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The air above the river bank gradually became a universe of flies. Perhaps those green and golden flecks were not flies after all, but a horde of spirits on the sacrificial altar. Why else did their droning sound so much like wailing? In the cool clear world beneath that green and golden fog the people began to feed. Their sweat-drenched faces remained expressionless. "Ding-ding dong-dong" they clanged their wine bowls, "ba-ji ba-ji" they chomped their meat, "shi-lu shi-lu" they slurped up the broth. All energy seemed concentrated in their mouths; they seemed to neither see nor think at all. Over hill and dale the only sound was the chorus of gulping throats.

The guttural sounds, and the droning, and the "tick-tock, tick-tock" of the clock jangled together. In the midst of this cacophony the people on the riverbank all turned into stone—except for their mouths, which continued to move. These rocks, too, gave off a green and golden glow.

Molitu sank to the ground. But even there he found no trace of himself, or anything else. Nothing but the splintering sounds of the Chaos.

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THE HOMECOMING

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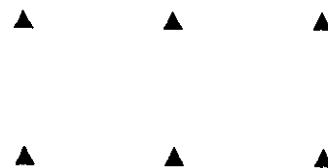
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H A N S H A O G O N G

In: Jeanne Tai ed.

Spring Bamboo: A collection
of contemporary Chinese
short stories. NY: Random
House, 1989, 19-40.



Many people have said that once in a while, when they visit some place for the first time, they experience a feeling of familiarity they cannot explain. Now I too know this feeling.

I am walking. The mud path, scoured and eroded by water running down the hillsides, stretches before me in an array of narrow ridges and clumps of pebbles, like bones and dried-out entrails after skin and flesh have been stripped away. In the gully are a few sticks of rotting bamboo and a length of tattered rope. portents that a village is close at hand. Some dark shapes stand motionless in the ditchwater. Only when you look carefully do you discover that they are not rocks at all but water buffalo, their heads barely breaking the surface, their eyes fixed on me in a furtive gaze. Mere calves, these, yet already wrinkled, bearded, already senile at birth, senility running in their blood. Rising above the banana grove ahead is a squat blockhouse, its portholes like cheerless eyes staring out of smoke-darkened walls, walls black from the countless nights congealed within them. I have heard this area used to be

infested with bandits, and that every so often there had been pitched battles between hill folk and outlaws. No wonder there is a blockhouse in every village. And the dwellings, in spite of their thick walls and beady-eyed windows set way up high, look fearful as they huddle in a tight circle.

All this seems familiar, yet strange too, like a word you've been staring at for too long—now it looks right, now it doesn't. Damn it, have I been here before or not? Let me take a guess: Down that flagstone path, past the banana grove, left at the oil mill, and just behind the blockhouse I should find an old tree—a ginkgo or a camphor—long dead from a bolt of lightning.

Moments later I find I am correct—down to the last detail, including the hollow in the tree and the two youngsters in the foreground playing with a small bonfire.

Nervously I try again: Behind the old tree there should be a low barn with piles of dung in front and a rusty plow or rake leaning against the side.

And there they all are, clear as day, seeming to come toward me in greeting as I approach. Even the large stone pestle in its lopsided mortar, with the leaves and muck at the bottom—even these look familiar to me.

Actually, the mortar in my mind's eye is clean and dry. But wait—it stopped raining only a short while ago, and water running off the eaves would have been dripping right into the mortar. So once again a chill rises from my heels all the way up to the back of my neck.

No, this is impossible, I cannot have come here before. I have never had meningitis, no mental illness, I still have my wits about me. Maybe I saw this in a movie once, or maybe it was in a dream that . . . Anxiously I rack my brains.

Stranger still, the hill folk all seem to know me. Just now as I was

rolling up my pant legs to cross the creek, a fellow came down the slope carrying a couple of logs lashed together at one end. He watched awhile as I teetered along reaching uncertainly for the stepping stones. Then he went over to the melon stand by the side of the road, pulled out a dried branch and tossed it over to me. On his face was an odd, yellow-toothed grin.

"Back, eh?"

"Yeah, I'm back . . ."

"It's been about, what, ten years?"

"Ten years . . ."

"Let's go sit in the house. Sangui is plowing the field up yonder."

Where is his house? And who is Sangui? I am completely baffled.

As I climb up a little hill, tiled roofs and courtyards begin to rise into view. Out in the clearing several figures are swinging at something, their flails cracking away unevenly. All of them have bare feet and closely cropped hair; their faces are covered by a coat of sweat that looks like a brown glaze with ragged edges, little slick patches on their cheekbones catching the light and glistening as they move back and forth under the sun. Short floppy jackets and pants that hang loosely from the hips leave their soft bellies and navels uncovered. Not until I see one of them going over to a cradle and undoing her shirt to breast feed the baby, and notice the earrings on every one of them, do I realize that they are—well, women.

One of them looks at me wide-eyed.

"Is this not Ma . . ."

"Ma Four Eyes." Someone reminds her. The name amuses them, and they all burst out laughing.

"My name is not Ma, it is Huang . . ."

"Changed your name, have you?"

"No I haven't."

"For sure, you still love to jest. Whence have you come?"

"The county seat, of course."

"Truth, a rare visitor. How is Missy Liang?"

"Which Missy Liang?"

"Your missus, is not Liang her maiden name?"

"Mine is surnamed Yang."

"Sakes alive, did I remember amiss? No, that cannot be, I know she once told me we were distantly related. My husband's family is the Liang clan, from Liang's Knoll, over at Three Rivers. You know that."

What is it I know? And whatever it is, what does it have to do with me? How did I end up here when it seems I was . . . was I looking for her?

The woman throws down her flail and takes me into her house. The doorsill is very high, very heavyset, and over the years legions of young and old have stepped on it, sat on it, until a gentle depression has been worn into the middle. Yellowish rings in its wood grain spill over the sill like widening circles of moonlight forever petrified. Toddlers have to crawl across on all fours while grownups must crook their legs high in order to clamber over the threshold, their bodies leaning forward awkwardly. Indoors it is very dark. The room smells of swill and chicken droppings, but I cannot see anything except for a thin ray of light that trickles in through a high narrow window, slitting open the dank blackness. When my eyes finally adjust to the dim light I am able to make out some soot-covered beams and an equally grimy basket hanging on the wall. I sit down on a block of wood—for some reason there are no chairs in this place, only wood blocks and benches. Women old and young are crowded around the doorway chattering. The one who is breast-feeding flashes an easy smile at me while she unabashedly pulls out one long tit, still dripping with milk, and presses the

other nipple between the baby's lips. They are all saying odd things: "Xiao Qin . . ." "No, not Xiao Qin." "Then who—?" "Her name's Xiao Ling." "Oh yes, Xiao Ling—is she still teaching?" "Why didn't she come for a visit too?" "Have you both gone back to Changsha?" "Do you live in the city or the township?" "Got any youngsters yet?" "One, or two?" "Does Chen Zhihua have any youngsters?" "One, or two?" "How about Bearhead? Has he found himself a wife yet?" "Does he have any youngsters also? One, or two?" . . .

Before long I realize they have all mistaken me for a certain "Ma Four Eyes" who knows these people named Xiao Ling and Bearhead and so forth. That fellow probably looks a lot like me, maybe he also peers out at the world from behind his glasses.

Who is he? Do I need to think about him? From the women's smiling faces I presume that getting food and lodging for the night will be no problem, thank goodness. It's not so bad to be this Ma So-and-so, after all. It's not so hard to answer questions about "one, or two," to surprise or sadden the women as the case may be.

The missus from Liang's Knoll brings over a tray with four large bowls of steaming *youcha*, a sweet gruel made from fried sesame seeds and rice flour. Only later do I learn that the four bowls signify a wish for peace and prosperity all year long—one bowl for each season. At the time I am rather put off by the grubby-looking bowls, though the *youcha* itself smells delicious. She sets the tray down before me, then scoops some dirty baby clothes off the floor into a wooden tub and carries it all into the inner room, her words coming to me in snatches: "Long have we not had news of you, then Master Shuigen told us . . ."—a long pause, after which she returns to the outer room—"as soon as you went back they put you in prison."

I am so startled I almost scald my hand with the *youcha*.

"No, never! What prison?"

"A pox on that Shuigen, always running on at the mouth! My poor father-in-law was so afeared he burned plenty of incense for your sake." She covers her mouth and begins to giggle. "Aiyo! I'll be darned."

The women are all laughing. The one with a mouthful of yellow teeth adds: "He even went to pray to the buddha at Daigongling."

Nuts, now it's buddhas and incense too! What if this Ma What-sisname is really under a jinx, really rotting away in a jail somewhere? And here I sit in his place, drinking youcha and grinning stupidly.

Mistress Liang brings me another bowl. As before, one hand is clasped over the wrist of the other, as if in some kind of ritual. I am still working on my first bowl—the sesame-and-rice mush has settled onto the bottom and I don't know how to get at it politely. "He was forever fretting about you, always telling us what a kind and upstanding person you were. That coat of yours—he wore it for many winters, and after he departed I turned it into a pair of trousers. Now little Manzai is wearing it. . . ."

I try to talk about the weather.

Suddenly the room darkens. I turn around to see a black figure almost blocking the entire doorway. From the shape I can tell it belongs to a man, his upper body bare, his bulging muscles angular and hard-edged like rocks. In his hand he is carrying something—an oxhead probably, to judge from its contour. The silhouette closes in on me before I get a good look at his face. Then, dropping his load with a thud, he reaches out both of his paws and starts pumping my hand. "Aiyo! If it isn't Comrade Ma, hiyaya!"

I am not some hideous maggot. Why on earth is he carrying on like this?

It is not until he turns toward the fireplace and his profile is

etched in light that I see the smile on his face, as well as his gaping black hole of a mouth and the tattoos on both arms.

"Comrade Ma, when did you get here?"

I want to say my name is not Ma at all, it is Huang—Huang Zhixian, as a matter of fact—and that I have not come in search of a once-familiar place in some kind of heartfelt and heroic gesture.

"Still wist"—know? recognize?—"me? The year you left we were working together on the Spiral Hill highway. I am Ai Ba."

"Ai Ba, sure I remember you," I reply shamelessly. "You were the crew leader then."

"No, I only recorded the workpoints. Wist you my wife?"

"Of course, she's famous for her youcha."

"You and I, we used to chase prey together, remember?"—Is that the same as hunting?—"That time when I wanted to make an offering to the mountain god, you said I was just being superstitious, but then you ended up with terrible sores all over your body from the poisonous *muma* weed. And then you ran right into a muntjac, but it slipped through your legs before you could spear it and—"

"Uh, yeah . . . I just missed it . . . my eyes are bad . . ."

The cavernous mouth starts to guffaw. Slowly the women get up and leave the room, swaying their ample hips as they walk away. The man who calls himself Ai Ba brings out a gourd. From this he pours me bowl after bowl of a cloudy brew that tastes sweet and fiery and bitter all at the same time—a drink made from steeping herbs and tiger bones in alcohol, I am told. Turning down the cigarettes I offer him, he shakes some tobacco onto a strip of newspaper and rolls it up into a little cone, which he lights. The paper begins to burn, brightly, and I watch with increasing apprehension while he calmly takes a drag without so much as a glance at the flame. But at last he blows it out with a casual puff, and the cigarette looks none the worse.

"Nowadays there's as much wine and meat as you want, every family's slaughtered plenty of cattle for the New Year." Wiping his mouth he adds: "That year when we were learning from Dazhai* we all had to tighten our belts instead. Remember?"

"Sure I do." I think I will talk about the excellent situation today.

"Have you beheld Delong? He's now the village chief. Yesterday he went over to Zhuomeiqiao to plant some saplings, so mayhap he'll come, mayhap not, but mayhap he will." He goes on to talk about other people and events that leave me more confused than ever: So-and-so built a new house sixteen feet high; So-and-so also built a new house, eighteen feet high; So-and-so is about to build one sixteen feet high; So-and-so is just breaking ground for his, it may be sixteen feet high or it may be eighteen. I listen intently, trying hard to catch his train of thought behind the jumble of words, but all I notice is the occasional odd usage of "wist" for "know," "behold" for "see," and so on.

My head begins to reel, and I find myself cheering just as heartily for sixteen feet as for eighteen, and just as witlessly.

"You're a good fellow, coming back to regard your old friends and all." Once more he lights his cigarette and lets it blaze for a couple of seconds—enough to set me on edge again. "I've still got those books you gave out when you were the local schoolteacher." He clomps up the stairs, and at length reappears, cobwebs in his hair, clutching in his hand a sheaf of dusty yellow papers smelling of mildew and tung oil. It turns out to be a mimeographed pamphlet, crudely printed, with splotches of ink all over the pages. The cover has been torn off, but I gather it is a reading primer: One page is devoted to the night school anthem, others contain things like

*Dazhai was known as a model commune during the years of the Cultural Revolution, and the entire country was exhorted to learn from its example.

basic agricultural terms, the story of the 1911 Revolution, passages from Marx's writings on peasant movements, and maps and so forth—all copied in a large, ordinary hand. It is something I could well have produced, but so what?

"Poor devil, you had a hard time too, so thin only the eyes were left in your face, but you never missed a class."

"It was nothing really."

"It snowed a lot that December, damned cold too."

"Yeah, so cold our noses almost fell off."

"And still we had to till the fields. We'd hoist our pine torches and go to work."

"Uh-huh, pine torches."

All of a sudden he turns mysterious. The glint on his cheekbone and the blackheads underneath press close to me. "I want to know something. Was it you who slew Yang the Runt?"

What Yang the Runt? Instantly my scalp constricts, my lips freeze—all I can do is shake my head repeatedly. For heaven's sake, my name is not even Ma, I have never set eyes on this Yang the Runt or whatever, so why is someone trying to incriminate me?

"They all say it was you. That guy was a snake in the grass, he had it coming to him!" Ai Ba rages. When he sees my denial, he looks as much disappointed as disbelieving.

"Any more wine?" I change the subject.

"Sure, sure, as much as you want."

"Lots of mosquitoes around here."

"They always pick on newcomers. Shall I put some rushes on the fire for you?"

The rushes begin to burn. More people come to see me, filing through the door in droves. Invariably they would ask about my health and inquire after my family. The men would smilingly accept the cigarettes I offer them and suck noisily on one end as they sit

by the door or against the wall, silent for the most part. Once in a while someone would make a remark, telling me I look fatter, thinner, older, or "young faced" as ever—must be from all that easy living in the city, they would add. Then, their cigarettes finished, they would smile again and say they have to go cut a tree or lay some manure. Several little kids run over to examine my eye-glasses, only to scamper away pellmell a few moments later, screaming excitedly in a mixture of delight and fear: "Goblins! goblins! in his glasses!" Then there is the girl who hovers by the doorway chewing on a stalk of grass. She keeps staring at me as though she were possessed, and her luminous eyes seem to be swimming in tears. I have no idea what it means but it makes me very uncomfortable, so I put on an earnest look and keep my eyes fixed on Ai Ba.

In fact this kind of thing has happened to me more than once. Just now, for instance, while I was on my way to see their poppy fields I ran across a middle-aged woman. She seemed horror-stricken at the sight of me and her face darkened like a lamp that had been suddenly snuffed out. Then she lowered her head and hurried away on tiptoe. I have no idea what that was all about either.

Ai Ba says I should go and see Grandpa San as well. Actually Grandpa is not around anymore—died from a snakebite not long ago, they say—only his name still crops up in people's conversations. Over by the brick kiln is the solitary little hut where he used to live, already tilting so badly it may keel over at any minute. But the two large tung trees are still standing. And beneath them the weeds are flourishing. Standing waist high, they have closed in from all sides and sidled up the steps, their undulating blades like sharp tongues waiting to devour the little shack, waiting to devour the last bones of a clan. The wooden door is padlocked, but termites have riddled it with little black holes. Would the house have fallen into such disrepair if its owner were still around, I wonder. Can it be

that the soul of a house is its human inhabitant, and when the soul is fled the carcass decomposes oh so rapidly? A rusty lantern stands upended in the undergrowth, its top and sides spattered with chalky bird droppings. Close by is a cracked earthen jug from which clouds of buzzing mosquitoes pour forth at the drop of a hat. Ai Ba says this is the pot that Grandpa San always used for pickling. He also says I used to visit Grandpa a lot just so I could have some of his pickled cucumbers. (Really?) Big pieces of plaster have fallen off the walls, but some writing can still be seen in faded outline: "Have the whole world in view."* Ai Ba tells me I painted those words on the wall. (Really?) He has plucked a handful of herbs and is now checking some birds' nests for eggs. I glance inside the window. Standing in one corner is a basket half filled with lime, and next to it is a big round disc that on closer inspection turns out to be a metal barbell, so rusted it is almost unrecognizable. I am amazed: What is this unusual piece of athletic equipment doing here? How was it brought into these remote mountains?

Perhaps I already know the answer: I gave it to Grandpa San, right? I gave it to him to beat into a hoe or a plow, but in the end he left it untouched. Right?

Up on the slope someone is calling the cows: "Ooo-mah . . . ooh-mah . . ." and from the woods across the way comes the faint tinkling of cowbells. These cattle calls are rather unusual: They sound like someone crying for mother, plaintive cries. Perhaps it was their keening that had blackened the walls of the blockhouse.

An old woman comes down the hill carrying a small bundle of twigs. Her back is bent almost double, and her thrust-out chin punches downward like a hoe with every step she takes. When she

*The slogan "Have the whole nation at heart and leave the whole world in view" was popular during the Cultural Revolution.

looks up to stare at me (or is she merely looking straight through to the tung tree behind me?) her murky pupils push right up against her eyelids. What startles me, though, are the deep lines in her otherwise expressionless face. She takes one look at Grandpa's dilapidated shack, turns around to look at the old tree near the blockhouse, and mutters enigmatically: "Tree is dead too." Then she continues onward in her oddly plodding way, the breeze flattening the few limp white hairs bobbing up and down, up and down on her head.

I am now absolutely sure. I have never been here before. As for the old woman's statement, I have no idea what it means either—an unfathomable pool.

Dinner is a grand affair: fist-sized hunks of beef and pork, all somewhat gamy and undercooked but full of pomp and swagger. They arrive in mounds piled high above the edges of the bowls, held together by loops of straw and stacked layer upon layer like bricks in a kiln—no doubt a custom dating back to the beginning of time. Only men are allowed at the table. One person does not show up, so in front of the empty seat the host places a sheet of straw paper onto which he would plunk down a piece of meat from time to time, for the enjoyment of the absent guest. During the meal I ask about their premium white rice, but they refuse to even discuss prices, they seem ready to give it to me for nothing. As for opium—well, there is a good crop of it this year, but the state pharmacy has a monopoly on the entire supply. I can say no more.

"The Runt got what he deserved." Ai Ba slurps some hot soup from a ladle, returns it to its gluey spot on the table, then glares at a bowl of meat as he taps it with his chopsticks. "Him and his fat ass and soft hands, a real good-for-nothing, but he had money enough to build himself a new house. If you ask me, I think he was up to no good."

"That's right! And how he used to torture us at those mass criticism meetings, tying us up like animals. Not a single one of us managed to escape that! I've still got two scars on my wrists to show for it. Damn that motherfucker!"

"How did he really die? Did he really run into a vampire and fall off a cliff?"

"No matter how mean you are, you still can't fight your stars. Don't be wanting a bushel when a peck is all you're meant to have. Hongsheng from Xia's Cove was the same way."

"Rats, he even ate rats. How mean can you get?"

"That sure is mean. Unheard of."

"Poor Bearhead really got smacked around by him. I saw those little cylinders—tubes of dye, no question about it. Hardly enough to paint a few dolls, let alone to dye cloth. And he claimed they were bullets."

"But Bearhead also had his own class background to blame."

I muster up all my courage to butt in: "About Yang the Runt, didn't the authorities send anyone to investigate?"

Ai Ba munches noisily on a piece of fatty meat. "Sure they did. What a load of shit! When they tried to talk to me I went looking for my chickens. Hey, Comrade Ma, you haven't even touched your wine! Come, come, have some more to eat. Here."

He presses another slab of meat into my bowl. I begin to gag and leave the table pretending to get some more rice, but as soon as I reach a dark corner I toss the meat to a dog scampering underfoot.

After dinner they insist on preparing a bath for me. I suspect this may be another local custom, and I try to appear well acquainted with the routine. The bathtub is actually a very large barrel standing in one corner of the cookhouse. It is filled with steaming hot water that seems to have been boiled with some herbs, maybe *qinghao*. Women walk about freely in front of it, the missus from Liang's

Knoll even bringing me more hot water in a gourd dipper from time to time. I am embarrassed but all I can do is crouch lower in the barrel. When she finally steps outside with a pail of slop I let out a long sigh of relief.

By now I am sweating from the heat of the bathwater, but the herbs seem to have taken the itch out of all those mosquito bites. I rub my fingers over an inch-long scar on my calf, the result of a spiking on the soccer field. But maybe that's not it, maybe it's from . . . being bitten by some guy named The Runt. Maybe it was on that morning dripping with fog, along that narrow path up the hill. He was coming toward me under his umbrella, but when he caught the look in my eyes he began to tremble. And falling to his knees he cried out that he would never do it again, never ever, that he'd had nothing to do with Er Sao's death, that he knew nothing about Grandpa San's buffalo. In the end he put up a fight, his eyes bulging till they seemed ready to pop out and his jaws clamped around my leg. Then his hands began to clutch at a lariat around his throat. But all of a sudden they flew apart, and like two crabs began to crawl and squirm and gouge the dirt. Later, who knows when, the crabs gradually calmed down and became still. . . .

I dare not think on. I am even afraid to look at my hands—would I find on them the stench of blood, and rope marks from a lariat?

I now decide with all my might: I have never been to this place, nor do I know this fellow The Runt. No. Never.

I dress quickly and return to the main room. It is alive with people and activity. An old man comes in and stamps out his glowing pine brand, says he once asked me to buy him a little dye, he still owes me two dollars for it, now he's come to pay his debt, and also to invite me to his house tomorrow for dinner and to sleep over. At this Ai Ba gets into the act, protesting that it is his turn to play host to me, he has already invited the traveling tailor to his

house tomorrow, he's got plenty of meat butchered anyway, no question about it but I am going to his house tomorrow. . . .

While they are arguing I slip out the door and, stumbling a little, set out to take a look at the house "I" used to live in. According to Ai Ba it's that shack right behind the old tree, and it wasn't until year before last that they turned it into a cowshed.

Again I pass beneath the tung trees, again I see the encroaching weeds and their prey, Grandpa San's sagging grass shack. And its shadow. It is watching me silently. It coughs in the raven's cries, talks to me in the rustling of the leaves. I think I even sniff an elusive aroma of alcohol in the air.

Child, have you come back? Pull up a chair and sit down. I told you to get away, far, far away, never to come back here.

But, I miss your pickled cucumbers. I tried making them myself, but they never taste the same.

What's so good about those wretched things? I only made them back then because I felt so sorry for all of you, poor devils. You were always hungry, always scrounging around for something to eat, and while you were plowing the fields if you found some broad beans on the ridges, you'd even eat them raw.

I know, you were always looking out for us.

Sooner or later we all find ourselves far from home. I did no more than I ought.

That time when we had to gather firewood, we only brought in nine loads. You were keeping tally, and you told them we brought in ten.

I don't remember anymore.

And you were always after us to shave our heads. You would tell us that hair and whiskers are both blood-eaters, if we let them grow they'd sap the life force right out of us.

Is that so? I don't remember.

I should have come back earlier to see you. I had no idea things would be so different, that you would be gone so soon.

It was time to go. Otherwise I would have turned into an immortal. My only fondness was for a drink or two, and now I've had my fill, I will sleep soundly.

Grandpa, would you like a cigarette.

Go and make yourself some tea, Xiao Ma.

I leave that aura of wine and head for home, holding aloft the almost extinguished pine brand and thinking about the morrow's chores. From time to time I would hear the splash of a frog jumping into the ditch. But I have no pine brand in my hand now, and my home has become a cowshed that feels so unfamiliar, so unfriendly. I can barely see a thing, though the sounds of cattle chewing cud and the warm musty smell of compost gush out of the barn door. Thinking their master has come, the cattle jostle each other trying to poke their heads outside and bump against the railing in a huge clatter. As I walk away, the sounds of my footsteps echo from the mud walls of the barn, almost as if there were someone walking on the other side, perhaps even within the wall itself—someone who knows my secrets.

The hills across the valley are pitch black. In the dark they appear taller and closer, stifflingly so. Looking up at the uneven strip of starry sky far above me, I suddenly feel so close, too close to the ground, as though I have been seized by an unnamed force and am about to be pulled inexorably down, down through this crack in the earth into the depths.

Just then an enormous moon appears, and the dogs in the village bay as if in fright. I turn toward the creek, treading on the flecks of moonlight that have been sifted through the trees and now dapple the ground like the floating leaves of some aquatic plant.

There may be someone sitting on the bank, I think—probably a young woman, a leaf whistle between her lips.

There is no one by the creek. But when I walk back I see the shadow of a person underneath the old tree.

A silhouette—the perfect touch for such a beautiful night.

"Is that you, Xiao Ma?"

"Yes, it's me." How calm and confident comes the answer.

"Did you just come from the creek?"

"Who . . . who are you?"

"Simeizi."

"How you've grown! I wouldn't recognize you at all if I'd run into you somewhere else."

"You've seen the outside world, now everything seems different to you."

"How is everyone at home?"

Suddenly she falls silent. Looking at the mill, she finally answers in a rather strange voice: "My older sister, how she hated you. . . ."

"Hated . . ." I am so unnerved I glance at the path leading to the clearing and some lights, thinking of escape. "I . . . many things are hard for me to say. I told her once that . . ."

"Why did you put those ears of corn in her basket that day? Did you not know you cannot just up and put something in a maiden's basket? And she gave you one of her hairs, did you not understand that either?"

"I . . . I didn't, I didn't know any of the customs around here then. I needed some help that day, so I asked her to carry the corn for me."

My answer seems to pass muster.

"Everyone was talking about it, were you deaf too? I beheld it with my own eyes, you were teaching her acupuncture."

"She wanted to learn, she wanted to be a doctor. Actually, back then I didn't really know much about it myself. We were just fiddling around."

"You city folk are all heartless."

"Don't be like this. . . ."

"It's true! It's true!"

"I know . . . your sister was a good girl, I know that. She could really sing, and her needlework was so fine. Once we went eel fishing, and she caught one right after another. When I got sick she cried her eyes out. . . . I know all of that. But, some things you don't understand, and I can't explain. My way of life will never be easy, I will always be on the go, I . . . I've got my lifework to do."

I finally settle on the term "lifework," even though it sticks a little in my throat.

She covers her face and begins to sob. "That fellow Hu, he was so mean."

I seem to know what this means, though I continue to answer tentatively: "I heard about that. I'm going to make him pay for it."

"What's the use? What's the use?" She stamps her feet as she sobs even more bitterly. "If only you had said something back then, none of this would have happened. Now my sister has turned into a bird, she sits here day after day calling, calling for you. Can you not hear it?"

Her slender shoulders heave with each sob. I can see them clearly in the moonlight, as well as her smooth neck, even her creamy-white scalp showing through the center parting of her hair. I want so much to wipe away her tears, I yearn to hold her by the shoulders and kiss that thin line of scalp, just as I would kiss my own little sister, I want to let her tears—salty ones—cling to my lips, so I can drink them in.

But I dare not. This is a strange story, and I dare not break the spell.

There really is a bird singing in the tree: "Do not go—go—go, do not go—go—go . . ."—a lonesome cry that shoots high into the heavens like an arrow before fluttering down into the midst of those hills and forests, down into those black clouds and noiseless flashes of lightning in the distance. I smoke a cigarette as I gaze at the silent thunderbolts.

Do not go, go, go.

I leave. Before going I ask the missus from Liang's Knoll to give Simeizi a letter from me. In it I talk about her sister's wish—unfulfilled in the end—to become a doctor, and how I hope she would be able to realize her sister's ambition. Where there is a will, there is a way. Would she like to take the entrance exams for medical training? I will send her all kinds of study materials. I promise. I also tell her I will never forget her sister. Ai Ba caught that partridge in the tree, and I am going to take it home with me where it will sing in my window every day and be my constant companion.

I steal away like a fugitive, without saying goodbye to the people in the village, and without taking care of the premium white rice. Anyway, what do I want with rice or with opium? It seems they are not what I came for originally. I feel suffocated by it all—the whole village, the entire enigma that is me. I must escape. But I turn around for another look, and once more I see the old tree that lightning killed, still standing at the entrance to the village, its withered limbs outstretched like trembling fingers. The master of that hand fell in a battle long ago and turned into a mountain, but he struggles to keep his hand raised above the earth, where even now it is grasping for something.

I go to the inn in the county seat and fall asleep to the twittering

of the partridge by my bed. A dream comes to me. In it I am still walking on and on along a rutted path, its skin and muscles of mud long since stripped away by runoffs from the hills, only bones and bowels left now to bear the trample of the hill folk's straw shoes. The road is endless. The calendar watch on my wrist tells me I have been walking for an hour, a day, a week . . . but still the road runs beneath my feet. Later I am to have the same dream over and over, no matter where I go.

I awake in terror, I get a drink of water, then another, and another, I go to the bathroom, once, twice—finally I make a long-distance call to a friend. I mean to ask him whether he has managed to “waste” Mangyhead Cao at cards yet, but instead I blurt out a question about how to study for entrance exams on your own.

My friend addresses me as “Huang Zhixian.”

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘what?’”

“What did you call me?”

“Aren't you called Huang Zhixian?”

“Did you call me Huang Zhixian?”

“Didn't I call you Huang Zhixian?”

I am stunned. My mind is blank. It is true, I am at the inn, in the corridor is a dim light swarming with bugs, underneath it a row of makeshift cots. Right beneath the telephone there is even a big round face snoring away. But . . . is there still someone in the world named Huang Zhixian? And this Huang Zhixian—is that me?

I will never be able to walk out of the enormity that is me. I am tired.

LAO KANG CAME BACK

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W A N G A N Y I