322 READER PART 5

M

Monfoon Leung

New Year for Fong Wing

"Come, Wing. We go to House of Ten-Thousand Delights. Good?" The Chung Shan accents of Lee Mun, the chef, rumbled up from deep in his round belly. He grinned at Fong Wing, a grin that put crinkles in the shiny smoothness of his face.

萬福
中山

Fong Wing did not reply. He picked up his pay from the cashier's counter and followed Lee Mun out the door. With the back of a gnarled hand, reddened from years of dishwashing, he brushed back a few wisps of gray hair that hung over his eyes.

Lee Mun spoke again. "Tired, eh, Wing? When New Year comes, everybody comes to Chinatown."

They stepped out of the restaurant into a gray world of fog. In it, the diffused yellow gleam from the windows made a semi-circular island of light in which they stood for a moment. As if at a signal, they both shivered with a spasm from the sudden damp cold.

"If I lose all my money again in fan tan game, old woman will nag me without rest," Fong Wing finally

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112

開平 answered. Although he had come from the Hoy Ping district, he adapted his reedy voice to the tones of the 三邑 more generally known Sam Yup dialect so that Lee Mun could understand him.

The chef chuckled. "You can blame only yourself for taking wife who thinks gambling not good."

"Wife is good woman," Fong Wing snapped.

They hesitated in the light as if afraid to venture into the early-morning darkness of the fog.

"May be good woman, but she nags you for gambling. Makes you feel guilty about one of joys of living."

Fong Wing nodded slowly. "When I have no money left for foodstuffs, she scolds night and day."

"I will go with you to buy things for New Year's feast," said the rotund Lee Mun. "Not want you to start year with wifely din. Store of Chun Bock is only one open all night. We will go there."

Relieved that his friend did not tempt him further, Fong Wing did not answer, but shrugged his coat tighter around his narrow shoulders and started up the street toward Chun Bock's. Lee Mun waddled along beside him.

Through the thick screen of fog, the few cars still parked on the street looked like so many shapeless monsters. Porcelain Buddhas squatted placidly in the dimness behind the plate glass of modernistic shop fronts. The steps of the two men, as they shuffled along, kicked up small clouds of shattered red paper, the remains of thousands of firecrackers exploded during the night in celebration of the coming of the New Year. What a din there must have been! The

street was still now. Still and empty, mused Fong Wing, empty as was his life. He cast a sidelong glance at Lee Mun and marveled at the vigor of his step after the long night of work.

"Why you not marry, Mun?" he asked suddenly. "You are now over forty years of age and still have no family to carry on name."

The chef's body quivered with his barely audible laughter. He could have been a reincarnation of the Laughing Buddha. "I like fan tan. And I do not like chatter of woman." His laughter slowly subsided as they walked a few steps in silence. Then he added, "Who carry on your name? You have only daughter left." He recognized too late the effect that his words would have, for a contrite wrinkling of his brow obliterated the twinkle of his expression almost before the words had left his lips.

Fong Wing knew that his friend had not meant to hurt him, his own words had planted the thought, but his jaw muscles tightened convulsively. He quickened his stride. Lee Mun had difficulty keeping up with him.

They had not reached the corner when Fong Wing felt the chef's hand on his arm. "Wing! Wing! To be angry is of no use." He slowed his steps. Lee Mun took his hand away. As they continued at a slower pace, the chef asked, "How old is your daughter now?"

Fong Wing looked sharply at him. "Too young for you," he said.

Lee Mun's laughter shook him so violently that he had to stop walking. Fong Wing waited for him. "No

need to worry," Lee Mun said between gasps. "I not want child for bride."

"She is seventeen. Why do you ask?"

"Is old enough for young husband." They started walking again. "Why do you not get husband for her?" Lee Mun hesitated, then added, "Husband of daughter would be son for you."

Fong Wing snapped, "Why worry about son for me? I do not worry."

"Do not tell me you do not worry—" Lee Mun began. He looked at his friend and became silent.

Chun Bock's was empty but for a clerk drowsing on a stool behind the counter that occupied one side of the narrow store. The opposite wall was lined with shelves of canned goods labeled in English and Chinese. On the floor beneath the shelves was a row of lug boxes full of vegetables. From one of them, Fong Wing picked up a bunch of foot-long string beans and plunked it on the counter to arouse the clerk. He awoke with a start and rubbed his eyes.

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Lee Mun picked up a warty, bright-green bittermelon and examined it with the eye of a connoisseur while Fong Wing asked the clerk, "You have good salted duck eggs?"

鹹蛋

The clerk had no chance to answer. Lee Mun erupted, "Salted duck eggs! Such food is for every day! For New Year's dinner should have more fancy dishes. Fish bellies make excellent soup." He pointed to a jar on the counter. In it were puffed-up, airy-looking pieces of golden yellow the size of a man's fist.

魚肚

"No. No. No fish bellies." A lump rose in Fong Wing's throat and he turned his face from Lee Mun.

"Why not? You like fish bellies, I know."

"Was third son's favorite dish." Fong Wing whispered the words, bending down to a jar as if to examine the contents more closely so that the moisture in his eyes would not be noticed.

Lee Mun burst out brusquely, "Wing, skin of your face is wrinkled, hair on your head is turning white, but you do not have wisdom of age. Yearning for sons will not bring them back."

"Two first-born killed in France in Big War. Was that not enough?" Fong Wing could contain himself no longer. The coming of the New Year had brought sharply to his mind and to his heart the realization that he could hope for no new beginning, for no grandchildren of his own name. Without that hope, the future was empty as a hollow gourd, there was left only the shell of the past. "Why did third son have to go?" Months of anguish were poured into the question.

Lee Mun soothed, "He returned from War on Fourth of July heroes' ship. Received hero's burial."

Lee Mun spoke of heroes. He had never had sons, had never poured his life into young bodies and spirits.

"No sons, no grandson will tell of his heroism," muttered Fong Wing.

The clerk was becoming restive as he waited for them to buy, but the two ignored him. Lee Mun moved his hand as if to put it on Fong Wing's shoulder. Before completing the gesture, he drew

back his hand and said instead, very slowly and hesitantly, "For long time I have wanted to ask you, Wing. How did boy feel about fighting Asian brothers?"

The question was not an unexpected one for Fong Wing, but he gazed at Lee Mun for a long moment before replying. He felt a bit ashamed as he answered, "Before son went to war, I asked him same question. He said he was not going to fight brothers; he was American fighting for his country against enemy." He shook his head sadly. "Mun, young men are not like us. Old country, old brotherhood of blood means very little to them. They are too much American, too little Chinese." Then he added, as if to himself, "Maybe — maybe it is good thing."

Lee Mun nodded slowly. "Your sons were born here, Wing. Home-land is heart-land."

"What does it matter now. They are beyond ties of blood or home." Fong Wing's words were almost inaudible.

Gently, very gently, Lee Mun said, "What is past cannot be helped. Is it not better to accept what is done? There is still tomorrow."

"How many tomorrows has old man without sons?"

Lee Mun shook his head as he said, "You have wisdom of old fool." Then he shrugged his massive shoulders and showed his teeth in a grin. "Enjoy today then. Flavor of fine birds' nest soup will drown bitter taste of melancholy. Today is New Year, Wing!"

燕窩湯

Fong Wing could not resist the chef's cheerfulness.

He had to admit to himself that his black thoughts could bring nothing but pain. He smiled wanly and shrugged. "Cannot afford good birds' nest."

"Money! Of what use is money?" Lee Mun exploded. "I buy you box of finest for New Year present." Brushing aside Fong Wing's protests, he ordered a box of the most expensive, snow-white birds' nest. Soon Fong Wing had filled a large bag with all manner of delicacies. For New Year's Day, at least, there would be no nagging from his wife.

He cradled the bag in his arm and followed Lee Mun out into the grayness. The fog chilled somewhat the warmth that was returning to Fong Wing's spirits and he was silent as they walked to the corner and turned up the steep street toward the two-room apartment that was his home.

Even the exuberance of Lee Mun was dampened. He respected his companion's silence. He stopped when they reached the entrance to an alley that was little more than a narrow passageway between the buildings. "I will go see if have good luck in New Year," he said. "You truly do not want to come?"

Fong Wing hesitated a long moment, but finally muttered, "Wife will chop off my head. Besides, what you do on New Year's Day, you will do all rest of year."

Lee Mun chuckled, "I say that will be fine. Nothing I like better than gamble all year. I will show you my winnings at work tonight." He turned and started off up the alley.

Fong Wing watched the waddling figure as it thrust its way through the fog. The chef was hardly a

dozen paces away, but was already almost hidden. Fong Wing started to call to him, but remembered the hour and instead, broke into a shuffling trot to catch the receding back. He hugged the bag of groceries with one arm, holding the top with his free hand so that nothing would be shaken out. "Wait. I will go," he said when he drew abreast of Lee Mun. He was puffing from the exertion. Lee Mun said nothing, but his teeth gleamed in a broad grin.

They stopped before a store, dark as all the others. In the light of the street lamps that barely filtered its way through the fog, a weathered wooden sign was visible over the doorway. It contained two Chinese 萬福 characters, "Ten-Thousand Delights." They opened the unlocked door and entered. In a back corner of the dark and empty cubicle that was the shop, a dim light glimmered through a hole at eye level. Lee Mun led the way to the door and knocked sharply upon it. An eye appeared at the hole. "Lee Mun," he said, and the door opened. They entered and proceeded down the dimly lit corridor toward another door. After a second scrutiny, they passed through into a large, oblong room in which the smoke was almost as heavy as the fog outdoors.

At the back was a washroom, a broom closet, and a door that Fong Wing knew opened on a corridor that led to the back entrance. Round tables were ranged along each bare wall, tables around which crowded Filipinos, Negroes, Mexicans, Japanese, whites, Chinese, all men, all intent upon their games of 牌九 poker, black jack, craps, pai gow, or fan tan. The clothes of most of them were worn and frayed as

Fong Wing's. They all looked so worn and tired that Fong Wing wondered why they stayed. "You play pai gow?" he asked Lee Mun, nodding toward a group of men, all Chinese, playing dominoes.

"I will watch beans with you tonight," Lee Mun said, moving to the fan tan table. Fong Wing took a place beside him. He watched the operator for a few minutes before he started to bet. The operator was young, he could not have been over twenty-five, but the skin over his gaunt cheeks and high forehead looked old and sallow. If he had not known that this generation no longer used the pipe, Fong Wing would have judged him to be an opium addict. He handled the ivory wand dexterously with the tips of his bony fingers.

With his left hand, he would scoop a handful of the white soybeans out of the box at his elbow and pour them into a pile in front of him. Checking the bets with a quick glance, he would spread out the pile with a sweep of his wand, a chopstick-like instrument with a curved, flattened end. With deft flicks of the wand, he would sort out the beans, four by four, and scoop them back into a pile. After the last group of four was taken out, he would intone in an emotionless voice the number remaining, rake in the money of the losers, and pay the winners.

Fong Wing, watching the boy, was disturbed. In his own youth working in a gambling house was understandable. A Chinese in America could find work only in restaurants, laundries, or gambling houses. Today there was opportunity almost without limit. Fong Wing came in the hope of winning

enough to ease the emptiness, the barrenness of his existence. But this boy had all of life before him, and he did not even have the chance to win for himself, as had the men whose money he raked in. "Young fool," Fong Wing mumbled under his breath. "Young fool."

He set his bag of groceries under the table.

"You are speaking to me?" It was Lee Mun, who had already begun to play and was gleefully sweeping in his winnings. Folds of flesh formed under his jaw as he cocked his head toward Fong Wing.

"That boy." Fong Wing nodded in the dealer's direction. "My boy died so he can waste life running bean game."

Before Lee Mun could say anything, a voice intruded. "You are playing?" The young operator was polite, but there was a tinge of impatience in his voice.

Fong Wing shot him a look of resentment, but pulled out his old, leather purse. Without a word, he began to play. He started betting on the four individual numbers. His weariness and resentment began to drop from him as he won again and again. He thought he would buy a nice dress for his woman. It had been a long time—. But his luck did not last. As his stack of coins dwindled, he switched to playing the odds and evens. They paid less when he won, but there was more chance of winning. He watched the dealer raking in his money. Once their eyes met and Fong Wing thought he saw a look almost of regret. He shook off the thought. Soon his stack of coins was gone.

His hand was trembling when he pulled the worn purse from his pocket. The five dollar bill was all that remained in it. He looked at Lee Mun. The rotund chef was beaming happily, one arm wrapped around a large pile of coins while his gleaming black eyes followed the darting movement of the ivory wand. What need had he for money? No wife, no family—.

Fong Wing looked at the bill in his hand. There was handwriting scrawled across it. The signatures of generals, he had been told. A short-snorter bill they called it, sent home with the rest of his third son's personal belongings. He looked up and found the young dealer watching him expectantly. He was about to place the entire five dollars on number three when a heavy thumping and the splintering of wood broke through the subdued hum of the room. He looked toward the door. The first doorkeeper was scurrying through it, piping "Police!" to the room in general. The second doorkeeper slammed the door shut and placed a wooden bar across it. No one in the room said a word, but almost all hurried toward the back door. The dealers were scooping their money into canvas bags. The thumping and splintering noise continued.

Fong Wing stuffed the bill back into his pocket. He looked for Lee Mun and found him still sitting, smiling imperturbably. Noticing Fong Wing's look, he said with a shrug of his shoulders, "I wait for police. They always wait at back door anyway—and I am too fat for closet door." He nodded toward the broom closet to which the dealers were hurrying. "You better hurry."

The young fan tan operator had already filled his bag with the money on the table. Noticing that he had not moved from his seat, Fong Wing started to urge him to hurry, but the youth spoke first. Very quietly, but with a note of desperate urgency in his voice, he said in Sam Yup dialect with a touch of Fong Wing's Hoy Ping accent, "Can you carry me to closet?"

"I carry you?"

"I do not weigh much. You see—" He looked downward. Fong Wing moved around the table to see. "I am only half a man." Fong Wing saw that the young man's trousers legs were indeed folded and pinned up almost to his hips. Anticipating his question, the youth added, "Army doctors said not enough left to fit man-made legs." A loud crash that shook the room announced the breaching of the first door. "Can you carry?" he asked again. Fong Wing picked him up and shuffled toward the closet. Even without legs, the youth was a heavy load for the old man, but the strong arm about his neck lent him added strength.

"War?" Fong Wing asked.

The lines about the young man's mouth sharpened and he nodded. Fong Wing felt a tensing of the body in his arms.

"My third son died there," he said.

"I should have." The arm tightened about his neck.

They were almost to the closet. Fong Wing shook him as if chiding a naughty boy. "Do not say that." He fumbled in his mind for words of reassurance and

came across a happy thought. "My woman and I—," he hesitated, then continued, "we need son." He felt the youth relax somewhat in his arms and then become tense again almost at once. He was shaking his head.

"You would not—," the youth started, but he was interrupted by one of the other dealers who hurried out of the closet door calling, "We forgot you."

Reaching them in a few strides, the man said, "Here, old man. I will take him," lifted the youth easily from Fong Wing's reluctant arms, and turned back to the closet. Fong Wing's effort to clutch the young body to him had been futile.

Over the dealer's shoulder, the youth smiled and said, "Half a son is worse than none. But many thanks, uncle."

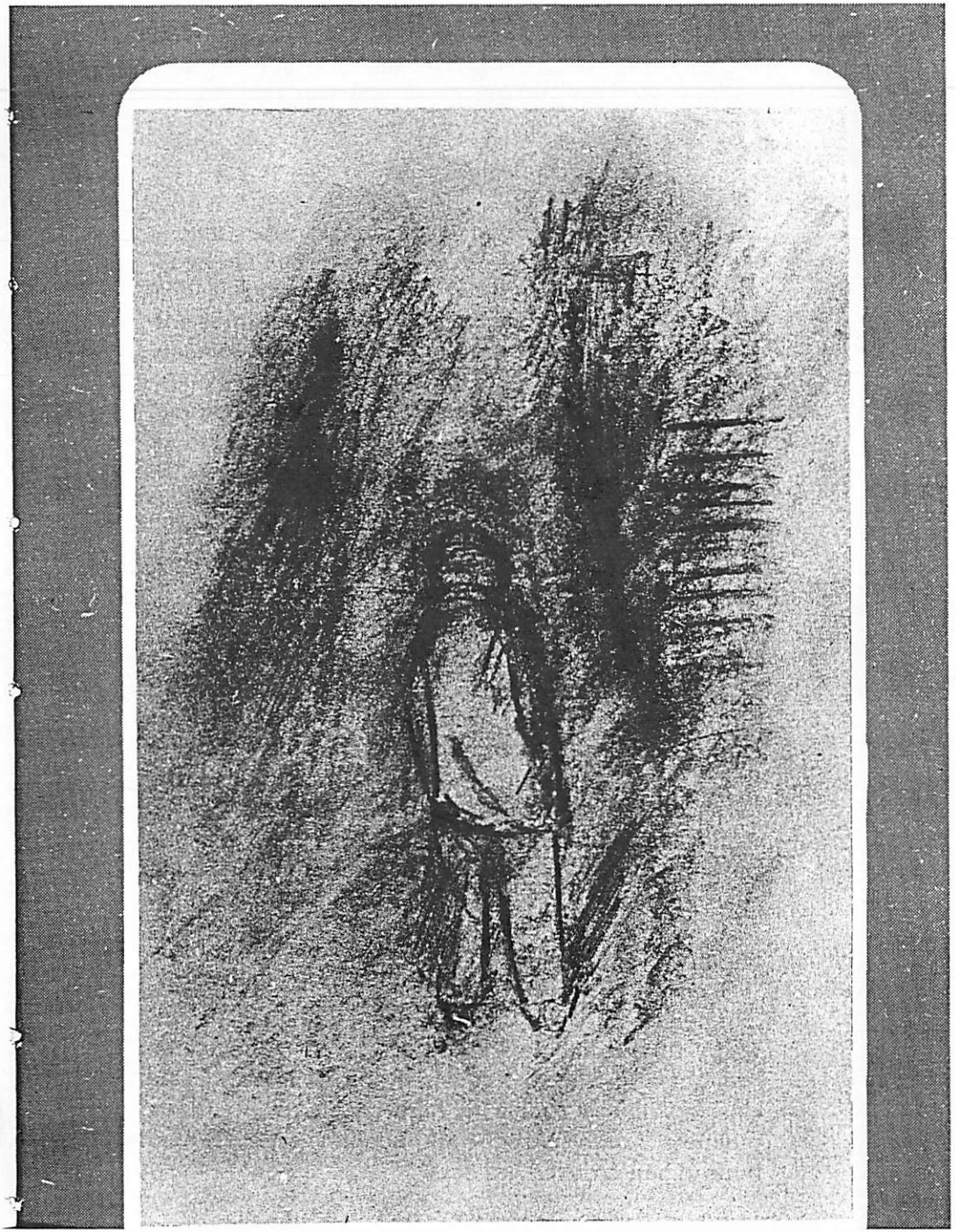
Fong Wing's heart warmed at the respectful title. They squeezed through the narrow opening at the back of the closet. The last one through, Fong Wing closed the panel behind him. He followed the others silently through door after door until they stopped in a shop that he knew faced the same alley which he had entered earlier. The other dealers were there, huddled in a group, some of them swearing softly in the darkness.

Fong Wing suddenly remembered with a deep groan of anguish that he had left the bag of delicacies in the gambling room. He thought of going back after it when the police had left, but remembered that they would probably leave someone to watch the place. Better to go home empty-handed than to chance the disgrace of a night in jail. That would

indeed be good cause for endless harangues from his woman.

He looked for the legless youth, but could no longer distinguish him from the others in the darkness. Soon the fading sound of the patrol wagon in the distance emboldened them to steal quietly out of the shop. Fong Wing strained to catch a glimpse of the youth again in the crowd at the door. Too many were pushing through. He thought to ask someone and realized that he did not know the young man's name. By the time he had slipped into the alley most of the group was gone. The legless one was nowhere in sight. At the end of the alley, he watched the others melt into the wall of fog. It occurred to him that he could have asked for "the man without legs." Now it was too late. Even half a son—.

He took the five dollar bill out of his pocket and stuffed it carefully back into the purse. The thought came into his mind to spend the night at Lee Mun's lodgings, but he pushed it away almost as soon as it came and headed homeward, shrugging his thin coat closer around his spare form. He shuffled heavily along, feeling the thick fog like an enormous weight on his shoulders, pushing him down.



Number One Son

In a few minutes Ming would be home. Slumped in his seat, he glared out of the window as the suburban bus jerked and shook its way through the downtown traffic. The usual hurrying shoppers pushed along, arms filled with packages; the usual harried policemen watched over the intersections; the usual drivers inched through the crowds to make their turns. All were preoccupied with the business of shopping for Christmas.

Ming wondered, and reproached himself even as he wondered, if he really cared any more than those strangers did that his father had died. This father of his had been little more than an old man with iron-gray hair that he saw occasionally on his Sunday trips home. Then it was nearly always only, "Hello, Pa," answered by an almost inaudible grunt as the old man hurried in from the restaurant to spend his two-hour rest period in bed. The dishwashing was bad for his rheumatism, Ming had heard him say

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many times, but you had to work when there were six children and a woman to feed. Really, there were only five since Ming was out working as a houseboy, but Ming had never corrected him. Now he was dead.

Ming braced himself against the window ledge as the bus turned a corner and headed toward Chinatown. He wondered if Mrs. Warner would be able to take care of the house and the twins without him. The twins, a pair of hellions, were only eight, but they were nearly as tall as Ming, and he was fifteen. He had planned to teach them to play football. There was always a little time right after school before he had to start helping with the preparation of dinner. He saw again the three square boxes under their Christmas tree. Two helmets and a football, probably. He caught himself wishing that his father could buy him a football helmet and he shut the Warners from his mind. His father could never buy him anything. He should be grieving, but all he could feel was a harsh resentment against the man who had been hardly aware of his existence and who had just left him with a family to support.

He deposited a dime in the coin box and got off the bus to walk the one block to his home. Passing the two "hotels" just around the corner from his home, he couldn't resist glancing surreptitiously up at the second-story windows. A woman sat at one of them, the hard beauty of her much too heavily made up face apparent even through the curtains. Catching Ming's glance, she winked at him. He jerked his eyes quickly back to the street, walked a little faster, and turned the corner.

A half dozen of the neighborhood boys were playing football in the street. They stopped their playing to let a car go by and saw Ming. One of the boys yelled "Come on, —" but stopped short when one of the others whispered fiercely into his ear. Ming raised his hand in greeting, but said nothing. They very carefully ignored him and started playing again.

"Home" for Ming was in a long, one-story building running the entire length of the block. Set at regular intervals in the once-whitewashed plaster wall that faced the street were screen doors, each flanked by a large, screened window. Most of the screens were brown with rust and sagging gently in their frames. Ming stopped at the third door from the corner and pulled it open. He stepped directly into his front room, for the heavy inner door was open.

The entire family was in the small room. He knew that his mother must have gathered them together to await his coming. On the worn, faded couch that squatted in front of the window sat his brothers, the three youngest of the family. All three turned identically serious faces toward him as he walked in, faces whose subdued quality was strained and unfamiliar, almost ludicrous. The younger of his sisters, sitting near the end of the couch in a straight-backed chair with her thin, brown legs wrapped around those of the chair, looked as if she were about to burst into tears. The other was seated with their mother opposite the boys. She held her mother's hand in both of hers and was looking anxiously up into her face.

His mother's eyes were dull with a lifeless opaqueness, their lids red and puffy. Her fleshless cheeks

were tightly drawn, her lips set in a line of resignation. Ming wanted to run to his mother, to throw his arms around her to ease the pain of her grief, but his Chinese childhood and years of working as a houseboy had taught him to restrain his impulses. If he did hold her in his arms, he would not know what to say to console her. He did not know the proper Chinese words. He took a few steps toward her and stood mute for a few moments, searching for something to say. Then he said quitely and deliberately in his mother's Cantonese dialect, "Papa . . . when die?"

She opened her mouth, closed it again and swallowed hard, then said hoarsely, "Last night. I wait till morning to call you. Not want to wake up your boss."

Poor Mother, Ming thought. Afraid he'd lose his job? The pay wouldn't be enough to take care of the family. He said, "Papa is where now?"

"At funeral parlor. Last night they took him there."

"Did you not call doctor?"

"Papa died before he came. Doctor said, heart had something wrong." She paused, then added, "Papa gone now, Ming. You are number one son, now head of family."

一家之主

She needn't have told Ming that. He had heard often of the old custom. Even his mother was to abide by his decisions now. He looked around at his brothers and sisters and felt the circle closing in about his life, tying it in chains of traditional responsibility. He felt his jaw tighten. It was his father who had begotten this big brood, his father who

could barely earn enough to keep them alive, his father who had left the empty rice bowls for him to fill, his father who had given him nothing. He wanted to curse his father and did not dare. There would be no more school for him. He would have to work full time now to support his father's children. He had been told in school that his I.Q. was high. What good was a high I.Q. when he would not be able to finish high school, much less even dream of college? Damn the Chinese custom. He was an American. He had the right to leave the family and pursue his own happiness. . . .

"Ming?" The voice at the door was a familiar one.

"Come in, Grandfather Choak," he said, trying to hide the tremor in his voice.

The door opened with a creak and a short, round man entered. He looked like nothing more or less than a Buddha in an American business suit. Ming had always called the man "Grandfather" although they were not actually related in any way. It was customary because he was of the same clan as Ming's mother and had come from the same village in China. To Ming, he had always been no less than a real grandfather.

The old man glanced quickly at all the family, but addressed himself only to Ming in his mother's dialect. "Ming," he said very solemnly, "your father leave no money. We must get money from friends for funeral. You come with me."

"I must go?" Ming started to turn toward his mother as he said it.

"You are head of family," Grandfather Choak said.

122

Ming started to frame a denial, but under Grandfather Choak's placid gaze, he stopped himself and said, "Yes, I go with you." He followed the old man to the door, but stopped and said, "My Chinese not very good. I won't know what to say to people."

"I talk for you."

They stopped first at Kwon Kim's herb store. Kwon Kim was weighing out some bear gall for a customer. Ming watched the wizened old herbalist behind the counter as he carefully placed a whole gall bladder on the pan of his balance and peered over his glasses to read the weight. Ming remembered that Kwon Kim had always grumbled when the kids had come in the store to beg for the sweet prunes that were kept in a huge jar on the counter. They were only to be used by his customers to take the bitter taste of his herb teas from their mouths, Kwon Kim had said. The memory of the man's miserliness made Ming very uneasy and he found himself wishing that Grandfather Choak had decided to start with someone else.

When Kwon Kim had finished with his customer, he turned to Ming and Grandfather Choak. He clucked his tongue and said, "Very sorry your father pass beyond, Ming. Leave big family for you."

Ming strained for the words to reply. Grandfather Choak cleared his throat and said, "Father of Ming leave no money, Kim."

The herbalist cocked his head over to one side for a moment as if to let the statement drain from his ear to his mind. Then, without a word, he pulled out a drawer behind the counter, picked up a bill, and

dropped it on the counter, shaking his head and muttering, "Too bad. Too bad."

While Grandfather Choak pulled a pencil and a tablet of rice paper from his coat pocket and started writing some characters in the tablet, Ming stared at the bill on the counter. It was a twenty. And Grandfather Choak had not even asked Kwon Kim for money. Kwon Kim was speaking.

"Father of Ming was good father," he said. "Every day I saw him go by carrying bag of cakes for children."

It was true. Ming had forgotten. His father had unfailingly brought home a bag of cakes from the restaurant when he returned for his afternoon nap. But they couldn't live on those cakes now.

He thanked Kwon Kim and followed Grandfather Choak out. The Buddha-like man waddled down the street with Ming at his side and turned into a new, self-service grocery. Flaunting its modernity, shiny gold letters on the big front window announced, "Chung's Super Market." Grandfather Choak went directly to the well-fed-looking young man who was presiding over the cash register. There was no mistaking the Mr. Chung of "Chung's Super Market."

Before Grandfather Choak had finished telling of the need of Ming's family, Mr. Chung snorted, "Man is fool to have such big family when cannot make enough money for them." He looked hard at Ming. "Young man must face truth about father. He was failure as father and failure as man. Must depend on others even when he is dead. I would be fool to give money."

123

Ming felt his heart pounding in his throat and choking him and his fists doubled up, ready to lash out at the face with its upper lip curled over white teeth in a self-righteous grimace. He sucked in his breath with a sob when Grandfather Choak took his arm and said, "Come."

As they turned to go, Chung said, "Wait," rang up a "No Sale" on the register and drew out a five dollar bill which he tossed on the counter. "Here."

Grandfather Choak picked it up without a word and made a note in his tablet.

"Don't take it, Grandfather Choak," Ming forced out through his clenched teeth.

"Must pay for funeral, Ming." He put a hand on Ming's shoulder before he could say anything more and urged him out of the store.

On the sidewalk, the anger oozed quickly out of Ming, leaving him weighted with a great weariness. He unclenched his fists. "He was right, Grandfather Choak," he said. "My father was a failure."

"Do not talk that way about your father."

"But he was. Family lives in hole in wall, goes without so many things other people have. Mother washes all our clothes with washboard and tub. You know I have worked since I was nine years old." All the resentment of years began to boil out of Ming. He stuttered and stumbled over the words that had to be torn up from his Chinese vocabulary, but they had to come out. "Father had no love for me. Hardly knew he had eldest son."

Grandfather Choak again put his hand on Ming's shoulder and stopped him. "Your father did best he

could, Ming. Came from China without education, without English. What could he do? Raised fine, healthy family. Loved his children."

Ming's lips squeezed together. "Father loved children? He did not know what love is."

They glared into each other's eyes for a long time. Then Grandfather Choak said gently, "You go home, Ming. Perhaps it will be better if I go see others by self." He patted Ming's arm and waddled off. Ming watched him go up the street, then he turned and started homeward.

From babyhood he had been taught to respect the words of his elders. Always he had had an especially profound respect for the wisdom of Grandfather Choak, but he felt sure that Grandfather Choak was dead wrong now. Perhaps his father had tried, but trying wasn't enough. He thought of Mr. Warner's home, the football helmets. His father had not given him even the love of a father. And now he was expected to revere his memory, to take his place, to give up his chance for an education, to struggle and go down as had his father. They had no right to ask it of him.

He was about to pass the Widow Loo without speaking when she gripped his arm. "Ming Kwong!" she said. "How tall you are now." She was a dumpy woman of about forty, several inches shorter than Ming. The note of surprise dropped from her voice as she continued, "I heard about your father. Am so very sorry. Your father fine man."

She released Ming's arm to fish in a well-worn purse she was carrying. "Many times your father

helped me and children. He had little money but much heart." She pulled two crumpled bills from he purse and put them into Ming's hand. "I know he did not leave you much," she said. "Maybe this will help a little."

Ming whispered a "Thank you" and she bustled away. He looked at the two one dollar bills in his hand for a long while.

His mother was anxiously waiting at the door for him. "Ming, your father's watch. They took it with him last night. We must get it back."

"Watch? Of what importance is watch? We can get it back at any time."

"No. It is gold watch your father had for many years. Undertakers will keep it. He told me many times that he wanted to give it to you when he was ready to go."

Ming could not believe his father had actually said that, but he said, "O.K.," then continued in Chinese, "We go now."

The young man in the office of the undertaker greeted them cordially. He listened politely while Ming explained that they had come for the gold watch that his father had been wearing when they had taken him away. The man said that he would check on it and glided into another office. He returned and said with a smile, "I'm sorry, but your father had no watch when he was brought in."

Ming interpreted for his mother. She looked sharply at the man and said to Ming, "He lies. Your father always wore watch. They try to steal it." Only the knowledge that his mother's eyes were filling

with tears kept Ming from hurrying her out of the office. He turned to the man, who was listening curiously.

"My mother says that she is sure that he had it on," he said.

"I'm sorry," the man said with a shrug of his shoulders.

The condescension on the man's face struck deep into Ming and his anger began to rise within him. Did this man think that he was talking to a child? He spoke deliberately, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice, "I suggest that you check on it again."

"But I'm sure it is not here."

Ming used his deepest tones to say, "If the watch isn't found, we will go to the police."

A slight twitch passed over the man's face, but he recovered quickly and said, "Of course, we may have overlooked it. I'll check again." He disappeared into the inner office. It was not long before he strode back in, waving his fist triumphantly. "We did find it in a pocket we had overlooked," he said. He put the watch into Ming's outstretched hand.

Closing his fingers over the watch without looking at it, Ming muttered, "Thank you," and, taking his mother's arm, walked out.

Ming blinked at the sudden wintry sunlight. He stopped with his mother in the shadow of a building and looked at the watch in his hand. It was large and heavy, attached to a massive-looking chain. It must have been many years old for it was of the type whose face is protected by a snap cover. He squeezed down the stem and the cover flipped open.

Inside the cover, he saw several words engraved in ornate script. Squinting his eyes against the brightness he read, "For Ming, my son." His mouth was suddenly dry and he had difficulty swallowing as he tried to moisten it.

His mother was watching him. "Only last year, your father had something put in cover," she said.

Ming couldn't speak. They started walking homeward.

"You are number one son, head of family now, but after funeral, you must go back to Mrs. Warner and to school," his mother said.

"But the family—"

"Many things a woman can do at home to earn money."

"No," Ming said firmly, "I will work and go to night school."

His mother started to say something further, but Ming stopped her with, "Remember, I am number one son, head of family."

He took her arm to help her across the street.

A Good Burial

The driver guided the old, but brightly polished, coupe between the granite gateposts whose shadows pointed the way up the drive. Clad in a tan sport jacket, he was barely old enough to have had his first shave. He clicked off the radio.

"This is cemetery?" asked his wizened passenger.

"I told you American cemetery is like—" The driver hesitated briefly, searching for the proper Cantonese word. "—like park, Uncle Kim. This one is called 'Wood Lawn Memorial Park.'"

The bird-like old man clucked his amazement. His head bent back as he peered at the neatly clipped lawns of the "memorial park" through the spectacles perched on the end of his button nose. He cranked down the window and knocked out over the sill the ashes from the brass bowl of his pipe, a foot-long tube of bamboo. Thrusting the bowl end of the pipe into the pocket of his coat, he asked, "Where are burial mounds?"

The young man's face, high-cheeked like his uncle's but not as thin, broadened in a smile. "They not use mounds here, Uncle Kim. Graves flat. Make look more like park."

Uncle Kim grunted. "Why cemetery not look like cemetery?"

"Is much better if cemetery look beautiful like park."

"Cemetery is empty place, Wing. Not need beauty."

Wing darted a surprised glance at his uncle. "How can you say 'is empty place'? Is full of people that other people love. Should be beautiful place for them."

"Young boy have no brain." Uncle Kim pronounced this dogmatically. "When you eat more salt, you understand."

食鹽多過食米

Wing bridled at his uncle's favorite remark. He searched for a retort that would show how much he understood. Unable to find one, he was relieved to be able to say, "There is office."

They were aproaching a squat, solemn building. Small and square and built of gray stone, it looked like an oversized tomb except for the smokestack jutting high into the sky behind it. Thin creepers of ivy struggled up the stone on each side of the dark doorway. On the lawn in front were neat rows of sample headstones. The crunch of their tires as they skidded to a stop on the loose gravel brought a huge figure to the doorway.

"Hello there. Come right in." The high-pitched

voice was, somehow, incongruous with so ponderous a mass.

Wing helped his uncle out of the car. They followed the mountainous man into a small fluorescent-lighted office. He squeezed around a desk and eased his corpulence into a swivel chair that complained at the load.

"Won't you sit down?" he said.

They seated themselves on wicker chairs.

"Now, what can I do for you?" He asked as if he did not know.

"We came to buy a grave for my aunt," Wing said.

"A burial plot. Your aunt, eh? I'm very sorry." He screwed up his forehead and smiled a smile that was obviously meant to be sweet and commiserating but succeeded only in making himself look happy at the prospect of a sale. He sighed gustily, "It is always hard to lose our loved ones, but we must do what we can to make their passing beautiful."

"Ask him about grave near Grandfather Choak," Uncle Kim prompted.

"We want a—" Wing caught himself. "Grave" was evidently not a word to be used in a "memorial park." "—a plot near my Grandfather Choak. He's over near the entrance."

"Choak. —Choak. Let me check my file." The salesman pulled out a drawer of his desk and began to flip through a card file.

"Wing, not get grave near Grandfather Choak if cost too much," said the old man, wagging a finger to emphasize his words.

"What does he say?" The salesman's chins blended together as he lifted his head.

"He wants to know how much the plot will cost," Wing interpreted.

"About seventy dollars around that area."

Uncle Kim knew enough English to catch the "seventy dollars." "Tell him is too much," he said to Wing.

"Place near Grandfather Choak is very nice, Uncle Kim. Is high up and has good view."

"Is too much for hole in ground. Dead body cannot see view."

"Friends who come can see. We would not want cheap grave. Friends would say we not love aunt."

Sensing the burden of the discussion, the salesman, who had pulled a card from the file, quickly unfolded a map that lay on the desk. "I'll locate Mr. Choak's plot and we'll go over and see if there's a spot nearby. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Wing said. Then, turning back to Uncle Kim, "We go see. You be sure to like."

"I not like—for seventy dollars," but Uncle Kim rose.

The salesman pulled a pencil from his breast pocket and made a mark on the map which he then carefully refolded as he squeezed around the desk. He shepherded Wing and Uncle Kim out the door. After a glance at the small coupe, he said, "We'd better take my car. It's around back."

His car was parked near the smokestack. Uncle Kim squinted up at the stack and asked Wing, "What that for?"

Wing asked the salesman and was told, "That's the stack for the crematorium."

"A crematorium!" exclaimed Wing. "I've always said that when I died I'd like to be cremated. I want my ashes taken up in a plane and thrown out to float around in the air. I don't want people to be bothered with what's left of me." To Uncle Kim, he said, "They burn up bodies there."

"Huh! They not burn up my body. I prefer to feed worms," grunted Uncle Kim as Wing helped him into the back seat.

The car sagged as the salesman wedged himself under the steering wheel. Wing climbed in beside him, saying, "My uncle doesn't like the idea of cremation."

A chuckle accompanied, "Old fashioned, eh?"

Wing wondered if the wheel hurt as it slid along the groove above the man's belt. He wondered if they made coffins that big. They must.

"By the way, my name's Moore," the man said.

"Mine's Kwon. Wing Kwon."

"You speak English pretty good."

"I should. I was born here."

"What? A real native Southern Californian? Haven't run across one in years." He shook with laughter at the stock gag. Wing smiled politely. Moore stopped his laughter short and glanced apologetically at Wing.

Uncle Kim said suddenly, almost to himself, "Your aunt always afraid of fire."

Wing looked back at him and a frown lightly crinkled his forehead.

"This should be it," said Moore, bringing a squeal of protest from the brakes with his heavy foot. "Best plots in the place," he added.

Wing helped Uncle Kim out. With a light touch on his uncle's arm, he guided the old man toward a black marble headstone in front of which drooped a bunch of white and yellow snapdragons. It was at the end of a row of stones.

"Grandfather Choak up here," he said, nodding toward the grave. "I bring flowers last week."

"Oh. Is nice. Very nice." Uncle Kim moved ahead of Wing with a quick shuffling step, his satin slippers, which he insisted on wearing instead of heavy leather shoes, making a soft swishing on the grass. Reaching the grave, he crouched in front of the stone and, adjusting his spectacles, read the Chinese characters carved on the marble.

Moore, holding at arm's length the spread-out map and stretching out his neck as much as possible to look over his paunch, was waddling along where there were no stones, searching in the grass for something.

Wing came up behind his uncle but to one side of the grave. He said quietly, "Uncle Kim, you are standing on grave."

His uncle shot a look at him, then remarked curtly, "No harm. Your Grandfather Choak dead several years now." He resumed his reading.

Wing stood a few moments without a word, his head bowed, then took a few steps into the stoneless area, turned, and said, "Uncle Choy and Cousin Pang are in this part."

Uncle Kim cocked his head around. "Choy and Pang here too?" He straightened up with a grunt and shuffled toward Wing. "Where? Where?" He looked along the rows of flat bronze markers for ones with Chinese characters. "Why these not have stones?"

Wing turned to Moore who was talking to himself as he waddled slowly over the graves searching in the grass. "Why are the markers flat in this section?" Wing asked.

"New idea. To make the place look less like a cemetery," Moore answered without turning his head. "More modern."

"Is there a plot near here?"

"There will be. This section's full, but we're opening one up tomorrow to ship the remains to a family plot in Iowa. I'll show it to you if I can find the little plot number marker. The grass grows over 'em."

"I'm not sure we would want a used—" Wing caught himself again. "—plot. I'd better ask my uncle."

Moore continued his search while Wing approached his uncle who was reading from a marker. "Chung Shan District, Tai Po Village, —" Wing explained about the Iowan's grave. 中山縣 大埔鄉

"Is good," was Uncle Kim's unexpected answer. "If grave is used one, can get cheaper," he said. "So near Choy and Pang is good."

"Why you worry about few dollars," snapped Wing. "You have so much, can easily buy nice grave here for aunt instead of shame family by one in cheap section where grass is dry and graves sink in."

"Who say buy cheap grave? You ask him make this one cheaper. You think I make gold from rice?"

"Aunt should have good grave," Wing said.

"Aunt will get good grave. So other body has used it. What is harm? You ask him make cheaper."

Wing took a deep breath, but did not argue further. The salesman had found the plot. To Wing's obedient bargaining, he answered that there could no reduction. "It's just as much work for us," he explained. "We give it perpetual care, you know. Of course, we like to help the bereaved in every way that we can. Perhaps we can arrange for payment in installments. Say—"

"No, no," Wing hastened to interrupt. "We can pay cash."

Uncle Kim was adamant. "Tell him we not want it. He make cheaper then," he insisted.

"Uncle Kim, American price not like in China. Have one price. Cannot change." Wing wondered if Moore could guess what they were saying. "You like grave, better buy now."

"Tell him we not want it." Uncle Kim was patient.

Wing told the salesman.

"Tell you what. We'll throw in one of these metal flower holders," Moore said, indicating a cylindrical container stuck in one of the graves.

Wing interpreted.

"What I tell you! Tell him we buy if he give us headstone too."

"Uncle Kim!"

"Tell him."

The bronze marker would cost an extra forty

dollars. Including tax. Obviously, Moore could not throw that in. When Wing told his uncle, the old man's jaw dropped.

"Forty dollars? Tell him—"

"I not tell him any more." Wing was trembling. How could Uncle Kim cheapen them so? Wing had always been told that people of the old country respected their dead and feared, above all, "losing face." Yet here was his uncle who, to him, personified old China—. "If you not buy, you tell him yourself." 失面子

He was as amazed at his own temerity in flouting his uncle's authority as was the old man himself, but the embarrassment, the shame of haggling with the salesman over the grave was too much. He strode quickly to the car, climbed in, and sat sullenly waiting, still shaking with rage and shame. The heartless old man could do his own haggling.

Uncle Kim looked at Moore. Moore looked helplessly at Wing in the car, then at Uncle Kim, and fumbled at the map. "Nice," he said. "Pretty," with a vague wave of his hand at the surroundings.

Uncle Kim spat deliberately into the grass, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and cleared his throat. His mouth opened and shut several times without emitting a sound. "Aw ligh'. I buy," he finally said.

Wing remained stonily silent as they drove back to the office. Nor did he break his angry silence at the office as Uncle Kim concluded the arrangements painfully in his broken English. Wing had to struggle to hold back his tears of humiliation while his uncle

121

squeezed two dollars off the price of the headstone. He signed the deed for the plot.

Uncle Kim had his pipe lit before they passed through the granite gateposts again. He puffed deeply and was musing aloud when they rolled out on the highway. "Will be good burial. Coffin with silk inside. Seventy-dollar grave near Choy and Pang. Thirty-eight-dollar bronze headstone with carving of Chinese name. Flower holder for nothing. Will be good burial."

He looked at his nephew. The muscles of Wing's jaw moved and bulged slightly. Uncle Kim puffed a while in silence. He seemed to be intently searching for something in the smoke that drifted up from his lips. Then, the deep lines on his forehead smoothed out to fine tracings. Very quietly he said, "Wing, your aunt and I, we married thirty-two years. We not bring her out here—"

Wing looked at him incredulously for a moment before turning his eyes back to the road. "Not bring her?" he said. He watched his uncle from the corner of his eyes.

Uncle Kim shook his head. "No." He tapped his thin chest with the ivory mouthpiece of his pipe. "She stay here." Speaking very slowly, he added, "We put bone and flesh in ground. Not aunt." He said no more.

Wing watched the road in silence. He stole a look at Uncle Kim and found him puffing his pipe again with a wistful half-smile adding a few more wrinkles to his old face. Returning his attention to the road, he had some difficulty swallowing the moisture in

his mouth. The road blurred a bit. He saw again the neatly clipped grass, the row on row of stones of the "memorial park," the smokestack. An "empty place" Uncle Kim had called it. It was an empty place.

He wanted to put his young arms around his uncle's shoulders and tell him how much he loved him, but he knew Uncle Kim would only be shocked at such unseemly demonstrativeness. He wanted to tell him how ashamed and sorry he was, but he didn't know how to say it in Cantonese. He reached over and switched on the radio.