my table, and you will not do it in the courtyard. And you will not ask me questions with a form in your hand.” She put the cup down. “If you want to know something from me, you will ask me the way you asked me when you were six, and I will tell you or I will not.”

He said he understood.

“And when you find out what happened to the children,” she said, “you will tell me before you tell the committee.”

He said he would.

She nodded. Then she poured the second round, and the second round was the same round, and the tea was the same tea, and the lane outside was quiet in the way it was quiet now. Which was the quiet of a place where the work had gone and the money had gone with it. And the people had stayed, and the tea had stayed, and the three cups were still three cups.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Volume 2. Round 2. Village 3. Page 41. Pencil. — logbook entry, 2004

•

The morning bus from Guiyu to Shantou left at seven-forty and took two hours and twenty minutes. He had the window seat on the left. The lane went past, then the market road, then the bridge, and the park's fence ran along the far bank with the buildings inside it going up in rows. And the buildings were gray and white and had the look of things built from a drawing.

The department corridor was empty at ten in the morning. The notice board had a new timetable on it and the old one underneath, and the water dispenser had two blue bottles on it now.

She was in her office with a stack of examination scripts on the desk and a red pen. She looked up and said, "You are early," and he said the bus was early, and she said that everyone said that and that nobody was ever early. And then she put the pen down and said, "All right. We will do it now, before the scripts."

The corridor to the basement was cooler than the rest of the building, and the polish smell was stronger in the morning. At the bottom there was a window at knee height with a grille, and through the grille you could see the wheels of a bicycle.

She unlocked the storage room and the light came on in two of the four tubes, and the third one flickered twice and then held.

She opened the storage room herself and pulled the box out and set it on the floor, and then she did not open it.

"Sit down," she said. "There is no chair. Sit on the box next to it."

He sat on the 2005 box. She sat on the 2004 box with the lid still shut and her hands flat on the lid, and the light in the room came from two tubes and flickered in the third.

She said there were things he should know before she opened it, and he waited.

The logbook, she said, was a record of the survey, not of the chil - dren. The numbers were in it because they had been written down at the table. The margin notes were hers; she had been twenty-four and had written fast, and some of what she wrote was not kind.

She said that the names were in the key, not the logbook, and the key stayed with her. She would read him the note. If he wanted the name, he would go to the house and ask, the way the protocol said.

He said he understood.

"Then we will open it."

•

The book was blue, hard-covered, the size of a school exercise book. And the cover had a white label on it with the volume number and the round in her handwriting, and the corners were soft with use.

She opened it on her knees and turned the pages. The paper was ruled and the writing was in pencil, in two hands—one small and upright. One loose and fast and slanting—and the pages had a smell that came up when she turned them, dust and graphite and the ghost of something sweet.

The storage room was cold enough that his hands were cold on the cover of the book. The cold came up off the concrete floor and out of the boxes, and it smelled of dust and of paper that had been in the dark a long time. And the smell was not unpleasant, and he noticed himself noticing it and stopped.

Above them, the third tube flickered and clicked. In the corner a pipe went up through the ceiling and there was a stain around it the shape of a leaf.

She held the book open on her knees with one hand flat on the page so it would not close.

"Round two," she said. "Village three. The primary school. We were there four days. The first day the principal would not let us in until nine because the children had to sweep the yard."

The table on page forty-one had been drawn with a ruler in pencil, and the pencil lines had gone soft where the page had been turned. And there were two smudges at the bottom where a thumb had rested while the numbers were written. The fourth column's heading was two characters, and the numerals under it ran down the page in the small upright hand. And each one had a decimal point, and the decimal point was a full stop made with the same pencil. And the pencil had been sharpened with a knife because there were no sharpeners on the table in the primary school.

The margin notes were in the other hand, the loose one, and they were written at an angle because the book had been held on a knee.

Some of the notes on the facing page read: "cried." "father away." "twins." "grandmother answered." "would not sit." "took twice." He read them without writing them down. They were not for his note‑book. They were for the file, and the file was hers.

The book had a bookmark in it, a strip of card, and the card had been cut from a cigarette packet and had a red stripe on one side.

She turned more pages. The entries were dated and numbered and the numbers ran down the margin in a column.

"The second day we did sixty-one children. The third day we did forty. The fourth day we did thirty-four and then the older ones started coming, brothers and sisters, and we did nineteen more because we had tubes left."

She stopped.

"Page forty-one," she said.

He leaned over. The page had a table drawn by hand in pencil with a ruler, and the columns were number, sex, age, and a fourth headed

with two characters that meant, in their shorthand, the result. The rows went down in the small upright hand.

Thirty-four. Thirty-five. Thirty-six. Thirty-seven.

Male. Eight. Sixteen point four.

Beside the row, in the left margin, in the loose slanting hand, there was a note.

She read it out loud. She read it the way she read everything, flat, without emphasis, the way a person reads a line they have read a hundred times.

"Quiet child. Mother answered for him."

He did not say anything, and the third tube flickered.

She turned the page.

"Page forty-two," she said. "The next day's list."

The rows went on. Thirty-eight was the first row on the new page.

Male. Eight. Sixteen point eight.

And beside it, in the margin, in the same loose hand:

"Talkative. Lively."

•

He looked at the two rows a long time: sixteen point four, sixteen point eight, four-tenths of a microgram between them.

"Who was thirty-eight?" he said.

She did not answer at once. She closed the book on her finger and looked at the wall of boxes.

"You know who it was," she said.

"I want you to say it."

She was quiet a moment more. Then she said, "The key says Li Xiaolong. Village three. Guardian, Li Axiu."

Li Axiu was Long Mu. The incense and paper shop. The shutters that went down for one day and then came up again because the town's dead do not stop dying to suit the living.

"He drowned in 2008," he said.

"I know." She opened the book again and turned to the back, where there were loose papers in a pocket, and took one out and unfolded it. It was a photocopy of a death notice, small, from a local paper. "I keep the ones I hear about. There are nine in the file now. Four of them are children from the rounds."

He looked at the notice. It was four lines long. The name, the age, the date, the place. The place was the river.

She put the notice back in the pocket.

She said she had written "talkative, lively" because he would not stop talking. He had talked through the whole needle. He had told the nurse about a machine with teeth in Guangzhou, and made the other children laugh so hard that the principal came out.

He said nothing.

She said the note was not a judgment. It was written in ten seconds, because they had forty children to do before lunch. Her hand lay flat on the page with the thumb along the margin, and the nail of the thumb had a ridge in it, and the ridge went white where she pressed.

•

He asked her to read his row again. She found the page and read it.

"Quiet child. Mother answered for him."

He asked what it had meant when she wrote it.

She said it meant that when she asked him his name he had not answered, and his mother had answered for him. And had given the age and said he was a good boy and said he did not like needles. It meant that she had forty children and one of them was not going to give her anything, and the mother had given her what she needed. And she had written it down so that the next person reading the book would know not to expect anything from the boy.

He said he had been that child.

"The key says the guardian is Xu Yan," she said. "Your mother."

He nodded.

"Then it is your row." She closed the book. "I am sorry that the note is the note. It was written by a twenty-four-year-old with a clipboard."

He said it was accurate.

"It is accurate," she said. "That is not the same as fair."

•

They sat on the boxes a while. Somewhere above them a door opened and shut.

He asked whether he could copy the two rows into his notebook.

"You can copy the numbers. You cannot copy the key." She handed him the book. "Copy the two rows. Not the names."

He took the logbook on his knees and opened his own notebook on top of it and copied the two rows in his smallest characters. With the four columns, and the two notes in the margin written out in full.

When he had finished she took the book back and closed it and put it in the box and closed the box.

"Now you have the row," she said. "You have had a photocopy for six years and now you have the row, and it says what it says. What are you going to do with it?"

He looked at his notebook.

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing today. Tomorrow I go to the third village with my mother and I start asking the mothers to sign the forms." He closed the notebook. "The row is not a finding. The row is a number with a note in the margin. The finding is what happened to the other hundred and sixty-four."

She looked at him for a moment. Then she stood up, which took her a moment because the box was low, and she picked up her steel bottle and said, "Good. Then we will begin."

They went up the stairs, and she locked the storage room behind them, and the key went back on the nail behind the neighbouring door. And she walked him to the end of the corridor and did not shake his hand, because she was not a woman who shook hands.

"Your mother will do the first three houses," she said. "After the third, the lane will know what the forms are for. After that you can knock on doors by yourself, and some of them will open."

•

Afterwards he went out and ate lunch in a noodle shop on the street behind the campus.

The shop had four tables and a ceiling fan and a calendar with a girl on it. The owner was a woman in her fifties with her hair in a net, and she made the noodles in front of him. Pulling them and knocking them on the counter, and the flour came off her hands in small clouds.

He ordered a bowl with beef and ate it slowly. The broth was dark and the beef was thin and the noodles were thick and white, and the chilli oil on the table was in a jar with a spoon in it. And the spoon had a red ring on the handle where the oil had dried.

Two men at the next table talked about a delivery route and ate with their phones on the table beside their bowls. A boy came in with a school bag and asked for a bowl with no coriander and the woman said there was no coriander today.

He finished the noodles and drank the broth and paid at the counter. The woman said, "Come again," and he said he would, and he meant it.

He took the bus back that evening with the notebook in his bag.

At the bridge he took it out and opened it to the page and looked at the two rows again.

Thirty-seven. Male. Eight. Sixteen point four. Quiet child. Mother answered for him.

Thirty-eight. Male. Eight. Sixteen point eight. Talkative. Lively.

Four-tenths of a microgram. The rows were next to each other in the book because the boys had stood next to each other in the line. And the line had been ordered by the class roll, and the class roll had been ordered by the pinyin of surnames, and Huang came before Li. And so the quiet child was thirty-seven and the talkative one was thirty-eight. And the number had given the talkative one a tenth of a point more lead and the water had taken him anyway.

That night he opened a new field notebook, the first of the study, and laid it on the kitchen table under the lamp.

It had a hard cover, ruled pages, a red spine. On the first page he ruled a header: subject, sex, age, village, 2004, 2005, 2006, consent, date, notes.

Then he wrote the first two rows in his smallest characters, and the ink was blue and the rule was straight. And when he had finished he looked at the two rows for a while and then drew a line under them with the ruler and turned the page and ruled the header again on page two. So that the study would begin on the second page and the first page would be the two rows from the logbook. And the two rows were not the study, and the two rows were the reason for it.

His mother came in and looked over his shoulder at the ruled lines and the two rows.

"Thirty-seven and thirty-eight," she said.

"Thirty-seven and thirty-eight."

She looked at the page a moment longer. Then she put a cup of hot water down beside the notebook and went out, and did not say anything about it. And the cup steamed on the table beside the blue ink until it stopped.

He closed the notebook and put it away before the bridge was behind him.

The bus went on. The light was the flat white light of late August, and the fish ponds lay in it flat and pale, and nothing moved in them.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Day one. Houses 1–3: signed. House 4: declined. Day two: two signed, one moved to Chaonan. Day three: none. — field log, September 2022

•

His mother did the first three houses.

She did them the way she did everything: with her hands, with her weight on the left leg, with a bag of oranges under her arm. She did not knock, because in that lane you did not knock. You stood at the open door and said a name and waited for an answer, and if there was no answer you said the name again. Louder, and then you went in. The first house was a woman of sixty-eight whose son had been in the round. She was sitting on a low stool with a basin of greens between her knees. She looked up and said, “Ah-Yan,” which was his mother’s name in the lane. Then she looked at the boy and said, “This is the one who went to Guangzhou.”

“This is the one,” his mother said. “He has come back to ask about the children.”

The woman put the basin down.

They sat. She made tea. The kettle was electric, not the clay pot. The tea was Tieguanyin in a small pot. She poured the first round into three cups and gave the first to his mother, because his mother was the elder, and the second to him, and kept the third.

The round went three times before his mother said anything about the study.

Then she said it in the flat price-voice. The university was doing a follow-up. They were asking everyone from the round. There was a test, a questionnaire, and a small payment for the time, and nothing would be done with the results that was not told to the family first.

The woman listened. Then she said, “What will they do with the blood?”

He answered that one himself. The blood would be tested for lead. The result would go to her and to her son. If it was high they would tell her what to do about it, and the study would not publish anything that could be traced to a person.

She looked at him for a while.

“You are Xu Yan’s son,” she said.

“I am.”

“Then I will sign.” She went to the back room and came back with her reading glasses and read the form for a long time. Then she made a mark with the pen. “My son is in Shenzhen and does not come home. You will have to find him yourself.”

He said he would try.

“Do not try. Find him. He does not answer my phone but he answers other people’s.”

The second house was a man whose daughter had been in the round. The daughter was there, thirty, with a baby on her hip. She signed for herself and asked whether the test hurt. He said it did not. She said the last test had hurt because the nurse had been in a hurry. He said he would not be in a hurry.

The third house was a woman of seventy-two who could not read the form and would not use a pen. She made a thumbprint with the ink pad he had brought. Then she pressed her thumb on a piece of scrap paper too, twice, and looked at the two marks. The last time she had done this, she said, the paper had been blue.

•

Then he did them alone, and the lane’s arithmetic changed.

At the fourth house the man stood in the doorway and did not ask him in he listened to the first sentence and said, “No.”

He asked whether he could explain.

"I know what it is. It is the blood thing. My son had the blood thing done when he was small and we never heard anything about it after." The man's hand was on the door. "So no. Tell them no."

He said the results would be given to the family this time.

"That is what they said the last time." The door closed. It closed without violence, the way a door closes when a man has decided something and does not want an argument.

He stood on the step for a moment and then wrote in the field log: *House 4: declined.*

•

The water yard was a concrete pad behind the market road with a roof of corrugated sheet on six posts and a tap at the far end where the tanker filled.

The pad had been rained on so often that the concrete had gone dark in the middle and pale at the edges, and there were tire tracks in it from a hundred mornings. And a drain at the corner with a grate and a mat of weed across the grate.

Two women came with jugs while he was standing there. They set the jugs down in a row and Cai Can filled them from the hose and took their money and wrote nothing down. Because in eighteen years nobody in that yard had ever written anything down.

The water came out of the hose white and went clear in the jug, and it had a smell, a faint smell of the borehole, of the lime and the iron in the water. And the smell was a clean smell, and the boy noticed it and thought: that is what clean smells like here. Lime, and iron, and the hose.

A dog slept in the shade under the tank. The sheet roof ticked in the heat as it expanded. A man on a scooter came for two jugs and argued about the price for a while and paid it.

Cai Can he found at the water yard on the market road, at four in the afternoon, filling his truck.

He was twenty-six and he had got bigger. He wore a blue singlet and a towel round his neck. The truck was a three-wheeler with a fibreglass tank and a pump and a hose. The water came from a borehole on the edge of the town, tested monthly, and he sold it by the ton and by the jug.

He saw the boy and his face did the thing that faces do when they have been rehearsing a greeting for twenty years and then decide not to use it.

"Doctor," he said. Then he laughed. "They said you came back. I said, no, he came back with a paper and a bag of tubes."

He asked how the water business was cai Can capped the hose. It was the only business, he said. Then he laughed and said his mother used to buy water from the truck and now he was the truck, and that this was what people meant by a circle.

He asked whether he could talk about the study.

"Go on then."

He explained it: the follow-up, the test, the questionnaire, the payment, the results returned to the family.

Cai Can listened with his hands on his hips and his head slightly to one side, and when the explanation was finished he said, "No."

He asked why.

"Because I know what my number was." Cai Can wiped his neck with the towel. "The biggest one in the class. My grandmother read it out in the lane. Do you remember? She stood at the gate and read it out twice."

He said he remembered.

"So you want to test me again. This time I will be twenty-six. The number will be smaller, because I am not eight and I do not live in the courtyard anymore. Then you will write a paper that says the numbers went down and the problem is solved." He hung the towel on the truck mirror. "Or the number will be the same, and then you will write a paper that says look, the damage is permanent. Either way I am a number in a paper."

He said the results would be his own, and the paper would not identify him.

"That is not what I said." Cai Can turned and looked at him. "You want the number? Then eat a number. You want to know how I am? I am twenty-six and I get out of breath on the stairs and I have a wife and a daughter and I sell water and I am fine. That is how I am. You do not need a tube for that."

He said the study needed the tube.

"The study needs the tube. I do not." He opened the truck door. "Ask me anything you like with your mouth. I will answer you with my mouth. I will not give you the tube."

They stood in the yard in the heat. The pump ticked as it cooled.

"Why not?" he asked.

Cai Can got into the truck and put his hands on the wheel and looked at him through the open window.

He said that the last time, the number had gone to his parents and not to him. He had been eight and everybody in the lane had known his number except him, and his grandmother had read it out at the gate. Eighteen years, and nobody had ever said it to his face. He started the engine. No, he said, he would not give another one. But the doctor could come and drink tea.

•

Yao Liting he found at the cheung fun stall beside the noodle stall, at seven in the morning, with the steam going up off the trays.

She was twenty-six, and her arms were the arms of a woman who had worked a machine for eight years and then a ladle for one. She had the ladle in her hand when she saw him, and she did not put it down.

"Look at this," she said, to the woman at the next stall. "The doctor came back."

He asked how the stall was. The stall was the stall, she said: eight yuan a plate, twelve with two eggs, rent four thousand, gas up, eggs

up. She poured batter onto the tray and spread it with the flat of the ladle in one motion. Then she said he had come about the blood.

He said he did.

She worked the tray. She put the lid on, lifted it, put the egg in, spread it, put the meat in, rolled it, cut it, and slid it onto a plate in under a minute. The whole time she did not look at him.

"Ask," she said.

He explained the study, the test, the questionnaire, the payment, the results.

"How much is the payment?"

He told her.

She stopped then. She put the ladle down on the tray and wiped her hands on her apron and looked at him properly for the first time.

"So the number is worth money," she said.

He said the payment was not for the number. The payment was for the time.

She said the time was the morning and the morning was the stall and the stall was eight yuan a plate. She picked the ladle up again. He was telling her that her time was worth that, and that was a price. She was not saying it was a bad price. She was saying it was a price, and the number was the thing being bought, and he could call it the time if he liked.

He said nothing.

She made another plate. The steam went up between them.

"I went to Shenzhen at seventeen," she said. "I came back at twenty-five. I have not been tested since I was eight years old. Nobody has asked me a question about my health since I was eight years old. And now a doctor comes to my stall with a form and a payment and the form says the payment is for the time." She put the plate down in front of a customer. "So yes. I will do it. But I want the result written down and I want a copy for myself, and I want it in characters I can read, not in a table."

He said he would bring the result himself.

"Not a nurse."

"Not a nurse."

"All right." She wiped the counter. "Bring it on a Sunday. Sunday is slow."

•

He walked home the long way, past the empty courtyards and the one with the bicycle in it. The lane was in shadow. And a woman was sweeping her step with a straw broom and did not look up.

At the corner the little god stood in his orange paint with a stub of incense in front of him and a week of ash. And the ash was gray and the paint was orange and the orange had gone dark where the rain came off the roof.

He stopped at the shrine, which he had not done since he was a boy, and did not nod because nodding was for passing, and stood a moment instead.

He walked home with the field log under his arm and the sun coming up over the lane.

Three signed on the first day, two on the second, and Cai Can's no, and Liting's yes with a condition. Eleven houses in four days, out of a hundred and sixty-five rows. Each house had taken an hour and a half, because each house had been three rounds of tea, a conversation about the price of greens. And a walk down the lane to the next door with his mother's hand on his elbow.

The method said twenty minutes per household. The method had been written in Shantou.

He wrote in the log, at the bottom of the page, in the smallest characters: *The tea is not a delay. The tea is the method.*

Then he closed the log and went in to eat his breakfast, and his father was at the bench with the oxygen tube and the machine's soft fan, and he said, "How many?"

"Five signed. One no."

His father nodded, and looked at the courtyard, and said, “Five in four days is slow.”

“It is slow.”

“Then it will take a year.”

“It will take a year.”

His father turned his head and looked at him for a moment. “Good,” he said. “A year is a proper length for a thing like this. The fast ones are the ones that are lies.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Result slip. Participant 12. 2004: 18.2 µg/dL. 2022: 4.1 µg/dL. Delivered by hand: 11 September 2022. — result register, page 1

•

Wu Wei he found at the chess table by the park gate, on a Tuesday afternoon, playing an old man in a white cap.

He was twenty-six and not a big man so much as a wide one, with the forearms of a man who lifted boards all day. He sat on a plastic stool with his knees apart and his elbows on the table and his chin on his fist. He was losing.

The chess table sat under the flame tree where the light came through in coins. The board was cardboard and the squares had been drawn on with a marker and gone soft at the corners. Somebody had scratched a name into the table and there was a ring where a hundred cups had stood.

Across from Wu Wei the old man in the white cap had a pipe he did not smoke and a bag of peanuts he did not offer. And he moved his pieces with two fingers and put them down slowly. And every so often he looked at the boy standing at the edge of the table the way the old look at the young, without surprise and without interest.

Beyond them the park's fence ran away along the road, and the machines were still inside it. And the machines were gray and rust had come through the paint in long streaks like something running down.

The boy waited until the game ended. The old man won with a rook and a pawn and said something about a trap. Wu Wei said, "You set it up three moves back." The old man laughed and Wu Wei laughed. Then Wu Wei saw him standing there and got up so fast the stool went over.

"Doctor."

He said not to call him doctor.

Wu Wei apologized twice and picked the stool up, and said he had heard the doctor was back. Everyone had heard. He asked whether he could sit.

"Sit." Wu Wei wiped the seat with his hand and said to sit, and then asked whether he played. He said he did not.

"I can teach you." Wu Wei said it was not hard, that you only had to see the whole board at once. He set the pieces up again without looking at them; the pieces were chipped and one of them was a bottle cap. Then he said he understood the study was the blood. He said it was the blood, a questionnaire, and a payment for the time.

Wu Wei nodded. He looked at the board and then at the boy. "My mother wants me to do it."

He asked why.

He moved a pawn and said his mother wanted it because they had never found out. When he was small they had come to the school and taken the blood and then nothing. His mother had asked at the clinic and the clinic had said the results went to the school, and the school had said they went to the clinic. So they never found out. He had been fourteen, and then twenty, and nobody had ever said anything, and he had begun to think that nothing had happened to him.

He asked what he had thought.

Wu Wei looked at the pieces and said he had thought it was fine, because nothing had happened. Then he had got older and thought the other thing. He looked up and said yes, he would do it, and asked when.

•

The first results went out on the eleventh of September, which was a Sunday, because Liting had said Sunday was slow.

The protocol said the results should be returned in a sealed en - velope at a scheduled visit, with a counselling sheet, and the coun -

sellor should be present. The protocol had been written in Shantou. The counselling sheet was two pages and had been translated into Teochew by nobody, and she had read it and said, “This is not Teo - chew. This is Mandarin with Teochew words in it. My mother will not understand a sentence.”

So he rewrote it. It took him two evenings and his mother correc - ted him four times, and the corrections were about words she would not use in front of a neighbor.

The sheet, in the end, said four things. What lead is. What the number means. What you can do. What the study will do with the number.

He put a copy of the sheet in the envelope with the result and went to Liting’s stall at nine in the morning. She was already working. She wiped her hands and took the envelope and did not open it.

“Read it to me,” she said.

He said the sheet was for her to read.

“Read it first,” she said. Then she would read it herself.

So he read it, standing at the counter between the egg tray and the tray of batter, with the steam going up. And she listened with her arms folded and her eyes on the tray.

When he finished she held out her hand. He gave her the envel - ope. She opened it and took out the slip and looked at the number.

2004: 18.2. 2022: 4.1.

“Eighteen point two,” she said.

“When you were eight.”

She looked at it for a while. Then she put it on the counter and flattened it with two fingers.

“Eighteen point two,” she said. “When I was eight.”

“When you were eight.”

“And now it is four.”

“Now it is four point one.”

She nodded slowly. The four was inside the line, she said, and the line was five. He said the reference was three and a half now, because the levels were lower everywhere and the reference had been lowered with them. Four point one was above it.

"So it is worse than I think."

"It is not worse. It is a different ruler." He put both hands on the counter. He said the important number was the second one, and the second one was much lower than the first. Because she was not eight years old and did not live in a courtyard with a brazier in it. If she had stayed at 18.2 for twenty years, that would be much worse.

She looked at him. Then she looked at the slip again.

"So the damage is done," she said.

"Not done."

"The exposure is done," he said. "The damage from the exposure is done. The four is the present, and the present can go lower."

"Thank you," she said.

She folded the slip in half and put it in her apron pocket.

"Thank you," she said, and turned back to the tray, and poured the batter, and spread it with the flat of the ladle.

He stood there a moment. She worked. Then she said, without looking up: "You will do this for all of them."

"For as many as will come."

"Even the ones who said no."

He said the ones who said no could change their minds at any time.

"Then you will be doing it for a year."

"It will take a year."

"Good." She cut the plate and slid it across. "Eat something. You look like a man who forgets."

•

The second envelope went to the woman of sixty-eight whose son was in Shenzhen. She could not give it to her son, so she read it

herself and then telephoned him. She held the phone eight centimetres from her mouth and read the whole sheet out loud down the line, in order, all four things.

He stood in her front room while she did it. She read it the way she read everything, slowly, with her finger under the words. The son said something on the other end that the boy could hear as a shape and not as words.

She said, "Four point nine." A pause. "No, that is now. The now is four point nine."

Another pause.

"Because the pipe is not in the courtyard anymore." She listened. "No. Nobody is saying that. I am saying what the paper says."

She hung up and put the phone down on the table and sat looking at it for a moment.

"He says he is fine," she said.

He asked what she thought.

"I think he is twenty-six and he works in a warehouse and he is tired all the time and he says it is the shifts." She picked up the sheet and folded it. "That is what he says. The shifts."

She put the sheet in the drawer of the sideboard, the way his mother put things in the drawer, and closed it, and said, "Will you have tea?"

"No," she said, when he offered to pay for the ink pad. "You are the son of Xu Yan."

He had tea, three rounds, and then he went out.

•

By the end of September he had twenty-two signatures, four refusals, and one family that had moved away. The four refusals had four different reasons. He wrote all four at the bottom of the page under a heading he made up: *Reasons*.

The first was: *Never heard anything after*. The second was: *Wants money first*. The third was: *Wife says no*. The fourth was: *The test is bad luck*.

He read the four reasons on the bus home and thought about what he could do about them, and the answer was nothing.

That evening his mother had the household book open on the table and was carrying the month across to a new page, and he watched her write the misc. figure, and saw that there was no remark beside it, and did not ask what it was. She did not offer. It was the first time in his life that he had looked at that column and understood that it was not a column for things, it was a column for things she was not going to write down. He could not make the past come back and answer. He could not make the test not be bad luck in a lane where the last thing the needle brought was a number your grandmother read at the gate.

The log had a column for *outcome* and a column for *notes*, and there was no column for *what the study owes them*. And he wrote that in anyway, in the margin, because the margin was where the notes went.

•

The bus from the lane went past the fertilizer depot and the second-hand appliance shops, and the shops had washing machines standing in rows on the pavement with their doors open. And the doors were all open the same way, like mouths.

At home his mother had made soup and put the bowl down in front of him before he had taken his bag off.

"Eat," she said. "You are thin again."

He said he was not thin. She said he was thin, and that she was his mother, and that she could see. She sat down opposite and watched him eat the first three mouthfuls, and then she said, "Twenty-two."

"Twenty-two, and four no, and one moved."

"Twenty-two out of a hundred and sixty-five." She said it the way she read prices. "It is not fast."

"It will take the year."

"It will take more than the year." She pushed the dish of greens closer. "Start with the ones still in the lane. The ones who went away will be harder in the winter. They come home at New Year and they do not want to talk about it at New Year."

He said that was a good point and wrote it in the log.

"Of course it is a good point. I have been selling to this lane for thirty years." She watched him eat. "And you should eat more liver. You look like a man who has been forgetting his own bowl."

He said he had eaten liver that morning at the stall.

"Eat."

"I am eating."

"More."

"I have eaten."

"One more piece."

She said he should eat it twice. She went to the stove and came back and put a piece of liver in his bowl without asking. The piece was gray at the edge and dark in the middle and tasted of ginger and soy.

He ate it. She watched. Then she got up and went back to the stove and put the rest of the liver in a bowl and covered it and put it in the fridge for the morning.

Neither of them said anything about it. Her whole argument with the world was in that bowl, and it had been for twenty years, and it had never once needed a sentence.

His father ate at the bench, where the oxygen machine sat on a stool beside him with its soft fan and its green light. The tube went from the machine to his nose and lay across his lip and over his ear.

The bench was the bench it had always been. The wood was dark where hands had worn it. The chisels hung on their nails, the saw

hung on its nail, and the tin of nails was on the shelf with the lid off, and the lid had been off for thirty years.

He told him the count. His father chewed slowly and looked at the courtyard, where the light was going down behind the wall and the wall was going red.

"The four no are the ones who are right," his father said.

He asked what that meant. His father said it meant they had already been told a number and nothing had come of it, and had decided not to be told another one. He would not argue them out of it. He would only be the third man who came with a paper.

"Then it will be small."

"It will be small." His father put the bowl down. "Small and true is worth more than big and thin. You know what they do with thin things? They look at them from far away."

The machine breathed. The green light stayed on. His father picked the bowl up again and said to eat, because his mother would be watching the bowl.

He ate. The courtyard went from red to gray, and the moths came to the light above the door, and the machine breathed. And his father's hand lay on the bench beside the bowl with the fingers slightly open, the way they had lain for twenty years.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Misc.: 1,840. Remarks: — . — household book, August 2022

•

His mother kept the household book the way she kept everything, which was without mercy.

It was a school exercise book with a red cover and a crane on it. It had been going since 1993. It lived in the drawer of the sideboard under the tea things. Every page was ruled into five columns with a ruler, and the headings were date, item, out, in, and balance. The balance was carried forward at the top of every page and it was correct to the yuan. And if it was not correct she went back through the page again until it was. He had watched her do it since he was small. She did it on Sunday nights with the radio on and a cup of tea going cold at her elbow. The pen was a cheap blue ballpoint and she held it in a fist. The numbers went down the page in that fist-writing, and at the bottom she drew a line and wrote the total, and then a second line under the total.

There was one column she did not explain, and it was called *misc.*

Misc. was for the gas, the water, the electric, the phone, the medicine, the shoes, the gifts at New Year, the money for the funerals, the money for the weddings, the money for the schools. It was a large column. It was the largest column in the book.

In August the misc. line was 1,840, and there was no remark beside it, and the balance at the bottom of the page was four hundred and twelve yuan.

•

He found out because of a wrong address.

The house was at the end of the lane where it bent. The woman was fifty-four and her son had been in the fourth round. The son was in Dongguan now, with a wife, and did not come home. The boy had come to ask about the study and she had said yes before he had fin - ished the third sentence, and then she had said, "Your mother already gave it to me."

"What did she give you?"

"Money for the boy's school."

She was drying a bowl with a cloth. "Two years ago. When my husband was in the hospital. She came with the envelope and she said it was from the lane. I said the lane does not have money, and she said this lane has money when it needs money."

He stood in the doorway with the field log under his arm and did not say anything.

"You did not know," the woman said.

He said he did not know.

"She does not tell." The woman put the bowl on the shelf.

"Two sacks," she said. "In the spring." "In the spring she came with the rice. Two sacks. She said a shop had over-ordered. Shops do not over-order two sacks of rice and give them to a woman at the end of the lane."

•

On Sunday morning he went to the market with her before light, which he had not done in years.

The market at five was a shed with bulbs hanging on cords and water on the concrete. Men unloaded crates from a lorry with a ramp. The crates came down one after another, each with the same knock on the ground and the same splash. The ice had melted off the fish and the fish lay on the tiles in rows with their eyes gone white. A woman was gutting something at a barrel and the knife went in and out and the scales came off in a fan, and the guts went into a pail at her feet, and the pail was full to the rim and did not spill.

"Fresh! Fresh greens! Two for three!"

The shout came from the end of the row every eight seconds, in the same voice, at the same pitch, and nobody looked up.

His mother walked the rows and did not look at anything she did not intend to buy. She touched the greens at the stem, turned them over, put them down. The sellers called her by name and she answered them by name. One of them said something about her son. She said yes, he is back. The seller said the doctor. She said he is not a doctor yet.

He carried the sacks. The sacks got heavy. By the time the light came up over the shed roof his shoulders were burning and his hands smelled of greens and ice. His mother had bought a chicken, a bundle of garlic, and a bag of dried shrimp, and had paid for none of it with the notes from under the bowl.

He went home and did not ask about it for four days.

On the fifth day he took the household book out of the drawer while she was at the stall and sat at the kitchen table with it and read the misc. column back to the beginning of the year.

The kitchen at that hour smelled of the stove, the cold rice, and the soap she washed with. The window over the sink was open and the lane was making its evening noise. A scooter, a television, a woman calling a child in the book's paper had gone soft at the corners and the cover had a ring on it from a cup set down years ago. On the inside of the front cover she had written the year in pencil, 1993. And under it a name that was not hers and not his, in a hand that was not her hand.

January, 2,110. February, 1,988. March, 2,340. April, 1,760. May, 1,905.

The numbers were not large. They were the numbers of a woman who sold vegetables and kept chickens and had a son in Guangzhou who sent money. The money he sent went into the *in* column as *from Chuan*, and she never spent it on herself. He knew that. He had known it since he was nineteen.

But the misc. column did not say what the misc. was. There were no remarks. In thirty years of bookkeeping she had written remarks for everything—*gas cylinder*, *school fee Ah-Chuan*, *doctor Peh*—and in August there was a line of 1,840 and the remark was blank.

He turned back a year. August 2021, 900, remark blank. August 2020, 1,250, remark blank. August 2019, 640, blank.

Three blanks. Three Augusts.

•

There was a photograph in the back of the book, in the flap, and it had been there so long that the corner had gone into the paper. It was a picture of three women at a stall with their arms around each other and a child in front of them squinting. And one of the women was his mother at forty and one of them was dead and he did not know the third.

He put the photograph back in the flap. He did not ask about it. There were things in that book that were not accounts.

She came back at seven with the basket and the smell of the stall on her and found him at the table with the book open.

She put the basket down and washed her hands and dried them and came and sat opposite him. And looked at the book, and then at him, and said, "You have been reading my book."

He asked what the 1,840 was.

"Where?"

"August."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "The Yap boy's school. The Lin family's medicine. The Chua funeral." She said it in the flat price-voice. "It is not one thing. That is why the remark is blank. If I wrote it down I would have to write down whose, and then the book would be a record of who took money. And the book is in the drawer and anyone could open the drawer."

He said nobody opened the drawer.

"I opened the drawer for thirty years." She put her hand flat on the table. "A book with names in it is a dangerous thing in a lane. You know this. You are the one who is writing one."

He said the study's payments came from the university and were recorded.

"The study's payments are a hundred yuan and a form." She looked at him. "A hundred yuan does not pay a funeral. A hundred yuan does not pay a school fee. A hundred yuan is what the university thinks a morning is worth, and maybe it is right, and it is not my business, and the rest is my business."

"Where does it come from?"

"The vegetables."

She got up. "And from the chickens. And from the money you send, some of it, not all of it, do not look at me like that. I have never spent your money on a stranger without telling you. I spent it on the lane. The lane is not a stranger."

•

His father heard the end of it from the bench.

"That money," his father said, "is the money she does not put in the book because she does not want to argue with me about it."

His mother was at the stove and did not turn around.

"You know," she said.

"I know." His father's hand was on the bench. "I have known since the Yap boy. I do not say anything."

"Then do not say anything now."

"I am not saying anything. I am telling him." His father turned his head. "Your mother has been paying this lane back for twenty years, and she has never once said the word, and if you put it in a paper I will personally burn the paper."

He said he would not put it in a paper.

"Good."

"Not one word."

"Good," his father said again.

His mother put the bowl down in front of him with more force than the bowl needed.

"The bowl was yours," she said. "You were the one who was poisoned. The repayments are mine. Do not mix them up."

•

He wrote in the field log that night, at the bottom of the page, in the margin where the notes went:

Study payment, 100 per household. Recorded. Auditable. In the budget.

And under it:

Xu Yan payment, unrecorded, uncounted, out of vegetable money. Not in any budget I can write.

Then he sat with the pen in his hand for a while and did the arithmetic he did not want to do.

Twenty-two houses. Twenty-two hundred yuan from the univer‑sity, with a receipt and a signature and a thumbprint, in a column that would go into the appendix of a thesis.

And beside it, invisible and unclaimed and spread over twenty Augusts, there were school fees, medicine, two sacks of rice, a funer‑al, a bus fare to Dongguan. The deposit on a stall, and the cost of a coffin for a child in 2008 that nobody in the study had ever asked about.

The study could not afford her. That was the plain fact and it sat on the table like a bowl. His instrument was a hundred yuan and a form. Hers was thirty years, a closed drawer, and no remark in the column. His would be published. Hers had never been written down anywhere, and would not be. And the reason it would not be was that writing it down would turn the lane into a list of people who had taken money.

He closed the log.

Then he opened the household book to August and took the pen and did not write.

•

He woke at two and went out to the yard to piss. The moon was up over the wall. The machine was breathing in the dark room, with its green light showing through the doorway.

The lane at that hour smelled of the drains and the frangipani and the smoke of somebody's stove, and the smoke went up straight because there was no wind.

A cat sat on the wall with its legs under it and did not move when he came out. The cat was gray and thin and had one ear torn, and its ribs showed when it breathed. It had sat on that wall for years. His mother put the fish bones out for it, and it did not thank her, and she did not expect it to.

On the way back he stopped at the kitchen table. The book was still open. He turned to the last page, where the totals were, and looked at the balance: four hundred and twelve yuan, in a fist-writing, with a line under it.

He tore a page from the field log, a blank one from the back, and wrote on it:

September, misc. 600.

Then he put it inside the household book at the August page, folded once. He closed the book and put it in the drawer and went back to bed.

In the morning the drawer was open and the book was on the table and the folded page was gone. There was two hundred yuan in notes under his bowl. He had written six hundred. She had taken four and returned the rest, which was her way of accepting the debt and refusing the surplus.

His mother was at the stove with her back to him. Neither of them said anything about it at all.

The chicken came out of the bag on the draining board with its feet tied and its head under its wing, and it lay there while the water ran. His mother killed it on the step with the knife she kept for that. The blood went into a bowl with a little salt in it. The feathers went into a bucket, and the bucket filled up slowly through the afternoon, and the cat came for the feathers with its belly low and was chased off twice.

He ate the noodles. The notes were under the bowl and he left them there. When he washed his bowl he put them under the bowl again, and she took them out and put them in the drawer. That was the whole of the argument.

•

It was not the end of the book either, because the books were stacked.

There were eleven of them in the drawer, going back to 1993, and he took them out one at a time on the Thursday and put them on the table in order, oldest on the left, and read the rice.

The household had grown rice until 2009. He knew that the way he knew the shape of the roof. There was a field, there was a harvest, there was a shed with the sacks in it and the smell of the sacks. The rice came in at the end of the year, went out to the mill, and came back and fed the house for twelve months.

He turned to 2001, and there it was.

Rice, market. 45.

February. March. April. May. Every month, the same hand, the same figure in the same column, in a year when the shed had sacks in it and the harvest was booked as sold.

He went to 2002. *Rice, market. 45.* Twelve times.

1. Eleven times, and once *rice, market, 52*, because the price had gone up.

He sat back and looked at the wall.

The arithmetic was small and it took no time at all. The household grew rice, sold the harvest, and bought rice month by month at market price from a shop, in a town where everybody grew rice and nobody bought it. The harvest that went out was the harvest from the low field, the one by the road, the one whose edges were never gathered for the Qingming cakes because the hill's was better.

His mother had read fish for thirty years. She could tell a fish from the gills and the eye and the stiffness of the tail. She had been reading rice the same way, in a drawer, one column at a time. She had paid the market price for it and let the neighbours believe that what came out of that shed was what went into the pot.

Nobody had ever said it. Not once, in twenty years, not to him, not to the lane, not to his father, who must have known, who booked the harvest as sold himself.

He put the eleven books back in the drawer in order, oldest at the back, and closed the drawer, and did not ask her about the rice.

He never asked her about the rice.

Once, years later, he would be in a room in Guangzhou with a graph on a screen. He would think about the 45, and the twelve lines a year, and the fact that his mother had solved the exposure problem for her own family in the only way available to her. Which was to pay for it quietly at the market rate, in a column with no remark.

Colophon

凡草木烧之即烬，而丹砂烧之成水银，积变又还成丹砂。

Fán caˇomù shāo zhī jí jìn, ér dānshā shāo zhī chéng shuiˇyín, jī biàn yòu huán chéng dānshā.

Burn plants and they become ash; burn cinnabar and it becomes quicksilver, and in time its transformations return it to cinnabar. — Ge Hong, Baopuzi 抱朴子 · on cinnabar, which comes back

The second of two companion volumes after Ge Hong, independent of the first — neither a sequel nor a prequel, and readable first. A lane at the edge of Guiyu, after the workshops came: boards stacked to the eaves, shreds in every doorway, drinking water on a tricycle, a kway teow stall under a blue tarpaulin, and a river that smells of nothing alive. Ah-Cuêng learns the lane's arithmetic before its alphabet — grain on one column of the household book, boards on the other — goes to the university in Guangzhou, and comes home with a field log to run the blood study the lane was never given the results of. Cinnabar, which the alchemists burned to quicksilver and which comes back to cinnabar, is in the water here. What the family kept, and what it paid quietly at the market rate, is the book's real subject: a household's account of a poison, kept without mercy and without a remark.

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.

YOUNG RIVER · 25 sections · 58,903 words. Typeset from a single Mark-down source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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