

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

1-1-2015

Up and Down

Guibing Qin

University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Qin, Guibing, "Up and Down" (2015). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1261.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/1261>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

UP AND DOWN

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

GUIBING QIN

May 2015

Copyright Guibing Qin 2015

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

In 1953, one day before the Korean Armistice Agreement, two Chinese young peasants decide to join the Chinese People's Volunteer Army. Wu Xiu-quan is hesitant because he is the only son and he has a young child bride of seven years waiting to marry him. Wu Xiu-bang, his cousin, convinces him that joining the army would bring honor to his family. The cousins hiked over night to get to the enlist office by the Yangtze River, only to be told that the Korean War has ended. They were sent home. Wu Xiu-quan's father captured him and gives him a good thrashing.

After Xiu-quan and Fenr get married. Xiu-quan deceived Fenr and they never consummate the marriage. The secret is discovered at the wedding banquet. After that, Xiu-quan is forced to consummate the marriage with Fenr, who is pregnant soon.

Xiu-quan leaves the village to work in a grain station in town. His father comes to find him and stages a scene, forcing Xiu-quan to quit the job in town.

When Xiu-quan arrives home, his first son is born. And he decides to stay in the village to help organizing the socialization of agricultural production.

DEDICATION

To Powah Cheng, Janice Dowd, and my mom, Wu Wensu.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first of all thank the MFA program at the University of Mississippi.

During the writing of the thesis, my committee chair, Chris Offutt, who has given me countless advice in both in workshops and private sessions, and for his great example as a writer and educator. Many thanks to my committee members, Jaime Harker and Mary Miller.

Many thanks to all the creative writing faculty. They are, Nic Brown, Tommy Franklin, Megan Abbott, Beth Ann Fennelly, Chris Offutt, and Mary Miller.

Many thanks to my colleagues in the program. They have offered kind and instrumental feedback to the stories and manuscript. I have learned everything from them.

Many thanks my friends who have lent their ears to my mumblings, Meredith, Dominiqua, Jacob, Jimmy, and Brendan.

And to the great John Grisham Fellowship that has pushed one step closer to my dream as a writer.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
1953	1
1954	35
1958	103
VITA	132

1953

1

One late afternoon in July, the heat was ebbing. Wu Xiu-quan took a break from reaping fodder on a paddy ramp. He sat on the balk, a raised ridge between paddies, and rolled himself a small cigar with sun-dried tobacco leaves. Above and below him green terraces of rice paddies scaled the top of Taigong Mountain. Once he turned eighteen, Xiu-quan was old enough to plan the rice harvest, buying and mending the thresher and bamboo baskets, the catering, and which relatives to ask for help.

He smoked and watched the peasants bending down all over this mountainside, reaping or foraging. “Boo,” someone jumped out from behind and yelled. He was startled and dropped the cigar. He looked up and saw who it was.

“Grow up, Xiu-bang!”

“I’m half a year younger than you,” said his cousin, laughing proudly. “To you I’m never grown up.”

Xiu-quan picked up the fuming cigar. Xiu-bang’s face was dark, because he was standing against the sun.

“What’s your decision, Big Brother?” Xiu-bang asked expectantly. “Do you wanna join me to kill some American Imperialists or not?”

Xiu-bang was mobilized to join the Volunteer Army, to resist the US aggression and aid Korea. Being a war hero was all he had ever wanted, and he revered the veterans of the Anti-

1

Japanese War and the Liberation War. The other day he had asked Xiu-quan to come with him to White Sands, where the county's enlist office located.

Xiu-quan said, "You've never seen a white devil in your life. Why do you want to kill them?"

"Big brother, the white devils are evil imperialists who wouldn't hesitate to invade China and take away our independence. Imperialism is the threat to world peace and national independence, so it must be eliminated. Who but China should accept the mission?"

"Why should we? China is not a powerful nation. If any one should, it is Soviet Union."

"Why China? Where should I begin? The Americans supported the Kuomintang during the Civil War. After the Kuomintang was defeated, the Americans sent aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait, preventing the reunification of China."

"But right now the Americans are not invading China."

Xiu-bang stood up, his face scarlet. "Do you think the little Korea is their endgame? Korea is the springboard to invade China, just like when Japan colonized Korea and then invaded the Northeast China. After all, there's merely a river between China and Korea."

"How do you come up with this high talk?"

"What?"

"Where did you get these opinions?"

"I went to meetings in Dustown Militia. I joined the militia in town, do you know that?"

"Do I? Even Fenr has joined the Women's Militia."

"You are a man, you ought to come to one of the meetings. One must have a grasp of the world we are living in."

"Me join the militia? As if my baba would allow that."

Xiu-bang went on, “Do you think I’ll meet the generals in Korea? I’m dying to meet General Nie Rong-zhen. He’s from here, our Jiangjin County. Let’s go see him in Korea, as volunteer soldiers and war heroes.”

The mountain ranges across the ravines were turning golden in the last sun rays, forming a clear line of brilliance and darkness. The green crops were turning deep blue in the great shadow.

Xiu-bang shifted his feet. He was lean and of medium height. He wore a sleeveless short gown and navy cotton pants with tightened legs. All the men of the Wu clan looked indistinguishably handsome. Xiu-bang was every bit of a Wu, thick eyebrows, large round eyes, high nose bridge, rich lips, and easy smiles.

He said, “Don’t you want to be a war hero or not?”

Xiu-quan considered, and the image of wearing the padded coat and cotton-padded cap and fighting in trenches looked farcical, especially with his thin limbs and narrow shoulders.

He said, “If I go with you, who’s gonna take care of my family? I have responsibilities to them. Not everyone is like you, you ...”

“Me what?” said Xiu-bang, dropping his face. “I’m a carefree orphan?”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Why the fuck do you always have to be the voice of reason? Why can’t you just, just be crazy for once?”

“If it were up to me,” Xiu-quan said, looking away from his cousin, “I wish I could leave this god forsaken mountain where birds won’t come to shit.”

Xiu-bang sat down. The cousins shared a cigar.

Half of the sun submerged behind the Basket Ridge, a giant scarlet ball that blushed the

sky and clouds. Pillars of smoke rose from the roof, and frogs croaked around them. The air cooled a bit, and Xiu-quan sensed the residue warmth of the army green shirt on his skin. The watery smell of the rice crop intoxicated him. He kept digging the balk with the grass knife, the dirt splattering like water drops. His large bamboo basket, not yet full, emitted the fragrance of the cut grass.

Xiu-quan said, "It's late, I must finish the work."

Xiu-bang sprung up like a frightened doe. He said, "Fuck his mother! You're no longer needed in your family! Have you heard that Skysburg is mobilizing the villagers to form Mutual Aid Teams?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So, the Mutual Aid Team will help your father once it's established here. What else does 'mutual aid' mean? The villagers send you off with a big red flower on your chest to defend our Republic. Once you're a soldier, people will be proud to aid your family." Xiu-bang was almost yelling. "Never have I believed in socialism like right now. There's nothing to stop you. Will you come with me?"

"You sly imp! Why haven't I thought of this sooner? With or without me, it doesn't matter to Baba, not if there's a team of helpers." Xiu-quan stood up, illuminated. His heart opened like a blossoming lotus flower, his stomach and intestines untwisted as if lubricated by lard. "I'll tell Baba as soon as I finish reaping."

"Tell First Uncle? Are you stupid? Don't you know your father?"

"Why? I can't tell him? You said I won't be needed ..."

"You're such a scholar, bury your head in the books! Of course he won't allow this. My argument was to change your mind, not my uncle's."

“But ...”

“There’s no but. If you decide to go, you have to go in secret. I’m a hundred percent sure my first uncle will lock you up if you told him. So will my sister-in-law. She would kill herself before letting you go to the war in Korea.”

“But how ...”

“Listen to me. You have to trust me on this. There’s no other way.” Xiu-bang grabbed Xiu-quan’s arms. “Fuck, why don’t we run away now? The enlist office is in White Sands. If we start walking now, we’ll make it tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow.”

“Are you mad? Run away?”

“Of course I’m mad! When will I get a chance like this again! We were boys when the Jap ghosts invaded us, and we were too young to fight in the Civil War. Now it’s our time! It’s our only chance to go to the battlefield, to be real men! We’ll have real guns, not those dummy rifles the militia gave us to practice. We’ll kill the American imperialists, just like our forefathers killed the Jap ghosts. We’ll win glories and badges of honor, bestowed by General Nie Rong-zhen. Wait to see General Nie’s face when we talk to him in our dialect, his mother tongue.”

Xiu-bang’s infectious words worked up Xiu-quan. “Yes, the battles, the glory, and the liberation! Imagine us in a foreign country! We’ll liberate the fellow sufferers in the world. We’ll truly be international proletarian warriors!”

“Hey, Big Brother, it’s now or never. Shall we do it?”

“Yes, we shall. Let’s go to White Sands and join the Volunteer Army.”

They hugged like two boys who just won a horseshoe game betting on fodder. Xiu-quan thought of Chen Sheng, the first peasant rebel who rose against the first dynasty two millennia ago. He cast aside the grass knife, left the basket overturned on the balk, and put on his straw

sandals. The evening glow was dazzling.

They swerved off the mountain range, avoiding the big road paved with stone slates, and wound down on the balks and trails among the paddies and corn fields, scampering in and out of dense bushes and woods, the opalescent light turning gray then blue then dark. Xiu-quan smelled grass juice and firewood smoke in the air. He came to a halt by the creek that ran under the Stone Dragon Temple, where a dragon ascended out of a paddy many a year ago. Xiu-quan's head was hot from the heroic aspiration, sustained by the free wheeling sprint. It hadn't rained for a few days. Dirty leaves, grasses, and rags were left hanging in the bushes by summer floods. The stones in the creek were exposed. In Fenr's first two summers in Skysburg, he had taken her and Xiu-lan to catch crabs under the stones. Now they were almost old enough to finalize the marriage, to finish the destiny spoken by his mother in her death bed.

Xiu-bang went down the ramp and crossed the creek, hopping on the stones, his short gown flapping. "With our speed, we can get to the valley in twenty minutes."

"What about Fenr?"

"What did you say? My ears are ringing."

"I said, if I ran away, what about Fenr?"

"Sister-in-law? What about her?"

"That's the thing! Fenr is not your sister-in-law, not yet. We aren't going to marry until she turns eighteen in August. The new marriage law states very clearly."

"What do you worry about? Sister-in-law is not going anywhere."

"But it's not right. I can't just leave her behind. Sky knows how long I will be away."

"Sister-in-law is the best woman in the world. She'll be here, waiting for a homecoming hero."

“Don’t you think it’s too much to ask? Even though she’s in my family for six years, I haven’t given her a rightful status.”

“Look here, Brother. Fenr is your wife since she’s twelve, whether you’ve married or not,” Xiu-bang said. “She’s nursed your mother and grandmother and buried them like a daughter that your family never had. She practically raised you and your sister, when all the women in your family passed away. Who but your wife would do that? Mind that she’s also a year and a half younger than you.”

“All the more reasons that I must tell her.” Xiu-quan turned back on the dirt trail. “I must say goodbye to her.”

Xiu-bang scurried up and blocked the way. “I can’t let you do that. You know she won’t let you go.”

“Still I should let her know. She deserves this much respect.”

“What if First Uncle saw you? What if Sister-in-law told First Uncle? Then you’ll never be able to come with me.”

Xiu-quan asked, hesitating, “Do you really think Fenr will tell my baba?”

“I don’t think.” Xiu-bang held Xiu-quan’s shoulders and looked at him in the eyes. “I’m sure of it. Sister-in-law loves you more than anything, but she’ll stop you from being a war hero. Now, let’s not argue about this and go. It’s getting dark. We have a long way ahead.”

Xiu-quan didn’t move. He mumbled, “Fenr’s mother has already requested to make preparations for the marriage. Marrying is not cheap, you may not know, and we needed time to save. Fenr has been sewing her bridal gowns and quilts for months. She has visited a fortuneteller in Dustown to pick the dates for registration and the wedding banquet. These should be my family’s responsibilities, but you know, Fenr has always ...”

Xiu-bang said, “Think about it this way, Big Brother, what will you ever achieve staying in Skysburg? Nothing. Of all the cousins in our Wu clan, you read the most books, but First Uncle never permit you to work anywhere except in the paddies. It’s not fair. If we join the army and come home a war hero, or at least a veteran, it’d be Sister-in-law’s honor too.”

“Yeah, if we can come home alive.”

Xiu-bang said, angry, “A million men have gone to Korea. I don’t want to die either, but I want a badge of honor more. You can’t have it both ways. It’s called volunteering for a reason.”

“I’m not afraid of death. I’ve accomplished nothing in my life, dead or alive makes no difference.”

“Now we’ve got the chance to change that. Volunteer for the army, and in the meantime, you may achieve something.” Xiu-bang walked down to the creek. “I’ve learned the route to White Sands by heart. I’ll go with or without you. Are you coming or not?”

After a long deliberation, Xiu-quan said, “Okay, I’ll come with you.”

“Then hurry. The heat is cooling down on the upper-level mountain, but I bet it’s still hot like a stove in the valley.”

They crossed and recrossed the creek a few times. Out of the Gate at the cliff, where the bandits had stationed until two years ago, Xiu-quan said that the first thing after they became volunteer soldiers was to write a letter home to Fenr, who couldn’t read, so the letter was more for his father and the relatives than for her. The trail down the Gate was steep and crooked, the trees were shorter to brave the stronger uphill wind. The sun had set completely, but the sky was still grayish blue. They raced down to the valley and crossed the creek-turned-river that ran through the streets of Dustown.

Xiu-bang said, “This small river flows westward to join the Qi River, which eventually enters the Long River. All we have to do is to follow the rivers, because White Sands is a port on the Long River.”

The storefronts on the interprovincial highway were closed. Old people walked in the alleys, waving palm fans. Xiu-bang removed his sweat-soaked gown and hung it over his shoulder. They didn't enter the town but stayed on the highway, off which the trails branched to the villages in and up the mountains. Xiu-bang chose the trail to the Turn-around Dragon Temple on a nameless range, which was lower than theirs. They climbed over it and raced down the foothills and came across a valley river. Xiu-bang was not sure if it was the same one through Dustown. They stayed on the big road, never lost the sight of the river, until they reached Five Fortunes on the Qi River.

The moon came out of the clouds and obliterated the stars. Today was the Seventeenth. The moon was a stained translucent disk contracted by the clear summer evening. Gusts of wind relieved the Sixth Month heat. Darkness returned the mountains to its prehuman forms. The contours of the landscape penciled against the sky. Everything in the shadow was a consolidated bulk, depthless and dimensionless, the ditches, the creeks, and the fluvial-cut foothills, the solidity of the woods and forests, the nocturnal birds and insects, and the whiffs of the silent vegetable growth. Walking among them seemed an intrusion of sanctity.

Xiu-bang had exaggerated his memorization of the route to White Sands. He deliberated over every bifurcation or trifurcation to keep on the big road. The “big road” in Sichuan was by no means big. It was a centuries-old route connecting towns and county seats out of mountain paths or trails, which were slated with stones if it traversed a rich or charitable village. They knocked at the doors of the mud huts to ask directions when they were lost. They drank creek

water when they were thirsty. They smoked tobacco leaves under fig trees when they were tired.

The cousins stayed on a dirt county road along the Qi River. They crossed the river at West Lake and braved back to the mountainous country. For hours they didn't come across another rural town. They hadn't eaten since yesterday's lunch. Xiu-quan said if he walked any longer he might fall into the paddies. Xiu-bang stole some sweet potatoes and radishes, which they ate raw. They crossed mountains, valleys, and bridges. And more rows of foothills and terraces of farmland. At the break of dawn, they watched the sun jumped out from behind a mountain range and saw Mercy Cloud in a flat bottomed valley. Limping downhill, they ran into peasants who carried baskets of green "flower peppers" on shoulder poles. The air within two kilometers of the town was infused with the spicy essence, which opened Xiu-quan's crown. Xiu-bang complained that the fresh peppers made him salivate, which made him hungrier. Neither had money in his pocket, so they left the town as fast as their hungry bodies allowed. Everywhere in the paddies and fields were peasants harvesting rice or foraging or gathering peppers. The dog days' heat soon regained its fierceness.

Hunger and exhaustion made Xiu-quan delirious. He drank the muddy water from the paddies. The taste of the rice stalks made his throat drier. He was tearing up and short winded. His nose was running because they had run out of tobacco leaves for hours. He thought that running away with Xiu-bang was the dumbest idea ever. Xiu-bang, however, remained in high spirits and responded to the curses and complaints with the same fatherless enthusiasm, because he had dreamed to go away since he had turned eleven.

At night, they avoided the woods to walk in the moonlight; now in daytime, they ran at the sights of the woods for shade. By noon, they arrived in White Sands, the ancient river port that straddled the bend in the Long River, or the Jiang, the original name of all large rivers. The

Jiang swelled to the highest level of the year without flooding the streets. It was so wide that Xiu-quan thought nobody could swim across. He read that the Jiang came from Tibet and enters the Pacific. One could go anywhere if he followed the river. His heart jiggled as he walked down a foothill. On a tree-studded gentle hillside, the slant black roofs of the mud houses and the box-like brick buildings rushed downwards the brown Jiang.

Most of the narrow streets were stone steps, winding up and down on the mountainous river bank. The streets turned to more streets and houses, instead of farmland like in Dustown. They knew the army camp must be close because they ran into lines of young soldiers in green uniforms, each carrying a bundled quilt on his back. The soldiers seemed to be advancing out of the town, rather loosely. Xiu-quan assumed that they were marching to the train station, where the special trains would haul them to Northeast China, three thousand kilometers away, and cross the Yalu River to Korea.

Xiu-bang approached an officer leading a line of soldiers and asked deferentially, “Commander, may I ask you where could I volunteer to join the army?”

The officer didn’t stop marching and looked at Xiu-bang as if he was joking. “Young man, you’re late.”

Xiu-bang quickened his pace to keep up. “Late? What do you mean?”

The officer said, “Late means late. The enlist office is no longer accepting volunteers.”

“Commander, we’ve walked all night and day to join the army. Please can you tell me where is the camp?”

“Are you deaf or slow? I said there’s no need of volunteers anymore, because the war ended.”

“Ended?”

“Yes, the war in Korea ended yesterday. Go home.”

“Please don’t kid me, Commander. We’ve walked ...”

The soldier behind the officer said, “Old Pan, just tell him where is the enlist office.”

The officer said the camp was set up at the ancient quay and told them to follow the soldiers as they were being called back. Xiu-bang thanked the officer and slackened his pace.

“Big brother,” he said, inflicted and out of breath, “do you think the commander was telling the truth? The war ended?”

Xiu-quan stood aside, watching more soldiers descending the streets. Can they be called soldiers? he thought; they haven’t been to the battleground yet, still young and intact. He studied the youthful faces of the volunteer soldiers. Some of them had peach fuzz. There’s no reason the officer would lie to us, he thought; no, not even considering we Sichuanese love our jokes and banter. A part of him was unspeakably disappointed, another part relieved. He wondered why ... Xiu-bang pushed him to follow the soldiers. He wondered why he felt relieved.

At the quay, of wide piers and dozens of stone steps disappearing in the Jiang, the soldiers were off their feet running in and out of barracks, clashing into each other heedlessly, and the officers’ orders added to the confusion. A loudspeaker blasted bugle notes and announced on replay: “All soldiers must report to their superiors immediately and wait for further orders.”

Xiu-bang ran up and down the steps, stopping everyone to ask if the war had really ended and was told to get out of the way. He was pushed a few times.

Xiu-quan was too hungry and thirsty, but nobody stopped to answer his burning question, where to find food. There was a Buddhist temple overlooking the quay. Bhikkhus should be the most compassionate people. He came close and learned that the army commandeered it as the

office space. The stone incense burner was dismantled and discarded under two knobby pine trees, one on each side of the gate, which was unguarded, so he wandered in. He crossed the Hall of the Heavenly Guardians, the Hall of Sakyamuni, and the abbot's quarter. In the yards were disfigured statues of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats. He reached the abodes of the bhikkhus at the back and found the lattice-windowed kitchen, where there was nobody. He found a gourd half and scooped some water from the water tank. He drank two gourds, gulping air and water at once. Satiated, he thought Xiu-bang must be thirsty too, so he brought some water to look for him. He found him lost among the broken statues of the buddhas.

Xiu-bang saw him. He said, "Big brother, where did you go? I worried about you. Don't loiter in an army camp."

"I was looking for water. There's nobody in this place." Xiu-quan handed the water to Xiu-bang, who snatched the gourd and drank like a buffalo. "Stop to breathe. You're choking yourself."

"My throat is on fire. You saved my life."

"What have you learned? What's the situation? They look like they have lost the war."

"No, we won the war. Yesterday, we signed the Armistice Agreement with America."

"Why aren't the soldiers celebrating?" Xiu-quan watched the last men scurrying inside the barracks. "It looks like they are evacuating."

"Well, they are evacuating. Now that there's no war, I think these new recruits are being sent home."

"Does that mean we must go home too?"

Xiu-bang wiped his mouth and eyes. His eyebrows were thick and long, so the sweat always trickled into his eyes. "We were so close. We could've come a few days earlier and finish

the paper work. We could've be veterans of the volunteer army.” He was welling up. It wasn't sweat.

They came out of the temple. The quay was deserted. Xiu-quan wondered aloud what to do now. Xiu-bang insisted that they should stay in White Sands for a few days and see if any opportunity would present itself. After the camp regained order, they found the enlist office in the Hall of Sakyamuni and expressed their wishes to join the army. The officers said there was no need for new volunteers, in fact, there were more than needed. Xiu-bang cried right in the office. He vowed to the military officers that he was a patriot and wanted to serve the Party and the people, but he was turned down all the same.

Hearing that they hadn't eaten for a long time, the officer gave the cousins some steamed sweet potatoes and charged them to go home. They plodded in the streets aimlessly, looking into the fancy shops in the county seat. They came down to the narrow beach of the Jiang, which was swollen to the levee at some sections. Junks and sampans moored up- and down-stream of the river. Xiu-bang seemed to have lost some of his three souls and seven emotions. Their clothes stunk with sweat and dust. Xiu-quan suggested it would be refreshing to bathe in the river. They took off their shirts and pants and walked into the water, when an old fisherman yelled, “Lads, if you don't want to drown yourselves, get out of the river!” Xiu-quan was awakened from the daze. In the flood season, the brown water looked peaceful on the surface, but the undercurrent could sink the most experienced swimmers to the bottom. Xiu-bang hadn't heard the fisherman's warning and walked deeper in the water. Xiu-quan waded to him and dragged him out.

They had a bath sitting on a boulder. They rinsed their clothes and spread them on the stones to dry. Exhausted, they took a nap under a shade. When they woke up, the sky and the water were red and the Jiang was full of water life. The river people were cooking supper on the

bows. Xiu-quan's stomach was growling. The sweet potatoes had been digested during the sleep. Xiu-bang was digging tiny crabs and water snails in the sands.

"Xiu-bang, it's time to go home. It's cooler now. We must go back to Skysburg."

Xiu-bang started to cry, which made him look like a twelve-year-old. "No, I don't want to go home. It's not my home. I don't. I don't want to go back."

"What do you mean it's not your home?"

"It's your home, not mine. My baba and mama died many years ago. I don't even remember what they looked like. I hate Skysburg."

"You're being silly. Let's just go back to Skysburg. There's nothing here."

"No, there's nothing in Skysburg. Why do you wanna go back to that mountain range?"

"Everyone is home, Fenr, my baba, and Xiu-lan."

Xiu-bang screamed that none of them was his real family.

"I'm your family, your grandpa and grandma are your family."

After watching the boats for some minutes, Xiu-quan asked, "If you don't wanna go back to Skysburg, where do you wanna go?"

Xiu-bang opened his mouth but no words came out.

Xiu-quan said, "Do you know that it's illegal to travel without a permit? Without a permit, you won't find a job. And if you get caught, you'll be put into prison for vagrancy."

He stopped talking when Xiu-bang started to cry again.

The sun began to set, Xiu-quan suggested they take the train. They had never taken a train before, so he thought it might cheer up Xiu-bang, who agreed with everything he was saying. They begged a sampan owner to ferry them across the Jiang and trekked along the railway

outside the train station. When a coal train was slowing down at a bend, they hopped on and made it as far as the Brass Pitcher Posthouse in Ba County. The small train station was on the wrong side of the port. They had to cross the Jiang again. They couched under the eaves of a stone house, waiting for the daybreak. As soon as the ferry was at work, they begged the operator to ferry them across and trudged home on a shorter route. By four or five in the afternoon, they were back in the streets of Dustown.

On the way uphill, Xiu-quan rested under every large fig tree, dawdling as much as possible. He hoped the evening would come sooner so he could steal back into the house without rousing his many relatives. All the families of his eight great-uncles lived in the nearby hollows. Crossing the creek near the Stone Dragon Temple, he thought how incredible it was that two days ago he had hesitated to leave the village.

“Xiu-bang, I’m scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“My baba! Heaven knows how angry he is. Can you run home first and see what’s going on? I’m terrified of Baba. If he’s too angry, ask Fenr to help me.”

“This is unnecessary. You’re First Uncle’s only son. What will he do? He’ll only be happy to see you home.”

“Please, just run home quick and make sure it’s safe.”

“Okay, okay, just know that you are the one who wanted to come back.”

Xiu-bang disappeared in the woods. Xiu-quan squatted by the creek. He picked up a pebble and scribbled on a moss-clad stone. It calmed his nerves somehow. He scribbled on three stones, and Xiu-bang was not back. He waited longer and thought they must have got to him. He stood up, a rush in his head, and threw the pebble in the water. It sounded *pootong*.

Xiu-quan knew the trail so well that he could have made it home blindfolded. The waxy leaves of the pear trees gave him rustled warnings. The mud houses in the hollows smelled of firewood smoke and pig dung. His second and third great-uncles were cooling under the eaves. He asked them if they had had supper, and they asked him where he had been. Several children and teenage cousins were playing in the yards and called him “Big Brother” and said they hadn’t seen him for two days.

Xiu-quan stopped on the balk of the deep water paddy off the yard. The rice stalks were over fertilized by household waste and duck dung. At the center of his yard, Fenr stood alone. She pursed her thin lips, crinkled her nose, and watched Xiu-quan with her birdlike eyes, which were teary and angry. Her expression of anger and concentration were the same, but it could only be angry today. He waited for her to scold him, but she simply watched him, fixed him, imprisoned him.

He said, shamefaced, “How are you, Fenr?”

She turned her face to the door. She had her hair braided, revealing her elongated ears. He always loved her shiny dark hair braided like fried dough. She wore a different outfit from what he remembered, her favorite indigo wide sleeve Manchuria jacket, whitewashed, and her wide-leg cotton pants, worn thin at the knees. The oversized clothes made her girly figure more juvenile, and wilder, and stranger. He felt it was much longer than two days, for he had left not expecting to return so soon.

The door was a black hole of the mud house. His second uncle, who lived next door, came out to the porch and shook his head.

Fenr asked sarcastically, “How do you find your way home? I swear I have no idea.”

“Fenr,” he said, “I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you, but Xiu-bang said you’d tell Baba, and

I'd never be able ...”

Wu Chang-hua came out on the porch with a roll of palm rope, which was the first thing that caught Xiu-quan's eyes. His instinct was to run but he was transfixed. His baba's face was a butcher's advancing on a dog. They were waiting for him. Damn that Xiu-bang, he thought.

Xiu-lan ran out of the gate, shaking herself off the grandfather, and screamed, “Run, Brother, run!”

Xiu-quan turned round and heard his baba bellowing, “You son of a turtle! Come back!” Xiu-quan sprinted on the balks where he had walked back just now. He looked back, both his baba and grandfather were pursuing him.

“If you're still my son,” shouted his baba, “stop right now and surrender.”

“Stop running, or I'll break your leg!” threatened his grandfather, who was lagging behind. He had turned fifty-two this year.

After trekking over a hundred kilometers of mountain trails, Xiu-quan's legs were no more than two dwarf oak logs. How he wished to leap like a rabbit or fly like an egret! At a forked slate path, he ran uphill, and he realized that it was a terrible choice. Climbing uphill softened his legs like noodles in boiling water. His father grazed his back several times, and each time he escaped with a dying wish to live, but at last, his father gave him a push. He fell, dead, into the paddy that seemed ten meters below. The world around him was a greenish blur. The serrated rice blades cut his face. The fall was a relief after three days of intense up-and-downs. He had no strength to get up in the mud.

His baba jumped in and grabbed his shoulders. “I'll see where you are running to! I'll show you what's the taste of the chaste rod.”

His grandfather arrived and helped his baba drag him out of the sludge. They pinned him

down on the balk and tied him up. The palm fiber needles pricked his wrists. He was pushed back to the yard, followed by his younger cousins, and bound on the palm tree hay stick under the waning sun. This is how people gut a knocked-out dog, he thought dimly. The exhaustion and hunger set in. All his relatives, cousins, uncles, great-uncles, and some neighbors came to watch. He was mortified, but he knew this was bound to happen at least once in a man's life.

His baba disappeared to the back of the house. When he reemerged, he was trimming a fresh chaste tree branch as thick as the thumb. Pliant and firm, chaste tree is strict parents' punishment tool of choice. As the Sichuanese saying goes, the chaste tree rod chastises an unfilial son. But Xiu-quan was a nineteen year old man. He met with his father's eyes, loving and in pain. The rod thrashed his back as if threshing dried soybean pods. His back was being slashed open. He cried, hugging the hay stick dearly as if it was a lifesaver. He refused to beg for mercy. The pain, he might never forget the pain that was crackling his skull. Would I feel pain if I fainted? he thought rather dramatically. He was stubbornly conscious.

Xiu-bang came out of the crowd and said, "First Uncle, please have mercy on Big Brother," only to receive a number of blows himself.

"Baba, spare Brother, don't beat him." Xiu-lan shook the grandfather's arm. "Grandpa, please tell Baba to stop."

Xiu-quan grinned at his little sister. The grin turned to a snarl. He was sorry that she was crying for him. He had abandoned her two days ago. Now she was crying for him. She was about seven when Mama died, now she's twelve, he thought; How big she's grown! She's not used to this side of our baba. Baba is strict but he's never laid a hand on either of us. He smothers me with the death of ... The pain cut short his thoughts. He wished he had the strength to tell Xiu-lan not to shed tears for him, that the pain on his body meant a great deal to his manhood, the

first of his rebellion. But he was afraid that if he opened his mouth, it would just be screaming. He heard his grandpa saying, “No, let your father teach him a good lesson. We’ve spoiled him.”

Fenr didn’t come to his aide at first. When Xiu-lan screamed of blood, she started crying as well. She begged, “Baba, please spare Xiu-quan just this once. He’s been punished enough. He knows what he did was wrong. And he promises he’ll never do it again.” She said to Xiu-quan, “You log of wood! Say something gentle to Baba. Admit you did wrong. Promise him you will never do it again.”

Xiu-quan clutched his teeth. If these relatives wanted to see his apology, they must be disappointed. He was determined that much. He tried to look into his father’s eyes, to tell him that he was not sorry. His father avoided his gaze.

All the while, Wu Chang-hua yelled, rhythmic with the beating, “You unfilial son of dogs! Ran away to join the army! Don’t you know how this family feels about the army? Your eighth great-uncle was conscripted by the Kuomintang Party and we’ve never heard of him since! Your great-grandparents died without seeing the last of their youngest son! Now you, my only son, your grandfather’s only grandson, ran away to be a soldier! Your mother died, leaving you and your sister to me, and you have a bride who has taken care of the entire family for years, now you ran away to be a soldier, offering yourself to people to kill you. What kind of books have you read? Which book told you to abandon your family! Don’t all books tell you to be a filial son and a responsible husband? Have Confucius’s teachings meant anything to you? Have you thought for a moment what I would do if you were killed! If anyone should kill you, it should be me. I’ll kill you today myself.”

On August 27, the day Fenr turned eighteen, Wu Chang-hua took Fenr and Xiu-quan to register in the township civil affairs office. Xiu-quan was in fact nineteen, one year short of the legal age of marriage. In order to extinguish Xiu-quan's funny thoughts, Wu reported his nominal age, which added one year to make him twenty. Wu thought the registration was superfluous, because Fenr had been his daughter-in-law for close to seven years. In the old society, it was only a matter of formality. Fenr's parents also came to witness the registration. The clerk asked Fenr's full name. Xiu-quan said she didn't have one as she was born in the old society. The clerk said her parents were present, just give her a name. Xiu-quan was the only literate man in both families. He thought awhile and named her Yang Chun-fen, meaning Spring Fragrance of the Yang's — the new marriage law stated that the wife has the right to retain her family name.

Out of the civil affairs office, Wu thanked the Yangs for raising such a great daughter, who had been nothing but the most filial daughter-in-law one could ever find and it was a great pity that Xiu-quan's mother couldn't be alive to see this day. And he promised the Yangs that there would be a wedding banquet at the end of the year when the relatives were free from farming.

Wu Chang-hua had prepared the sleeping chamber in the east wing as the wedding room. There was no more sleeping in separate bedrooms for Xiu-quan and Chun-fen as if they were foster brother and sister. One thing Wu had failed to calculate was that there was no young male guests to tease the newly-weds on the wedding night. He worried that Xiu-quan would be too coy on his first night.

The next morning, and every morning after that, Wu Chang-hua would look at Chun-

fen's belly for signs.

Daily, Xiu-quan went up the slopes and farmed like an unshod horse. He came home deadly tired. He ate his meals and picked up whatever books he happened to find. There wasn't much exchange of words on the dinner table or during the smoking between the father and son.

Wu couldn't muster the face to ask his son about what was going on in the bedroom. He imagined that Xiu-quan would know; from whom or what, he wouldn't imagine.

September had come and gone, no sign.

By October, the movement of Mutual Aid Team was spreading from the valley villages to the upper level mountains. Most of the peasants were reluctant to join the MAT, because they were requested to share farm tools, draught animals, and a number of other means of production. Village Head Dong of Skysburg paid Xiu-quan a visit and enlisted his assistance. Each morning Xiu-quan left home to do the thought-work on the non-cooperative households.

Chun-fen went about the household cooking the meals, feeding the pigs, and foraging for the buffalo the same way as she had always been. She greeted Wu and the grandfather the first thing in the morning, put the rice bowls on the table, and took care of Xiu-lan as her surrogate mother. She was indeed irreproachable, except her belly was flat.

October had come and gone, still no sign.

Wu wished that there was another woman in the house. He asked Xiu-quan's Second Aunt next door for help. It was the season to sow the rape, pea, and broad bean. They must select good corns from the seeds stored from last year. Second Aunt and her younger daughter-in-law invited Chun-fen over to prepare the seeds.

Second Aunt said, "Chun-fen, when you were a maiden, we loved to tease you about you and Xiu-quan. But now that you've registered, have you really married as husband and wife?"

Chun-fen said, "What do you mean, Second Aunt? Of course Xiu-quan and I have married."

Sister-in-law was a stout, thick-voiced mother of two. She said, "Well, you know, married as in only a man and wife could do? Like making a baby. Don't you want a baby?"

Chun-fen's face burnt like a splash of chili oil. She said, "I don't like babies. Babies are always crying and I have to wash diapers for them. I saw you do that with your two sons."

Second Aunt said, "You've always liked your nephews. You've always wanted babies."

Sister-in-law said, "You don't have to feel shy with us, Chun-fen. It's just us sisters here. Have you done it?"

Chun-fen said, "I'm not ashamed of it. Xiu-quan and I have married."

Second Aunt said, "Nobody said it's shameful. It's in line with the principles of heaven and earth that a man and wife should marry and make babies."

Chun-fen said, "Yes, we've slept in the same bed and shared the same pillow."

Second Aunt asked, "Then why your belly is still flat like a chopping board?"

Chun-fen said, "We slept together every night. It'll grow when it grows."

Second Aunt informed Wu that the young birds knew what they were doing. Wu's hope was picked up for another month. But November passed and still there was no sign. Many a morning, he lighted incense and oil lamp in front of the memorial tablets of his wife and his mother, and prayed to them to watch over Chun-fen and make her pregnant soon.

The oranges were red, the sweet potatoes were harvested, the winter wheat and beans were sown, and Wu became disheartened, so much so that he suspected that Chun-fen was barren and it was a waste of money to host the wedding banquet. To anyone who asked why he had canceled the banquet, he said Chun-fen had already been his daughter-in-law for seven

years, that he would rather spend the money on Xiu-lan's schooling, since nowadays even girls were required to receive basic education.

The Yangs were displeased. Yang Nian-zu climbed up to Skysburg and demanded an explanation from Xiu-quan, but Chun-fen told him that Xiu-quan was busy working for the village head.

Yang said, "Did Xiu-quan allow it? Does he agree to it?"

Chun-fen said, "It doesn't matter, Baba. I don't care if there was a banquet or not."

Yang said, "Of course you don't care! For seven years, the Wus are taking you for granted. You're used to them using you like a servant."

Chun-fen said, "No, Xiu-quan asked me if I wanted the banquet, I told him I'm fine either way."

Wu said slyly, "Brother Yang, I'm not saying I won't hold the banquet at all. If we could combine the wedding with the first month celebration of the future baby, we could save a lot of money."

Yang said, "Is Chun-fen pregnant? I haven't heard that she's pregnant."

Wu said, "No, she's not."

Yang said, "Brother Wu, don't be smart with me. Is that why you canceled the banquet? That Chun-fen is not pregnant?"

Wu said, "We are all one family. There's no need to put that kind of thing into words."

Yang said, "Well, is that the reason? If not, I want the banquet to be back on. No banquet is an insult as it's Chun-fen's first marriage, and there is no excuse for not treating her as a girl of decent family. If you are too cheap to pay for it, I'll pay. I'm not marrying off my first daughter without a proper banquet."

Wu said, "Now, if you put it this way, Brother Yang, I can't say anything else."

Xiu-lan said, "Baba, Sister-in-law has prepared her own wedding gown and cloth shoes. It'd be a shame if she didn't have the chance to wear them."

The grandfather said, "Chang-hua, your daughter is more reasonable than you. It won't look good on the family if you refused to marry Chun-fen properly. Chun-fen is like your own daughter."

Wu was cornered and said, "Fine, fine, if you all gang up on me like this. The banquet is back on. But I don't want a big one, an intimate luncheon with just our two families together. It'll just be a celebration within the family."

The grandfather said, "Chang-hua, what has got into you? No relatives from your own family? What would people say?"

Wu said, "Baba, it's not that I don't want to invite my uncles and cousins. Your grandson is very unpopular lately, because he is making us join the MAT. Even if I invited them, they won't be willing to come other than kindred obligation."

Yang Nian-zu left satisfied. He didn't care if Xiu-quan was loved or not, as long as Chun-fen was treated fairly.

That night in bed, Chun-fen told Xiu-quan about her father's visit.

He said, "I'm happy that someone is brave enough to stand up against Baba. I know I dare not to do that."

She said, "Is that why you are helping VH Dong, so you can make Baba do things your way?"

All month in November, he and VH Dong's agricultural socialization team were doing the thought-work on the upper level mountains, as this was the last group of individual peasants.

He said, "Next week, all of our Wu clan and the neighboring families will form the last MAT in Skysburg. I'm relieved the work is done. I can't go to work in the fields with my uncles, great-uncles, and cousins coming over to argue with me. They really hate my guts."

"Your baba said the same thing."

"He resents me too. He just doesn't say it out loud."

"Is there anything you can do to change their opinions of you?"

"None really. The work is done. Willing or not, they have joined the MAT. The force rushes forward and flooded everyone with it. I'm not sure if we understand what it is."

"You do whatever you do outside. I don't understand it nor am I interested. We all have our own part to play."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't bore you with the official work."

"You didn't ask why my baba visited Skysburg."

"I know why he came."

"It's not because your baba canceled the wedding banquet."

"I know."

"My baba worried that your family will turn me away because I'm not pregnant."

"Don't be silly. Baba won't do that."

"You're just saying that. We've married for three months, and I'm still not pregnant."

There must be something wrong with me. Be honest, Quanr, is there something wrong with me?"

Chun-fen was crying. Xiu-quan felt he was going to hell. He was by no means clueless; he read wide enough, and the cousins and lads in the village had joked about the bedroom activities in very explicit and frivolous Sichuanese manners. He was sorry that he had to hurt Chun-fen, but he knew if he gave in, that was it for him to ever get away. He had been sneaking

out in the middle of the night when he couldn't control himself.

He held her in his arms. "Fenr, don't be upset. Honestly, there's nothing wrong with you. Be patient. You'll be pregnant very soon."

"But when? Tell me, what did I do wrong?"

"Trust me, there's nothing wrong with you. We just need to be more patient, for one more month or two." He moved his lower body away. "Hey, are you excited for the wedding banquet? You get to wear your red gown."

On the day of the wedding luncheon in early December, Chun-fen cooked two tables of food in her red wedding attire. Her parents and siblings arrived in mid morning and watched her flying on her feet on her big day. Of Xiu-quan's relatives, only his uncle's family next door were present. Xiu-bang was forbidden to attend the wedding for instigating Xiu-quan to join the army, even though Chun-fen told her father-in-law that she wanted him to come, for he was like a brother for Xiu-quan.

The Yangs were fond of Xiu-quan, but the Wus' treatment of Chun-fen lately cancelled many of the good impressions. They didn't enjoy the luncheon at all, and the food was far from enough, and they took it as an unceremonious insult. Yang Nian-zu said to his wife under his breath that there was only one pork dish, a sausage cold plate, two vegetable stir-fries, and the main course was tofu flower, the cheapest thing in the world. There wasn't even a soup.

Yang Nian-zu saw the rice bowls in front of the memorial tablets and said, "Even the dead people have more food than on the table."

Mrs Yang said, "You pipe down. Cause any trouble it'll make your girl look bad."

Chun-fen's two brothers and sister sat on the table with the guests. Chun-fen's younger siblings didn't know her that well, because she had left home so young. They weren't happy or

sad about her getting married. They were famished after the hiking from Great Hillside to Skysburg. However, every time they reached the pork and the sausage, they would check if their father was looking.

Xiu-quan sat at the table smiling awkwardly, downing the home brew of mixed grains. Chun-fen worried that at this speed of drinking, he couldn't make through the luncheon. She'd never seen him drunk and worried that he might behave inappropriately in front of her parents, who were already unhappy about all this. If someone was making a toast, he could barely stand up and say thank you. It became undeniably clear that he was drunk when he was slurring promises to her parents.

"Baba and Mama," Xiu-quan said, standing upright, "today is the happiest day of my life. So happy. Only Sky knows. Fenr is more than a wife to me, she's everything to me. I know it's kind of late to say this, but I'm a man now, and I promise that I'll take good care of her. I was working everyday in the village. Village Head Dong said I could join the Party, so I may find a career in the village."

His father said, "Xiu-quan, in front of the elders, shut up."

Xiu-quan continued, "If not in the village, there's always a way outside the village. I promise I'll give you my words to improve my prospects and provide Chun-fen a better life."

Mrs Yang was in tears. Yang Nian-zu said, "Xiu-quan, we are all of us honest peasants. We labor to earn our cereals. I don't expect you to be high dignitary in the future. I'll be satisfied as long as you treat Chun-fen fairly and don't abandon her like you did in the summer."

Mrs Yang said, "Why do you bring that up? Can't you simply enjoy a cup of wine on your daughter's big happy day?"

The grandfather asked Xiu-quan to sit down. Xiu-quan obeyed and focused on Chun-

fen's siblings on the other table.

Chun-fen wasn't eating much, and she sipped a bit home brew if someone made a toast to her. As there were just a few guests, she didn't finish one tea cup. She watched over Xiu-quan's cup and heaped vegetables in his rice bowl to distract him from the wine.

The luncheon ended sooner than expected. The Wus sat with the guests in the living room. Chun-fen started to clean the dishes.

Xiu-quan was more considerate than usual. He asked Chun-fen to take a rest for a day and sit with her parents.

Chun-fen said, "Who's gonna clean the tables?"

Xiu-quan said, "Let Xiu-lan do it. She's very grownup today. She was serving tofu flower whenever a bowl was empty."

Xiu-quan's second sister-in-law sprung up and volunteered to help.

Chun-fen said, "There are two tables of dirty dishes. A lot of work. I don't know what to say among people anyway. Kitchen is my place."

Xiu-quan said, "But today's the wedding banquet, your special day."

Chun-fen gave in and sat down, letting her sisters-in-law do the chores. She was quiet as usual and listened to the others talk. Xiu-quan's tongue was limber and he dominated the conversation with his work in the village and his failed attempt to join the Volunteer Army. The color of her father-in-law's face was not good. She was no longer angry with Xiu-quan, so she found her father-in-law's reaction very funny. She even smiled at Xiu-quan's story.

Sister-in-law II came out of the kitchen and whispered in her ears, "Xiu-lan was burnt in hot water. Don't say anything. She's embarrassed. Come to the kitchen."

Chun-fen smiled to her parents and went in to check upon Xiu-lan, who looked perfectly

fine.

Xiu-lan said, “Ha, got you!”

Chun-fen said, “Why do you pretend you got hurt?”

Xiu-lan said, “Do you like to sit with drunk men? Don’t you hate the tension between Baba and Brother? I couldn’t wait to get out of there.”

Chun-fen said, “I worried to leave your drunk brother to the elders. He might say something to anger your baba. Ah well, they are father and son, what could possibly go wrong between them?”

Sister-in-law II said the home brew warmed her up in the nippy weather. Xiu-lan said she would watch the fire. The three of them were washing and chatting, when Chun-fen’s mother walked in.

Mrs Yang asked, “Fenr, can we find somewhere to talk?”

Chun-fen said, “What’s so important we can’t ...”

Mrs Yang said, “Something very important. Let’s go to your bedroom in your wing.”

Chun-fen put down the towel melon sponge and led her mother out of the living room to the yard. The door of the wing was open. They went in.

Chun-fen said, “What is it, Mama?”

Mrs Yang said, “Go to your bedroom.”

Chun-fen was surprised, and she knew what her mother was going to ask. She pushed the wooden door of the bedroom and sat on the bed. Her mother followed her in and closed the door. Light came in from the small window on the cracked mud wall, but the room was dim. The bedside chest a standing closet were darkened.

It didn’t take many questions before Mrs Yang got the truth out of Chun-fen, who was

weeping at the end and felt betrayed by her husband. Chun-fen rushed out of the bedroom and the wing.

Mrs Yang said, "Chun-fen, come back."

Mrs Yang ran after Chun-fen, attempting to stop her from making a scene. When she was in the yard, Chun-fen was already at the gate, crying. She walked up the porch and stood by her daughter.

She said, "Chun-fen, don't do it now."

Chun-fen said, "Xiu-quan, how could you do this to me?"

Xiu-quan was listening to his fathers' conversation. He said, "What, Fenr, what did I do?"

Chun-fen said, "How could you? All this time, I thought I was barren, or something wrong with me! I asked you many times, and you never told me anything. How could you do this to me?"

Xiu-quan knew that his mother-in-law had taught Chun-fen the lesson that every mother would give before the wedding night. Chun-fen grew up in his household without any mother-figure and had no such education, and he used it against her.

Chun-fen said, "You have no word? No apology?"

Xiu-quan sat on the bench. He couldn't bear to see Chun-fen crying like this. Chun-fen almost never cry about herself. He got up, but he felt the influence of the home brew he had imbibed greedily.

Wu Chang-hua was looking from one to the other. He asked, "What did you do, Xiu-quan? Why do you upset Chun-fen on her big day?"

Chun-fen sat on the ground, weeping. Xiu-lan and Sister-in-law II came out of the

kitchen and gawked at the strange scene. Chun-fen's siblings were very quiet.

Chun-fen said, "I wanna go home, Mama. Take me home."

Yang asked, "Chun-fen's mother, what's going on?"

Chun-fen could only cry.

Mrs Yang said, looking at Xiu-quan reproachingly, "They haven't consummate their marriage. That's why Chun-fen could not get pregnant."

Wu Chang-hua and the grandfather sprung up from their seats and turned to Xiu-quan, whose face was drained of blood.

Wu asked, "Is it true? Why keep your mouth shut now? Is it true?"

Xiu-quan said, "Fenr, don't be angry at me. I ..."

Wu slapped on Xiu-quan's face. Blood appeared on his lips. The grandfather kicked him on his shin twice.

Yang said, "Please, Brother Wu, don't beat your son."

Wu said, "Why did you do that to Chun-fen? Didn't you promise you'll treat her well last time I gave you a thrash? Have you forgotten already? It was only five month. Is you skin itchy again?"

Xiu-quan said, eyes on his wife, "Fenr, please don't cry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Wu said, "Then why did you do it? And you made me the bad man in this household. I was telling all the relatives that Chun-fen might not be able to get pregnant. And all this time, it's you."

Chun-fen said, "Mama, take me home."

Mrs Yang said, "Chun-fen, don't say such thing in a temper, not on your happy day."

Chun-fen said, "He doesn't want me here. I'll go myself."

Xiu-quan steadied himself and walked to Chun-fen. He said, "Forgive me, Fenr, I want you here. I got carried away. Please don't be angry at me."

Chun-fen said, "No, I don't forgive you. How can you be so cruel? I asked you so many times. You know what I have gone through all these months."

Xiu-quan froze at the doorway, afraid of approaching her. He was full of remorse.

Wu said, "Xiu-quan, did you do this because you want to get back at me? You hate me so much you want to deny us a grandchild?"

Xiu-quan said, "Not everything is about you, Baba."

Wu said, "Then what's the reason? Explain yourself, in front of your parents-in-law and your grandfather."

Xiu-quan squatted down. Chun-fen was on the other side of the threshold. He reached his hand to touch her. She moved away.

He said, "I didn't mean to hurt you. Please forgive me this once. I won't let anything come between you and me ever again."

Chun-fen wiped her tears and looked away.

Xiu-quan said, "Please look at me, Fenr. Believe me, all this time, I was tormented too. It's hard for me too."

"I should want to know how hard for you exactly," said Chun-fen. "Mama, I wanna go home for a few days."

Xiu-quan was not drunk anymore. He was crying. "Fenr, please. I don't know what got into me."

Yang said, "No, you can't go home with us. This is your home now."

Chun-fen said, “Baba, didn’t you see what Xiu-quan has done to me?”

Yang said, “That’s between you and Xiu-quan. You’re a couple. You sort it out.

However, you must visit us in three days as the custom dictates.”

Chun-fen looked at her father and felt the betrayal for the second time in one day. She resumed her tears.

Mrs Yang helped Chun-fen up. “Fenr, now let’s get you back to your sleeping chamber. Let’s have a rest. Whatever the problem is we can find a solution in time. Let’s go.”

Chun-fen got up herself and ran away from the main house.

Xiu-quan called her name and came after her on the porch.

Mrs Yang stopped him. “Leave her alone for now.”

Xiu-quan said, “But she said she wants to go home. I don’t want her to leave.”

Mrs Yang said, “She didn’t mean it. When her head is cool, she’ll know.”

Xiu-quan wasn’t sure about it. He thought Chun-fen would never forgive him. His father opened the sealed home brew and poured a bowl of wine to share with the grandfather and his father-in-law.

1954

1

By mid-February, Chun-fen had missed two periods. Xiu-quan took her to see his friend, Dr Liu, in Moon Dale. Dr Liu was a very good western doctor, and he confirmed that Chun-fen was nearly two months pregnant. Within half a day, Wu Chang-hua told all his relatives that his daughter-in-law had been knocked by happiness. He also sent the words to the Yangs of the Great Hillside.

In March, Xiu-quan found a teaching position in the newly founded Moon Dale Primary School. He asked Chun-fen's permission for it. He kept the job for less than two months before his father asked him to quit.

His father said, "It's the busy farming season. You're needed home."

Xiu-quan said, "I come home everyday. If there's work, I can still do it. My job doesn't interfere with your farming."

His father said no more words. Xiu-quan thought that was it. The next day, his father paid the headmaster a visit and cursed the ancestors of the students, the teachers, the headmaster, and the Moon Dale Cooperative.

Xiu-quan had no choice but to leave the school in disgrace. Before he did that, he asked the headmaster if he could hire Xiu-bang for the position. The headmaster granted his wish.

For the long hot summer, Xiu-quan had been toiling in the rice paddies and corn fields. He tilled vegetable fields and maintained paddies. But next to his baba and grandfather, he was a

sham peasant. He continued to work for the village head occasionally under no official capacity — his father made sure of it. And he was not a cadre either, even though the village head intended to recruit him to the Communist Party.

In August, Xiu-quan received a letter. It read,
Comrade Wu Xiu-quan,
How do you do!

For the first time in a century, there is no war in China, and the socialist constructions are on the fast track. This year's rice harvest will be the first harvest under the newly established socialist production relations, the Mutual Aid Team (MAT). Anticipating a steep increase of grain production, the Grain Station is short of a clerk who can use an abacus and keep an account. I have in separate occasions learned your name from the Village Head of Skysburg and the principal of the Moon Dale Elementary School, both of whom spoke highly of your capabilities. Now, what the New China wants from you is your highest mission. Do you, Wu Xiu-quan, wish to make your contribution to the socialization in agriculture by working in the Grain Station?

Tang Yao-lun

Director of Dustown Grain Station

August 21, 1954

Xiu-quan showed the letter to Xiu-bang.

“The letter is a savior,” Xiu-bang said. “Big brother, you must seize the opportunity and, if things went well, you might be able to get Big Sister-in-law to the town as well.”

As expected, Wu Chang-hua said no to the Grain Station position outright. He said, “I just got you back from that school. Why are you looking for another job behind my back?”

Xiu-quan had learned to talk back to his father. “The director sent me the letter of his own accord.”

“Who do you think you are? A peasant’s son! Why should a director write a letter to give you a job?”

“Because I can do it? I’m gonna take the job, Baba. I don’t care if you permit or not.”

“Your wife is six-month pregnant. Why can’t you settle down your heart?”

“You sent me to school.”

“That’s the biggest mistake I’ve made in my life. It gives you wrong notions of life.”

“Why don’t you want me to do better for myself? What’s the point of sending me to school to read and write?”

“You’re my only son. I sent you to school because that’s what a father does. As to the job in town, trust me, in time, none of these fantasies would make a difference.”

Xiu-quan left the living room abruptly. Xiu-lan was watching them fighting in silence. She followed him back to his sleeping chamber in the wing, where Chun-fen was hiding. He began to collect clothes in spirit.

He said, “I’m taking the job no matter what Baba says.”

Fenr was mending clothes on the bed.

He stopped rummaging in the clean clothes basket. “Fenr, what do you think?”

Her eyes were on the split stitches of a padded coat. “I’m with Baba.”

“But I’m getting you out of the village, out of the mountains,” he persuaded. “We’ll live in town.”

“In that dry town, one can’t drink a mouthful of water without worrying. I like it in the country, where I can wash my face with as much free water as I’m pleased to.”

He raised his voice and wanted to know what good was this mountain. She teared up and refused to say another word.

Xiu-quan was terrified of fighting Chun-fen. Growing up, his mother had instructed him to love her like his own sister, but now the nature of their relationship had changed beyond his grasp. What he'd done last year, it took a few months before Chun-fen had begun to forgive him.

“Fenr, I’m doing this for both us. You will understand one day.”

Chun-fen sat motionlessly. Xiu-quan packed some clothes in haste, picking up a few thicker books to fill a large basket. He asked Xiu-lan to take care of her baba, grandfather, and sister-in-law, and realized that she was only thirteen. Xiu-lan, with her teenage wistfulness, made him promise to come home as often as possible, as if he was leaving forever. Chun-fen didn't cry until Xiu-quan shouldered a basket and went downstairs.

Xiu-quan reported to Director Tang and was put in the dormitory converted from a disused posthouse from Qing Dynasty. In the next couple of months, he had not gone home once, fearing that if he had, he might not be able to escape. Chun-fen was either too proud or too hurt to visit him. Not until a month later, she had sent Xiu-lan to bring him his favorite chili sauce and long bean pickles. His father, however, had shown up in the Grain Station and the dormitory five or six times, each time threatening to disown him if he refused to go home to his wife and grandfather.

On an early morning in late October, Chun-fen walked in the Grain Station's front room — only the front room faced the interprovincial highway to receive the peasants who came to pay grain tax or sell the grains and beans. The main building was a sturdy Soviet-style gray brick warehouse, rectangular and masculine, designed specifically to ward off Sichuan's humidity.

It was an idle day, very few peasants came to town when the market was not open. Xiu-quan's workmates and Aunt Lian were teaching him to play long cards. Aunt Lian was the director's wife. She was in her mid forties but carried herself like an old lady. She set herself apart from the rest by wearing a green army coat, as the director was a veteran.

Xiu-quan was surprised to see Chun-fen as she didn't like coming to the market except to see her mother's family. Her belly was round like half a watermelon. She had on a large sized cotton jacket and a pair of new-year cloth shoes. In her small basket were a straw hat and a gourd melon water bottle. The grain appraiser asked if she wanted to pay tax. Xiu-quan introduced her to his workmates, who greeted her as "sister-in-law" with broad smiles.

Xiu-quan took her aside and asked, "What do you come to town for? Look at your belly. Look how you sweat. You should rest at home."

"As if you care about me."

"Did Baba send you?"

"So what if he did?" She looked at him playfully, not one of those young wives with a temper. "Can't I see my husband of seven years without being scolded?"

She sauntered to the platform scale and played with the iron weight on the ruler.

"Anyway, you shouldn't come downhill by yourself, not with a full-term baby in your belly. You might give birth to it on the big road." His workmates were snickering. He raised his voice. "If you wanted to see me, send a word and I can come home."

"Don't flatter yourself. I come to the market to do some shopping, nothing more."

"Shopping? Shop for what?"

"Salt? Why do you care?"

"Baba always buys salt enough for three years. Has he run out?"

Chun-fen glared at him. He pushed her in front of Aunt Lian. "Chun-fen, let me introduce someone important to you. This is Director Tang's wife. You can call her Aunt Lian."

Aunt Lian said, before Chun-fen could greet her, "Chun-fen, it's so great that I finally see you in person. Xiu-quan talked a lot about you."

"I'm just a country wife, what about me is worth talking? Aunt Lian, I must thank you for looking after my Xiu-quan. He likes the town so much that he doesn't come home at all."

"I didn't do anything. The man in my home got him the job." Aunt Lian turned to Xiu-quan with feigned disapproval. "But Xiu-quan, I must say a word not agreeable to your ears. You're in the wrong for not going home to your pregnant wife more often."

Xiu-quan laughed embarrassingly. Aunt Lian was teasing him. She knew his father was against him taking the job in town.

"Let me guess," said Aunt Lian. "Seven months?"

"Haha, it's longer than that, about nine lunar months and a half."

"But you don't look like it. Well, it's your first one. Your figure has never changed completely before. When is the due?"

"I have no clue. Everybody tells me differently. My mama said in ten or twelve days. Xiu-quan's friend Doctor Liu said about a week."

"Ay-a, look at me, keep you standing here. Wait for me to get you a stool."

"There's no need. I'll go straight home after I get a pack of salt. I just want to stop by and have a look at Xiu-quan's work unit."

Aunt Lian brought out a long stool. "Nonsense, you don't come downhill often. We must have a nice little chat. Let the men play the long cards. It's so difficult that my brain hurts."

Aunt Lian took Chun-fen's hand to sit down. Chun-fen removed the basket on her back.

Since she was a first time mother, Aunt Lian, like all mothers, felt it was her duty to pass on her childbearing experiences, tips and fails in great details and be prepared for an insensitive and useless husband.

Xiu-quan listened to them chatting and watched Chun-fen's smiles. Her ponytail clutched so tight as if her charcoal hair was glued on her skull. From time to time, she threw him a casual look, with softened absolving eyes.

Before noon, Chun-fen said she'd better get on the way home. Aunt Lian invited the couple to lunch at her home. Chun-fen declined, saying that she had never heard of such a thing. Aunt Lian was offended and insisted that Chun-fen must go home with her, otherwise she was looking down upon her and her husband. Xiu-quan also said Chun-fen should accept the invitation as the director and Aunt Lian were his good friends.

The exchange of invitation and declination went on for a few minutes, until Chun-fen said, "This won't do, Aunt Lian. How about some other time? I'll bring something with me and pay you a visit, so that I can thank you and Director Tang for looking after my Xiu-quan."

Aunt Lian gave up with an amicable reproach. Xiu-quan and Chun-fen said goodbye to her and the workmates and came out of the Grain Station. They strolled on the dirt highway, passing a few out-of-business shops and taverns.

A truck came up from the direction of Chongqing. They stepped to the roadside. Chun-fen muttered a curse and covered her mouth and nose immediately. She couldn't stand the exhaust, and she couldn't run away from it with that big belly. The truck drove by, leaving a fog of dark smoke. The effect of the exhaust on her was instantaneous. She turned aside and retched. He patted her back. The large belly prevented her from bending down.

"I hate the gasoline cars," she said, tearing up. "And you want to live in town. Look at

me, how can I live here with the disgusting smoke?”

“You won’t be nauseous once you’re not pregnant.”

“It’s not the pregnancy. My head hurts whenever I smell the gas oil.”

“There aren’t many cars. I haven’t seen one for days. Besides, we won’t live by the highway once we move here.”

“But I don’t want to live in town.”

Xiu-quan was dispirited. Even though Chun-fen was eighteen, she’d grown up a long time ago, certainly before him, and the country life was the one thing she understood.

At the exit to the market, Chun-fen walked straight ahead. He said, “The Supply and Market Cooperative is down this street. Don’t you want to buy the salt?”

“Don’t worry, Baba is coming downhill this coming market day.”

She was not coming to buy salt, so he took her back to his dormitory, which was a short way ahead of them on the highway.

“How’s Xiu-lan and grandpa?”

“They are great. I’m surprised you even ask.”

Xiu-quan kept his eyes on the road. He knew he didn’t have to ask, and Chun-fen was taking good care of them. They came to the rickety gate of the posthouse.

“Do you want to come in and have a look at where I live?”

“I would love to if I don’t hate it.”

“Oh, come on. It’s just a dorm.”

“Whatever it is, you think it’s better than home. So good you don’t want to come home for two months.”

“It’s not better than home.” He smiled, attempting to ease the tension. “I don’t have the

room all to myself. I have a roommate. ”

“Why don’t you come back to live at home? It’s not a long walk. And I should not go to your dorm if there’s another man in the room.”

“Teacher Shu is a very good man. He’s from Chengdu. It’d be fun to meet him.”

“I’m not interested in meeting a strange man. I’d better get going.”

“Why do you do this? Please, come in and have a rest, at least have a mouthful of water.”

She shook her basket. “I have brought my water gourd.”

“How about this? If you don’t want to come in, let me take you to a restaurant to have a tofu flower lunch? It’s really delicious, I bet you’ll like it.”

“Why do you want to waste money on that? If I want to eat tofu flower, I can make it myself. I’ve been making tofu flower since the first month I moved in your family.”

“Ahhh, I’m mad at you!” He clenched his fists. “Please don’t make me feel guilty. Please don’t be angry at me. I ... You know I came downhill for the good of both of us. I told you I will try to settle down and bring you to Dustown someday. That way we’ll be together.”

“I know, Quanr, I know.” Her eyes softened. She touched his cheek and sighed. “Why do you hate the village so? It’s not that bad. We can have a happy life uphill. I don’t need much. I don’t want you to work here alone like this, with nobody to look after you.”

“Come to look after me in town. I’ll try my best to make this job permanent and apply to the urban residency. Just wait a few months. I know I can do it. Trust me. I’m hardworking, and Director Tang likes me.”

“But I’m not the one who doesn’t like you to move out. You know my opinion doesn’t matter. You must convince Baba, not me.”

He growled. “Baba. Baba. All he ever does is to destroy my prospects! I hate him.”

The coral trees on the roadside fended off the warm autumn sun. He kicked the twigs and gravel on the floor, sending the gravel hitting the wall of the posthouse.

She held his arms. "You don't hate your father, Quanr. You know he cherishes you and doesn't want you to leave home. Try to understand, you're the only one he's got, nobody else."

He breathed deeply. "Everybody is telling me that. I'm tired of hearing it." He paced about her. "Don't you see that he's strangling me with his cherishing?" His ears were ringing with blood, and he could see that Chun-fen wouldn't see it that way.

"By the way," she said, as if this was an afterthought, "I do have something to tell you. Baba said he will come to take you home this coming market day on the 27th."

He stopped pacing and shook his head like a horse. "I won't go home with him. I won't. He's tried and succeeded many times. He's made me quit two jobs already. Not this time, I'm not letting him. I've had enough."

"But he will come all the same," she said, with a tone of finality. "You know he will. I don't want to see you fight like this. Our entire family is not peaceful as a result. A father and son shouldn't hate each other. It's not right."

"Fenr, every son hates his father. I just hate mine more than most people."

She said woefully, "Quanr, promise me don't fight with Baba. He cherishes you very much. Don't make him sad."

Xiu-quan's eyes were watering. He fought back the tears. He wished that he was childish so that he could still cry, or throw a tantrum. He paced back and forth in front of her. He couldn't bear to look in her eyes. He looked away, and he seemed to feel the coral-tree leaves drying.

He said, "You are right. Baba won't give up. What do I do? I don't want to go back to the village. I have to say no and refuse to let him win. I'll just have to hold out this time. I must win

a small victory, just once. That's all I need."

"Do whatever you want, but please don't fight him."

"You think I won't win."

"I don't know, and I must go home now. You take care of yourself."

"Why are you so headstrong? Stay longer with me."

"With the large belly, it'll take me a while to get home."

"You always get your way." Xiu-quan looked at the foothills behind the posthouse. "Let me see if Xiu-bang is free. I'll have him walk you home. His school is on that knoll in Moon Dale." He pointed at the bluff where the school was.

"Why must we bother Xiu-bang? He has a teaching job to do."

"He doesn't teach in the afternoon. Besides, he hasn't gone back to see his grandpa for a long time. He should go home anyway."

Chun-fen said okay. Xiu-quan made her wear the straw hat and walked her on the dirt trail up to the school. On the bluff, she remarked that the vegetables on the river banks looked very luscious and beautiful. She conceded that farming in the valley wasn't all that bad.

Chun-fen's visit left Xiu-quan in a bad mood the entire afternoon. His father's previous visits had left indelible impressions on his superiors. After work, he visited Director Tang's home in the cadres' family quarters by the Fig Bridge at the end of the oldest street in town, where big families of the old society used to live. The entrance was under the knobby canopy fig tree, gated but no guard. The director and several cadre families shared one courtyard mansion.

Director Tang answered the door. "Xiu-quan? What brought you here?"

Xiu-quan said, "Director, can I discuss something urgent with you?"

Director Tang said, "Of course, come in."

Xiu-quan was invited to sit in a bamboo chair. The house was not bigger than fifty square meters, with a kitchenette, two bedrooms reconfigured from one, and a sparsely furnished living room.

Tang Yao-lun was twice a veteran. He was in his late forties, shorter than average, with bull eyes and square face. In fact, all his facial features seemed square, quite untypical of Sichuanese. He was sincere to his subordinates and clean in his social dealings, again untypical of Sichuanese, which Xiu-quan admired very much.

They talked briefly about the work in the Grain Station. Xiu-quan fidgeted in his chair, not sure how to begin to tell the director about his father's visit and that he was leaving the job. Aunt Lian brought him a cup of warm water.

She said, "Yao-lun, you missed Chun-fen today. She's very pretty and very big with baby. And how polite she was to decline my lunch invite and insisted on visiting us with gifts in the future."

Xiu-quan told them the reason of Chun-fen's visit. Aunt Lian was confounded and turned

to her husband.

She said, "Xiu-quan, can't anything be done about your father?"

Xiu-quan said, "I'm afraid not. He has taken me out of two jobs before. He's not afraid of anybody."

Aunt Lian said, "I don't understand why? To be frank, many fathers seek connections, even bribe the cadres, to have their sons work in the township. Now you're quitting? It's a pity to give up a post envied by many."

Xiu-quan said, "My father had many reasons before, and now Chun-fen's about to give birth."

Aunt Lian said, "Can't you tell your father that you can take a leave to look after Chun-fen? Once she had the baby and rested long enough, you can come back to the Grain Station. The problem is solved."

Xiu-quan said, "I'm afraid to my father the work schedule is the least of the problems. It's not this particular job that he objects."

Aunt Lian said, "You mean you must go back to the village for good? I don't know what to say. Not to look down upon the farming, for I've farmed most of my life, but now I'm used to the life in town and can't imagine returning to the paddies and feeding pigs."

Xiu-quan said, "That's what my father has designed for me. I ought to have known it by now. He doesn't even accept the money I sent home."

"It's a shame to squander your abilities," said Aunt Lian. "But what can one do? Speaking as a parent myself, a son should not rebel against his father."

Director Tang was smoking a cigarette and nodding at whoever's speech. He said, "Xiu-quan, you can keep account, you can use abacus, and you write very well. Between you and me,

you are my most qualified clerk. I want you to work here, instead of going back to the village. Do you want me to talk to your father, see if I can change his mind?"

Xiu-quan said, "You flatter me, Director, but my father is not easy to be persuaded."

Director Tang said, "We won't know before we ask him. Your aunt Lian's suggestion is not bad. When your father comes to the market, tell him that I can give you a month's leave, even two months. Come back whenever you can. The job is always yours."

Xiu-quan said, "I'll tell him that, but I'm not optimistic. Thank you very much."

Aunt Lian said, "Chin up, the road will appear once you are in front of the mountain. And, how exciting that your baby is coming! You're gonna be a baba!"

Xiu-quan said, "I don't know if it's something to be excited about."

"What a nonsensical thing to say!" said Aunt Lian with a chortle. "You're twenty, not too young, not too old, just the right age to be a first time baba."

"I suppose so," said Xiu-quan, not willing to say what was on his mind.

The Tangs asked Xiu-quan to supper, but he declined. His roommate was waiting for him to cook together in the communal kitchen at the posthouse.

Back to the dorm, lying on the straw bed, Xiu-quan had no appetite. Teacher Shu asked him what was the matter. He told him, and there were many sighs. They agreed that there was nothing to be done with one's father, although Teacher Shu himself had defied his father's wish and left the provincial capital to teach in this obscure town's primary school.

The next day came and Xiu-quan felt he couldn't wake up from an exhausted dream. He couldn't read the novels that Teacher Shu had lent him. He went about like one who has lost his ghosts. There weren't much work in the Grain Station. Aunt Lian asked his workmates to play long cards again. He appreciated that she was trying to distract him.

He dreaded every minute approaching tomorrow, wishing that this night of all nights the world would end, which would do away the problem for him. At one minute he laughed at himself for ever dreaming of moving to Dustown, painting the unpractical picture to Chun-fen. At another minute, he was guilt ridden, for if he was to move to town, it would mean that he'd have to leave behind his grandfather and little sister to his father. The wonders of a man's mind! he thought; Baba doesn't allow me to commute, let alone to ever let me deprive of him the bliss of living with his grandchild. When the oil lamp was blown off in the night, he would submit to whatever might come to his way; however, in the morning, his dread would mushroomed out anew.

Xiu-quan pulled through to the market day. A queue of peasants snaked along the roadside, many of whom hiked from the top of the mountains. They must have set out before sunrise. At their feet were the bamboo baskets of various shapes and sizes brimmed with wheat or beans or rice. They were smoking pipes of tobacco leaves, chatting with neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers about livestock, autumn drought, and the winter season work such as sowing broad beans and peas and winter vegetables.

Since arriving at the Grain Station, Xiu-quan hadn't had so much as a cup of water. He stood behind the platform scale, adjusting the balance on the steel scale when a peasant would mount the grains on the platform, if the appraiser had approved the quality of the grains. He read the weight and jotted it down in the accounts, and two workers would carry the grains in the barns. So focused at his tasks, Xiu-quan didn't notice his father's arrival until his toilet break at 10.

Wu Chang-hua was smoking with a villager from Skysburg, squatting by the mud gutter in his blue jacket and pants. The temperature was dropping, but he only wore a pair of straw

sandals. He hadn't shaved his head for at least a month, and he was bareheaded. His face relaxed a little in the humid air. His lips cracked. He seemed older than the last time Xiu-quan had seen him.

This would be me when I'm fifty-years old, Xiu-quan thought, sun tanned, wrinkled forehead, tobacco stained teeth, and cracked hands, and being able to read and write doesn't make any difference.

He said, "Baba, how long have you been here? Why didn't you tell me?"

Wu looked up from a lower position, yet his expression was so haughty that he seemed to be taller. He appeared to be irritated by the interruption.

"I don't know how long. I've smoked three pipes, that's how long." Wu turned back to his interlocutor. "See, this is my son, talking to his own father like I'm his sworn enemy."

Xiu-quan turned away with impatience.

"What? Ashamed of talking to his own father!" Wu said to the peasants who lent their ears to him. "He thinks he's better than his own father."

"Baba, what do you want to accomplish this time?"

"To take you home. Dr Liu said Chun-fen is going to give birth any day."

"I am coming home. Director Tang gave me a month's leave, but I need a few days to settle the accounts in the Grain Station."

"You are coming home, but you're not coming back to this job."

"Chun-fen is not giving birth forever, isn't she?"

"No, this is not what I said to Chun-fen."

"If you want me to live at home, I'm fine with walking to work every day. It won't be any different."

The sneer on Wu's face froze. He knocked the tobacco stub off the pipe on the curb. He stood up and appealed to the peasants, "Neighbors and fellow villagers, uphold the justice for me. What has the Grain Station director put in my son's head to keep him here, to abandon his family? This only son of mine refuses to come home even after his pregnant wife has come begging him."

Sichuanese were jolly in nature. They cheered and supported Wu.

"His wife is about to give birth to his first child, and he refuses to come home, not even to have a look at his grandfather and his little sister." He pointed at Xiu-quan with the bamboo pipe. "He's bending on becoming a town folk, leaving behind his honest birth as a peasant to chase a fancy career in town so he can be better than all his family."

The on-lookers were wondering if Wu Chang-hua was drunk or crazy. One or two of them who knew the ins and outs of the quarrel were relaying what the Senior Wu had done at the Moon Dale School. Thus, the other spectators were able to watch this informed.

Even Xiu-quan had to admire his father's improved ability to embarrass him in front of a public. His baba was stubborn, but also sharp. He thought wickedly if he should leave his baba alone, but he knew that that wouldn't stop him.

"Baba, why must you do this? Why do you have to destroy me?"

"Destroy him," said Wu, still not addressing Xiu-quan directly. "He read lots of books but he knows nothing of the world. Destroy him? He doesn't know I'm saving his neck! What good can come for people who work for the officials! How many officials have died a peaceful death in the history? It's a dangerous business, I tell you, not for someone like you!"

Xiu-quan was genuinely surprised at his father's cautiousness. Even as an illiterate, his father and many Chinese grew up with stories of officials in imperial court fell from high or low

positions.

“Baba, I’m working in a Grain Station, not in a government office. You think too high of my position.”

“And I thought you didn’t know!” said Wu in glee. “Wu Xiu-quan, take me to your boss. I’m done talking to you. If you don’t listen to me ...”

“Baba, stop being so unreasonable. Why do you want to see the director? I said I’ll come home.”

“I’m done talking to you.”

Xiu-quan knew that his new career would be buried if his father met the director. He begged his father to stop. His workmates had halted the work and come out to see what the commotion was about.

Wu folded up his sleeves and looked at the son daringly. “I can do this all day.”

“Director Tang’s office is behind the grain shop in the old town.”

“Then lead the way. Let’s go to the old town.” Wu picked up the back basket. “I’m ready when you are ready.”

Xiu-quan handed the accounts to his workmates. He took his father off the highway to the old streets by the river, where the market-goers with baskets on their backs were thronging slowly and stopping now and then to see the merchandise sold on the ground or in bamboo baskets. They descended, passed the shops and the SMC, crossed the bridge, and ascended the street to the end, where it formed a “T” with the Fig Bridge Street. The grain shop was right at the intersection, facing two streets at once. It was reconfigured from the largest grain shop of the old society at the best location. Being the only grain shop in Dustown, it had since expanded to several grey brick buildings occupying a third of the block that also included the township

primary school.

As part of the socialization of manufacturing and commercial industries, the State voluntarily formed a jointure with the largest grain shop in Dustown, as well as most private businesses. Starting from this year, it was ruled that grains, oil, and other strategic staple food must be procured by the State first through the grain stations and the peasants could sell and buy what was left in the rural markets at a higher price with vegetables and other non-vital produce.

Aunt Lian saw them from afar and beckoned at Xiu-quan. He went in to have a quick talk. Wu remained outside the shop. As a land owning peasant, he had never set foot in this place.

Xiu-quan told Aunt Lian about his father's request. She asked if his father wanted to make sure that he quit the job altogether. Xiu-quan said that must be his intention. He worried that Director Tang would be offended by the unannounced visit. She smiled at the senior Wu as a kind of greeting and assured Xiu-quan that Director Tang wouldn't mind and wished that her husband would be able to change his father's mind. Otherwise, she joked, since he stubbornly wore a single layer liberation jacket in late October, it would be better for him to go home and have Chun-fen reprimand him.

Aunt Lian said to the Wus, "Yao-lun is in the office. Go knock at his door."

They turned right to the alleyway and entered a compact mud house courtyard, which was just big enough for one sweet olive tree. Of the two offices, the one in the left wing belonged to the SMCs. Xiu-quan went straight to the other one and knocked on the doorframe. He asked a clerk whose desk was close by the door if he could see the director.

The worker recognized Xiu-quan. He got up from his desk and knocked at the door of the inner office. "Director, here is Wu Xiu-quan for you."

The director said, "Show him in."

Xiu-quan thanked the clerk. They passed the desks and entered the director's office, which was rather cramped with a clerestory window that Xiu-quan couldn't figure out which side of the block it opened to. He heard faint voices of children reading a poem.

Tang stood up behind his desk. He said, "Old Wu, good to see you again. Xiu-quan, move the stool and seat your father."

Xiu-quan brought forward the stool and placed it as far from the desk as possible without it against the wall. His father put down his basket and sat away from the door.

Tang said, sitting in his wood chair, "Xiu-quan, don't stand there. Take a seat."

Xiu-quan sat on the tip of the stool, leaving a wide gap between him and his father.

Tang said, "So, Old Wu, what brought you here today?"

Wu studied the director and deliberated. He said, "Director Tang, my boy said you've given him a month's leave?"

Tang said, "That's right. Xiu-quan told me about Chun-fen's condition. I think a month is quite long enough. We don't normally give paternity leave, ..."

"Then why give it to him?"

"... so Xiu-quan can't receive compensation for it," said Tang unperturbed. "Well, the former village head of Skysburg referred Xiu-quan to me, and I found your son a very talented young man. Even though he's not a permanent clerk of the Grain Station yet — because of the limited personnel quota in public sector — he's very competent in his work and he's indispensable to the Grain Station. In time, he might be a permanent worker, which means he can apply to urban residency."

"Did Xiu-quan ask for it? Did he beg you to keep him in your work unit?"

“No and no, but I sensed that he’s unwilling to go back to the village, so I offered him the one-month leave.”

“How do you know if he didn’t ask you?”

Director Tang was not used to have one of the masses question him like this, he didn’t know how to answer the question.

Wu said, “You wouldn’t know unless he told you, in which case, I must apologize on his behalf, because he knew very well that I’ve told him to quit the job on several occasions.”

Tang said, “That I know. But consider for a moment, Old Wu, of the lad’s future. He’s better off in the Grain Station than in the village. He has the skills and the attitude for it. One can’t do much better otherwise.”

“Director Tang, thanks for pointing that out. I sent him to school, so he should listen to me. I sent him to school to learn how to read and write so he can be of use for family matters, not working in Dustown streets.”

“The New Republic is young, and we need young talents such as your son to build this fledgeling nation. If you don’t like him working for the township, think about our nation.”

“I’m merely a peasant. I don’t know a thing about nation or township.”

Tang’s face changed. He prepared to reprimand Wu Chang-hua’s unpatriotic remarks.

Wu said, “Director, forgive me that I’m a simple peasant and don’t know what I can and cannot say, but don’t you think being a good peasant, tilling the land distributed by the Great Communist Party, is also contributing to the great New Republic? You’re silent, Director, because you know I’m not completely wrong. If my son comes home, he can look after the family and contribute to the nation, all parties are happy. No one can say I’m selfish.”

Tang realized that the son didn’t get half of the father’s cleverness, and he thought it was

fortunate for the son's sake. He said, "Xiu-quan earns steady salary in the Grain Station, don't you think it's better for Chun-fen and the child?"

Wu said, "His father is a peasant, his father's father is a peasant, and every ancestor before that was a peasant. So he's a peasant too. This is our lot, and we don't change what Sky gives us."

"Old Wu, you're leaving me in a rotten situation." Tang shifted in his chair. He leaned to his left and grabbed the green enamel mug on the desk. He drank the tea. "How am I supposed to find someone who can keep the accounts like Xiu-quan?"

Xiu-quan fixed his eyes on the floor. He said, "Director Tang, you've done enough for me. I don't want to put you in this situation. I'll go home with my father and you should look for a new clerk to take my place. I thank you very much."

Wu said, "Xiu-quan as a clerk is replaceable in your Grain Station, but not so in my family."

Xiu-quan said, "Really, Director, we have interrupted your busy day long enough. Thanks for helping me. We must leave you to your work."

Tang drank more tea and said, "Xiu-quan, you're a bright young lad. I wish you could continue to work here, but I am not ignoring the fact that you're the only son, and I have no right to deprive your duty as a son, a father, and a husband." He stood up. Xiu-quan scrambled up. "I'm glad that you can go back to spend more time with your family. I understand that you had some trouble with your father during the past few months, but I'm happy that now it's worked out, which is a good thing. You are thus dismissed from the job." He thought for a second. "Old Wu, I have a request, can I keep Xiu-quan for a few days till the end of the month? So it's easier for me to find someone to replace him."

Wu said, standing up, "I'm good with that. Many thanks to you, Director. Xiu-quan must know that I'm not bluffing, Chun-fen's due date really is just one of these days."

Tang said, "Xiu-quan, I'll conclude your salary as soon as possible. I'm sorry it has to end in such circumstances."

Wu said, "Great, it's time for me to leave." He picked up his basket and walked out of the room without saying a word to his son.

Xiu-quan thanked the director and rushed out to catch up with Wu, who was hurrying out of the courtyard. The market-goers were thinning out. Wu made some sharp turns. At first, Xiu-quan walked very fast, but Wu scurried ahead like a rabbit running away from a hound. Xiu-quan pursued him, calling him to stop.

Wu stopped in front of the SMC on the other side of the bridge. He turned around in the middle of the street. Among the peasants who were passing in both directions, he seemed almost approachable. He took the pipe out of his basket, and he put it back again.

Xiu-quan wondered what was the point of chasing after his father, who seemed eager to get away. He walked up to him, whose padded coat was clumsily patched. He recognized that it was Chun-fen's handiwork. As a girl, she had never been old enough to learn the art of housewifery, and once she had crossed the threshold of his family, his mother had been too ill to teach her anything. Chun-fen had resorted to her own imagination to solve domestic emergencies: the rule was to eliminate the problem at hand, not to refine the art.

"Baba, is that it? You've seen the director and you've gotten what you want?"

"I'll see you at home."

"You know you could let me stay here longer. The Grain Station is busy, and the director won't be able to find a replacement in time."

“That’s not my concern, and your wife can’t wait,” snapped Wu. “Come back or not, your decision. It’s fine if you don’t want to live with us, but you must not fail Chun-fen.”

Wu Chang-hua sauntered away on the ramp to the highway. He was confident that Xiu-quan would give up this nonsense without a fight, not after the lesson he’d given him today in front of the Grain Station. He didn’t have to see Xiu-quan this morning at all, because Chun-fen’s condition was good enough to persuade the director to let Xiu-quan go. But he couldn’t help watching his son at work for a few minutes. Xiu-quan was too thin, his cheekbones were protruding, and one could almost imagine his ribcage under his single-layered uniform — obviously they overused him if what they were saying about him being capable was true. Wu lamented the degeneration of the men’s physique in his clan. His father’s generation was big and strong, then his generation dwindled, now his own son was even smaller. Those sharp shoulders of Xiu-quan’s must bear the duty of the entire family. But we’ve always let him have his way, he thought; I shouldn’t have allowed him to smoke at the tender age of twelve. He had slowed down in front of the Supply and Marketing Cooperative to give Xiu-quan time to catch up with him. He didn’t know how to verbalize his thoughts to Xiu-quan except for demands, which he figured were unpleasant for any son’s ears. I sent him to school, so the fault is all mine, but you leave me no choice, son, he thought; the director was polite enough, but he had the face to tell me that I’m ruining my son’s future, what did he know? You’re my son. He remembered the headmaster of Moon Dale School had said similar stuff to him. Am I really destroying your future? he thought, but you must come home to stay with us, instead of this silliness! What’s the use of having a son if he doesn’t take care the family? Those outsiders know a fart. There’s nothing wrong to wish my son to live at home. Damn the fog! There was a chill in Wu’s right knee. Living by the river!

I don't want my son to attract arthritis at such a young age, he thought, as he slacked his pace on the big road home.

In the afternoon Director Tang came to check up on Xiu-quan in the Grain Station. Xiu-quan tried very hard not to show his disappointment. The director thought it was a shame that his father had left no room for negotiation. He promised to think of something for him and invited him to lunch on Saturday as a farewell.

That night Xiu-quan told Teacher Shu the outcome of his father's visit. They promised to see each other and preserve the friendship in the future. Xiu-quan loved to discuss affairs of the State with Teacher Shu, who had a new education from the provincial capital, the kind of modern education that Xiu-quan had never had the chance to receive. No heart to read, Xiu-quan stuffed some of his things in his back basket.

On Saturday morning, he went to the Grain Station as usual. Aunt Lian dropped in on her way to work.

"Xiu-quan, come to stand in the grain shop for a day. The Grain Station won't be busy today. It's more interesting in the grain shop. It's your last days, anyway."

"I rather like the job in the Grain Station."

"But what to like about?"

"I can't say exactly."

"Come to the grain shop. I'm gonna leave early to cook the lunch that your director is hosting. By the way, he also invited the director of the SMC. They were comrades-in-arms during the War of Resistance Against Japan."

Xiu-quan complied and handed the accounts to his workmates.

The grain shop was at the vantage point and at the center of the town. Standing at the door that opened to the street leading to the highway, Xiu-quan could see all the way up to the

mountains. He used to walk through different quarters after work, which were sewn into one town by the two bridges and overhanging trees.

And it started raining. The seasonal rain of Eastern Sichuan soused the streets of Dustown, first in a glaze, then muted by the overcast and the heavy fog. The houses, of black tiles and white walls, clamped the cobbled and slated streets laid out along the bends of the valley river. The gables were whiter, the slant roofs were blacker, and the lofty structures were grander, but less congruent than the thatched mud huts in the mountains. Dark green bamboo groves were livelier even in winter than the browning fig trees at street corners.

A middle aged man came up from the SMC Street and interrupted Xiu-quan's brooding. The man stomped at the doorsteps, the basket on his back swaying. He scraped the army green shoes on the edge of the steps before he walked in. He looked about the grains and oils casually, as if he stumbled in the shop by accident, and to conceal that, he decided to have a look.

The man asked, with a bamboo pipe held in a corner of the mouth, "How much is a *jin* of white sugar?"

Xiu-quan returned to the counter. "It's 9 *jiao*."

"Weigh me half a *jin*, please."

"A gift?"

"Yes, for a cousin's fortieth birthday."

A cousin could be any relative, even someone remotely related. Xiu-quan said, "You are generous, half a *jin* of sugar for a fortieth birthday."

"He gifted me a *jin* of lard last year. I can't be stingy now."

Xiu-quan poured the sugar from a glass jar on a brown paper spread on the scale's disk. He adjusted the scale and added a few pinches. He clutched the stringed balance and showed the

asterisk to the man. The scale tilted upward to the customer's favor. The man smiled with satisfaction. Xiu-quan packed the sugar in a square with rice straws.

“Anything else today?”

The man looked at the handwritten price tags of the variety of rice, beans, vegetable oils, and cigarettes. He said no. He paid and left.

How very interesting to talk to the customers! Xiu-quan thought; the sugar of course will change hands during the gift season. Nobody is so wasteful as to consume this much sugar! There are mud stains on the back of the man's indigo pants. Xiu-quan opened the sales record and wrote down each digit with fanciful curves. He would miss the smells of the oil, sugar, and grains, even though he knew next to nothing about cooking. He was going to miss the work in the Grain Station and the grain shop as well. So far, it had been his favorite job because he got to talk to everybody from every village, gathering people's life stories, their families, farming plans, livestock, frustrations, harvests, and good or bad business, always in snippets, always in small talks. How marvelous are the routine lives of the peasants and the townsfolk! he thought, as he put down the ballpoint pen that he loved more than the traditional brushes; if one knew but only a few of their secrets!

At about ten and half, Aunt Lian said, “Xiu-quan, close the door at 12 and come for lunch. Don't frown so much. You're still young. There'll be other opportunities.”

Xiu-quan smiled — yes, there will be. Standing at the door, he looked at the foggy sky, opalescent, gloomy, and heavy. The streets were more or less deserted, as the townsfolk had finished their daily shopping. Private commercial activities after hours were forbidden. The vegetable vendors collected their baskets and gathered on the bridge waiting for the late customers.

An old woman in a greasy hat and an apron full of burnt holes walked up the steps and asked, “Young man, do you want the last of the stem lettuce.”

“No, aunty, I don’t need vegetables.”

“It’s the last bit, so cheap like giving it away for free.”

“Pardon me, but I don’t cook.”

The old woman turned away and moved on to the next pedestrian.

On a clear day, one could see the range of the Taigong Mountain, the east side of the valley. Xiu-quan made out a few mountain caps behind the foothills. Somewhere his house was tucked in a hollow. He couldn’t see it, but he knew it was there, forever so, his father, his wife, his sister, and his extended family. Seven generations ago, his ancestors had been one of the millions of migrants from the provinces of the Dongting Lake and the Canton to this parcel under the sky. By the time they had arrived, the land in the valley had already been claimed. He wondered where he would be if his ancestors had set out the journey half a century earlier.

At noon Xiu-quan closed up the grain shop and headed to Director Tang’s. He had grown to like the polished cobble stones on the narrow and winding Fig Bridge Street. The live fowls and small animals market at the bridge head reeked with blood and feces, which were streaking into the river.

Director Tang answered the door. “Come in, Xiu-quan. You’ve met Director Guo?”

Xiu-quan did remember the director of the SMC, who got up from the primary guest seat on the table, which had been pulled to the center of the living room. They shook hands. Director Guo was a lean and agile man in his forties. He was a head taller than Director Tang, his facial features were slender and gentle, and in his eyes there was no military sharpness but an official

cordiality.

Xiu-quan was seated on the secondary seat, on Guo's right side. The room seemed smaller. Xiu-quan felt if he didn't do as he was told, he would be pushed against the wall. Tang took the left side with his back to the kitchen.

There were bowls and a plate of stem lettuce stir fried with preserved pork on the table. Xiu-quan asked if Aunt Lian was in the kitchen.

"Don't worry about her," said Tang, picking up a bottle of liquor. "Let's have a cup of real Jiangjin laobaigan. Thanks to Director Guo, who brought two bottles of the special supplies from the SMC. Not any one has the opportunity to enjoy it."

Guo said, "Regarding the limited supply of laobaigan. I have good news. Jiangjin Liquor Brewery will be nationalized. The State centrally plans the demand, the production, and the supply and marketing of laobaigan. I believe the production will increase tremendously. Soon my SMC would have sufficient stock, and even one of the masses can afford our favorite laobaigan. Not only the white spirits, most of the products will be sufficient for the masses' consumption when the socialist revolution is completed."

Tang poured the liquor into shot cups. "Aw, Old Guo, not just yet, I need a cup first."

Lian brought out a plate of twice fried pork belly. She said, "Welcome, Xiu-quan. Here are all the liquor dishes. You men enjoy and drink a few more cups. I'll make a greens stir fry and a soup."

"Aunt Lian, this is too lavish if it's on my account," said Xiu-quan. "I'm merely a common clerk. Please stop cooking more dishes and join us."

Tang said, "Don't be over polite, Xiu-quan. It's not as though you were anyone else."

Lian said in the kitchen, "It's just a simple family lunch. Don't take offense if the food is

not palatable.”

Tang distributed the cups. “Raise your cup. Let’s drink to a bright future for Little Wu.”

Xiu-quan said, “I don’t know what that bright future might be, but I thank you both.” He bottomed up. The sting in his throat elevated his spirits. “Aghhh, this is much stronger than my grandfather’s home-brew of mix grains and sweet potato.”

They all praised the good qualities of Jiangjin laobaigan.

A true Sichuanese, Tang said, “Old Guo, you’re my oldest friend, I don’t have to play the host to you, but Xiu-quan, start your chopsticks. We don’t care for formalities in this house, not among comrades-in-arms and friends.”

Guo said he would venture to be the rudest guest.

After several cups, the table became lively. Guo was giving his opinions on the collectivist and state ownerships in the means of production.

Can’t one enjoy a cup of laobaigan without thinking about national affairs? Tang thought; but I chose this life, didn’t I? To change the topic, he brought up Wu Chang-hua’s visit the day before.

Intrigued, Guo said, “I’ve never heard a father wishes his son to return to the countryside. Even in the old society, one wants his son to be a scholar and get out of the village.”

Tang said, “Indeed, Xiu-quan was sent to receive an old education.”

Xiu-quan said, “It was merely primary education, reading some primers and such. There was no new education school around, although I had a teacher who’d come back from Chongqing.”

Tang said, “If anything, Xiu-quan’s father represents the masses. He got the land from the Communist Party, he prides himself on his hard-working peasantry, and he wanted the same

thing for his son, so there's nothing wrong in the political line.”

Guo said, “Except that the land will no longer belong to him privately.”

“Right,” said Tang to Xiu-quan. “Dustown will implement the agricultural cooperativization very soon.”

Xiu-quan said, “I don't think my father knows about that yet. He's in a Mutual Aids Team. He still owns the land, but I figure he must give it up in order to join an agricultural cooperative?”

Guo said, “MAT is not collectivist ownership. If China aims to transform itself into a socialist country like Soviet Union, peasants such as your father must volunteer to join the cooperative. The reasoning is simple as that.”

Tang said, “The peasants are reluctant. It's understandable. It was only two years ago that they got their land from the Land Reform.”

Xiu-quan asked, “Directors, how did you come to Dustwon? Wasn't it during the Land Reform?”

“It was before that,” said Tang, realizing that Xiu-quan was changing the topic. “And there's a certain predestined element in the story too. In 1950, Dustown's Grain Station was robbed and burned down by some bandits from Guizhou.”

Xiu-quan asked, “Guizhou, from another province! What kind of bandits, like those in the *Water Margin*?”

Tang said, “You could say that. It was the famous bandit leader, Gong Zhi-guo. He was originally from Sichuan. He used to be a local leader of the Gelaohui in Qijiang County.”

Guo said, “Gelaohui is the largest secret society in Sichuan. Many Sichuanese men joined them in the old society.”

“Did you join it?” asked Xiu-quan.

Guo laughed and bottomed up a cup of laobaigan.

Tang said, “Kuomintang Government used to recruit members of Gelaohui. Gong Zhigu became Qijiang County’s Chief of Public Security. After the People’s Government was established, he went into the mountains and became a bandit, like some of the well-known bandits in *Water Margin*.”

Guo said, “We all know that there are 105 strongmen and 3 strongwomen in *Water Margin*, you could say that Gong Zhigu’s circumstance was like some of them. However, there is a fundamental difference in political line between the bandits in *Water Margin* and Gong Zhigu and his ilk. In the classical novel, the bandits rise against Song Dynasty that represents the interests of the landlords, so the political nature is peasant uprising. But Gong Zhigu sabotages the People’s Government that represents the interests of the masses, so he is anti-revolutionary.”

Tang said, “It took us years to clean up the bandits in the Southwest, because they were roaming in the deep mountains crossing provincial borders. For instance, Gong Zhigu and his two sons were infesting the mountainous juncture of three counties, Xishui, Qijiang, and Jiangjin. He was shot by the Liberation Army in June this year, I’m sure you’ve heard the news.”

Guo said, “As to Dustown’s bandits, we destroyed them in a number of days.”

Xiu-quan said, “I went to see the beheading of the bandits on the primary school playground, five of them. I was fifteen, very callous, for I remembered I was excited to see blood. It was December 1951, if I remember correctly.”

“They robbed the government’s grains and killed the grain tax workers. They got what they deserved,” said Tang.

Guo said, “Jiangjin launched the Land Reform in 1951. By nature the landlords refused to

cough up their land, which was the basis of feudal exploitation. My platoon was sent here to assist the Land Reform, what we call ‘fighting the local tyrants and evil landed gentry and divide the land.’”

Xiu-quan said, “Many small landlords were struggled against.”

Guo said, “The landlord class’s time has come. Where do the peasants get the land if we don’t confiscate the exploitive class?”

Xiu-quan hadn’t reached for pork after his first slice. He was drinking the laobaigan and smoking the cigarettes offered by Tang. He ventured to say, “Land has always been the central issue of any revolution in Chinese history. It makes or breaks kings, depending on who wins the support of the peasants.”

Guo said, “Xiu-quan, you couldn’t be more correct. The secret of the Communist Party’s victory is that we’ve won the support of the peasant class.”

Tang said, “In the first years, the Greater Southwestern China was under military rule. My platoon stationed in Dustown after the Land Reform to stabilize the new regime on the township level. When the military rule ended in 1952, I chose to stay for the civilian transition, because a great challenge for the civilian transition was to find cadres who are familiar with local situations.”

Guo said, “And here we are, we’ve settled down. Have you read the newspaper? The Southwestern Administration Committee headquartered in Chongqing is to be devolved on Monday, November 1, 1954.”

Tang said, “Does this mean the revolution is finally completed and normalcy is restored?”

The table became quiet with this realization. The men stopped their chopsticks. No one

seemed to know what to say.

Lian brought out a soup of the lettuce greens, with a few pork slices floating on green leaves. The two guests entreated her to join them on the table. She brought out the rice and asked them if they wanted to eat rice, because with alcohol and meat dishes, none of them had touched it.

Tang picked up the second bottle of laobaigan, half a bottle left. He laughed that three years of civilian life must have enfeebled him, for he wanted eat something solid to fortify himself in order to finish the rest of the laobaigan. Lian bowled the rice for them and sat on the lower seat, focusing on her own rice.

Xiu-quan asked, “Aunt Lian, where are Chao and Min? Shouldn’t they be home for lunch?”

Lian said, “I sent them to play with Director Guo’s boy. They are too little to drink white spirits with adults.”

Xiu-quan said, “One doesn’t eat pork everyday. The kids would enjoy it once a while.”

Guo said, “Sister Lian, do save some pork for the kids.”

Both Tang and Aunt Lian urged the guests not to worry about the kids and enjoy the liquor and the humble dishes. Lian routinely apologized repeatedly that the food was humble and insufficient, which was rebuked by the guests.

The rice was devoured. The food were almost finished. Tang asked Lian to bring out some roasted peanuts to help the guests finish up the laobaigan. For the second round, the men sipped instead of bottoming up the white spirit as if it was water,.

After one and a half bottles of 60° liquor, Guo brought up his recent study meetings on realizing the General Line in the transition period, namely, the socializations of agriculture,

handicraft, and supply and marketing. Guo said one should expect the expansion of the SMC and the prohibition of all private business activities. “Except for fresh produce from the vegetable farmers,” he added.

Tang said, “The first step of the socialization in agriculture is to encourage the peasants to join the Agricultural Producers’ Cooperative.” He turned to Xiu-quan. “Your father may not be happy to lose his land, but exemplary statistics across the nation proved that cooperativization increases grain production. It’s a scientific truth that socialist relationships are more efficient than petty peasantry.”

The talking of APC bored Guo into a stupor that the laobaigan had failed to give him. He said, “The peasants till the land as long as there is land available. Whoever owns the land doesn’t matter. How intricate could that be? It’s the industrialization and the state-planned economy that represent the true socialist economy.”

Tang assumed an expression appropriate for a cadre; he couldn’t get away from it.

“Try to imagine, the State sets the production goals, deploys the means of production, and redistributes the products to the masses. Never again will the production and sales be for capitalist profiteering. The public ownership is the answer to everything!” Guo paused for agreement from the other men but was offered none. He continued, “Granted, it’s impossible to eliminate private business entirely in the transition period, but the State-private joint ownership is an ingenious move. Once the cadres learned how to manage the businesses, we’ll take them over entirely. Which country can say that the nationalization of its economy was achieved by peaceful means? Not USSR.”

Tang said, “Old Guo, you’ve improved a lot from the studies in White Sands. I can only think about the grain production, but you think about the entire nation.”

Guo said, “A thought just flashed in my mind. I should write an article about this and submit it to the *Jiangjin Daily*. Xiu-quan, what do you think? Although lads should listen when the elders were speaking, you’re awfully quiet today.”

Tang said, “Xiu-quan, young men like you should learn from the old revolutionary cadres like Director Guo, always study the theories and apply them to practices.”

Xiu-quan said, “I always look up to revolutionary elders like you two. Our People’s Regime is merely five years old, we’ve already achieved so much.”

Guo said, elated, “We elderly are quite ignorant. Even revolutionary cadres should raise our political consciousness continuously. Director Tang and I were also born peasants, we learned how to fight the Japs and the Kuomintang reactionaries with ill-equipped soldiers in guerrilla wars, but we don’t know much about business planning or increasing grain production.”

Tang laughed. “Old Guo, you’re too humble after a cup of liquor, but you’re on point. The Party won this vast country and had to rebuild it from scratch. In building the nation, everybody is stumbling, and everybody is looking for guidance. We’ve won the war, but it was fast and easy, because Chairman Mao and his generals were good at it. I often feel like it’s a dream.”

Guo said, “Don’t even start, Old Tang. I still have nightmares.”

Tang said, “I can think a number of treacherous elements both from without and within that could overthrow the New Republic. Example one, the Korean War, indicating the American Imperialism is not just a spectral threat. Example two, many spies and bad capitalists have exposed themselves in the cities.”

Guo said, “Any progressive class must face these barriers. China is big, the Southwestern Region is big too, and Beijing is far away. Sichuan has been doing well so far.”

Tang said, "All thanks to the successful Land Reform. Whenever I visit the villages to allocate grain tax, it thrills me. It's like I'm back to the battlefield. Only in this case it's a battle to win the war of producing more grains to support the industrial production. Xiu-quan, tell me, what do you think about the transitioning from the MAT to APC?"

Guo must be mentally writing his article, while sipping his laobaigan.

Xiu-quan hesitated for a second and said, "The majority of the land on the mountain top is a thin layer of soil on hard bedrock, low fertility and susceptible to poor irrigation. My MAT is lagging behind, because to overcome these natural problems requires man power and better organization, which a MAT simply doesn't have."

Guo asked, "But?"

Xiu-quan looked passed Director Guo out of the window. He said, "How would the peasants feel if they can no longer call the land their own? The members of the MAT are mostly relatives and long time neighbors. It's true that they help each other transplant seedlings or harvest or feed a buffalo, but they've been doing these before the introduction of MAT. Please forgive me for saying such bold words, but if cooperativization is the inevitable trend of production relationships, what's so special of a fancy name? I think we should only focus on whatever that is for the best of the masses."

The last bit of laobaigan was finished. The men toyed with empty cups. Lian cleaned off the empty plates.

Guo babbled on why collective ownership is a more advanced type of production relation, thus would enable higher grain production, theoretically.

There's something about Xiu-quan, Tang thought, something that has raised a tenderness in me: the tenderness that a carpenter ponders over a piece of seasoned rosewood, to release an

heirloom abacus from this chunk of wood, an abacus like the one Xiu-quan is using, wrapped in extenuated yellow copper. Why is Xiu-quan so straightforward? He can talk on any topic with common sense, and nothing comes out of his mouth is simplistic, but his honesty won't serve him well in this business.

Tang sighed at the last thought. He sipped the cup and realized it was empty. He picked up a roasted peanut.

He said, "Xiu-quan, I invited Director Guo here today because we have something to discuss with you."

Xiu-quan looked at them with doleful eyes and said, "Yes?"

He could hold his liquor, Tang mentally noted. He continued, "It's a pity that you can't work in town, but there're opportunities in the rural as well. There is a new village head in your village. Director Guo and I are referring you to him. You'll assist him in expanding the Elementary APC in Skysburg, as a probationary Party member. Your extended family is still in MAT. With a good example such as yourself, your organizational work will advance their political consciousness."

Xiu-quan said, "Can I be a probationary Party member? I'm not a member of the Communist Youth League. I know something about the Party's organizations, but I've never studied the Party's theories."

Tang said, "Your political element is solid. If you want to submit your application to the Party, we can be your references. What do you think?"

Moved and ungainly, Xiu-quan rose from his seat. He said, "Director Tang and Director Guo, this is a tremendous trust you put in me. I don't know what to say, except that I'm aware that I'm not advanced enough to join the Party. I don't think I deserve the honor." His tongue

was a little twisted.

Guo said, “Aspiring to political progressiveness is one of the most important criteria.”

Tang said, “The Party can only lead the masses if it recruits the best from them, and you are a fine specimen from the proletarian class. You are certainly correct that the communist education is essential for new members, but the Party needs new blood to build this great New Republic. The recruitment process is ... we don't have time for that now. We're in time of peace now — even American Imperialists were defeated by our People's Volunteer Army in Korea — you'll learn to be a qualified party member through practice. If you want to improve your theoretical weaponry, you're a scholar, you can read and think. Meanwhile, you improve your communist education by working for Village Head Shen. You help him organize the Elementary APCs. Hopefully, you'll inspire your family and you relatives.”

Tang pulled out a letter from his left breast pocket and handed it to Xiu-quan. “Here is the introduction letter to transfer your work relation from the Grain Station to your village. Show it to VH Shen when you report to him.”

Xiu-quan took the letter with both hands and thanked the directors. The letter felt like a lump of stone. It was the cue for him to leave. He said goodbye to the directors and thanked Aunt Lian for her wonderful lunch. Director Tang and Aunt Lian congratulated him again on his coming baby. She told him not to worry about opening the grain shop.

When Xiu-quan walked out of the cadres family quarter, he couldn't differentiate the faces of the directors in his mind, except that he now understood that there was more than one way to obey. He realized that he'd been greedy with the liquor cups, but it couldn't have been more than half of a bottle.

A quick descent on the pebbled street brought Xiu-quan back to the SMC Bridge. The clay huts and a few farm houses along the river were soaked with coldness and silence. What are people doing when they are free? he thought; I never knew much about farming and now with so many things I've done, how can I go back? What if I'll have nothing to do for the new village head? I don't even know him. The current stopped in winter. Here and there were dead water, feces and duck feathers, and the bare bleached boulders. The fog lifted, revealing the bamboo groves on the river banks, rootless and topless like in a tired dream. The streets were flanked by planked houses, descending towards the bridge, to him. On most walls were slogans painted in unpresentable penmanship and quite a few non-standard characters: "Unswirvingly Implement the General Line for the Excess to Socialism," "Perversely Struggle against the American Imperialism," "Rush to Fulfill the Gradual First Five-Year Plan," or "May Chairman Mao Live Ten Thousand Years!"

A chill gust over the river sobered Xiu-quan a little. Join the Party! A peasant's son? He was amazed. He remembered that his schoolmaster had discussed about the Three Principles of the People to a class of peasant boys. A new country needs him, his schoolmaster had told him before his disappearance. The preteen Xiu-quan had no idea what civil rights meant. But how strange that a strange word stuck.

The Southwestern China was the last region to be liberated. It had been the stronghold of the Kuomintang's power, so the Southwesterners had never been baptized by red revolutions like other regions. In the first years of the New Republic, trails of propaganda teams had performed plays and held rallies in the township school playground, attended by organized villagers in slack seasons. The newly liberated had learned that under the Party's leadership, the proletarians had overthrown the imperialist, the bureaucratic capitalist, and the feudal dictatorships and the

oppressed were now masters of the nation.

But none of their beautiful speeches had spoken louder than the public beheading of the bandits and the landlords, which the peasants referred as “smashing the clay pots.” The hand raised, the machete fell, the heads rolled in front of the audience, the headless bodies twitched, the blood gushed out black instead of red — blood was never red. Seeing the bodiless heads and the coagulated blood of the old oppressors had convinced a sixteen-year-old that they were under a new sky. The richer a landlord was, the more horrible his death. He remembered a prophesy demonstrated by the three monks of Stone Dragon Temple, a corn cob full of kernels miserable; a cob half of kernels placid; a cob of no kernel ecstatic. The cob symbolized the property.

Xiu-quan left the bridge and went back to the posthouse. Through the folded doors, he entered the courtyard bordered by open rain gutters under the black-tiled eaves. Two hunger-stricken hens were pecking at something. All the doors were closed. Surely nobody’s taking a nap in this coldness, he thought, unlocking the door of his room on the west wing.

Sitting in bed, he took out the reference letter and read it.

Let the peasants have land to till should persuade me, he thought; a peasant son is asked to join the ruling party, isn’t it something? I’m a master. Any warm-blooded young man would jump at the chance to join the Party. He had toyed with the idea before. Isn’t it the testimony of the Party’s nature, that a peasant son could join the ruling class to serve the people’s best interests? He wished that he could tell his schoolmaster, but he hadn’t seen him since his disappearance. He might have already died, or been killed.

November 1, another market day in Dustown. The Grain Station might be busy. Xiu-quan didn't care any more. He stayed in the bed till the afternoon. Teacher Shu didn't come home for lunch from the school.

He sat up in the bed for a few minutes. He looked about the room for the last time. It was dark and short, sparsely furnished, with just two straw beds and a short desk in between, on which there were two canteens, a few books, and an oil lamp. The floor was bare mud, as were the walls.

He had packed most things in the previous evening. He put the clothes in the beddings, rolled them all up and stuffed it in his basket, together with his abacus, an herbal medicine self-guide book, a novel titled *Ripples On Stagnant Water*, and a copperplate print *Kangxi Dictionary* for his antique book collection. Without the cover, the bed was but rice straws on pine planks laid on bricks. He shouldered the basket and looked around if he had missed anything. The canteen. He threw it in his basket. The bamboo rain hat. He threw it in bottom-up. He left the soap for Teacher Shu.

Out of the posthouse, Xiu-quan heard noises in his stomach. He would like to have some steam buns for once on the Fig Bridge Street if not for the overcrowded market-goers. He could smell whiffs of citrus and the late season pears from the rural market. He decided to visit Xiu-bang on the way.

The big path in Moon Dale had been relaid recently, organized by one of the new APCs in Moon Dale. A few yards into the dell he stopped by the village clinic where Dr Liu was working. He greeted the doctor through the folded doors.

Doctor Liu used to operate on high ranking military personnel, but not for the

Communist's army. After two years' reeducation in labor camps, he was fortunate enough to be able to work in a village clinic — even though the cadres secretly came to him for anything more serious than a common cold.

Dr Liu was checking on a woman's swollen neck. He saw Xiu-quan and congratulated him on his coming baby, affirming that Chun-fen's due was "either tonight or tomorrow."

Dr Liu turned back to the female patient, shaking his wild-haired head. He said, "I'm afraid it's iodine deficiency."

The woman whimpered, "What's that?"

"Big Neck Syndrome. Next time, don't buy crude salt."

Xiu-quan wanted to ask Dr Liu about some herbs from the folk medicine manual, but there was a line of patients. He said goodbye to the doctor and promised to visit again soon. Dr Liu was checking the next patient. He didn't take any notice.

Xiu-quan returned to his path, which curved with the course of the river. Upstream, it slimed down to a brook. The blacksmith shop thundered metallic noises. He came to a small bridge at the foot of the knoll. The Moon Dale School was on the bluff. He looked at the opalescent patch in the sky where the sun was supposed to be, somewhere between 2 to 3 o'clock in the afternoon. He picked the trail, flanked by fields of winter vegetables such as lettuce, spinach, and chard. The top of the knoll was more or less flat. Across from the classroom building was a mud cottage used as the teacher's dorm. There were three classrooms for five grades.

Xiu-quan peeked into the abnormally large windows. In the middle classroom, Xiu-bang was explaining a puzzle on the blackboard. Boys and girls, aged anywhere from nine to fourteen, so beautiful and dirty, their eyes riveted on the teacher, their backs upright, hands behind,

shivering in the dilapidated desk chairs. Two or three students were stealing glances at him.

Xiu-bang looked like an overgrown boy performing at the podium. His youthful face was heightened by the loose-fitting blue coat, because the cotton padding was taken out. Xiu-bang noticed Xiu-quan. He told his pupils to work out the puzzle on their own and asked a boy to observe the order.

He came out and said, “Big Brother, on the way home?”

“Shouldn’t you finish the class first?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“There are blue stubbles around your mouth. Have you got the mustache you wanted?”

“Yes, it grew like wild grass after some sleepless night. Teaching maths is hard.”

“Why did you shave it?”

Xiu-bang shrugged. He took out his cigarette pack and extended one to Xiu-quan, who waved his hand no. He lit one for himself.

He said, “So, my first uncle has got you again!”

“I’d be lying if I hadn’t thought of this end.”

“Even so, how many times has First Uncle sabotaged your jobs?”

Xiu-quan looked away. The river disappeared in the streets that he had known better in these months more than the past nineteen years. The road down the knoll merged with the interprovincial highway. The walking had warmed him. Now he stood still under the eaves, he sensed the gusts on his face. It’s the top of the hill, he thought; the wind scrapes at the top. The sweat on his feet grew cold. His single-layered cloth shoes felt soaked with icy water.

“How’s the teaching? Used to it yet?”

“The sums are nothing, but you should have seen me sweating from teaching the

multiplication table to the beginner's class. It took me months to have everyone memorize it in front of me." Xiu-bang laughed at himself. "It should be you teaching here."

"You're doing fine. Anyone can teach primary school. What counts is your dedication."

"But the abacus is hard. I wish I've paid more attention in school. Now I'm spending hours practicing fingerings and the abacus rhymes before I can stand on that podium. Do you want to sit in my room and wait for me to finish the class?"

"I'm fine. I just got out of bed."

"Then put down your basket."

Xiu-quan did so and said, "On a second thought, give me a cigarette."

Xiu-bang gave Xiu-quan a cigarette and his own. He went inside the classroom and inspected the students for working the puzzle. He walked among the aisles. When he came out, Xiu-quan gave him back his cigarette and told him about Director Tang and Director Guo's proposal.

Xiu-bang said, "That's excellent! I didn't know you were applying to join the Party."

"I didn't. They suggested that I should."

"Well, all the better. Most of the young men want to join the Party, you see, so they can be cadres."

Xiu-quan showed him the letter.

Xiu-bang took it and read it aloud in a mocked official air, "To the comrade it may concern, The bearer of this letter, Wu Xiu-quan, is approved to transfer his work relation by this organization, the Dustown Grain Station. Please accommodate him with expedience and formalities accordingly. Respectfully cosigned, Tang Yao-lun, Director of the Dustown Grain Station, and Guo Kai-wen, Director of the Dustown Supply and Marketing Cooperative. 1954,

Oct., 30.”

Xiu-bang folded the letter and returned it to Xiu-quan. “Ay, Big Brother, you’re a big shot now, two directors recommending you to a job. The Grain Station’s loss is Skysburg’s gain.”

“It’s too early to say this is a blessing in disguise,” said Xiu-quan. “They wanted me to help VH Shen prepping our MAT to join an Elementary APC.”

“What? Work on our stubborn relatives and neighbors! Good luck to that, Big Brother! It took them a long time to join the MAT. The former village head forced them to visit other teams, to see the waterworks and improved paddies and larger buffalos with their own eyes.”

“Yes, I know. I organized the visits.” Xiu-quan looked around the playground. Seeing nobody, he said in a hushed voice, “Our uncles and great-uncles all think the APC is just a ruse to take away their land. On the market days, they came to the Grain Station and complained to me. You know what they said to me? ‘What does collectivist ownership even mean? One simply can’t understand how the land is yours and not yours at the same time!’”

Xiu-bang said, “They’ll dislike you more. I dare say they haven’t forgotten your work in the Peasants Association, or the Mutual Aid Team.”

“But they turned around eventually, didn’t they? They got land from joining the Peasants Association. And they realized that the People’s Government just wanted them more organized and produce more grains, so there’ll be more for the tax.”

“No peasant will be happy once the APC takes away their land.”

“But the Elementary APC is just like the Mutual Aid Team. One never truly owns the land anymore, look at the fate of the landlords.”

“Go tell that to your great-uncles. I couldn’t care less. I don’t want a piecemeal of the

land.”

“The policy is that it’s voluntary to joining the APC.”

Xiu-bang laughed.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Xiu-quan, “I think joining the Party will help turn my family around. I’ll be a cadre. But honestly, the cooperative is not bad at all. The APCs in the valley all increased their rice production. I’ve seen the numbers in reports.”

“It’s useless to discuss this. You know whoever in power will get what they want. But I’m happy you can work for the village head, Big Brother. I know you can find a way out.” Xiu-bang looked inside the windows. “The thing is, you have such a stubborn father. I don’t understand the way First Uncle thinks. He even made you give me this teaching job.”

“If the job is yours, no one can take it away from you.”

“Big Brother, why the fuck so fatalistic? Fight it, don’t surrender without a fight.”

“It’s not easy, Xiu-bang, not that I’ve never tried. I’m the only son.”

“I guess I’m lucky, my father died early. Oh, don’t make that face, it’s true.”

“It’s easier to surrender to Fate.”

“You can run away, if you meant it. I’ll gladly give up this job whenever you make up your mind.”

“I did run away with you last year. How did that turn out?”

“Ah, yes, the War to Resist American Aggression and Aid Korea!” Xiu-bang sighed.

“We came so close.”

“No use talking about it now. You’d better go back to your classroom.”

“Wait,” Xiu-bang said, putting out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe and put it behind his ear. “I have something for grandpa.”

Xiu-bang sprinted inside the cottage and dashed back with a bunch of dried tobacco leaves and a brown paper package, which he put in Xiu-quan's basket and explained, "Some sugar for grandpa."

"Good. Now go back to your class. Your students are watching us instead of working on the puzzle."

"Some of them used to be your students too."

Xiu-quan's feet didn't warm up until he passed the Qiu's hollow. Talking to Xiu-bang always reminded him what he had lost at the hands of his father. He wondered, again and again, why his father would deny him the chances of a less toiling job and making use of his knowledge. Simply being a peasant's son, things were looking up for him already. Nothing pained him more than thinking his father had sent him to school only so that he could write appropriate letters on occasions of marriage and funeral without seeking help. His father had eagerly volunteered him to relatives and neighbors whenever his talent could be of use. The irony is that he hadn't used any of the skills for his own wedding. Bah, how hateful to write for funerals and marriages! he thought; When one's mind latches on something, one simply can't get out of it.

His heart was heavier than the basket on his back, as he was climbing the steep path to the cliff, a belt of shed trees and evergreen pines that divided the mountain into two villages. He hobbled on the slates broken by horseshoes. He trudged mindlessly, through browning woods and fields of rapeseed seedlings, wishing to reach the Gate, which was nothing but a crack on the crags allowing no more than two people to climb the perpendicular passage, zigzagging between a slab of stone wall and shapeless boulders ruffled by elder-bushes and shaded by old growth trees.

The bandits' stone fortress was a pile of rubble, only the stone steps preserved. The court of the bandits was reclaimed by vines and grasses. The Gate was a spot for hikers to rest and, on market days, to socialize. One should open a tea stand here, he thought, like Pu Song-ling, the master of ghost stories, who set up tea and tobacco and engaged passersby to tell him tales. When everything fails, this is where I end up, he resolved, serving people tea and listening to

their tales.

He laid down his basket and sat down on one of the boulders. His heartbeat drummed in his ears, and the undershirt glued on his sweaty back. Youthful impatience. He rolled a cigar and searched in his pockets for matches. He realized he didn't have any, but he put the cigar between his lips anyway. On his left the creek that originated in Ba County rushed down, joining the creek on his right that originated somewhere behind Stone Dragon Temple, forming the ravine he had just trudged through. The knolls looked like tombs in the ravine. The mountain ranges limited his universe.

Sitting under a fig tree, he fancied himself a monk in meditation. He was mindful that his buttocks were wet. He was mindful that his mind was older than his age and body. He was mindful that he was being a filial son. He heard someone climbing up under the boulders, the knockings of a staff, an old person. The footsteps were slow but steady.

The man was Master Qiu, the great blind fortuneteller from a neighboring village in Ba County. His oracular reputation reached far beyond Dustown and Ba Country. Many of his believers revered him as a demi-immortal. Xiu-quan had met the fortuneteller once or twice, but he'd never had his fortune told by him. Should I help him? he thought; no, it's a little presumptuous, but I should announce myself.

Xiu-quan greeted aloud, "Ay, Master Qiu, you look the same fresh and vigorous."

He realized that this was a mistake, for "fresh and vigorous" was a greeting to the elderly, someone at least in his sixties with grey hairs. Master Qiu could not be older than forty, and his beard was black. His eyes weren't clouded, just normal looking eyes, one would not assume straightaway that he could not see. His cheeks were round, but his mouth was impossibly square. No wonder he's a fortuneteller, he thought; hope he doesn't mind my blunder.

Master Qiu's bust emerged from the passage. He wore a sheepskin hat and a blue coat and carried a golden satchel. He supported himself on his staff. His eyes fixed on Xiu-quan.

He asked, "Isn't it Wu Xiu-quan, from Skysburg?"

Xiu-quan said, "Yes, Master Qiu. How incredible that you know it's me!"

"Ah, my memory is my livelihood. I talked to you almost eight years ago. You were crying to your mother, you didn't want to marry because you were twelve."

"Yes, wasn't it right here, back when the bandits were still holding the Gate? My mother passed away in less than two years. Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Master Qiu, please come up and take a seat. The way home is still far ahead." He pointed at the steps, knowing that there was no need to treat the fortuneteller any different.

"Standing here with nothing behind me is somewhat scary, as if I'm about to fall to the precipice," said Master Qiu, his voice sonorous and quiet at once. He walked up, his staff tapping till he reached the top step, where he turned round and sat down. "How's your wife? You sound like your heart is not with you. Is she going to be in labor?"

"Yes, it's very gentle of you to ask," said Xiu-quan, not questioning how the fortuneteller knew about his wife. "My father told me that she's about to be in labor in one or two days, which is why I'm going home."

Xiu-quan sat down, but he too was afraid of having his back to the cliff. He got up, excused himself in front of Master Qiu, and sat on a stone under a small fig tree above the stone wall.

"Master Qiu, where are you coming back from all by yourself?"

"I visited a relative in Qijiang." Anticipating Xiu-quan's question, Master Qiu added, "Once I was accompanied to Dustown, I assured my relatives that I can find my way home."

“How marvelous that you can walk all the way back to Ba County by yourself!”

“You don’t need your eyes to see, if that’s what you meant to ask. I’ve walked home from much further away. My feet can be trusted.” Master Qiu took out a tobacco pouch from his satchel. “Besides, my home is on the big road, very easy to find.”

“Would you do me the honor and let me roll the tobacco for you?”

“Of course, young man, how polite of you.” Master Qiu handed the pouch to Xiu-quan, who took it over and started smoothing out the shriveled brown leaves. “While you are rolling, make one for yourself.”

Xiu-quan accepted the offer. He sniffed the leaves. “From the smell one can tell this is of the best quality.”

“I cured it myself. Of the Five Elements, I have a fire life. I wish I had more with me, or I’d give you some.”

Xiu-quan rolled two cigars and handed one to Master Qiu, who stuffed it in his short copper pipe. Xiu-quan found the match box in the pouch and lit it for him. The cigar sizzled and sparked. Master Qiu puffed, and the smoke looked clear and pure, even in such damp weather.

Xiu-quan lit his own and sat back to enjoy. The smoke was smooth and rough at the same time. He said, “This tobacco is better than the best cigarettes I’ve ever had.”

Master Qiu said, “I’m not bragging, but I studied the taste of a few expensive American cigarettes back in the 30s. I’ve tried out different curing processes, and this is the closest to the flavors in my memory.” He held his copper pipe, which was too heavy to hold in between lips, but each time he put it back to his mouth with precision. “This is stronger than cigarettes. Urbanites can’t stand the smell and smoke.”

Xiu-quan wondered what kind of questions people would have for a powerful

fortuneteller. Does wisdom come naturally to someone like him? he thought; does his knowledge get in the way of his daily life? Xiu-quan's mind wandered. How peaceful to sit down and enjoy a pipe in such a chill day. One was neither here or there.

“Young man, I think it's time for you to go back to your road.”

Xiu-quan was brought back. He was embarrassed by his ill manner. The weight on his mind had slipped away, it seemed, though for a short time. He felt reinvigorated. He apologized for his zoning off.

Master Qiu said, “Start now, you might get home to see the birth of your son. Don't take another rest on the way.”

Xiu-quan thanked him but remained seated. “So, it's a son. That would make my father and grandfather extra happy.”

“Aren't you excited to see your first son?”

“To be honest, Master Qiu, I'm not.”

“It's intimidating, isn't it? But you don't seem like a man who shuns responsibility. It's something else.”

“I'm too young to be a father.”

“Young, old, nobody is ever ready. I don't think it's your immaturity that's on your mind, either.”

“It is, but in a different sense. I don't know where my life is heading, and I don't like what's forced on me. That is my immaturity.”

“Some people are destined to greatness, some people are not. The only way to make sure is to plunge in the life that's yours, do you think not?”

“Wouldn't it be great if you knew your destiny and just go for it with certainty?”

“It won’t make any difference.”

“But you’re a fortuneteller.”

“Yes, yes, I am, and I don’t tell the truth to anybody.”

Master Qiu seemed to be serious. There was a curved scar on his left cheek, pigmented, not easy to detect. Xiu-quan asked, “Why tell me the truth?”

“Answer me this. If I tell you now that two of your sons will be crippled, would that make you not want to have sons any more, so that you can spare them from being disabled, like me?”

Xiu-quan’s young heart ached. Master Qiu seemed not the kind of man who would say something like this to make a point. Fortunetellers secure the clients’ trust by assertions of past injuries on their limbs or face, wherever visible. Master Qiu told him about his sons that weren’t yet born.

“How could I do that? They are my children, even if they are not yet born. The children of my future are also the children of my past. Why do I deny their chances to live?”

“Now, tell that to yourself.”

Xiu-quan shook his head. If only life’s resolution came so easily, he thought; yet one has to plunge in, even if blindly. “The Sky and the Earth do not care, they treat the myriad things, impartially, like straw dogs,” he thought of the line from *Tao Te Ching*; I’m a straw dog for ceremonies, not any different from the next person.

Master Qiu said, “Many people come to fortunetellers to ask their fate. Now tell me, what is fate anyway?”

“Fortune? Possession? Health?”

“But you see, the three things are actually one: to have. What fate promises you, you will

have it; what fate denies you, you will have not.”

“So it’s settled in advance? No changing. Just accept it.”

“I didn’t say that,” said Master Qiu, finishing his cigar. “How is it fate until you look back? Knowing is not the beginning, but the end.”

Xiu-quan got up and slapped the dust off his buttocks. He said, “Many thanks to you, Master Qiu. I know what I have to do. I’ll let myself go.” He walked passed him and shouldered his basket. “Do you want to walk with me? It’s more interesting to have a company on the way.”

“I’ll slow you down. You go ahead. Rest assure that our crossed paths have not finished yet. I’ll see you, Xiu-quan. And watch out for fire.”

Xiu-quan thanked the master, wondering the meaning of those cryptic words. He shouldered his basket and bade goodbye to the master.

Up Xiu-quan marched. His feet were springs and the scenery was fleeting by. Paddies with water of rotten stubbles, paddies without water of cabbages, fields with bean stalks or lettuce, fields of winter wheat or rapeseed seedlings, woods of wild persimmon and wild dates, woods of dwarf oaks and pines, ponds with grey water, hollows with clay huts and bamboo groves, mounds with tombs and gnarled kudzu vines, balks with pear and Manli trees, balks with citrus and loquat trees, creeks with stones and shoals, stone irrigation ducts, yellow mud paths in the woods. This was his village, his mountain.

On the way home the acquaintances from various production teams seemed more lovely than usual. Zhu Lai-de from the eighth team asked him if he had had lunch; Shen Da-wei from the seventh team asked him about the price of fresh pork in Dustown; he sprinted up before Dong Biao from the sixth team had time to greet him; Shen IV from the fifth team talked to him about the winter wheat; the hunchbacked Mrs. Cheng squinted at him as he was rushing on the balks where she was reaping fodders; the monks in the Stone Dragon Temple were in their own world.

Xiu-quan permitted no one to keep him long, for Master Qiu had said no rest and Chun-fen was awaiting.

On the ridge that looked at his house, he stopped at a shrine for the local earth god by a red bean tree. The daylight was fading. The mountain caps were shrouded with a lingering fog. The air dampened everything, absorbing too much light that the world around him became stark. Behind him he couldn't see the Dustown valley, for below him was an opaque sea of nothingness. His world was a floating island, rootless, precarious, and cut off. The Wu clan scattered in three hollows under this ridge. He intended to move but he didn't. The homecoming

timidity, he thought. During the months working in the Grain Station, he'd come home once to help his father move the corn stalks for firewood at the request of his sister. The mountains were still blue, and the sky was still grey. He knew every parcel of the land here, the paddies, the vegetables and crops fields, the creek where the crabs were waiting for the kids in warm season, the pond, the chestnut trees, the hollowed oak trunks, the fan palms, and the bamboos groves shading the mud huts.

Xiu-quan descended on the balks studded with late season pear threes and arrived at the shared yard with his second uncle's family. A few hens were sauntering aimlessly. Large oak fagots surrounded the houses, leaving the doorways and front porches open. There was a pile of split firewood crisscross-laid by his main door.

His grandfather's patrimonial house was the smallest among his relatives. His grandfather's generation had boasted eight siblings, but his father was the only son, so his grandfather had never found the impetus to expand the house. After Chun-fen had been confirmed pregnant, Xiu-quan and his father had divided up the household. He got the east wing, with a kitchenette and a thatched pigsty. Xiu-lan and his grandfather lived with his father in the main house. Since daughters are born to be other men's, eventually this house would belong to him.

He strode to the double-doors. The fog poured in the central room. He heard muffled voices from the sleeping chamber. His father and grandfather were smoking, their eyes fixed on the mud floor. Someone had lit the oil lamp and incense in front of his mother and grandmother's memorial tablets. At a corner, there was a modest pile of sweet potatoes. The walls were covered by faded newspapers. It was the same house. Nothing had changed.

Wu Chang-hua said, "Why are you back this late! It's almost dark!"

Xiu-quan asked, "How close is it? Is Chun-fen about to ..."

The grandfather said, "If you come back any later, you might miss the birth of your child."

"Who's she with?" Xiu-quan asked, impatient. He put down his basket behind a door.

Wu asked, "Have you brought anything for Chun-fen?"

Xiu-quan stammered. He hadn't thought of it.

Wu yelled, pointing him with the bamboo pipe, "What kind of a husband are you? Your wife is in labor, and you never thought of buying brown sugar for her? You work in Dustown."

The grandfather intervened, "Shut up, will you? You two are like dogs and sheep, can't see eyes to eye. Xiu-quan, go ask your sister in the kitchen. She knows what's going on."

Xiu-quan found Xiu-lan sitting behind the stove in the kitchen. The skylight tiles were sooted, he might have to clean it sometime. She was feeding twigs in the fire pit to boil hot water. The fire's reflection was dancing on her bright red cheeks, and her eyes were flickering. Xiu-lan was too young to remember their mother, but she looked like their mother, or his memory of her, slender nose, almond eyes, and sunflower seed cheeks. And the likeness grew with age.

"Brother, you are back! Baba thought you won't make it."

Xiu-lan got up and left the stove. Her girl child figure was concealed in her loose indigo coat. Her hair was to the ears, the student cut, held back by bobby pins. The stone countertop was covered with unwashed dishes. She saw his eyes and put them in one of the big woks.

She said, "Sister-in-law is on the loft of Baba's bedroom."

"Why Baba's loft? Why not in my sleeping chamber?"

"The mud walls of your wing are cracked. The midwife said your chamber is droughty."

“Which midwife? How long since she’s been here?”

“It’s Granny Dong. She delivered you and me! And Sister-in-law II is helping too. They didn’t want me on the loft. I wanted to see it. They said I’m too young to see such thing and kicked me out. I just wanted to help.”

“Well, you’re a little girl.”

“But I’m thirteen. I’m the oldest girl in my classroom.”

“Granny Dong is experienced. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Come sit in front of the stove, so you can talk to me while I’m washing the dishes.”

“The walked sweated me out ... oh, well.” Xiu-quan unbuttoned his jacket and sat on the knobby short stool. “I wonder if I could see how Chun-fen is doing.”

“No, no man is allowed, Granny Dong and Sister-in-law II said so, not even the husband.”

Xiu-quan fed a few twigs in the cracking fire. The water in the big pot was making noises. Xiu-lan opened the wooden lid, and the steam rose to mist her face.

“Add a large log,” she said. “Aren’t you happy? You don’t look like you are happy.”

“I am. I’m having a baby.”

“I’m talking about you coming home. Remember that day you ran downhill after a fight with Baba?”

“I’m fine. Holding a grudge against Baba won’t alter his mind.”

“No, you can’t. If it’s any consolation, Sister-in-law and me are excited that you are back.”

“Tell you something,” Xiu-quan said, trying not to think about Chun-fen in pain. “The director of the Grain Station has recommended me to work for the village head of Skysburg. I’ll

still be busy, because it's slack season, but I'll work from home."

"That's great. I still wish you are a teacher, so that you might teach me in my school."

"Be a teacher again? Don't be absurd."

"Why absurd? Oh, Baba."

Xiu-quan felt the fire was licking his face. He said, "You should work hard in school and be a teacher in Dustown. It's a pretty good livelihood. My roommate is a teacher. He said teaching in town comes with a steady salary from the township government, unlike teaching in the village schools. Xiu-bang works for Moon Dale, and sometimes he doesn't get paid because a village doesn't have much money."

"I'm not as smart as you, Brother. I'm dumb. I'm the oldest in my class, and I'm very behind. I want to drop out and help out at home. I'm old enough to work."

"You are dumb if you think you are dumb. And no talk of dropping out. I won't allow it."

"I'm just a girl."

"A girl is the same as a boy in New China. The Women's Association propagandizes that girls should receive basic education. And I'll make sure you go as far as you can."

"Xiu-lan," Xiu-quan's second sister-in-law yelled from the other end of the house. "Xiu-lan, is the water hot?"

Xiu-lan yelled yes. After some rapid footsteps on the wooden stairs, Sister-in-law II came in the kitchen.

She said cheerfully, "Xiu-quan, you are back! This family is interesting. Nobody issues a fart, not even in this situation."

Xiu-quan stood up. "Many thanks to you, Sister-in-law, for being there for Chun-fen."

"Oh, I help very little. I just stand by the bed and watch Granny Dong. Chun-fen is a

tough woman.” She ladled the water into an enamel washbasin and tried the temperature like a cat playing water. She added some cold water and tried again. Satisfied, she held the basin and ready to go. “Chun-fen is doing great, by the way. I’ll tell her you are back. She was asking about you.”

Xiu-quan felt a pang of guilt. Growing up he had never worried about Chun-fen. It was she who had taken care of everything. He rubbed his slimy palms on the sides of his pants. The heat was too much so he went to the central room. His grandfather was smoking in silence. His baba was pacing. He went out. It was almost dark. The mountaintop was colder than the valley. He buttoned his jacket and he couldn’t put the buttons through the tiniest buttonholes. His hands were shaking. The dogs were barking at each other from afar, the vestige of a primordial instinct. He looked around, the thatched or tiled roofs of the Wu clan’s houses around him seemed a cattle pen, and he was a saddled horse. The smell of the dust in the country was enticing, the smokes of families cooking dinner with firewood instead of coal. The hens gathered around him. “What the fuck do you want?” he cursed under breath. He went into the wing and found some sweet potato peels in a bowl, which he poured on the ground for the hens. Chun-fen’s quick-breathed screaming came out of the tiny window.

Xiu-quan sat under the eaves. Without knowing, his hand reached into his side pocket for the tobacco leaves. But he had no matches. He thought of going inside to ask fire from his father, but asking fire was such a cordial thing that he didn’t know if he was ready. He fished out the cigar he’d rolled at the Gate. He put it in his mouth and felt eased a little. Xiu-lan came out and stood beside him, silent as well. Should I say something to her? Xiu-quan thought. But he didn’t know what to say, or think, or will say, or will think, or will ever do. Do I tell my sister that I know it’s a son? Better not, it’s quite bizarre. What else to talk about except being a father to a

son? That was him, now. The seal of a family man, he thought; there'll be a son, sons, according to Master Qiu. Nothing will ever be different. He got up, walked about. He sat down hard for he forgot that there was no stool. The baby would be his father's weapon to tie him down. Ah, he couldn't breathe. How am I to get away? he thought in aghast, for he remembered that he must tell his father that he was going to report to VH Shen. He spat out the cigar and felt sick.

There was a piercing cry of a baby and the agonizing scream of Chun-fen. Xiu-quan rushed inside. Xiu-lan followed him. He heard sobs and soothing encouragement.

That's my son, and my mind is occupied with my job and future, not about my wife, he thought; I have always been a bad husband, now I'm going to be a bad father, too, he thought; how selfish I am! But am I selfish? I'm here, aren't I? I can't be selfish, for I've given up yet another job. There was a voice at the back of his head, of his schoolmaster, "You can't live for yourself, not in a troubled nation like this." He had betrayed his schoolmaster. He teared up, Oh, I have. This was not the only family of his. No, he wanted to tell himself, it's a duty, not so different from the one to the Grain Station or to the village. But he couldn't fool himself. At least, I don't have to feel guilty to Chun-fen any more, he thought; I'm not the sky or the earth, nor am I a sage. I can't treat my family like straw dogs, and let them be.

Wu Chang-hua stopped pacing and sat down, as if the storm was over.

After what appeared to be an age, Sister-in-law II came out of the chamber and cried with a broad smile, "It's a son, Xiu-quan, your first child is a son, such a great fortune."

Wu Chang-hua and the grandfather stood up from the long stools.

Xiu-quan asked, "Can I see Chun-fen?"

Sister-in-law II said, "Yes, go see her."

Xiu-quan dropped something that he didn't know he was holding and allowed himself to

be led through the dark chamber. The wooden stairs made unnecessarily loud thuds. The loft was lighted by candles and oil lamps. There she was, under a red mandarin ducks wedding quilt, her head wrapped in a towel. The wood bed was covered by a canopy cloth net. Granny Dong was cleaning something bloody on the plank floor. She congratulated him without looking up. Xiu-quan went to Chun-fen, the wide plank floor vibrated and gave away to even louder resonances. He tiptoed. He knocked over a basket of old clothes. Chun-fen stirred. He gave many thanks to Granny Dong, his eyes fixing on Chun-fen and the swaddled baby in her arms. Her eyes were shut, and her face was gleaming. The infant was staring at something that Xiu-quan couldn't see, its tiny fists twitching. He was frightened by its wrinkly face, swollen eyes, and toothless mouth, and its head, not round, but oblong, with sparse fuzz on the head. Its crown was a recess, not yet developed. Xiu-quan was frightened by such thoughts of the infant, his son, whose temples were throbbing. Granny Dong encouraged him, "Go ahead. Try your hands. Don't be afraid of him." "How?" He mouthed. The midwife laughed. Her gnarly fingers reached over to take the baby. Chun-fen clutched the baby, she opened her eyes.

Chun-fen was taken aback. It's just Granny Dong. How long was I out? I must not do this with the baby. She saw her husband standing by the bed, looking at her with his large staring eyes. "You are here," she said. She wanted to reach out to Xiu-quan's cheek, he's thinner than a couple of market days ago. I can see the contours of his skull. They know he's smart so they overuse him. It's good he's back.

Chun-fen let Granny Dong have the baby. You don't have to take him this rough. Her son was hovering in the air, out of her vision. Xiu-quan had the baby, holding him like he was a pot of boiled water. Xiu-quan's eyes were on her son, and his eyes were widened, as if her son was a

wolf cub. Chun-fen smiled. She looked at Xiu-quan's face. He'd started to grow a full beard that ran in his family, the scruff covered half of his cheeks. He's still the boy I first met, the fear in his eyes just like the day we were being introduced. Now everybody is with me. She shut her eyes and tried to sit up, but a shot of pain paralyzed her, and her loins were powerless. She winced and issued a small cry.

Stop, don't move, Granny Dong admonished. You lost a lot of vigor. Keep still. It'll take a while to recover yet.

Her sister-in-law brought up a brazier of burning charcoal in a clay bowl. She put it by the bed. She didn't say a word, smiling at them.

Granny Dong flipped open the swaddling blanket and showed her son's bit to Xiu-quan. It's a son all right. Now I've done my duty to the Wus. Xiu-quan looked at it, and at her. Are those tears of joy or sorrow? I hope my son got his looks. I like his vulnerable scholar looks.

The wood stairs shook. Her father-in-law couldn't wait any longer. Granny Dong said don't crowd this loft with the entire family. His second sister-in-law said, let's go downstairs.

More footsteps. Granny Dong's laughter and sister-in-law's voice reached Chun-fen's brain like whiffs of smoke. Chun-fen made out the old midwife's words, Four generations under one roof! This is a man's greatest fortune.

Her father-in-law stood there, smiling at the baby, then at her. He mumbled, Chun-fen, you've exerted too much. You take a good rest, now it's our turn to look after you. He wiped his eyes. If I gave birth to a girl, would you say the same thing to me? But I'm blessed with a son. It's painful to think, I'd better close my eyes. She felt a lumping sensation in her breasts. She reached out her arms. Xiu-quan took her hand. His hand is cold and slimy, broad, bony. She shook her head and nodded at her son.

Xiu-quan handed her the baby, with utmost care. Ah, it's my first time to nurse my child. She pulled up her clothes, baring her breast, ready. I've seen enough nursing. Her son groped. Her breast was bursting. His tiny mouth missed, missed, he sobbed, he missed, he cried again, his fingers clawed angrily, then his mouth found it. He closed his eyes and sucked. The milk didn't come out. He whimpered and sucked more. Then he got the gist of it. An immense comfort took over her and she closed her eyes.

She woke up with a jolt, as if she'd already slept for a hundred years and missed everything. Her father-in-law was gone, Xiu-quan and Sister-in-law II and Xiu-lan were standing by the bed. Her baby was resting, and he was sucking reflexly, but there was no milk coming out. She switched him to the other breast, but he made some angry noise, so she switched him back and he was pacified.

Sister-in-law II was whispering admonitions of the month-long confinement to Xiu-quan: No cold water should touch her hands and feet whatsoever, otherwise she'd get gout in early age; no gust whatsoever, which is why she's upstairs, otherwise she'd get headaches in early forties; no sudden movements, her bones are brittle, otherwise she'd hurt her organs and will be barren; no hot and inflammatory food, otherwise she'd not produce enough milk. Speaking of milk, get some crucian carp and make soup with white radish and tofu, the best lactating food; or I'll see if I can find a pig heart and make her soup; make sure you have steady supply of eggs and brown sugar, she lost a lump of meat and lots of blood, otherwise she won't recover; what else, watch out the cries of the baby, learn from the cries, because that's how babies talk. Sister-in-law II was knocking her forehead, thinking, and she added, Xiu-quan, Chun-fen is the best wife anyone could have. She took care of First Uncle and First Aunt and you and your sister and Sixth Great-uncle, now you must make sure she'll recover as quick as possible. Your family is small, so you

are better off than most of others, don't skimp on nutrition for her, you hear me? And absolutely no cold water ever touch her fingers!

Chun-fen smiled to herself. Xiu-quan was muddled. He won't remember half of what you're saying, Sister-in-law II. Poor baby father. Chun-fen laid back and enjoyed her husband's distress. He can't even boil noodles by himself. Trust the men and I'll starve to death! Now I have a baby to feed. But I do hope he'll stay this time, it'll be easier if he's with me.

Chun-fen realized how much she'd missed Xiu-quan. Am I happier to be a mother or because my husband's home? Bah, who cares now that both of them are with me? How old was I when I first met him? How gentle he is to my little brothers each time we visit! Mama loves him like her own son.

Sister-in-law II was leaving. She stooped to tell Chun-fen gently and promised that she'd come back to check on her the first thing next morning. And Xiu-quan can find her next door. Not one woman in the house, Sister-in-law II whispered. Chun-fen, how did you make it all these years? She shed a few tears. She laid out the diapers on a basket over the brazier and told Xiu-quan: These are the diapers used by my kids. They are very absorbent and soft to the baby's butt. Prepare to wash the diapers for her and dry them on the fire all the time. Don't let my sister touch any water, you hear me? She touched the baby's cheek and tiptoed downstairs.

Now the loft was clear, Chun-fen indicated Xiu-quan to sit by her. He sat down on the edge of the bed. He looked sad, anxious, and grateful. He didn't know what to do. I don't like this. He always knows what to do, but I can't turn my back on his helplessness.

She said, "Don't worry, Quanr, you'll be a great father."

He said, "I have help." He nodded to the central room and managed a smile.

"Yes, you have. Did you write down his Eight Characters?"

“I can remember my son’s birth hour.”

“OK.” She smiled. “You know I can’t read. When our baby is one month old, you’ll bring his Eight Characters to a fortuneteller and choose a suitable name. But what should we call him now?”

“He was born on the loft, let’s call him Gao-sheng.”

“Born high up. It’s a funny infant name. He won’t like it when he’s grown up.”

“I dare him.”

“Quanr, have you decided to leave the Grain Station? Are you gonna stay at home with me and Gao-sheng?”

“Yes, I’ll work in the village from now on. I’ll tell Baba about it tonight.”

“Good. Good. Then I’m content. I’m happy. I’m tired. I want to close my eyes for a bit. Can you look at Gao-sheng for me?”

“Yes, I’ll look at him, by the fire. I’ve asked Xiu-lan to boil some eggs for you, so you’ll eat your first poached eggs with brown sugar when you wake up. Go to sleep.”

Chun-fen closed her eyes and was peaceful. Xiu-quan smoothed her bangs and thought, up and down, one always find his way right back on track.

1958

1

One noon in late June, Wu Xiu-quan came back to lunch in the coop's storerooms near Stone Dragon Temple. His family was temporarily housed in a spare room after the fire destroyed their house. Wu Sheng-hua was smoking a cigarillo under the eaves.

Xiu-quan asked, "Baba, why don't you go in? Isn't it too hot?"

His father nodded inside. Puzzled, Xiu-quan got in and found Director Tang Yao-guang of the Dustown Grain Station in the sitting area. He clutched a bowl of water as if it was saving his life. Gao-sheng was playing with his baby brother on the floor.

Chun-fen was making lunch in the kitchenette by the door. She was relieved to see him home. "Look who is visiting us!"

"Yeh, Director Tang," Xiu-quan said, "it's an honor to receive a rare guest."

Director Tang stood up and they shook hands. "I'm no rare guest. If you mean infrequent, then I should visit you more often."

"Please sit." Xiu-quan pulled out a stool and sat down. "You must excuse us that we don't have tea or anything better than a bowl of plain water."

Director Tang said, "Water is enough. Don't worry about it."

Xiu-quan said, "How about a smoke then?"

Director Tang said, "You and I need no such courtesies. Tobacco is hard to come by these days. Save it for your father."

103

Xiu-quan seldom thought about how humble his temporary abode was until it was presented to guests. The room was partitioned into living and sleeping areas by bamboo mats. Chun-fen fashioned the fire pit after the Yi people. She dug a shallow pit on the floor and circled it with stones. She set up an iron pot on a tripod over the fire. Apart from some mismatched stools, a small table served both as a kitchen counter and a cupboard.

Wu Sheng-hua came in and sat on the other side of kitchenette. He still held grudges against the director for getting Xiu-quan to work in Dustown. He didn't even offer the director tobacco leaves. Wen-zang was excited that there was a stranger in the house. Wu Sheng-hua picked him up and put him in his lap, but the infant kept staring at the stranger.

The director brought up the domestic situations for discussion. Xiu-quan expressed his support and appreciation to the Great Leap Forward in agriculture and the Second Five-Year Plan to catch up with Britain and America in fifteen years. Chun-fen kept herself occupied with cooking and keeping Gao-sheng from running or screaming. At times the director included her in the conversations, and she would pipe up a few catchy picked up from the night studies organized by the Women's Association. Wu Sheng-hua was not awakened to politics, even contemptuous of the empty talks for that matter. He kept his mouths shut and smoked his tobacco.

After the obligatory political discussion, Director Tang asked the wide-eyed infant, "What's your name, you little thing?"

Xiu-quan said, "We call him by his formal name, Wen-zang. Wen is his hereditary name and Zang is his given name."

Chun-fen said over the dangling pot, "When it was the first son, we felt it was special and gave him a pet name. The second time around, we didn't bother."

She chuckled at her own little joke. Xiu-quan lost track of the conversation for a moment. The director didn't get Wen-zang's name and joked if it meant mosquito net, as the two phrases pronounced the same in Sichuanese.

"No," Xiu-quan said, "it's zàng, as in Táng Sān-zàng, the great monk in the *Journey to the West*."

"It's a good name." Director Tang didn't ask the meaning of the character. He pored over the room. "This is not a big room, and there are five of you. How can you live here without tripping over each other?"

The air in the room condensed. Gao-sheng and Wen-zang were quite loud. Chun-fen stared at Gao-sheng and asked him to behave in the presence of a cadre.

Xiu-quan said, "We are very grateful for what the coop has done for us. The room is large enough. We couldn't have asked for more from the Collective."

Director Tang said, "But how do you sleep in such a small space?" He peeked behind the mats. "There's only one bed."

Xiu-quan said, "Chun-fen and the kids sleep behind the curtain. My father and I set up a makeshift bed in the outer room."

Director Tang said, "Every night? It's been two months since the fire accident. I noticed the room next door is empty. Why not ask your production team about it? In our socialist nation, the People is the master. Do not hesitate to ask the Collective for help."

"Director, honestly, this room is large enough." Xiu-quan stole a glance at his father, whose face turned cloudy. "If everyone ask whatever they wanted, then the Collective as a whole would suffer the loss. We can't put the individual interest before the collective interest."

"It was a fire accident. Nobody will say a harsh word if you get a little help." Director

Tang looked at the children. “How about your uncle’s family? I heard his house was burnt down as well.”

Xiu-quan said, “We inherited the houses from our ancestral estate. They were attached, so if one house is on fire, there is no escape for the other.”

The director sighed in sympathy. “I should have looked into this sooner. Are your uncle’s family sheltered in the same situation?”

“Same,” Wu Sheng-hua snorted. “They got two rooms in Landlord Zhao’s mansion. And we got this mice infested firewood shed.”

Wen-zang blubbered in Wu Sheng-hua’s lap. Chun-fen removed the infant from him. She shushed Wen-zang, but he felt responsible for his grandfather’s unhappiness.

Wu Sheng-hua said querulous, “Director, today in front of you, I’ll say what’s on my mind, and I want your honest opinion. Our Xiu-quan joined the Communist Party, everybody calls him a cadre, but he can’t even get a decent shelter for his wife and kids when his house was burnt down. He let the masses have the good house first. What’s the use of becoming a Communist Party Member!”

The director said, “Old Wu, join the Party is not to be an overlord of the masses. The Party member’s responsibility is to serve the masses, to lead the masses to communism. Xiu-quan did well, I must say. He put the masses’s interest before his own.”

Wu Sheng-hua said, “Now that’s not judicious. It’s not as if I want special treatment. His mind is not right, never fought for what he deserved. For that I don’t want him to be no cadre nor landlord. Look at him, not even a production team leader, but he works day in and day out for those leaders. He teaches the masses to read in the night school, he organizes the masses to build the aqueducts, but he got nothing in return. He works like a buffalo and a horse, but he earns

only one full labor's work points, a mere ten points per day for ten men's work! Is it too much to ask a proper roof for his wife? If you ask me, my son is a stupid egg."

Director Tang said, "There's no room to discuss his work point. In socialism, we distribute the gains according to labor. One full labor gets one full labor's work points, that's the rule. But I concede that it's amiss of the coop to put you in one room."

"Director, you're a good cadre. Only you give us a fair word." Wu Sheng-hua pushed tentatively. "To give you my honest opinion, if this is before the Liberation, we can stay with our relatives. But nowadays everything belonged to the Collective, we become a burden."

The director said magnanimously, "You're no burden, old Wu. Against the limitations of petty peasantry is the principle advantage of the Collective. If the fire occurred in pre-Liberation days, nobody will help you out."

Wu Sheng-hua agreed drily, and a dry silence followed. Chun-fen said, "The lunch is ready. Director Tang, please join us if you don't mind our humble fare."

"I can't eat here," the director said. "I'm a cadre, I must not take from the masses. And our grain ration is limited. With my wolfish appetite, you'll starve if I eat yours, haha."

Xiu-quan said, "If it's anybody else, we won't ask. You are always kind to this family."

The director waved his hands. "It's been three or four years, you're still a peasant in the countryside. What help have I offered?"

Xiu-quan said, "You've done a great deal."

The director said, "Only if your father lets you leave home. There's opportunity outside this village. A man must figure out his calling and follow it. We should aspire to be our nation's founding fathers in revolutionary times."

Wu Sheng-hua was used to the opinions contrary to his decisions. He said defiant, "I

don't regret it. I don't. Xiu-quan is not leaving for Dustown. We are just a peasantry family of seven generations. It's the fate of our lot. A peasant should till his land," — he looked at the director sly — "if he still got his land, that is."

The director said reconciliatory, "Old Wu, this isn't a criticism to you. Your disapproval of Xiu-quan's Grain Station job is ages old. A lot have changed. My word is the same. With his knowledge and abilities, Xiu-quan can contribute more to the socialist construction in Dustown than in the countryside. Also practically speaking, the supply grain of a town resident is stabler."

Xiu-quan said, "It makes no difference to work in the coop or in the town. One should reject this kind of petit bourgeoisie thought. One can't cut oneself from the root of the masses. As for the grains, so long as the coop fully rations to each member, we'll have sufficient food." He trod carefully. In recent months, the coop was cutting down the ration and substituting rice with sweet potatoes and melons. "Everybody got the same amount of food according to his or her labor grade. I find no cause for complaints."

"Let's not argue any more," the director said. "The children look starving. You go ahead and eat. Moreover, I already ate."

Chun-fen said, "But you've climbed to the mountain range. I figured you must be hungry beyond tolerable."

"Aha, you reminded me the purpose of my visit, but let me ignite my cigarette first." Director Tang patted on his chest and waist with both hands and pinched half a cigarette out of the chest pocket of his Liberation suit. He probed the fire pit with the fire-tongs and took out a piece of red charcoal. He lit the cigarette and returned to his seat. He didn't stop talking. "My family has moved to Skysburg two or three days ago. It's the house under that pine woods at Basket Ridge.

Chun-fen said, “The empty house above the Gate?”

The chief said, “Yes, that one. So it doesn’t take me an hour to visit you.”

Xiu-quan was too surprised to respond to this calamity. He held the bowl of gruel that Chun-fen gave to him but forgot to eat. There was no need to ask what the relocation meant. In the past months this year, his production team had received seven or eight cadres from Jiangjin and nearby townships. The news blasts said that some — always some or certain, never many nor few, some — revolutionary cadres had grown estranged to rural situations after several years of living and working in the towns and cities. The cadres were said to have lost the ability to make decisions on behalf of the masses’s interests. In effort to fight bureaucracy, the Party transferred them to the countryside to eat, sleep, and work with the masses. But Xiu-quan suspected that Director Tang’s situation was different.

He asked, “Do you know how long will Dustown keep you in the coop?”

The director mused over the cigarette and said, “The County has transferred a new director to the Grain Station. It looks like I’m gonna stay in Skysburg.”

Xiu-quan expected the director to say more, but he offered no further circumstances. The chief might have some scruples with two masses in the same room.

Xiu-quan said, “I thought something must be wrong. I heard that the Grain Station has increased the public grain by 30 percent. I thought you wouldn’t have asked that much. This crop of winter wheat has increased, but not by 30 percent to my knowledge.”

“No, it’s not my decision to make,” the director said. “The Secretary of Sichuan promised the Central Government more grains to support the industry in other provinces. Each county must meet the raised quota.”

“Other provinces,” Xiu-quan said. “What about the industry in Chongqing? There must

be many factories of steel, iron, and textile.”

The director said, “That’s being denounced as regionalism. Sichuan’s image is a region of grain production, not a powerhouse of heavy industry. We’re expected to make more sacrifice. Judging from in the news reports, the grains have increased tremendously.”

Xiu-quan said, “If you mean the increase from the land reclamation and irrigation construction, yes, the wheat has increased by some 20 percent.”

The director said, “I went to an emergency meeting for food supply in Jiangjin. The Secretary predicted a 40 percent increase of rice.”

“But how’s that possible?” Xiu-quan was confounded. “Well, it might be if we had enough chemical fertilizers, but we don’t.”

“The estimation doesn’t come out of thin air,” the director Tang said. “The growth of grains production planned by the Central Government is 23 percent. The province raised it to 35 percent. And the county raised it to 40 percent. If there are people doubt the optimism, it’s scientifically proven that the yield per *mu* could reach 10, 000 jins of grains.”

Wu Sheng-hua guffawed. He was chocked a little by the corn meal. Chun-fen frowned at him. No matter how close the director was to Xiu-quan, one should not laugh at a cadre. She winked at Xiu-quan and wished he say something to smooth this out.

Wu Sheng-hua cleared his throat and said mocking, “10, 000 jins per *mu*! Are you joking? I feel like I’m listening to a storytelling in teahouse. Is 10,000 just a number for you? That science of yours is either crazy or stupid. The highest yield I’ve ever heard was 450 jins. That was twenty years ago. Many people travelled dozens of *lis* to that parcel of paddy to see it for themselves. 10, 000 jins per *mu*! Aha ha ha ha, I bet that not even your chemical fertilizers can increase the yield to 1000 jins.”

“Baba,” interjected Chun-fen, “save your breath and speak no such things.”

The director said, “Old Wu, I didn’t believe the numbers either. When I raised my doubt in the meeting, many people denounced me, questioning me how can I contradict science and the news report in *People’s Daily*. Two weeks ago one coop from Henan Province was reported to have yielded 1100 kilos of wheat per *mu*, and this report was supported by a top scientist, whose name I don’t recall at this moment.”

“1100 kilos of wheat?” Xiu-quan thought aloud.

“Wheat, with lower yield than rice,” said the director wryly, “which is why the County decided that we will increase the rice production by 40 percent this year.”

Xiu-quan said astonished, “But ... how? We can’t ask the God of Grains, can we?”

The director said, “The nation has launched a wave to experiment ways to increase grains yield. The most important thing is fertilizers. Since we don’t nearly have enough chemical fertilizers, Dustown is collecting the human excrements in town and redistribute them to nearby coops.”

Xiu-quan said, “That sounds ... Before the Liberation, the nightmen came to clean the chamber pots every morning. Now the town is reviving this profession.”

The director said, “Now that the excrement and urine are means of production, even the public toilet in Dustown is guarded. The township is afraid that the coops would steal the manures. But our problem is that Skysburg is too high, so we can forget about Dustown’s quota. We got to think of something else.”

Xiu-quan said, “How about the market at the Stone Dragon Temple? It’s of the same height.”

Wu Sheng-hua said, “Stone Dragon Temple has no more than fifteen families. How much

shit and piss you can beg from them? I heard they are already exchanging their manures with some vegetable growers.”

The director said, “Ay-a, I’m so sorry. You’re lunching, and I’m talking about excrement and urine.”

“We talk about shit and piss all the time. Shit and piss are the peasant’s treasures,” Wu Sheng-hua said. “Director Tang, half an hour of crazy science and ludicrous numbers, now you’re talking about something serious.”

The director said, “Chairman Mao teaches us that we should learn from the masses. Old Wu, you’re one of the masses. So I should learn from you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I don’t know what this has got to do with Chairman Mao,” Wu Sheng-hua said. “But if you ask me, only pig and buffalo feces are reliable.”

The director looked displeased, but he said, “You’re absolutely correct about the Stone Dragon Temple. We can’t expect that small amount of people can solve the fertilizer shortage. The only way is to increase the numbers of livestocks, which is even more difficult, because no coop has money to buy piglets and calves. But no more shit and piss now.” He got up to the door and looked up. He shadowed the room. “Xiu-quan, I come today for a specific matter.”

Xiu-quan had finished his bowl of gruel. He looked at the director’s back, guessing what he might ask of him.

The director said to the front yard, “I was transferred to Skysburg for a specific mission. Jiangjin is implementing the Central Government’s spirit to increase the food production and support the Great Leap Forward.”

Xiu-quan said, “You’re not a scientist or an experienced peasant. Why do they ask you?”

Moreover, how can I help? Although I'm a peasant, I know nothing about increasing grains yield."

"As the new coop chief," said the director —

"Coop chief?" Xiu-quan asked. "Are you the new coop chief? Since when? I thought you're just working here temporarily. Excuse me if I have offended you."

"It's just a title. In the Grain Station or in the coop, my job is to secure food for the cities," Director Tang said. "As I was saying, I know nothing of the frontline work in the country, and I have a lot to learn. The township wants every APC to set up an experiment field. I don't really know a lot of people in Skysburg, so I want you to be the coop's accountant. But our main task is agricultural experiment."

Xiu-quan said hesitant, "Chief Tang — I guess I'm gonna address you as the chief from now on — as a Party member, I should follow the Collective's order unconditionally, but I doubt I can offer any help. I simply go uphill with everybody else."

"Xiu-quan, you finally come to your senses," said Wu Sheng-hua, before the chief was able to respond. "Director Tang, my position has not changed. I forbid my son to work outside of the land. This is even worse than working in the Supply and Marketing Cooperative. You have no idea how much his relatives hate him."

Chief Tang said, "That sounds strange. Why?"

Wu Sheng-hua said, "Why? What else but helping the coop collectivize our land, their land, the land they got from the Land Reform, gone, taken. We own nothing under this roof."

Xiu-quan said, "Baba, be careful not to be reactionary. You don't own anything under the roof, but you own everything in the Collective. And we've got the private lot."

"Private lot!" Wu Sheng-hua snorted. "What can I grow in that one-tenth of a *mu*? Water

spinach and cowpea, no tobacco leaves, no chili pepper. We can't raise our own chicken. Not an egg to treat a guest." Chun-fen was so terrified that her eyes twitched, but her father-in-law went on. "We also turned in the pigs and buffalo as shares to the Collective. Never have I ever thought that a peasant doesn't have to raise fowls and livestock."

"Old Wu, you wish to retrogress to private ownership," Director Tang said, toying with the cigarette butt. His military stature towered over the Wus. "It's fine that the masses express opinions democratically, but make no mistake, don't go so far as attacking the foundation of socialism. A line has to be drawn somewhere."

Wu Sheng-hua said too much today, went too far, like an aged donkey stealing a carrot from its master and testing if the ready thrash would befall. He was a poor peasant, his ancestor seven generations back were poor peasants. He was afraid that if his pure political element could exonerate him. He shut his mouth, like a misbehaved dog cowering and diminishing so that nobody would take notice of him.

Xiu-quan scrambled up. He said, "Chief Tang, please forgive my old father. He was born and raised in the old society, and the narrow and backward thoughts root deep in his mind. It's not easy for him to understand the true nature of collective ownership and what collectivism means to socialism. Please take no offense at his ignorance. I'll educate him more about the collective ownership and elevate his revolutionary awareness."

"That's all right." Director Tang waved his hand. "Your father is frustrated that the Collective hasn't solved your housing problem. I trust you'll educate him more about our socialist system."

Baba is courting disaster to himself, and he doesn't even know, Xiu-quan thought; Since ancient times men have found themselves in trouble because of insubordinate words. Chief Tang

can afford to bear little air with the masses, but we the commoners must not forget our place.

The chief extinguished his cigarette, which was burning close to his fingers. He said, "In all sincerity, Old Wu, nowadays not many people speak their minds. I don't hold it against you. Let's return to my proposal. I know you don't want Xiu-quan to work out of the land. But consider, he's not leaving the village. And I don't ask his help for nothing. I'll make you a deal."

Wu Sheng-hua said, "Nothing will change my mind."

Xiu-quan said, "Baba, save your breath for once."

The chief went on, "Hear me out. If you let him work in the APC, I'll assign him in a new house at Basket Ridge. Once he and the kids settle down, you can move to the mid-level production team too. What do you think?"

Wu Sheng-hua eyed the chief suspicious. He put down the empty bowl. He would have said no, even if this was two years ago when his son was hated by the Wu clan for collectivizing the properties for the elementary Agricultural Production Cooperative. Xiu-quan was a traitor who conspired to take away the land of the peasants. He hadn't regretted even then that Xiu-quan was not working in Dustown. But now circumstances changed, or rather, the circumstances had remained the same for more than two years. In no way the peasants were getting the land back.

Wifeless, landless, houseless, Wu Sheng-hua replied, "OK, I give my permission, if my grandsons have a roof over their heads and my son stays in the village."

One day the tall fire flared up in that field where a swarm of two-leggers worked suns and moons. The fire was so awesome that the two-leggers scattered and few returned. At first the feathered creatures didn't know what it was, because the fire was a column, hot like sun and loud like a storm. The barn owl hooted that it was fire, but no one had seen any fire like it. Tall and angry, the fire sucked in tremendous amount of air and formed a fire tornado. The two-leggers sometimes burn a hay to mark their territories in the water fields, except the hay fire smolders rather than flames, and black pieces rise in the white smokes and sift down around. The tall fire produced no smoke nor soot. The braver feathered creatures could not suppress their curiosities and flew close to investigate. One of the dirty vultures got too close that his fluffy wings were seared. He saved his life only by darting to a fish pond over the mountain. But for his broad wingspan, he would have been dead for certain.

The feathered creatures were convinced of the fire's deadly power, but unlike the skittish four-leggers, they weren't afraid of the fire by nature. However, they were known to have short memories. After three or four full moons, they were used to the fire as if it had been there since time immemorial. The small feathered creatures ventured closer and closer, careless of the danger, and would occasionally lost control in the current of extreme heat and rapid air. Some turned to charred balls instantly, but some made out alight, screeching in pain, flying frantically away until combusted entirely.

The fire was indeed a death trap. The feathered creatures from other mountains and the

migratory species made up the majority of the casualties. When the trees were blossoming, many migratory feathered creatures returned from chasing the warm winter. One day a flock of swan geese flew by in perfect forked formation. The gaggle of geese single-mindedly set on its perennial course, unexpected of any potential threat. Confused by the noises and the brilliance of the fire, the geese soared higher and stayed in formation. Alas, they didn't soar high enough. It was too late when the head goose realized the fire was much higher than their normal flying altitude. The first four or five geese hurled headlong into the fire.

The forked formation was broken. The first geese perished and fell nearby naked and smoldering, snatched away by foxes and vultures scouting nearby. One goose's tail was ablaze. Panic-stricken, she honked shrilly and flew astray. She darted this way and that, and within minutes she entered the sky above the mountain with a mammoth Stone Two-legging Nest, where she recognized no stones nor streams. The fire spread on her body slow and steady till finally it reached her wings. She couldn't bear the pain any longer and dived to a thatched mud two-legging nest. Oh, the soft fluffy thatch.

The kids were cheeping with hunger, which was a worry to no end for swallow couple nesting above a disused beehive under the eaves. The couple came back from Australia and discovered that there was a new two-legger family of four under their nest, two adult ones and two small ones. The two-leggers must have moved in last winter. The two-legger female, who loved to look at a deck of dried leaves, always bared her teeth with goodwill whenever the couple came back from hunting.

This trip back to the North proved to be a hard one. The swallows found it hard to hunt

enough mosquitos and flies to feed their kids. The first brood was not strong enough to leave the nest until after a good twenty-five suns. The second clutch was merely three eggs, and one chick died after one sun. The first brood couldn't hunt enough food for themselves, let alone help their younger siblings. The mother swallow, a European blueback, took it pretty hard. They had never lost a chick in the previous five hatchings.

That great fire tornado hanging in the western sky luminesced, which tricked the mosquitos and flies to think the sun broke earlier. Apparently, the two-legged female was also tricked, for she had left home before the mice returned to the holes. The swallows were constantly on alert for the nearsighted predators, who were quite capable of climbing the mud walls and desiccated tree trunks.

“Children’s father,” the blueback swallow sang, “we must fly out to hunt earlier to-sun, as soon as I can see. It is not right for the kids to starve.”

“Children’s mother,” the blackback swallow sang, “I’m glad you brought this up. The mosquitos and flies love to dance in twilight.”

“Children’s father, I noticed that we can’t hunt enough food in the cesspool near the two-legged nest-hold. Far-flung water can’t save near fire.”

“Children’s mother, the two-legged creatures have poured something in the cesspool to kill the maggots and larvae. I smelt something funny. It’s not the decoction of Asiatic plantain, not purple perilla, nor tomato leaves. It’s either lime water or honey locust decoction or both.”

“You’re silly, children’s father. Why would the two-leggers waste time to kill the mosquito pupae? You can’t kill them all. They know that, which is why they burn mugworts to repel them.”

“Children’s mother, you’re from Europe. You don’t like to chat with the other Asian

sparrows. From my conversation with other blackbacks and house martins, they've noticed the same pattern near their nests. The two-leggers are concentrating the pigs and buffalos so that they can kill the mosquitos and flies with a single dose of poison."

"But I also noticed that they are killing the mice. For that matter, have you seen any cat or dog in this trip? Or chickens and ducks in any two-legging nesthold? They disappeared. I believe the two-leggers have killed and devoured them all."

The blackback did not look surprised. It was quite common for the yellow two-leggers to eat these creatures.

The blueback warbled, "When you proposed to me three years ago in Australia, you told me this is a dirty land with limitless supply of mosquitos and flies. I believed you and left my flock. Well, this is still a dirty land, but there isn't enough food anymore. Maybe we should abandon this nest next trip."

The blackback sang with a witt, "But we never abandon our nest. This nest was left to me by my grandfather. I always come back. I mend it every spring with the fresh mud from that valley stream yonder. And you made some friends too. Besides, the two-leggers in this land love us. They look forward to seeing us every trip. Don't you feel happy to see their welcoming smiles?"

The blackback swallow twittered his neighbors, a pair of house martins nesting under the eaves across the square ground. They were raising three kids, so life was even harder for them. Their sturdy brown fork-tails were much disheveled from the hardship. The house martins answered that they would fly out together. Recently, most swallows nearby hunted at the cesspools of the large pigsty and cowshed on the ridge yonder, where bony mosquitos and fat greenbottles thrived on feces, urine, and blood. The blackback sang that if they were lucky, they

might catch some giant gadflies that love sucking cattle blood.

On the air to the new cesspools, the swallows were surprised to view many two-leggers standing apart on the mountain. Each had a pot or bamboo tube in hands.

The blackback chirped shrill, “Why these two-leggers are up before the sun appears? Even with that fire tornado, the light is not bright enough to harvest the golden seeds in the wetlands.”

The blueback sang, “I declare I’ll never know. The longer I live in this land, the more confused I become. Look at their musical instruments. Do you think they are participating an organized mating ceremony?”

A few glides took the four swallows to the ridge, where they found an unoccupied bamboo branch by the cowshed. There were already a flock of Asian blackback swallows hunting by the pigsty, where swarms of young mosquitos came out to the world, ready to suck blood or nectar. The swallows shuffled back and forth in the air, chirping and hunting in excitement. The ridge was usually the first place in this cove to greet the first sun rays. Little by little, the sky where the sun appears became eggshell white and flushing red, and the light of the fire tornado faded.

The blackback warbled, “Listen, the nocturnal winged creatures have stopped cawing. There, the croaking of magpies and sparrows! The sun is about to rise.”

A sudden blast startled the swallows. The noise was from that flower-like thing, giant, gray, tough. Every sun-rising, it would make that noise, which sounded like the two-leggers trying to mimic the pig’s mating calls. Since the roosters had disappeared and most two-legging families woke up at the noise, the swallows speculated that this flower-like thing was a substitute for the rooster, because the noise was always the same crescendo notes before the sun-rising, and

the two-leggers started their sun at that fixed time. Last trip, the swallows had come back from Australia and discovered that flower-like thing on a branchless trunk, which grew out of two long, leafless vines extending to the lake near the mountain range. Some curious swallows investigated the longest vines, longer than any vine in the warmer South, and came back saying that the vines' root was inside a two-legging nest on the lake dam. Some older male swallows had already marked the territory and built new nests next to a fish hawk who could fend off other feathered predators. In the beginning, the swallows were scared of the strange vines, though thin and easy to grip, they never cooled down like the other green vines. Furthermore, perching on the strange vines kind of exposed the winged creatures to predators. And truth be told, no swallow likes to rest or walk on the ground with the tiny claws they had. But the swallows grew to love the vines that afford a better view for hunting flies and other exoskeleton creatures.

Then some swallows who wintered in the southern coast of Australia clarified the confusions: the vine was made by the two-leggers to transmit light in the moons. There were lots of such light vines in big cities. This colony of barn swallows didn't recognize it because they habitually avoided urban centers on the migrating journeys.

The blueback spotted a gadfly. She dove and had it in her beak. She killed it with a snap and stored it in her oesophagus.

The blackback sang, "Why don't you eat some now that we're here? It looks like we have enough mosquitos here."

She sang, "It's easier to hunt in the morning, but we're not the only swallows waiting and the morning ends soon."

As she was twittering, two male two-leggers came out of the kitchen. They poured two water-carriers of dark decoction into the cesspool. They grunted something. The older blackback

swallows who could make out some of the two-legging tongue sang that they were murderous to the exoskeletal creatures. They returned to speculate why the two-leggers were standing on the mountain like trees. The swallows from other parts twittered that it was the same everywhere. The twittering sounded more and more scared by the end, because the two-leggers were never up to any good in a herd.

The blueback said, “Children’s father, are you seeing this? They’re killing our food source. We’d be better off hunting the aphids in the vegetable patches.”

The blackback sang, “But the aphids stick to the plants. I can’t fly in thick grasses.”

She sang, “Don’t worry. I grew up in the European meadow. I can teach you. Once you learned the skills, you won’t forget them.”

The blackback didn’t hear what she had sung. He dove to catch the greenbottles. The house martins had some luck with the mosquitos. The couple decided to eat some mosquitos now that they need more strength to hunt in grasses. By the time the rays reached the west side of the ridge, the four neighbors each hunted a mouthful to fly nest. They planned to hunt once more before the sun became full-bright.

Without any signs, thunder-like fracas erupted everywhere on the mountain. It sounded like the storms over the oceans down south. The swallow couple thought it must be imminent danger. They were so frightened that they almost fell off the bamboo branch. They found balance and flew nestwards. The house martins scrambled in midair and followed them. The other swallows were alarmed and took flight as well.

It was pan-avium. Every kind of winged creatures was airborne. They were fluttering, flapping, gliding, darting, and shuffling. The sky became somber, feathers falling like the leaves in autumn. The two-leggers were striking the bamboo tubes and water-carriers. They stood not

far from each other, forming a bewildering pattern. The noises were as great as one flew too close to the dark clouds in a thunderstorm. The frightened callings of the winged creatures distracted the blackback. Some timid ones started crying. His blueback mate siflitted to him in warning. She sang him to explain the strange behaviors of the two-legged creatures in this land. The two-leggers canvased every parcels of the dry ground, no where could they alight without getting dangerously close to them.

The swallow couple were off the course nestward. The two-leggers seldom scared the swallows, unlike the other winged creatures who nest far away and take flight whenever a two-legger approaches. But today, the swallows were scared of the two-leggers, with all the terrifying noises and the menacing roars. In other suns the swallow couple would take a rest on the light vines every now and then. Today they were deadly tired, but there was no place to alight. The woods weren't safe. The gaudy pheasants, black crows, and a few white herons, the ones who had resisted the deadly temptation of the fire tornado, were fluttering above the pine woods at the cliff, which was out of reach of the two-leggers. The barks of the wetlands were more dangerous. Many water rails quacked over the wetlands. Their wings, white when spread out, flapped helplessly. The water rails hated flying, because their elongated bony legs and long, sharp beaks fared better in the marsh.

The blackback witnessed a horrible scene. A female rail, witless, darted into a two-legger's upperpart. That female two-legger, ugly and unadorned as she was, snapped the rail's neck with her wide paws. His blueback viewed that as well, and she trembled and siflitted with horror.

"Children's father," she sang muffled, "why are they doing this? Why are they killing them? Chip, our kids! Are they killing all the winged creatures?"

The blackback faltered his wings. He hadn't made the connection. He siflitted, "Chip, mother! I ...". He couldn't finish. He was choked by flies and mosquitos.

It took them three times longer than usual to fly back. Several female two-legglings climbed on the roofs of their nests, ready to use the mischievous catapults in their claw-like paws. One of them was aiming at a sparrow in air. A few sparrows and crows were trying to alight on the top of the bamboo groves about the two-legger's nests, but a group of two-leggers were shaking the compliant grass. The winged creatures were greatly indignant but could do nothing. They revolved in the air, waiting for the senseless two-legging behaviors to stop. The swallows siflitted to the sparrows, warning them to be careful.

The male two-legglings, whose tails bobbing behind their heads, shrilled at the females on the roofs. The male two-legger that lived under the couple's nest was looking after the howling small two-legglings in mobile bamboo nests on the porch. The blackback watched his children cheeping in terror, but he was too afraid to get to the nest. Flapping in terror, the couple were so distracted that they thought the noises were thundering above, had they not viewed the two-leggers striking the bamboo tubes on the square ground. The blackback wanted to trust his neighbor the male two-legger, but he couldn't help but view maliciousness in the apish eyes. One two-legger was waving a butterfly snatcher under the sparrow's hole of a nest on the date tree. The swallows kept flapping, exhausted.

The blueback flitted agonized, but she dared not to approach her nest. She circled the eaves. "Oh, my babies! Oh my babies! Don't be afraid. Mama is here."

The blackback siflitted to her in warning.

She cried, "The two-legglings can't reach me. I'm gonna try. I don't care."

A two-legger started the hunting cries. Soon every two-legged creature was howling

like seagulls. The gibberish sounded like this:

Ye sparrows carry your way too official,
Even the sky falls you wouldn't care.
Ye sparrows carry your way too grand,
You devour the rice like whirlwind.
Ye sparrows carry your way too senior,
You are too lazy to make a stir.
Ye sparrows carry your way too stubborn,
You are afraid of the Red and the Uprising.
Ye sparrows carry your way too frail,
Equipped with wings yet you cannot soar.
You bastard winged creature,
You hobble around with the Five Ways.
You have wronged us for thousands of years,
Today we are settling the scores.
Poison, strike, chase, fish, full-on assault,
Our last move is to roast you on fire
We will commit you and the weapons to fire,
Exterminate all Four Pests, and the Nation will be a Great Harmony.

The blackback understood no two-legging cries except the grunt that meant sparrow. He learned this grunt from the wicked female two-legglings who amused themselves by chasing and yelling at the sparrows. In fact, the sparrows ate anything they could find, because they stayed

here year round. Sadly, they never learned to cohabit with the two-leggers. When the sun was the brightest, the two-leggers always occupied themselves with hoarding the rice seeds like squirrels. The sparrows sometimes were simply too lazy to forage the seeds in the wetlands. They would rather peck the food right off the ground. No wonder the two-legglings would set up trappers to catch them. But the sparrows should have recognized that the seeds under a bamboo nest were baits. Well, they were too lazy anyway, and laziness leads to recklessness.

The blueback sang, "Children's father, I can't fly any longer. I'm hungry, and my wings are so tired."

The blackback sang, "You didn't eat the mosquitos, did you?"

"No," she sang, "I just want to save it for the kids."

"Eat some now. It'll give you some strength."

"No," she sang, "the food is for the kids. I'm gonna brave it."

"Don't do it. You don't know if ..."

His blueback mate darted towards the nest. A female two-leggling shot at her with the catapult. The shot missed her body but scrapped her fork tail. She lost her balance and fell off the porch. A male two-leggling covered her with a bamboo nest.

The blackback's heart was ache with anger. He siflitted at the evil two-leggers and charged at them. He pecked the male two-leggling's hand, who wailed in pain. He pecked him so effective that the two-legging was bleeding. Another male two-leggling waved a bamboo tube at the blackback, who escaped easily. He landed on the bamboo nest, heedless of the danger. He siflitted at the small two-leggers, "If any of you dare to come one more step, I'll peck your eyes out!"

But of course the two-leggers wouldn't understand him, just like he didn't understand the

four-leggers. The blackback siflitted at the two-leggers anyway. He must protect his mate and his kids, and he knew that the expressions of anger and warning were trans-species.

The blackback's neighbor the male two-legger grunted to the two-legglings. The swallow didn't understand him, but he recognized the grunt that meant the name of his species. The bleeding two-leggling, though reluctant, lifted the bamboo nest and released his blueback mate. The two-leggers must somehow understand his warnings and fear for their eyes. He was too happy to think for a reason.

The blueback flew up to her nest. She sang, "Oh, my babies, don't be afraid. Mama is here. Nobody is gonna hurt you. Mama is here."

The kids were very frightened and forgot that they were hungry. The blueback told them to open their beaks and fed them the flies and mosquitoes.

The male two-legger grunted to the two-legglings again. He dressed the bleeding two-leggling's paw. The other two-legglings were told to hunt under the sparrow nest.

The blueback swallow asked, "What had happened? Why did they let me go?"

The black swallow fed the kids. "I don't know either," he said. "They are hunting the sparrows and the crows on the bamboos, why not us?"

The conversation was cut short by a screech of the house martins. The female house martin cried, "My baby, oh, my baby!"

One of the three martin kids was lying on the porch, immobile. The couple flew to the house martins. The two-leggers didn't show any menace to them, but the banging of bamboo tubes and water-catchers was no less terrifying. The swallows landed by the side of the house martin couple. The chick was dead, its head snapped to one side, and its down was brown and thin. It was not old enough to learn flying yet.

The mother house martin cried, “My baby, oh my baby, how did you fall from the nest! I should have come back sooner. Those evil two-leggers! They murdered you! I’m gonna peck their eyes.” She flapped her wings, but she was too sad to fly.

Her mate warbled in sadness, but he sang, “Children’s mother, the two-leggers are too big. We can’t do anything.”

“But they are murders!” She flapped her wings. “I want to peck their eyes out!”

The swallow couple consoled her, twittering in sympathy. The blackback viewed the fevered two-leggers, none of whom paid a slight attention to the death. They stroked the bamboo tubes and shouted the hunting cries, oblivious of the winged creature’s grief. The swallow couple returned to their own nest and nursed the two kids under their underparts.

The blueback sang, “This is sad. I think the two-leggers became crazy. What has become to them? Why are they suddenly so violent?”

The blackback didn’t have the answers. He viewed the two-leggers and realized that he had never really understood them. The entire mountain was thundered with noises. The winged creatures were flapping in the sky, darting around, and flying into each other. After a long time, the larger ones seemed to realize that the two-leggers had no intention to stop banging the bamboo tubes. They ascended into the clouds and left this patch of sky. But the smaller winged creatures couldn’t soar and had no place to go.

When the sun was nearly at its highest point, a sparrow was too exhausted to keep flapping and fell from the tip of a date tree on the square ground. A two-leggling rushed over and smashed the sparrow with a bamboo stick. The blackback heard a squish, and he viewed that the sparrow was smashed into a pulp, like a rotten plum fell from the treetop and crushed on a stone slate. The blueback gave out a cry of horror next to him. She wept. She asked why, but neither

understood the way the two-leggers behave. One by one, the nest of sparrows fell from the sky. Each was promptly smashed.

The blackback thought he was not capable of viewing the massacre any longer, but he kept viewing. He didn't leave any detail out, how the sparrows fell, like rotten plums; how the sparrows were smashed, the squishy sound when the sticks hit them, their blood and flesh spread on the ground and their blood-stained, flaxen feathers dancing in the air; how the two-leggers shrilled at the blood like wild dogs.

His mate cowered at his side, reduced to a blue ball of despair and hatred. She moaned that she couldn't view the killing anymore, but she too kept viewing. The nest of twelve or thirteen sparrows perished under the bamboo sticks. The two-leggers picked up the crushed sparrows and put them away in a bamboo nest.

In the next three suns, the swallow couple dared not to fly out because of the nonstop thundering noises. The family starved, chancing a few stray mosquitos and flies that happened to buzz by the nest.

They viewed the winged creatures, who dared not to alight, fell from the sky and never took off again. Many big ones with wide-span wings flew west and commit themselves into the great fire tornado and went out on the other side, incinerated before they must have plummeted as smoldering charcoaled balls.

They viewed the female two-legger who lived under their nest counting the dead sparrows in large bamboo nests. The dead winged creatures were not only sparrows but also the white rump munias that looked very much like sparrows, and many other creatures such as sparrows, bagpipes, crows, cuckoos, pheasants, goshawks, owls, bulbuls, tits, streptopeliae, doves, blackbirds, ducks, wild geese, sandpipers, charadriuses, falcons, silver pheasants, long-tail

pheasants, mergansers, spoonbills, white storks, black storks, vultures, and sparrow hawks. Eventually, there weren't enough bamboo nests to contain all the winged bodies. The female two-legger asked other two-leggers to chop off the claws in pairs. There were at least seventeen bamboo nests of claws.

On the second sun, some two-leggers from the other side of the flower-like thing brought four bamboo nests of dead mice. The female two-legger had them chop off the mice tails. The square ground was soon piled with the tailless mice and clawless winged creatures. It didn't take long for the sun to bake the bodies. Hungry and scared, the blueback fainted a few times at the suffocating stench. Swarms of flies and mosquitoes visited the bodies, but the swallows were too terrified to fly out, not with tens of two-leggers on the ground all day long. But soon the two-leggers committed themselves in trapping the flies and mosquitos as well.

The female two-legger had her worker two-leggers, like the worker bees, dug tunnels under the elder walnut trees, bamboo groves, purging croton bushes, date trees, prickly pepper bushes, and chestnut trees to bury the mice and feathered bodies.

In the second moon, the swallow couple's kids stopped cheeping of hunger, their bodies dried up and shriveled, cold under the couple's underparts. The blueback cried, but no tears came out. There was no more tears, no water and strength for tears.

In the third moon, the noises finally stopped, but the kids had long been dead and cold so it hardly mattered. The couple ventured across the square ground and found the entire family of house martins dead. They flew out, over the bamboo groves, over the bushes, over the wetlands, over the dry patches of vegetables, over the large pigsties and cowsheds, over the woods of pines and dwarf oaks, over the roofs, over the light vines, and over the row house roofs in the valley. They didn't come across a single living winged creature. They hunted some stray flies and flew

to the cliff, the habitat of their ancestors before the settlement of the two-leggers. There they encountered a starving barn owl who hadn't seen a field mouse for three days.

In the remaining trip, the swallow couple hunted only three times a sun as far away from the two-legging nests as possible and hid on the cliff where the two-leggers couldn't reach them.

Whenever the blackback swallow closed his eyes for a short nap, the smashed sparrows projected on his eyelids, vivid like the shadows that the two-leggers put on a wide cloth sometimes popped up on that ridge under the moon. He could still hear the hunting cries and the squishes, even though he knew the hunt had stopped, but the silence, the devoid of any coo-coos of the winged creatures enhanced the cries, shrieks, and flaps of fear and death during that three suns. He woke many times a night from the nightmares, in which his kids were cooing of hunger and died again and again and again.

In that autumn, when the temperature fell, the sun went south, and there was no more mosquitos and flies, the swallow couple flew south and intended never to return.

VITA

GUIBING QIN

EDUCATION

M.F.A., Creative Writing, University of Mississippi, to be awarded May 2015

Concentration: Fiction

Thesis: Up and Down (Novel Excerpt)

M.A., British and American Literature, Beijing Foreign Studies University, April 2012

Thesis: Politics and Body in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

B.A., English, Beijing Language and Culture University, July 2009

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Guest tutor, September 2012 – May 2013

Chinese Flagship Program, University of Mississippi

Course: Directed Readings on Topics of China

HONORS and Fellowships

John Grisham Fellowship, 2012-2015

PUBLICATION

“A Teenager Was Killed on Laifeng Street.” *Shanghai Literature* April 2010

<<英语2 (基础模块)>> 外文出版社 January 2010

(English 2 (Basic Module) Foreign Languages Press)