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## BLUE LIGHT IN THE SKY

**W**HEN SUMEI WAS PLAYING A GAME OF "CATCH THE ROBBER" IN the yard, a piece of sharp glass cut her foot. Blood gushed out. She began crying right away and limped toward the house. Behind her, the other kids went on playing like crazy. No one noticed that she had left.

As soon as she went in the house, she stopped crying, opened the wardrobe, took a rag out of the drawer, and bandaged her foot. As the blood continued seeping out, she added another rag. She pricked up her ears: she was afraid her father, who was in the backyard repairing a wooden tub, would come in and see her. The bleeding soon stopped. Sumei took off the two blood-soaked rags, and bandaged her foot with a clean cloth. Then she stood up, intending to throw the two dirty cloths into the garbage can. As soon as she got up, the door opened. But it wasn't her father who came in; it was her older sister Sulin.

"What's that?" she asked aggressively. She was quite pleased as she pointed at Sumei's foot.

"Don't tell Pa," Sumei pleaded.

"So much blood! Your foot! What a catastrophe!!" Sulin was shouting loudly on purpose.

In a flash, Sumei thought the whole sky was falling. She lost no time in hiding the two rags in the burlap bag behind the door. A frightened young rat glided out of the burlap bag and fled in desperation. Because of her hurried, vigorous movement, her foot started oozing blood again. Sulin observed her little sister carefully for a while, then turned and went into the backyard. Sumei knew she was going to report this to Pa, and—terror-stricken—she sat down on the bamboo chair to wait. She predicted a storm would soon descend on her. But she waited and waited. Pa still hadn't made a move. So she thought, *Could Pa be too busy* (that morning, she'd noticed that three people had come to ask him to repair their tubs) *to come and discipline*

ber? Thinking this, she felt a little better. She decided to spend the day in the woodshed. As she left, she took the two dirty rags out of the burlap bag behind the door. She limped down the steps and threw them into the garbage can. She also grabbed two handfuls of dried leaves to cover the rags.

The woodshed was more than ten meters from the house. Living inside it was Sumei's old friend, the big gray rat. As soon as she saw the nest made from bits of grass and rags, warmth surged up inside her. She knew that there were a few baby rats inside. They'd been born a few days earlier and hadn't yet opened their eyes. The day before, she'd taken advantage of the time when the big gray rat was out hunting food to steal a look at those little things that were almost transparent.

Sumei sat down far away from the rat's nest. From the woodshed, she could hear Sulin's voice. What on earth was she saying to Pa? Maybe they were discussing how to discipline her. And in the front yard, the kids playing "catch the robber" were shouting with glee the whole time.

When it was almost afternoon, Sumei was so hungry she couldn't stand it anymore. She intended to slip stealthily into the house and find something to eat. When she walked into the kitchen, she saw Sulin in the midst of washing dishes. Sulin was staring at her full of suspicion.

"Your food is in the cupboard. Pa kept talking about you. We thought you'd had an accident!"

Sulin's voice had become really soft. It was even a little fawning. Sumei felt truly flattered. Sulin made quick work of bringing the food to the table. Sumei sat down, and as if in a dream began gobbling down the food. At the same time, she heard her sister talking on and on beside her.

"Sumei, Pa says you could die from tetanus. What do you think? You know Mama died from tetanus. I've never approved of your playing with those wild kids. Why don't you ever listen? Actually, I've known for a long time that there was a lot of broken glass by the fence. Last year, I smashed a few wine bottles there. I just never imagined that you would get hurt so soon. Now you've been hurt. I'm so jealous of you. This morning, I saw that your foot was very swollen, and I ran over to Pa. He was putting a hoop around a barrel, and without looking up, he just asked me if it was the broken wine bottles that had hurt you. He also said that those wine bottles had all held poison;

there'd be no way for you to escape with your life. His words upset me. As soon as I calmed down, I remembered those stencils that you used for drawing flowers. Why not just give them to me to save? You won't be able to use them anyhow. I know that you get along well with Little Plum—she gave you those patterns; but if you hadn't asked her for them, she would have given them to me. Right? What can you do with those things now?"

Sulin frowned. It seemed she hadn't thought this through. It also seemed she was up to something. Sumei washed her dishes and was about to go back to the bedroom. She noticed that Sulin was still standing next to the stove and smirking. She ignored her and went back to the bedroom by herself. She and Sulin shared this bedroom: the two beds were opposite each other, with a wardrobe in between. It was from a drawer in the wardrobe that Sumei had found the cloth to bandage her wound. Now she opened the wardrobe again, took out a key, opened a locked drawer, and took out that set of stencil blocks. They were made of peach wood, a smooth red color. Altogether, there were four of them. One could draw four floral designs to embroider pillows. Little Plum had told Sumei that she had swiped them from her mother. In the last few days, her mother had looked everywhere for them. Sumei didn't know how to embroider flowers yet, but the magical blocks enchanted her. When she had nothing to do, she drew flowers in pencil on old newspapers—page after page of them. She felt this was incredibly wonderful. After holding those floral blocks for a while, she carefully put them back in the brown paper bag, then locked the drawer. Her wound was hurting a little, but it had stopped bleeding. Sumei recalled what Sulin had said, and all at once she felt a little afraid: was it possible that she would really die? Just now, she had thought that Sulin was making a mountain out of a molehill. Sulin had never lied. And Pa—whenever she or Sulin did something wrong, he slapped them twice. This time, though, had been an exception. Was it because Pa was giving her special treatment that Sulin had said "I'm really so jealous of you"? And why in the world had Pa discarded wine bottles with poison in the vicinity of the house? Sumei couldn't figure it out. She didn't even bother to think it through. Her policy was always to wait for the trouble to go away. "It'll turn out all right"—that's what she always told herself. Sometimes, when something bad happened, she hid out in the woodshed and slept there. After she woke up, it didn't seem nearly so bad. But today perhaps



what Sulin had said wasn't so trivial. For some reason, at the time, Sumei hadn't been at all worried; but now remembering what Sulin had said back in the bedroom, she began to feel vaguely worried. She was also afraid that Sulin would see that she was concerned. She sat on the bed, took the bandage off, and looked at her foot. There wasn't anything unusual about her wound. She thought, *Maybe that piece of glass wasn't from the wine bottle containing poison. Pa and Sulin were both too decisive about this—really oddly decisive.* Sumei decided she would walk to the other end of the village. If she could walk that far, it would mean there was no problem. How could anyone who was about to die walk to the other end of the village?

By the time her father caught up with her, Sumei had left the woodshed behind, and was almost at Little Plum's door.

"Are you asking for trouble? Go back and lie down!" her father roared ominously.

"I, I'm doing my best . . .," Sumei said in a small, pleading voice.

"Your best! Soon, we'll be watching your finest drama!"

Through it all, her father's expression was stern. Not daring to look at him, Sumei glided to one side like a mouse.

"Where do you think you're going? Do you want to die? Hurry up and go back to bed and die there. If you die outside, no one will pick up your corpse!"

Chased and scolded by her father, Sumei didn't feel that her foot was lame at all. She rushed back home. As soon as she went in, she saw that Sulin was trying to open the drawer where the floral stencils were kept. She was using a wire to open the lock. When she heard the door open, she chucked the wire at once and blushed.

"You can't even wait for me to die."

Slamming the cupboard shut, Sulin left in a huff. Sumei knew that she was going to look for Pa again. It was strange: Pa didn't even like Sulin. Of the two sisters, he liked Sumei somewhat better, but from the time she was little, Sulin had always done her best to please her father. Even if Pa was mean to her, she was never discouraged.

Sumei lay in bed, closed her eyes, and forced herself to go to sleep. She was a little worried about sleeping. After a while, she felt dazed. In her dream, she went into a forest by accident, and couldn't get out. It was cold in the forest, and there were huge trees everywhere. She sneezed a few times in a row, and suddenly as she bent her head, she noticed that her foot had been perforated by a sharp piece

of bamboo. She'd been nailed down and couldn't move. Feeling an indescribable stabbing sensation, she screamed. She woke up. Her hair was drenched with sweat, but her foot didn't hurt. What was this all about? *Could it be that it was someone else who stepped on the sharp piece of bamboo in her dream? And that person was the one who would soon die?* Although her foot didn't hurt, the feeling of pain she'd had in the dream was deeply embedded in her memory. The poplar tree outside the window was whispering in the wind. Sumei was afraid she'd go back to the same dream, but—without knowing why—she also really wanted to go back to it so that she could understand some things better. She shilly-shallied back and forth between sleeping and waking. Finally, she woke up, because of the tremendous sound of Sulin shattering a bowl in the kitchen.

Sumei went into the kitchen to help Sulin. Just as Sumei was about to start cleaning the rice out of the pan, Sulin suddenly turned polite. She snatched the pan out of her hand, and said repeatedly, "Go and rest. Why don't you rest?" Her behavior again made Sumei suspicious. Sulin kept busying herself, while Sumei watched from the sidelines. She admired Sulin's skillful way of working that she could never learn. Now, for example, Sulin was absorbed in using tongs to roll damp coal dust into little balls. She stacked them up next to the stove. It was as if her right hand were joined with the tongs in a single entity. She looked rather proud of herself.

"Sulin, I had a strange dream. I dreamt I was dying." Sumei couldn't keep from saying this.

"Shhh! Don't let Pa hear you."

"But it was just a dream," she added. "Weird, huh?" Sulin looked at her speculatively, and then buried her head in her work.

At dinner, their father didn't say a word. Only when they'd finished eating and Sulin had stood up to clear the table did he say abruptly, "Sumei mustn't go out."

"I'm okay. There's nothing wrong," Sumei argued, her face flushed.

Father ignored her and walked away. "You're so stupid—so stupid!" Sulin said as she grabbed the bowl out of Sumei's hand. "Go off and rest!"

Lights were on in Little Plum's home. The whole family was just wolfing down their dinner. After Sumei went in, Little Plum just

nodded at her, indicating that she should wait, and then didn't look at her again. They were eating pumpkin porridge and corn bread. Their faces were covered with perspiration. Little Plum's two little brothers buried their faces in the large bowls. Little Plum's father and mother didn't look at Sumei, either. They both looked a little angry. Sumei stood against the wall for a long time. When the family finished eating, they all went into the other room, leaving only Little Plum to clear the table. Sumei thought, *Little Plum is really strange. Neither her pa nor her ma is here now. Why is she still not even glancing at me?* Little Plum piled up the bowls and carried them into the kitchen. Sumei followed her, not guessing that she would snatch up a cloth in the kitchen and come back to wipe off the table. And so Sumei collided with her.

"Leave now—now! Later on, I'll go to see you," she said in annoyance. She actually forcefully pushed Sumei outside.

Sumei fell down the steps of Little Plum's house. After sitting up, she inspected her foot. It was still okay. The wound was no worse. As soon as she looked up, she saw Little Plum motion to her anxiously, shouting softly, "Leave now—now!" Then she shrank back into the house and didn't emerge again.

Sumei felt it was really a little dangerous now. Recalling her father's orders and his expression, she couldn't help but shiver. All around, it was very dark. In the dark, two people carrying lanterns were in an urgent hurry. Soon, they went past Sumei. She heard one of them say, "We need only get a move on and we'll be in time. In the past, people in our family . . ." Sumei was about to get up and go home, but Sulin had caught up with her. Out of breath, Sulin said to Sumei, "I don't dare stay home alone."

"Is Pa going to beat you?"

Sulin shook her head vigorously.

"What's going on?"

"I was at home thinking about your situation. The more I thought, the more I felt afraid. Why do you always have to go outside? I guess it's great outside. It's so dark that it seems there's no point in being afraid."

She took Sumei's hand solicitously, and strolled around with her on the path. All at once, Sumei felt greatly moved. She had always thought that Sulin just talked rubbish. She'd thought that she stirred up their father to be against her, but at this moment, she felt puzzled.

Maybe Sulin really was more sensible than she was, and knew some things that she was in the dark about. Why had she taken on all the housework Sumei was supposed to do? Sumei had learned through repeated experience that Sulin was a smart person and had always had a clear head ever since she was little. With this thought in mind, Sumei felt she could rely on Sulin, and she held her hand tighter. She whispered to herself, *I can count on Sulin no matter what happens. She is so good, kind, and gentle. She helps me take care of everything. I should rely on her.* Then Sumei suddenly found that she had been following Sulin all along. They hadn't gone far at all; they were just circling around Little Plum's home. Now no one was on the street. The wind blowing from the mountain was like a song. All the while, Sulin was silent. What on earth was she thinking about? Or wasn't she thinking of anything?

"Let's go see Pa over there."

After walking around several times, Sulin finally suggested this.

When they went into the backyard, their father was splitting firewood in the dark. The sound he made was rhythmic. Sumei was very surprised: she didn't believe her father could see in the dark. But the fact was that Father was clearly working in a systematic way—just as if it were daylight.

"Pa, Pa, we're afraid!" Sulin's voice quivered.

"What are you afraid of?" Father put down his work, walked over, and spoke amiably.

Sumei couldn't see Father's face well, but it was a relief to hear his tone. She thought to herself, *Pa isn't angry anymore.*

"Sumei isn't afraid, is she? Sulin, you should learn from Sumei. As I split firewood here, my whole head is filled with things having to do with the two of you. Ever since your mother died, I've been fearful. Sometimes I'm so scared that I get up at midnight and split firewood. Talk about being afraid, I'm the one who should be afraid. What do the two of you have to be afraid of?"

With that, he bent down again and resumed his work.

That night, once Sumei fell asleep, she saw that forest, and she saw herself located in it again. At first, she noticed just one scorpion. Then she noticed scorpions hiding everywhere—under the dried-up leaves, on the trunks of the trees. As soon as she found some, they disappeared and others appeared. They were everywhere.

Time after time, she screamed and woke up with a start. In fact,

it was worse than death would be. When Sumei woke up, she saw Sulin standing motionless on the bed across from her: it was as if she was observing the night. Finally Sumei didn't feel like sleeping. She turned on the light and, drenched in sweat, sat up in bed.

"Sumei, you're really brave." Sulin's voice held jealousy.

Sulin jumped down from the bed, approached Sumei, and gave her a handkerchief to wipe away the sweat.

"When Pa threw away the broken glass from the wine bottles that held poison—threw the glass along the fence—I was off to the side. He wouldn't let me get in on the act. He's always like this. When I told you today that I was the one who threw away the broken wine bottles, that was just my vanity making mischief."

Sulin was deep in thought. Sumei suddenly thought that, under the light, Sulin's face had become a shadow. She couldn't stop herself from stretching out her hand to touch her face. But the thing she touched let out a sound like the rustling of dried leaves. Sulin moved at once, and reproached her: "What the hell are you doing? You're really insensitive. I've told you repeatedly that you should cut your fingernails, but you just don't listen. What do you think Pa is doing? Listen!"

Sumei didn't hear anything. But Sulin was terribly tense. She crept to the door, opened it, and slipped lightly outside. Sumei didn't feel like going with her. She just turned the light off, and sat on the bed and worried. She thought again that if she woke up from a really sound sleep, maybe everything would change. But she was also afraid of sleeping and seeing the scorpions. Her mind was really conflicted. But finally in a haze, she couldn't ward off sleep. She entered that forest again. This time, she shut her eyes tight and didn't see anything. When she woke up, it was already broad daylight.

Another day passed, and she found that her foot had healed. It was obvious that her father and Sulin had made a mountain out of a molehill. Even so, she didn't feel the least bit relieved. She couldn't ever forget the dreams she'd had of the bamboo and the scorpions. Those dreams were linked with the wound where, each time the wounded foot was punctured or bitten, it was exactly on the spot where the wound was. It was really strange. All right, then, go outside, and look for Little Plum and other people. Maybe Little Plum had to chop grass for the pigs. Well then, she'd go with her to chop

grass for the pigs. While they were doing that, she could sound her out and see if she had changed her attitude toward her.

After chopping grass for the pigs at home, Sumei went over to Little Plum's house.

"Little Plum! Little Plum!" she shouted as she craned her neck.

Nobody inside the house responded. After a while, though, she heard Little Plum's parents cursing—calling Sumei "a bad omen." All Sumei could do was retreat and walk discontentedly back along the path. After a while, she came to Aling's home. Aling was in the vegetable garden out in front. Sumei called her several times before she looked up slowly. She looked all around in alarm. With a gesture, she indicated that Sumei shouldn't come any closer. But just then, Aling's mother came out and walked over to Sumei. Taking hold of her shoulders, she looked at her carefully. She said, "Lambkin, lamb—." Sumei was uncomfortable and really wanted to break away, but that woman's grip was very tight. Without listening to any protests, she forced herself on Sumei.

"Sumei, your father is quite good at his craft. He must have made a lot of money—am I right? But I don't think it's all that great to make money, and I don't want my children to get close to someone like that. I'm not so shortsighted. Let me tell you, if a person sets himself up too high and also knows things that a lot of ordinary people don't know, then he's heading for a major fall. Actually, my Aling is a lot better—quite ordinary and without any cares or worries. As the saying goes, she's 'content with her lot.' How's your foot?"

"My foot? It's fine." Sumei was surprised.

"Haha. You don't need to hoodwink me. This is an open secret in the whole village. Could someone like Sulin keep this quiet? You don't look at all happy about this. . . . So I say, it's still better to be ordinary. I always wonder: What's your father up to? Aling! Aling! What the hell are you doing with the hoeing? Have you lost your mind? Run off and feed the pigs—now!"

Suddenly she relaxed her grip on Sumei, and began bellowing at Aling. Aling threw the hoe down at once and started running toward the house.

Sumei wanted to leave, but the woman gripped her by the shoulders and wouldn't let her go.

"Your sister Sulin is much too curious. She's brought herself to an emaciated state. I don't admire her one bit. And I don't let Aling

have any truck with her. But you're different. I adore you. Let me see you smile. Smile! Ah, you can't smile. You poor child. That guy has been too strict with you. I can't ask you in. After all, Aling has her own life. Everyone knows what kind of trick your father is playing. Everyone wants to know what the end result will be. We say this is an instance of 'wait and see what happens.' Understand?"

"I don't understand! I don't!" Sumei was struggling with all her might.

The woman held her shoulders even tighter, and pressed her mouth against her ear.

"You don't? No wonder! Let me clue you in. Listen: you mustn't walk around outside aimlessly. And when you're home, you mustn't sleep in. Prick up your ears. Spy on your father's activity. You won't be used to doing this at first, but as time goes on, you'll get used to it."

Sumei twisted around and looked over the woman's shoulder. She saw Aling talking with Little Plum in the doorway. They were both excited and gesturing a lot. Sumei recalled the good times when she had played with them. She felt miserable. "Little Plum! Little Plum!" she shouted in despair.

Little Plum was dumbstruck, and then pretended that she hadn't heard and went on talking and laughing with Aling.

"You little girl, you're rotten through and through," Aling's mother said, gnashing her teeth.

All of a sudden, the woman scratched her hard on the back, hurting her so much that everything turned black and she sat down on the ground.

When she opened her eyes again, the woman had disappeared. So had Aling and Little Plum. It was as though they hadn't been here just now. Only the pain in her back reminded her of what had just happened. Sumei thought back on what the woman had said about her father. Although she didn't quite get it, she still knew it wasn't anything good. After going through this, she gave up the dream of finding companions. She was weak all over. Only after struggling hard did she manage to stagger to a standing position. That woman had definitely hurt her back. This was truly sinister. Weeping, Sumei walked slowly to the other end of the village. No matter what, she still felt that perverse desire: she had to walk to the other end of the village. It was as though she was struggling against her pa and Sulin.

Taking breaks to rest, she walked ahead. No one else was on the street. At the doorways to the homes, everything was quiet. If she weren't walking in the village she knew so well, she would have suspected she had come to a strange place. Now, even on the hill where cattle used to graze, she didn't see even one cow. At last, Sumei reached the old camphor tree at the other end of the village. Leaning against the tree trunk, she thought she'd rest for a while, but the deathly stillness all around began to terrify her. A long brown snake was swaying back and forth on the tree, hissing at her. The frightening scene in her dream suddenly recurred in its entirety. Holding her head, she ran away crazily. She ran a long way before stopping. She sat on the ground and took off her shoe. The wound had split open again, and there was a little red swelling.

"Sumei, let's hurry on home. There isn't much time."

Looking up, she saw her father. This was really weird: was it possible that Pa had followed her?

"I can't walk any farther," she whimpered timidly.

"Come on. I'll carry you." Father bent down as he said this.

Sumei straddled her father's broad sweat-covered back. She was feeling myriad emotions. She glued her small, thin ear to her father's body, and heard clearly the sound of a man's sobbing. But her father surely wasn't crying, so where was this sound coming from? Father was rebuking Sumei, and talking, too, of the wine bottles that had held poison. Sumei was absorbed in identifying that sound of weeping, so she couldn't care less about what her father was saying.

Carrying Sumei, Father walked on and on. Sumei realized they weren't heading home; instead, they'd taken a fork in the road leading toward the river. At first, Sumei was a little scared, but the sound of weeping coming from her father's back was like a magnet drawing all of her attention. She forgot about danger, and she forgot about how she hated her family. Everything seemed more and more distant. At the back of her father's neck, she said lightly, "My foot doesn't hurt anymore."

Father began laughing. They were already in the river now. The water came up to Father's neck. Supporting herself on Father's shoulders, Sumei managed to get her face above the water. But her father gently pulled her back down. She heard the sound of Sulin's resentful sobbing being blown by the wind along the river. She thought to herself, *Is Sulin perhaps jealous of me?* She closed her eyes and in her



dream, she drank lots and lots of river water. She felt it was strange that, even with her eyes closed, she could see the blue light in the sky.

The next day, when Sumei woke up, the sun was already shining on the mosquito net.

Sulin stood motionless at the head of the bed watching her. Her face was as fresh as pumpkin blossoms opening in the morning.

"Sumei, you've completely recovered. Get up now and chop grass for the pigs. I've exhausted myself with work the last two days. I need to rest. Yesterday, Little Plum came looking for you. She wanted to take those floral blocks back. Since you were sleeping, I took the key out of your pocket, opened the drawer, and gave them to her. It never occurred to me that, after thinking about it a moment, she would turn around and give the stencils to me. God only knows what she was thinking. But to tell the truth, what good would it be for you to have them? You don't know how to embroider."

"I guess you're right." Sumei's voice was buoyant.

# THE BIZARRE WOODEN BUILDING

**T**HIS MULTI-STORY BUILDING IS REALLY TOO HIGH. ITS OUTER WALL is made of long wooden planks piled up horizontally, and the inside is also made completely of wood. These boards with their exposed wood grain have already turned black from the passage of time. If you look at it from a slight distance, it's just one blurry expanse. The building is of ordinary design. In just one small point is it different from others: it's so unexpectedly high that people can't believe it. Considering its construction materials—ordinary wood—we find it hard to imagine that it was possible to build such a high structure. Standing here, even craning my neck, I can't see its roof, because the top half has completely disappeared into the mist. It's very foggy in this region. This must have been the evil design of whoever designed this building—the work of an extremely suspicious person who didn't know his place. Perhaps he started planning it with just the general outcome in mind and without any consideration of its daily use. Later, he didn't examine it closely, either, and left things unsettled. When you went up the stairs, shaking and squeaking sounds accompanied each step—and even the groaning sound that one associates with carrying a heavy load of wood became more and more intense the farther up you went. As I was hesitating, the master issued a cheerful invitation from the top of the building. The voice came down from above, like an echo in a deserted valley. He'd seen me from so far away, and had finally shouted to me. Had my reply reached the top?

Somewhat relieved, I started climbing up. On each floor were residences for two families. All the doors were tightly closed; it seemed they were locked from the inside, but it was also possible that there weren't any people inside. I was dizzy. When I finally reached the last floor, I looked up to see the master smiling and standing at the entrance of the open door. He was dressed clumsily in a black down jacket—even though it was late in the spring. Yet after climbing up the stairs, I—wearing only a wool shirt—was dripping with sweat. Not until I walked up to him did I see that the man's face

bore the marks of having stayed up all night. His face was puffy and his greasy hair covered his pate like a thin pancake. The room was empty but for a narrow bed. On the bed was a quilt that was neither gray nor green, all in disarray. Under the bed was a clothes trunk.

He invited me to sit under the quilt with him, saying that one could keep warm this way. So each of us sat at one end of the bed. Sure enough, after a while, I felt the wintry chill in this room. Although the room had only one small window plastered tight with newspaper, the wind poured in from every crack between the wooden boards. The whole room was whizzing with cold wind. Luckily, the quilt was very big. He told me to wrap myself up in it, and only then did I slowly stop shivering.

"I didn't expect you today, so last night, I worked hard again all night long. Now that I'm in bed, my eyes are fighting to stay open. You won't take offense, will you?" he asked.

"Of course not," I said, wrapping the quilt more tightly around myself.

The room was only dimly lit. Even though he and I were sitting across from each other, I still couldn't see his expression well. His pale face kept wobbling, his teeth all exposed on the outside, bringing terrible thoughts to my mind. It was only his body warmth under the quilt that reassured me. I bent my head to avoid looking at him. I thought, *Hasn't he fallen asleep yet?* He hadn't even taken off his down jacket.

"Most recently, I've started considering how to overcome the obstacle of distance," he said, his train of thought clear, "and last night, I made a lot of headway. My house is the highest building in this area—my ancestors were proud of it, for you know, in the past it was densely populated here and the means of communication were much different from today—but this fact hasn't brought any essential benefit with it. Rather, it's taken the shape of an impassable obstacle. The invasion and attacks of the white ants also give me a headache. Every day, they seem to proclaim that the end of the world is approaching. You also noticed that all of the households here have moved away. So then how did I make headway? This is the problem that I've been thinking about constantly for the last several years. Last night, I finally made an unimaginable breakthrough. But now I need to go to sleep right away. The pitiful child at the door can tell you what the solution is."

Strange . . . I hadn't heard anyone come up the stairs. Was he talking nonsense? Aside from me, who would come here? I hesitated a while, and finally—risking the cold—shuffled over to open the door. Sure enough, a figure stood at the entrance. He turned around: it was a boy of thirteen or fourteen. His lips were trembling from the cold. In his hand he carried a basket.

"Who are you?" I said as I fled back to the quilt.

"I deliver pancakes. He wants me to deliver them twice a day. But downstairs, I saw you coming up, and thought you would probably also want pancakes. This is gratis. Look, there's bottled water, too."

He removed the cloth from the basket, and took out a small bottle of water, a tumbler, and two pancakes.

I took the tumbler from him, and as he bent to pour water for me, I noticed that he was wearing an odd long gown. The front of this gown was all covered from top to bottom with large pockets. When he saw me staring at his clothes, he shrank back, and sniveling in embarrassment, he smiled. This long, pocket-covered gown lent his actions an experience that didn't match his age. Just then, the master was snoring thunderously.

"Actually, what these pockets hold is all the same thing." Watching me eat a pancake, he said, "It's all information from this region that I've gathered for him. When I sell pancakes, with no one the wiser, I grab onto those people's inside stories. They never guess that I'm in the habit of jotting things down. Huh!" He conceitedly patted the pockets on his chest, then asked, "Can you guess what's inside? This room is so cold it's like a tomb. It's lucky I came to pass the time of day with you. Otherwise, you'd be just sitting here frozen stiff, wouldn't you? He's different. He took precautions long ago by wearing such a thick down jacket."

"Are you cold?" I asked him anxiously.

"I'm not afraid of the cold!" He let out a piercing yell, as startling as firecrackers. "You're a villain. You intend to find fault with him, don't you!"

The kid's yelling had apparently disturbed the master. He turned over, and vague moans came from his mouth.

Then it was as if the kid had forgotten what he had just said, for pointing at the master, he assessed him in a mocking tone:

"Look at him. His life is like a pig's. Each time I come up here,

he's dreaming. He sits there swaying on the bed and drinks water and eats pancakes, without coming to at all. When I put the news items in the trunk and lock it up, he goes to sleep." In a flash, the kid's expression turned unusually serious, and he asked again, "You aren't finding fault with him, are you?"

"Does he read your jottings at midnight?" I was trying to be ingratiating.

"Why do you ask?" He was on his guard as he glared at me. "He's never read them. All of the materials are in my small wooden box. My small wooden box is then placed in his large trunk. But he has the key only to the large trunk. How could he read them?"

The kid pulled a big bunch of keys out of a large pocket on his chest, and—showing off—he shook them so that they jingled. While he was talking, he came up and sat down carelessly on the bed. Without knowing why, I felt a little afraid of his zeal. As he talked, he massaged the master's back through the quilt. I found this disgusting: it was as if his and the master's positions had been reversed. In short, I felt this kid was too affected.

"Although he has never read the first-hand information I've brought him, I always tell him about everything I've run into. That's the usual situation. Wait a minute! You can pretend to be him, okay?"

I nodded my head.

"Please close your eyes, and lean back against the wall."

Then he climbed up beside me, his rapid breath rushing against my face. I waited a long time. He said nothing. What was he doing? I opened my eyes, and saw that he was dejectedly withdrawn to one side.

"Is this how you interact with him?"

"Exactly. Ordinarily, this is how I interact with him. I actually don't have to say anything. Of course, each time, he's asleep, and those things that I'm thinking of enter his dreams. He says that what I pass into his head nags at him all night, and so he's pissed off at me. He says he won't allow me to come up here anymore. I know he's just talking through his hat. This guy—if I didn't bring him pancakes and water, he'd have starved to death long ago! I discovered that he actually likes to listen to my reports: if a day or two goes by without my reporting to him, he feels wronged and loses his temper. As I see it, this kind of person belongs to the class of people who can't get what they want but aren't willing to settle for less. He can't let go of his

pride. All day, he lies in this high place, and depends on the news I bring him of the outside world. Once I've satisfied his wishes, he again considers himself aloof from politics and high-minded things, and then he's exceedingly condescending to me."

I couldn't help laughing at his tone of voice.

"Are you laughing at me?" Sternly, he said, "Did I climb up to such a high place to give you food just for you to ridicule me? I'm telling you: What I just said is not exaggerated in the slightest. He really cannot do without me for even one day. Otherwise, he'd starve to death. Now, though, I have to take a look around the staircase. Someone wants to come up, and that is something he absolutely does not allow." With that, he turned around, bounded over to the door, and went out.

But I hadn't heard any sound at all outside. I was really surprised that the master's, and the kid's, sense of hearing was so acute. Did this building have some kind of mechanism set up somewhere that made it possible for people to sense activity going on below? Or was this building connected with the master and the kid into an organic whole? After a while, the kid came back and told me that he'd thrown a bottle down the staircase to serve as a warning. The bottle would roll straight down to the bottom of the staircase. The many bottles at the entrance to the master's room were all for this purpose. Generally speaking, none of the persons who intended to charge upstairs had much courage. They were all afraid of their own shadows. When they were halfway up the stairs and unable to withstand the cold and then suddenly saw a bottle rolling down from the top, they were naturally scared out of their wits, and took off as if they'd seen a ghost.

"He demands that absolute silence be maintained here," the kid announced solemnly. "One time, I arrived a little late. As a result, a guy had groped his way up the stairs and entered his room. I'll never forget it: that was such an ugly scene. Of course, he immediately lost consciousness. He had no ability to defend himself against this kind of occurrence. I've never been able to forgive myself for this. I know that guy; he's one of my customers. I rushed up and pounded him with a bottle. As he was running away, he pounded me with a bottle, too. He hit his target, and the blood on my face scared him. Without looking around, he ran off and never came up here again."

The kid lifted the hair up from his forehead so I could see his

scar—a very deep, sunken, wedge shaped scar, incredibly deep. It was as if you could see through to his brains. The kid smoothed his hair, laughed uneasily, and went on to say:

“Several days ago, he told me that you’d be coming here. I asked him who you were, but he wouldn’t tell me. Who are you? Anyhow, you can’t be the guy who scurried up here last time. You don’t look at all like him. To my surprise, he also invited you to sit under his quilt. It’s so cold up here, you should leave.” Jealousy appeared on his face.

Since I didn’t make any move, he came and sat on my feet. He meant for me to be uncomfortable. I saw through his plot, and stayed persistently under the quilt without moving. When he saw that his little trick couldn’t succeed, he stood up decisively and walked over to the window. With a *peng, peng!* he opened the window. A gust of wind blew fiercely into my face. Not only was there wind, but mingled with it was a profusion of fluttering snowflakes. It was really bizarre that there would actually be snow falling in the late spring! Swaggering as they floated in, the snowflakes created a dazzling vortex in the room. The kid stood there as if stupefied by the scene. The cold was beyond the limits of my endurance. I was afraid I’d freeze to death here. I had to go downstairs at once while my legs could still carry me.

I turned over and got out of bed, and—scuffing along because I hadn’t tied my shoes—I ran downstairs. But I couldn’t run fast. In the severe cold, my body was gradually stiffening. My feet were numb. Clenching my teeth, I stepped forward desperately. Those stairs were endless! I don’t remember how many curves I turned, nor do I remember how many stories there were. The whirlwind in the staircase was wrapping around me, and my thoughts were frozen stiff. I walked down the last flight of stairs, and—suddenly dizzy—I slipped down to the ground. I was desperate for a rest! Tears of pain were running down until my whole face was covered with them.

“I thought you could hold up. It never occurred to me that you didn’t have even a little patience and willpower. You loser!” In a daze, I heard the kid berating me, “People can’t just sit down here anywhere they like. Up there he can hear you clearly.”

Supporting me with his slight, skinny body, he helped me walk away. I wouldn’t have imagined that he had so much strength. After taking several steps, we reached the street. He abandoned me at the side of the road and went back.

I sat on the ground for a long time before recovering. It wasn't snowing at all. It was still foggy. Pedestrians were wandering around slowly on the street, as though everyone was undecided about something. When I looked up at the wooden building, I could see only as far as the seventh floor. Above that, it was hidden in fog. As I composed myself, I felt terrified by the experience I'd just had: our climate down here could differ so greatly from the climate up there! I couldn't help being filled with hatred for those forebears who had created such a building. Evidently, the master hadn't gone downstairs for more than ten years. Yet, in the past, he and I had often played chess in the vegetable garden—playing continuously until, from the sun shining overhead, we saw stars before our eyes. While I was thinking of this, I saw the kid carrying a basket of pancakes and turning hurriedly into a small alley. I looked up again, and I could still see only as far as the seventh story, but I distinctly heard the depressing *peng! peng!* sound of the window up there being shut. Of course, that might have been my illusion.



## NIGHT IN THE MOUNTAIN VILLAGE

**O**UR HOME IS IN LAKE DISTRICT, WHICH WAS ONCE COVERED BY A lake. Later, people stopped up the lake with dikes. All around, paddy fields stretch to the horizon. The land is fertile, and the rice and rape grow well. We should have had an affluent, peaceful life. Unfortunately, the enclosures built of earth were always giving way. Whenever this happened, our homestead was swallowed up by flood-water in an instant. As I recall, this terrifying thing occurred every two or three years. Generally, the cresting lasted more than ten days, and Mama grew agitated. She made pancakes from morning to night, the salty sweat dripping from her forehead onto those pancakes.

Finally, when all the flour had been made into pancakes, Mama put them into bamboo baskets, shouldered the load, and told my four sisters and me to each pack a suitcase and follow her out. We walked along the dangerous, high embankment. The sun beat down on our heads like a ring of fire, and the vapor from the boundless lake waters braised our heads until we were dizzy. Carrying a roll of cotton wadding, I followed Mama. Behind me were my four unkempt sisters. As I walked, I hallucinated. I felt the bank begin swaying under my feet, and so I screamed, "*Help!*" The people struggling on the embankment were confused for a moment, but they quickly calmed down and shouted obscenities at me. I blushed and tears ran down my face. When Mama saw this, she didn't stop and console me, but just pressed me to walk faster. Usually, we had to walk a whole day before getting out of the flood water and coming to the mountain called "Seven Monkey Immortals." With the pancakes for sustenance, our whole family had to stay on the mountain for about a week. It was like this every time. When we came to the last of the pancakes, they'd gone completely bad.

Life inside the cave was unbearable. Each day, we had to go out and dig up weeds for food and collect firewood. Several hundred people lived in this cave. As soon as it was light, we spread out over

the mountain like monkeys. When we'd dug up all the edible weeds, we picked leaves. When we'd collected all the dry firewood, we cut down small trees. Every once in a while, we went to the summit to gaze out on the cresting floodwaters. In these dizzying days, I encountered some mountain people. These scary-looking people lived in a col of the mountain. Sometimes they came up the mountain to cut firewood. From their point of view, we plains people were invaders, so when they saw us, they always looked angry. It's very difficult to describe the appearance of the mountain folk. They're a little like the savages you read about in legends. But they had unusually keen vision: it seemed they could look right through you. In general, they refused to be distracted. After expertly chopping the firewood, they tied it up beautifully with rattan into two bundles, and then sat down for a smoke. It was when they were smoking that I got up my nerve to edge closer to them. Altogether, there were six of those longhaired, long-bearded men sitting in a row on the ground.

"Hullo," I said.

As if they'd heard a signal, they turned toward me in unison. Anger quickly appeared on their faces, and their mustaches quivered.

"I, I want to ask directions. . . ." I explained, withdrawing.

No one answered me. Their eyelids all drooped. It seemed they wanted to obliterate me from their minds. I heard one of the old ones say, "The water will begin receding tonight." As I walked away, I looked back and saw that they were still sitting there smoking. Soon, I saw people from Lake District—from my hometown. They said I was really gutsy. They'd seen the scene just now while they were hidden in a clump of trees. They'd all thought that I'd purposely tried to get a rise out of the mountain men, and that I was a goner for sure, because a few days ago, someone had died and been thrown into a heap of leaves, his head severed from his body. Later on, Mama came up, too. When she heard what the villagers had to say, she began beating me with a cane. I couldn't stand it, and yelled, "Mama, why not just let me die at the hands of the mountain men? Let me die at the hands of the mountain men!"

As she beat me, Mama said, "No way! No way!"

Later, I saw a chance to escape.

Strolling on the mountain, I was thinking resentfully about what had just happened. I thought, *Violence can't get rid of my curiosity; it can just nurture it.* After a few days here, I already knew where the moun-

tain people's village was. Tomorrow, while cutting firewood, I'd go there. From the summit where I was now standing, I saw that everything was a boundless expanse of floodwaters. I couldn't even see the long embankment we had walked along. Floating on the water were some dark specks. I didn't know if they were animals or furniture. They could also have been trees or corpses. Even though Mama had spared no effort to deceive me, I still knew that we were running out of pancakes. Yesterday, when my little sister was crying for another one, Mama slapped her face. If the water didn't recede, what other wonderful way did she have to get us through this difficulty? This mountain was the only refuge for miles around.

It was said there was a faraway city, where people came and went, and which didn't flood, either, but to get to that place, we'd have to have a boat and float on the water for seven days and seven nights before we'd be able to glimpse the high-rises of the city. Those buildings were as high as the mountain. For a seventeen-year-old boy to think of going there was nothing more than a daydream. I don't know why I thought that the mountain people had gone to that place; maybe I'd seen it in their eyes.

When I went back to the cave, Mama had already lit a small fire and was simmering some beans. My eyes brightened, and my stomach began growling with hunger. My oldest little sister told me they'd gleaned the beans from the mountain people's land. They'd already finished harvesting, but they were slipshod about it, and they were also all nearsighted. And so they hadn't picked them clean, thus giving us an unexpected bounty.

"How do you know they're nearsighted?" I asked.

"Everyone says so. Otherwise, why would they live in this mountain col generation after generation? It's just because they can't see well. They really don't know of Lake District, nor do they know of the city. Everything is a blur to them. They even think this mountain is the only place in the world!"

"You've looked into them really thoroughly," I sneered.

With beans to eat, everyone was in high spirits. All of us sat around the fire. We even ate the pods. Mama told us confidently that she'd also seen some wild vegetables near that place. As soon as it was light the next morning, we'd all go and dig them up.

It was cold in the cave at night. Our worn-out cotton wadding was placed on top of the piled-up twigs and grasses. Everyone slept

together. I heard Mama sigh in the dark. Worried by the sound of her voice, I sat up.

"Are you thinking of breaking away from this family?" Mama asked me.

"I want to have a look around and find a way out. Anything wrong with that?"

My voice was filled with complaints and disgust. I knew that my sisters weren't asleep. They were all listening intently. To avoid arguments, I went outside.

The mountain wind was blowing so hard that I got goose pimples. The wind held the smell of lake water. I hadn't walked far when I ran into people from my hometown. They couldn't sleep, either, and had come out for a walk. We'd grown up in the Lake District that stretched to the horizon, and we all had good eyesight. As long as there was hazy moonlight, we could easily distinguish the paths. Now for example, I saw a girl about my age standing in front of me. She was eating something. I couldn't be sure if she was a mountain person or someone from our village, so I walked up closer. When I'd almost reached her, she began tittering and turned to look at me. Actually, she was a lot older than I. Her face was pockmarked.

"How about some melon seeds?" She squeezed toward me with her hands full of them.

"No! No!" I dodged away.

Melon seeds were what girls ate. I didn't. Now I knew she was a mountain person, but she was different from the mountain men I'd seen. She drew her hand back, and snorted arrogantly.

"Coward! Your ma is too strict with you. I've been to your Lake District. It's really a barren land. In a place like that, probably no one loses any sleep."

"It's this wasteland of a mountain that's a barren land!" I flung her words back at her. "Over there, all we have to do is plant seeds and food will grow. We have plenty of food and clothing."

"Let's introduce ourselves. My name is Little Rose."

Looking at her rough, pockmarked face, I could hardly keep from laughing at this name, but I contained myself.

"My name is Long Water."

"That name is really drab. I noticed you a long time ago. You're my Prince Charming. It's a pity you don't have a good name. Let me

choose one for you. From now on, I'll call you Black Bear. How's that? I bet you'll grow up to fit that name."

"Whatever," I said. In fact, I was really pissed at being called this. And I couldn't call her "Little Rose." Privately, I called her "Pocky."

Pointing to a turnoff, she said, "Let's take this path. Your mother is looking for you now."

"How do you know I wanna go with you?"

She pushed me hard from behind—pushed me onto the turnoff, and then said, "Because—because I'm the only one in your heart."

I was really pissed off now: she had actually projected her desire onto me, but said it was my desire. Although this is what I was thinking to myself, I couldn't find any reason to brush her off. It seemed as if my feet weren't my own but were being led ahead by her. As we walked into the jungle, the light dimmed. It took a strenuous effort on my part to distinguish the path. I asked Pocky how she could see the path. She said she didn't actually see it: she knew this mountain as well as she knew her own body. She went on to say that, in fact, we Lake District people didn't train our vision. We flattered ourselves in thinking we could see things; in fact, it was merely a false impression. As she talked, she walked faster, but I stumbled and fell behind. If she'd abandoned me then, I'd have been a little concerned, because lots of wild animals roamed this mountain.

We walked quite a ways on the mountainous path, and kept ascending, but when we reached level ground, I realized that we'd actually come down the mountain. This level space was the village's threshing ground. Pocky wanted me to go to her home. I asked if that would cause trouble, and she said as long as I said I was her fiancé, there'd be no trouble. She also said that it was so dark outside that there was no way I could go back: if I entered the mountain, I might run into wild boars, so I'd better just stay at her home.

"How could you turn back at this stage?" she said in an overbearing tone, her breath gushing against my face.

This was a medium-sized village. All the houses were low: if you stretched your hand out, you'd touch the eaves. The whole village was silent now. Not even the dogs were barking. Only the pigs in their pens were snorting.

While I was still standing between the houses and looking around, a low door suddenly opened, and a hand pulled me in. Before I knew what was happening, I tumbled onto a bed.

"This is my mama. Black Bear, you mustn't make her angry," Pocky said in the dark. "Mama, what do you think of my fiancé?"

"He's too skinny," the old woman said without a trace of politeness. She was sitting to my right. "And where are you going to put him? There's only one bed in this house; it can't hold three people. If I had anything to say about it, he'd drown in the floodwater, too."

Her last words scared the shit out of me. I almost started running away. I heard the old woman groping for firewood; it seemed she'd also knocked something off the windowsill. She was swearing under her breath.

"Rosy, oh Rosy, couldn't you give me a break? How much are you going to mess up our lives?"

"Mama, how could I hold back when Prince Charming was right in front of me?"

Pocky's voice had turned into that of a spoiled child. I couldn't help feeling jealous when I recalled my own mama. I also felt a little puzzled: Pocky actually didn't like me at all. Why did she have to talk like this to her mama? It appeared that these mountain people were all really strange; they didn't seem at all like my fellow villagers. Just then, I heard a door creak near the bed: mother and daughter had quietly gone out and left me alone in the room. In their pen, the pigs were squealing as if being butchered. Maybe a thief had come to steal them.

I sat there alone for a while, then tried to go outside and take a look. I'd just reached the passageway when mother and daughter both shouted at me to stop, and asked me, "Where are you going?" They also blamed me for not doing a good job of guarding their house. "What if a thief had slipped in?" I said I'd been sitting in the dark room and couldn't see anything. Even if there'd been a thief, I couldn't have done anything about it. At this, they said in unison that I "had no conscience." As they were talking, a tall man appeared behind them. He was holding a lighter. After striking it several times, it finally caught, and I saw a large mustache. He was stuffing his pipe into his mustache.

"This boy complains that he can't see anything," Pocky said to the man.

"People from over there are all like this," the man stated conclusively as he smoked his pipe.

I wanted to engage Big Mustache in small talk, but before I'd

opened my mouth, Pocky dragged me over to one side, and admonished me under no circumstances to talk nonsense. She also said that her mama had just now agreed that she could take me around to get acquainted with the village.

"That man killed an old guy from Lake District." Pocky told me this only after we'd turned out of the passageway.

"Some people say that the old guy was his father. I don't put much stock in this kind of thing. You, for example: it's impossible for you to become one of us. You grumble that our house is too dark."

"If that's so, why did you still say I was your fiancé?" I interrupted.

"You've been looking down on me after all!" She raised her voice sharply, "If you're so dissatisfied, you do have feet on your body: you can just leave! But you won't go. You're afraid of the wild boars in the forest. No. It isn't just this, either. You still intend to thoroughly check us out, so you can go back and brag. You flunky! I'll root the evil out of you."

Pocky said she'd take me to an old guy's home. He was the village head. He usually didn't sleep at night. Whenever villagers felt depressed, they sought him out. Everyone called him "Uncle Yuan."

We got there in no time. Uncle Yuan's house was slightly higher than the others, the windows slightly larger, but—like the others—there was no light in the house. It was so dark outside that if you put your hand out you couldn't see your fingers. After I went in, I heard lots of voices discussing something. When I walked over to them, they stopped talking. I felt people staring at me.

A youthful voice told us to go upstairs. Pocky said it was Uncle Yuan. Uncle Yuan pushed me onto a very narrow staircase, and the three of us filed upstairs, to a very low loft. I had to bend to keep my head from bumping into the ceiling. Some chickens were being raised in this loft and let out squeals of surprise. I guessed they were shut up in a basket. Uncle Yuan pulled me down to sit on a mat. Pocky sat in another corner. I got the impression that Uncle Yuan was a young guy. I didn't know why he was thought of as an old geezer.

After sitting there a while, I heard sobbing downstairs. At first it was one person, and then it was a chorus. The sobbing was larded with the sound of sniveling. It seemed these people wanted to unburden themselves of an untold number of sorrows. Neither Pocky nor Uncle Yuan said anything. They probably were concentrating on listening. As I continued listening, the sound of sobbing stayed the

same. It remained grief-stricken and hopeless, but lacked any explosiveness. All along, it was oppressive. Had Uncle Yuan sent me upstairs so that the people below could cry their hearts out? It hadn't occurred to me that these mountain people were so emotional. This probably had something to do with their nearsightedness. My impression of these people was much different from that I'd had of the other people in the daytime.

After sitting there for a long time I felt bored, and so I started imagining Pocky's worries. I thought, *This ugly girl brought me here to impress me with something novel. The reason she's being so quiet now must be that she was wondering about me, waiting for my questions. If I really ask questions, she can show off with her condescending attitude and lecture me.*

Just then, a commotion downstairs interrupted my thoughts. It was as if those people were fighting with clubs. One person yelling "Save me" was about to run up to the loft. When Uncle Yuan heard this, he shouted something I didn't understand at the head of the stairs; the guy who was halfway up the stairs went back down. I figured they'd leave then. It didn't occur to me that they'd stop fighting and once more sob in unison. This time, it was even more grief-stricken and hopeless. They were also stamping their feet, as if each one was just asking to die sooner. Their voices made the caged chickens jump constantly. My nerves were on edge. I finally asked some questions, because if I went on keeping quiet, I knew I'd start crying. I asked Uncle Yuan why the people downstairs were sobbing. He said, "Nights on the mountain are filled with intense emotions. They're summoning the souls of the dead. This is the most active time deep down in the rock formations."

"Can you people see those things?"

"That's a snap for us."

I wanted to ask more, but from her corner Pocky rebuked me unhappily, and said to Uncle Yuan, "Ignore him." Uncle Yuan was quiet for a while, and then crawled over to the chicken basket. When he turned around, he gave me two eggs, and told me to crack them open and drink the insides. I did as he said. The eggs tasted great. It had been a long time since I'd eaten anything so good.

Just then, another guy charged upstairs. Uncle Yuan pushed me over there, and told me to ward him off. I stood holding onto the railing tightly with both hands. In a moment, I felt that it wasn't just one person charging up the stairs, but a powerful army. It was as



though my legs had been broken. I started falling down the stairs involuntarily, but not all the way down: I was blocked crosswise on the stairs. Downstairs, it grew silent all of a sudden. It took a lot of effort before I could extricate myself and shout for Uncle Yuan. I shouted and shouted, but no one answered. Pricking up my ears, I listened intently: I couldn't even hear the chickens clucking. Holding onto the railing, I gingerly made my way down. When I got to the room downstairs, I groped my way along the wall until I came to the benches where the keening people had just been sitting.

The front door was wide open. There was a little light outside, but you still couldn't see anything well. I didn't know if Uncle Yuan and Pocky were still upstairs or not. I guessed they had probably left from the other side of the attic. I couldn't stand this deathly silence. I wanted to smash something. I felt around, touched a kimchee vat, and threw it to the floor as hard as I could, but it didn't break. On the mud floor it just made a muffled sound, and the salt water flowed everywhere. After throwing the kimchee vat, I was even more terrified; in desperation, I dashed outside.

I groped my way forward between the houses, sometimes touching the low eaves on both sides to keep my balance. The ground was very uneven, as though the bumps were man-made. All the doors were tightly closed; no one came out. After a while, it seemed to me that I'd walked through almost the whole village, and still hadn't run into anyone. I thought I'd go back to the village head's home, but I couldn't find it. And I didn't dare barge into these people's homes. I was afraid they'd think I was a thief. So I just stood like this on the narrow path, one hand touching a thatched rooftop on one side. I took in the night sky, as well as the monster-like mountain below it.

At this unseemly moment, I recalled Mama. If the water never receded, Mama and my four sisters would be trapped. Second Sister had gotten a stomachache from eating too many fruits and wild vegetables yesterday: she'd rolled around on the ground from the pain.

If the water did recede, we'd have to rebuild our house—plait the wall from thin bamboo strips, paste fresh cow dung onto it, and transport straw from far away to place on the roof. If the house had collapsed, it would be even more trouble. I don't know why when I thought of these things it was as if I was thinking of someone else's problems: I was neither pissed off nor self-pitying. I thought these

things were related only to that me of the past. I didn't know what this me of the present was all about. I was seventeen, and I'd never been to such a strange place before. The people here spoke the same language as I did, but it was almost impossible to understand them. Their innermost anguish also scared me and made me think that a disaster would soon befall the world. Still, I was inexplicably fascinated. I'd come here with the thought of finding a way out: now, though, I'd already flung the issue of a "way out" from my mind. After listening to the keening just now, I knew that the mountain people didn't embrace any hope for the future. Just think: would any Lake District family raise chickens in the loft?

Just as I was woolgathering, a little kid tugged at my clothes. A boy.

"Black Bear, Uncle Yuan wants you to go home with me to help my grandpa take a bath." He said loud and clear, "But don't lean on our roof with your hands. The house could collapse. You're too tall for your own good."

The little kid said his name was "Mother Hen." His family lived close to the main road. He walked fast, leaping along, leaving me in the dust. Whenever I shouted, "Mother Hen! Mother Hen!" he turned around and said my "stalling for time" was really annoying. We finally arrived.

Bending over, I followed him into the low house. I heard him splitting firewood. Then he lit a small kerosene lamp. He said that the village head had told him he had to light a lamp as a favor to me. Holding the lamp high, he approached a bed. I saw the old guy lying on the tattered wadding. He was groaning and struggling, like an injured mantis. His grandson patiently held the lamp up high. Several times, it seemed as though he wanted to sit up, but each time he fell back on the bed with a thump, and then renewed his struggle. I said to Mother Hen, "Let me hold the lamp while you heat water for your grandpa's bath." Mother Hen sniffed at my idea. "Heat the water? You moron. We all take baths in cold water."

His grandpa slumped back again and began weeping hopelessly. Without saying a word, Mother Hen held the lamp up. I was about to go over and support the old man, but Mother Hen fiercely held me fast and said I would "scare his grandpa to death." I had to retreat and wait obediently beside the bed.

"Who's here?" the old man wheezed.

"A young man. He's come to help you take a bath," his grandson answered.

"Tell him to leave. I can take a bath by myself."

Mother Hen indicated that I should go over to the door. He and I both retreated there, and he said softly, "Grandpa has a strong sense of self-respect. We need to be rather patient."

After struggling for a while, the old man actually moved his legs down from the bed. Holding the bedposts for support, he stood up, wobbling. Mother Hen joyfully cheered his grandpa, but he didn't do anything. He just let the old man stand there pitifully. I couldn't go on watching. I asked Mother Hen where the basin was. He answered impatiently that it was outside the door. Then he continued cheering his grandpa, shouting, "One, two, three, four . . ."

Outside the door was a well. Groping in the dark, I drew two buckets of water and poured them into the basin. I shouted for Mother Hen to help me carry it into the house. He came out, rudely grumbling that I was useless: I couldn't even carry a basin of water. We put the basin of water in the middle of the room. Mother Hen undressed his grandpa. With arms like a marionette's, the old man tried to break loose from his grandson, and howled like a wolf. But when all is said and done, he was decrepit: he wasn't the least bit strong. His grandson quickly undressed him. In the faint lamplight, his body looked strange: it wasn't at all like a human body. He didn't have any muscles, and his body was creased with wrinkles. His old, dark skin adhered to his frame. If I hadn't heard him talk, I'd have been freaked out by now. Mother Hen swiftly hauled him into the basin, where he sat down. He ordered me to start giving him a bath.

The water was cold, and the old man was crying sorrowfully. When I washed his neck with a washcloth, he cursed me out bitterly. He said I was too heavy-handed; it would be better if he washed himself. I noticed that he wasn't at all bothered by the cold—maybe he'd been numb for a long time. He was terribly dirty. It was impossible to think that this one basin of water could get him completely clean. I suggested to Mother Hen, standing there holding the lamp, that we change the water. He said that wouldn't work, because "Grandpa has a strong sense of self-respect." All I could do was help the old man stand up and hurriedly dry him off. I wanted to get him dressed, but he held me off with his arms. He said I hadn't gotten him clean—I'd just tricked him. As he was talking, he sat down in the

basin again, and I washed him again with that filthy water. This time, he seemed more or less satisfied. He didn't cuss me out again, nor did he cry. He sat in the water with his eyes closed. Because he'd been sitting in the cold water too long, he started sneezing. I urged him to stand up and let me help dry him off. He refused, saying the towel was filthy and it would make his washed-clean body dirty.

Just then, Mother Hen said that his grandpa was hallucinating. I waited a long time, but the old man was still stubbornly sitting in the water. It took all my strength to prop him up. He was crying sorrowfully and loudly. All of a sudden, he broke loose from me with a strength I didn't know he had and threw himself onto the pile of tattered wadding on the bed. His body was dripping wet, but he fell into the cotton wadding. I sighed with relief; Mother Hen and I emptied the dirty water from the wooden basin. When we came back inside, I suggested that we help his grandpa get dressed, but Mother Hen said coldly, "Mind your own business."

It was as if Mother Hen had changed into another person. Without paying any more attention to me, he marched over and extinguished the kerosene lamp.

Once more, I couldn't see a thing. The old man was still crying on the pile of tattered wadding. As he cried, he poured out the miseries of his life: he was so old and yet he had to endure such suffering. Over and over, he said, "Why can't I die?" I was standing bent over against the door frame, my eyes fighting to stay open. I thought to myself that it must be almost daylight.

Just then, I smelled the aroma of smoke. It was Mother Hen lighting a fire in the stove. I couldn't help respecting this little boy. He was probably only about ten years old, but he was shouldering the heavy burden of caring for his sick grandpa alone. How could he bear it? He was also composed in all of his movements. Following the smell of the smoke, I felt my way to the kitchen, and saw that Mother Hen was conquering the damp firewood with a thick blow tube. He sat on the floor, absorbed in the task. He was skillful at lighting the fire, and when the fire was blazing, he stood up and added water to a large iron pot. He was cooking something.

"You, Black Bear, you can't do anything. When the village head handed you over to me to take charge of, I knew my work wouldn't be light."

Manipulating the cooking paddle in his hand, he talked arro-

gantly. I was jealous of him. Such a little child—yet he held a dominant position. He could look down from on high and tell me what to do.

He told me to sit down on the floor with him, and began probing into the details of my arrival in the village. When I mentioned Pocky, he interrupted and said her name was Rosy. He went on to say that he really wasn't interested in listening to me talk of her. I shouldn't have sought her out in the beginning. If he'd known earlier that I'd looked for her, he wouldn't have agreed with Uncle Yuan's request to take me under his wing. His face looked very serious in the firelight. He even looked a little indignant. I sort of regretted mentioning Pocky.

"Her family doesn't even cook at home. At mealtime, they go to other people's homes and cheat them out of food. They also took advantage of me, and took my food by force."

I apologized to him repeatedly. He wanted me to guarantee that I wouldn't pay any attention to Pocky's family anymore. If I ran into them on the street, I had to look down and pretend I hadn't seen them. As we were talking, the food finished cooking. Mother Hen ran over and bolted the door. He said we had to eat fast; otherwise, someone would break in and steal our food. We stood beside the pot, each of us holding a large bowl and drinking this stew. There seemed to be rice bran, kidney beans, and something like taro in it. It was hot and scalded our tongues. I hadn't eaten a real meal like this for a long time.

I asked Mother Hen if his grandpa was going to eat with us. He muttered that his grandpa had a strong sense of self-respect: he didn't want other people to see what he looked like while eating. With that, he filled a bowl and took it to his grandpa's room. The fire had already gone out, and the kitchen turned dark again. It must still be the middle of the night: why were we eating breakfast? In the room over there, Mother Hen coaxed his grandpa to eat. He kept talking tenderly. It was hard to understand his attitude toward his grandpa. It seemed that I couldn't understand even this one mountain child, much less the other mountain people.

After feeding his grandpa, Mother Hen came back to the kitchen. I considered helping him wash the dishes, but I couldn't, because I couldn't see anything. I heard him sigh like an adult and say, "Grandpa—you know, he is exuviating."

"What on earth is that?"

"Molting. When he's in bed, he's always thinking about shedding his skin. Every morning, he tells me that he's a different person. In the evening, he sobs again and says he's going to shed another layer of skin. Listen: Rosy and her mama are beating on our door. Those two bad eggs don't raise any food. They're specialists in eating other people's. My parents live on the summit. Right after I was born, they gave me to Grandpa. It was lucky they did; how else could I have gotten such good training? Now you've come, and I have even more to do. I was born to a life of hard work."

His adult tone made me chuckle. I asked why it wasn't light since it was already morning. He replied that the mountain blocked the rays of light: it wouldn't be light until afternoon. After deftly putting the bowls away, he swept the kitchen. Then he sat down next to me again, and rested his head on my leg. Whispering that he was exhausted, he soon dozed off. Just then, a dark figure appeared at the kitchen door, shouting miserably:

"Ah, Mother Hen!"

It was his grandpa. The old man had actually gotten out of bed. Mother Hen was dead to the world. The old man shouted again. The sound was like a saw slicing through my nerves: it made me think he was about to die. Then I heard him fall with a thump. I pushed Mother Hen hard, but he still didn't wake up. All I could do was put him on the floor, and get up to help the old man.

The old man had collapsed at the kitchen door, but he wasn't dead. He was naked, and his chest was rising and falling heavily. I lifted his upper body, intending to put him back to bed, but he was resisting feebly. A wave of nausea came over me. Finally, I managed to carry him back to bed. When I covered him with the tattered wadding, he suddenly whispered to me, "I was a worker at an oil-press factory in Lake District." Then he was quiet again. I thought, *Perhaps he's finished molting.* After settling him in, I was wiped out and decided to fall into this bed and sleep for a while. As best I could, I lay down on the edge of the bed, but the old man detected me. He was very displeased and kept kicking me in the back. I put up with his kicks, sometimes sleeping and sometimes waking. In my dreams, I had just walked to a well when Mother Hen woke me up with his bel-  
lowing.

"This is my grandpa's bed. How can you lie in it? Oh no. My

grandpa will start crying again. When he cries, I won't be able to get anything done! You beggar from Lake District: I really shouldn't have let you stay!"

I explained that I wasn't a beggar. In Lake District, I had my mama and my family: we had ample food and clothing. If it weren't for the flood, I'd never have come to this place. As I talked, I wasn't sure of what I said. After just one day, I already felt my previous life wasn't real. I was imagining a boundless flood, and I became deeply suspicious of everything under the water. Could everything still go back to the way it was? Even if it could, could I still go on like that? I didn't know why: I was growing more and more certain that Mama and my sisters would die in that cave.

Mother Hen was still lighting into me, but the door was pushed open from the outside. It wasn't Pocky who came in, but the village head Uncle Yuan and a young person.

"Did you have your bath? Are you clean?" Uncle Yuan shouted.

At that, Mother Hen's grandpa groaned grievously in the tattered wadding.

"The old man is worried," Uncle Yuan said, bowing in his direction. "What did you say? His hand is heavy. . . . and he doesn't treat you with respect! Haha. These people from Lake District are all like this! You mustn't mind. . . . He's also struggling with you for the bed. Let him sleep in one corner. This bed is very wide! Mother Hen! Mother Hen!"

Mother Hen walked up.

"Be a good mentor to Black Bear. This poor guy can't go home anymore."

"I'll train him until he's as industrious as I am," Mother Hen said seriously.

Uncle Yuan couldn't keep from laughing and praising Mother Hen. I quietly asked the lad with Uncle Yuan why Uncle Yuan had said I "couldn't go home." The lad taunted me, "That's because your wonderful villagers headed west yesterday. They decided very quickly to abandon their homesteads."

When Uncle Yuan heard the young lad say this, he turned around and admonished me "not to lose heart." He went on: "Men can survive anywhere in the world. Does it have to be your old home village?" Then he praised me for adapting and being a quick learner.

For the moment, I couldn't make any response to this news. I

just stood there dumbfounded. Maybe encouraged by the presence of so many people, Mother Hen's grandpa told Uncle Yuan about me: he said that just now I'd carried him as if I was carrying a load of firewood—carried him to the bed and thrown him down there. The rough treatment had almost broken his ribs. He was stuttering, and actually wanted Uncle Yuan to help him up so that he could demonstrate what had happened. Bending down, Uncle Yuan softly and gently urged him to be patient, because "everything is difficult in the beginning." While the two of them were talking, Mother Hen and the young person were quiet, though I felt that they were rebuking me with their stares. Their looks made me really feel guilty.

I was like a stupid clod. I didn't do anything right, and couldn't learn, either. I was just a heavy burden for all of them. My sixteen years of life at Lake District had been for naught. At the same time I was feeling guilty, I also felt rather indignant: I really just wanted to get out of there, but where would I go? It was obvious that no one in this village would have a different opinion of me. I knew that already from my experiences here. I didn't quite believe that Mama and the others would have left me and gone to the west. I was her eldest son—the family's main worker. Even though they might still survive if they moved far away without me, that wasn't the way she usually operated. I thought she must be waiting in that cave: even if all the others left, she'd still be there. But this would be dangerous. If they stayed in that cave, they might all starve to death. At this point in my thinking, I acted impulsively and slipped quietly toward the door. Mother Hen hopped to in a panic, and said loudly, "Look: he's running off!"

At that, the young person shot to the door like an arrow and stopped me. He said, "So you still don't believe me. How muddle-headed you are! See here, this is your teapot. Before she left, your mother asked me to bring it to you. I brought a message from her, too—'If you can't go on living, you should die away from home.'"

Touching the little clay teapot, I didn't understand Mother anymore. Did everyone who came to this demonic mountain go crazy? If she'd had this idea of abandoning me from the beginning, then why did she have to beat me that one time? Mother was neither muscular nor strapping, but she had hit me vigorously with the club.

The old man in bed said something again. He seemed to be criticizing me for being flighty. He also cried and said, "He always dis-



appoints me. He didn't satisfy me even once." As soon as he cried, all three of them leaned over the bed and consoled and massaged him. The scene made me want to crawl into a hole. Mother's attitude made me realize that my sixteen years had truly been lived in vain. That must be so—even if I wasn't fully convinced. This instant was like torture, and I suddenly thought of Mother Hen's grandpa shedding his skin. I couldn't help saying, "I want to shed my skin, too! I want to shed my skin . . ."

At first, they were dumbfounded; then they began laughing in unison. Uncle Yuan stopped laughing right away, and said, "Don't dash cold water on this commendable enthusiasm." He turned around and hugged me, saying affectionately, "You need to keep your temper in check. After a while, Rosy will come to take you away. She's a beautiful young girl with lofty aspirations. If you're with her, you'll make progress day by day."

After coaxing Mother Hen's grandpa into going to sleep, they all surrounded me. They wanted me to take out the clay teapot for them to admire. They passed it around from one to the other, but they didn't give their opinion. Even Mother Hen didn't utter a word. He just brought the pot to his ear and listened. Then Uncle Yuan asked me if I'd already made up my mind to stay in the village. When I said yes, he sighed and gave the clay teapot back to me. The three of them decided to leave, and Uncle Yuan told me to wait in the house.

There was a foul smell in the house. Mother Hen's grandpa kept talking fiercely in his sleep. After feeling my way to the kitchen, I sat down. I put the clay teapot in the cupboard, and groped around in the kitchen. I discovered a large pile of grasses—used for kindling—next to the stove. It was fluffy and soft. I fell onto the grasses thinking I'd have a good sleep, but my plan quickly went by the board. The old man began shouting himself hoarse and crying. The sound was so loud that probably everyone for several miles around could hear him. Halfheartedly, I felt my way back to the side of his bed. As soon as he saw me, he stopped crying. Sniffling, he asked me why I sometimes struggled with him for the bedding and sometimes left him all alone. Did I want to trick him? Then he said something vague, and through his sobs, he repeated what he'd said. Since I couldn't hear him clearly, I took my shoes off, felt my way into the middle of the large bed, and drew close to him to listen. Then I could finally hear him: What he said was, "You have to stay with me."

Since I was lying down on this filthy bed, he seemed discontented. He complained angrily that I hogged too much of it, and that what he'd meant before wasn't that I should get into the bed, but just that I should keep an eye on him. A person who was dying, as he was, certainly didn't want someone else in bed with him. I ignored him, and lay there sleepily. Then he kicked me, propped himself up, and swatted me in the face with his withered hand. He kept stuttering, "Are you going to get down or not? Are you going to get down or not?" I didn't resist or withdraw, either, but dozed off on the bed. He was tired out from his struggle, and slumped back with a thump. He was still cussing. I slept a long time this time.

When I woke up, it was already light. I slowly swept my eyes over the room. I was filled with amazement at the crude, run-down nature of this place: the walls were exposed adobe—jet-black from the soot of the firewood, and caved in in lots of spots. The grasses on the roof were all waterlogged. In several places, the light came through. Except for this wood-plank bed, there was no furniture in the house. Behind the door were several kinds of farm implements. The so-called bedding was simply a heap of smelly garbage—pieces of dirty tattered wadding held together by some yarn. Burrowed in this pile of garbage, Mother Hen's grandpa was still sleeping, with one leg outside the covers. On that leg were several large infected sores. I jumped out of bed, because if I'd stayed there any longer, I'd have puked. As I was bending over to tie my shoelaces, Pocky came in. Only then did I remember that I hadn't locked the door before going to sleep. I asked her warily what was up. Squinting at me, she said in a contemptuous tone, "So Uncle Yuan arranged for you to stay in this sort of home."

"What's wrong with it? Don't you come here often to scrounge a meal?" I said sarcastically.

"That twerp has given me a bad name everywhere. I'll break his legs."

In a single movement, Pocky sat down on the bed and patted Mother Hen's grandpa's leg. She made quite an uproar: "Look, just look at how thin he's become—all because that evil kid kept back some of his food and starved Grandpa! He's a bloody little hoodlum!"

I was puzzled: how come none of them thought this house was dirty? Not only didn't Pocky think it was dirty, she even knelt on the bed and tidied the tattered wadding and bits of cloth. She stirred

things up so much that soot covered everything. I coughed several times. After she finished putting things in order, she brought a small whisk broom from the kitchen and swatted the bed with it. She said she was "whisking the soot." With that, my best option was to escape and stand outside. She didn't think anything of the thick dust. And Mother Hen's grandpa was still asleep. Thinking back on the attitude the village head and the others had toward the old man, I was certain that all the villagers respected him. Finally, Pocky finished cleaning the house. She came outside, brushing the dust off her clothes with a colorful cloth. She said she wanted to take me to see some great fun on the summit, and urged me to get a move on; otherwise, it would soon be dark. As soon as it was dark, I—this guy from Lake District—would be blind.

She pushed me out of the small house, and as we threaded our way between the eaves, I saw some people in small groups talking about something in an alley. Their appearances all fit the stereotype of wild men. By comparison, Pocky actually was the best-looking person among these mountain people. What did Uncle Yuan look like? I couldn't remember. As soon as those people standing in the alley saw us, they retreated into their houses. They didn't forget to close their doors, either. Pocky lifted her head arrogantly and said to me, "These people are jealous of me. This began yesterday. They don't like Lake District people, but when they heard that I'd found a young guy from Lake District to be my fiancé, they were rather jealous and wished they could take your place." I didn't quite buy this. I thought she was bragging, but I didn't care. I wished she would be a little quicker about taking me to the summit. When we reached it, maybe I could figure out a lot of things. But she began dillydallying. She said she wanted to go back and say good-bye to her mama. "Good-bye" is the word she used. It was really funny. I thought she wanted to go home, but she didn't go. She stood where she was, deep in thought, so I couldn't help but urge her on. She criticized me: "What's the big hurry?" So we just walked in fits and starts. It was a long time before we finally reached the mountaintop.

Looking down from the summit, I saw this scene: the floodwater had already receded, but that long embankment we'd walked on was already gone. The Lake District houses inside the embankment had also disappeared. At a glance, I saw that the flat earth had only low-lying water reflecting light. Looking to the west, I saw a large

crowd of people moving like ants. I watched excitedly, but they quickly vanished into the distant mist. On the west side, everything was divided into square paddy fields, just like what one would see in a dream.

"You can't catch up with them—it's too late," Pocky said. She'd no sooner said this than the sky darkened.

Holding my hand, Pocky ran down the mountain. I couldn't see anything in the dark, so I had to follow her. Her sweaty hand was disgusting. Gasping for breath, she said we had to run without stopping. The wild boars on the mountain attacked people frequently. When we were roughly halfway down the mountain, I heard someone talking ahead of us. I thought, *Could there still be some people in the cave who didn't leave?* I flung off her hand, and felt my way toward the voices. After a while, I smelled tobacco: it was exactly the kind the Lake District people smoked. Just ahead, in a small clearing, were three people's figures. They were arguing about something, and then it seemed they reached a consensus. I just saw one who was a little shorter raise a knife and hack ferociously at another person. Because he exerted himself so much, he himself fell onto the ground as well.

Then the skinny, taller one plunged a spear into the short one's back. Not until that person was no longer moving did he pull it out and sit down for a smoke. The skinny one seemed to be waiting for someone. After smoking for a while, he looked in all directions. Pocky said to me, "This person is waiting for you to help him." This scared me so much I wanted to run away then and there. Grabbing my hand, she led me off. At the sound we made, that person spun around and chased us. Several times, I thought he'd quickly overtake us, but each time he stopped and waited for us to run a little farther. Then he'd continue chasing us. He also flung the spear at a large tree trunk ahead of us. I was scared out of my wits.

That person chased us straight to the entrance to the village. I heard him stop and shout, "Long Water! Long Water! You beast! You killed your mama!"

He shouted time after time. The villagers all came out. Even though I couldn't see them well, I knew they could all see me. I wished so much that Pocky would hide me, but she was strutting arrogantly on ahead of me, deliberately striking up conversations with those people, as though she wanted to exhibit my wretched appearance to all of them. These people were all talking about me:

they said I'd "only fled after committing a crime." Pocky told her neighbors that I was now her bodyguard. "I picked him up because of his brutality," she said.

After showing me off, Pocky finally led me into their small house. We went in, and her mother was groaning in bed. Then she propped herself up, and—just like the last time—she went over to the windowsill to look for matches. The match she found was damp. No matter how she struck it, it didn't light. She was so angry that she threw the box of matches on the ground and stomped on it several times. Then she said, "I wanted to get a good look at this guy in the light. It seems I can't. You've brought this sort of person back, but how are we going to deal with him? He isn't a teacup that can be put on the table."

"You can just act as if he isn't here."

"Not here! Do you mean to say that he won't take up any space in this house?"

"Sure, Mama, sure. I'll make him burrow into the heap of kindling in the kitchen. Please don't piss him off. If you do, how will I have the face to look people in the eye?" Pocky was extremely agitated.

The old woman moaned and groaned and complained, and went back to bed again. It seemed she was in pain all over. Pocky quietly told me, "The older villagers are all like this. By comparison, my mother is in good health." She also said, "Your top priority right now is to hide in the pile of kindling in the kitchen. Don't let Mama hear any activity—her nerves can't take it." I asked her where the kitchen was. She said, "Right here; we have just one room—the stove is on one side." I groped my way as I followed her. Sure enough, I felt my way to the stove. I thought uneasily, since I was in the same room, how could I be inaudible? In fact, there wasn't a pile of firewood next to the stove. There was just some rubble. I recalled what Mother Hen had told me: he'd said that this mother and daughter never cooked. Day after day, they cadged food from others.

"This isn't a bad spot. You can have a good sleep in the kindling. You need to think everything through. Don't complain. People can come into this village, but no one leaves. You've come to our village. You can't leave. That guy who lit into you just now was very smart, because he stopped at the entrance to the village and didn't step in." I shifted the rubble, swept out a level spot, and sat down. Pocky seemed to have found some pity for me. She squeezed into this cor-

ner and sat down with me. Although she told others that I was her fiancé, I could see that she didn't have the slightest interest in me. It was obvious: I wasn't her type at all, so why did she want to say I was? She sat beside me, her arms hugging her knees. I thought her expression must be serious. Just then, I started feeling hungry: I was dizzy with hunger. When I told her this, she laughed and asked why I hadn't said so earlier. She got something from the stove and gave it to me. A bowl of cold rice. And a pair of chopsticks.

She whispered to me, "Take it slowly. Don't let Mama hear you." Shoveling the rice into my mouth with the chopsticks, I restrained myself with all my might to keep from making a sound. Not until I'd polished off the rice did it occur to me that Pocky had also gone without food tonight. I asked her about this quietly, and she said that was right, she hadn't had anything to eat, because she'd given her own rice to me. But it didn't matter—she wouldn't starve. Sometimes, when she was so hungry she couldn't stand it, she went to Uncle Yuan's second floor and grabbed a couple of eggs to stave off her hunger. Perhaps her mama heard our whispers, for she began fidgeting in bed and threw something like a pillow down to the ground. We stopped talking at once, and I marveled at the old woman's sense of hearing.

After I'd been sitting on the floor for a long time, my rear end was numb and sore. I began shifting restlessly. I looked at her: she was absolutely still and sitting bolt upright. In a flash, I realized how wretched I was. Plagued by this thought, I was looking for an escape hatch. Finally, I stood up and stretched a few times. Heedless of everything, I walked to the door and quietly opened it. Immediately, a storm swept through the house: that mother was pounding the bed boards for all she was worth. She shouted, "Ah! Ah! He's going to murder me! Save me!! Uncle Yuan! Uncle Yuan!!"

Pocky jumped up and held her mother in her arms. The two of them rolled around on the bed. I was panic-stricken by the extent of the old woman's strength as she struggled mightily to break free. She actually broke the bed's headboard with her kicking. The pillow and quilt flew to the floor. As I saw the terrible trouble I'd just caused, I wanted even more to sneak away. Pocky stopped me with a stern shout. She said I shouldn't even think of making a move. After several attempts, she finally brought her mother under control. The two of them lay on the bed gasping for breath.

A long time passed before the old woman finally broke her silence. She said resentfully, "Okay. Let this bad boy stay. If you weren't my daughter, I'd break your neck, just the same as I did away with that wolf cub not long ago."

Pocky got out of bed. Taking my hand, she wanted me to go with her to the pigpen to "avoid upsetting Mama."

Once outside, we turned and climbed several flights of stone steps into the pigpen. The two pigs began creating a hubbub with their snorts. Pocky asked me to sit with her on a pile of straw. Outside, the moon had already come out, its silver rays flashing. Sitting here, unexpectedly, we could see the entire village. I thought this place was wonderful, and thought to myself that I wouldn't think again of leaving. She was uncomfortable, though: she was worrying about her mama. She also said the pig shit was much too stinky. She'd never thought she would be disgraced to the point that she could stay only in this sort of place.

"Before you came, Mama and I were always very close," she said haughtily.

As I sat comfortably on the straw, admiring the beauty of the mountain village, I recalled the days in Lake District and the enigma of my family. And for the first time in a long time, I recalled my father who had drowned in the lake. Father had drowned while fishing. An eyewitness had said the boat had definitely not capsized. It was Father's impatience: he had jumped in to wrestle with the large fish he had speared. He'd jumped into the lake and hadn't come out. Afterwards, his corpse hadn't floated up. I also thought back on those loblollies that I'd seen this afternoon from the summit: that used to be my homestead. In no time, it had ceased to exist.

But now, I didn't feel at all sentimental. I was sinking into a humongous shadow, in which life was brand-new and completely incomprehensible. I thought I would certainly become an industrious mountain man. After several more years, I would have the same piercing, penetrating eyes that they had. I'd be accustomed to distinguishing everything in the dark. As I was thinking these thoughts, I also felt a spark flickering in my heart: it was the first time since I'd come to the village that I'd felt a faint sympathetic response to this homely girl beside me. I didn't know what sort of sympathy this was. I thought I'd eventually figure it out.

## AFTERWORD BY CAN XUE

### A PARTICULAR SORT OF STORY

**T**HE PARTICULAR CHARACTERISTICS OF MY STORIES HAVE NOW BEEN acknowledged. Nevertheless, when someone asks me directly, "What is really going on in your stories? How do you write them?," I'm profoundly afraid of being misunderstood, so all I can say is, "I don't know." From any earthly perspective, in truth I do not know. When I write, I intentionally erase any knowledge from my mind.

I believe in the grandness of the original power. The only thing I can do is to devoutly, bring it into play in a manmade, blind atmosphere. Thus, I can break loose from the fetters of platitudes and conventions, and allow the mighty logos to melt into the omnipresent suggestions that inspire and urge me to keep going ahead. I don't know what I will write tomorrow, or even in the next few minutes. Nor do I know what is most related to the "inspiration" that has produced my works in an unending stream for more than two decades. But I know one thing with certainty: no matter what hardships I face, I must preserve the spiritual quality of my life. For if I were to lose it, I would lose my entire foundation.

In this world, subsistence is like a huge rolling wheel crushing everything. If a person wants to preserve the integrity of his innermost being, he has to endlessly break his self apart, endlessly undergo "exercises" that set the opposed parts of one's soul at war with one another. In my exercises, while my self is planted in the world, at the same time my gaze—from beginning to end—is unswervingly fixed on heaven; this is forcing a division between soul and flesh. By enduring the pain from this splitting of the soul, I gain a force of tension—conquering the libido and letting it erupt anew on the rebound. Through this writing, where the self is split apart, one achieves the greatest joy in the midst of an infinitude of keen feelings. As for the world, it constantly exhibits an unprecedented godly purity.



It isn't possible for people to live in pure spirit, because we are situated in a world that is highly filtered and conglutinated. The birthplace of pure spirit is situated in our dark flesh and blood. Perhaps my stories simply return to the old haunt: while pushing forward the dark abyss, they liberate the binding desires and crystallize them into pure spirit. The impetus for this kind of writing lies with the unending desires that make up ordinary life. While the conglutination decomposes wondrously and while the wide-awake imagination receives a clear message from profound restlessness, my pen achieves its own spiritual power. If one is in pursuit of the very purest language, one has to encounter grime, filth, violence, the smell of blood. While writing, you have to endure everything, you have to give up all worldly things. If you still care about being graceful, concerned with your posture and stance, you can't write this kind of story. In this sense, I exist only after my stories exist.

Stories with this kind of unusual language open another life for me. These stories and my ordinary life pervade each other, are interdependent. Because of their intervention, all commonplace vulgarities are imbued with secret significance; human feelings become the greatest enigma of them all. Therefore, daily anguish is no longer something that can't be endured, because the unending source of inspiration lies precisely in this. Perhaps it's from the boundary which is between melting and blending that artists are able to derive truth in a split second, the result being a coagulation into a work of art.

I believe that art is instinctive in human beings. Artists are simply those who are able—via mighty restraints—to exert their instincts to the utmost. My realm is one shared with all artists. When I enter this realm, the first thing I do is to remove the stone foundation from under my feet, and suspend my body in a semi-free state. Not until then is there an acceleration of mystery. And that is only in spurts. Years of repeated practice have gradually made me aware that success benefits from the mighty logos, inside myself, that is like a murderous machine. The more rigorous the sanction of reason, the more ferocious the rebounding of flesh and blood. Only in this way can the stories have a powerful, unconstrained style and fantasy, yet also have a rigorous and profound level of logic.

I certainly did not painstakingly set out to write this kind of story. From the beginning, as I practiced, I heard the faint drumbeats of fate. Afterwards, my life naturally evolved in pursuit of that sum-

mons. From my experience, one can see how great the power of art is to transform a person's life. Whether or not a person is a writer, if he maintains the sensitivity of art, his humanity can be greatly increased. So, art very much harmonizes with human nature and humanism. Art is the most universal pursuit of what it means to be human. Its essence is love.

Some people say that my stories aren't useful: they can't change anything, nor do people understand them. As time goes by, I've become increasingly confident about this. First, the production of twenty years' worth of stories has changed me to the core. I've spoken of this above. Next, from my reading experience, this kind of story, which indeed isn't very "useful," that not all people can read—for those few very sensitive readers, there is a decisive impact. Perhaps this wasn't at all the writer's original intent. I think what this kind of story must change is the soul instead of something superficial. There will always be some readers who will respond—those readers who are especially interested in the strengthening force of art and exploring the soul. With its unusual style, this kind of story will communicate with those readers, stimulating them and calling to them, spurring them on to join in the exploration of the soul.

Self-reflection is the magic formula for creation, a particular self-reflection different from passive self-examination. This kind of self-reflection brings all one's strength to bear on entering the profound world of the soul, and makes what one has seen there appear again through a special kind of language. Thus, it opposes the scenes of the spiritual world with the exterior world we're accustomed to, so that we can deepen our understanding. So artistic self-reflection is virtually an active process: it is taking the initiative to go down into hell, to establish oppositions, to strengthen self-contradictions. And in the brutality of fighting closely with oneself, one achieves a unified, highly conscious creation. This dynamic process comes from the longing of the artist to deny his worldly, carnal existence.

To satisfy this innermost desire, I put into effect this sort of drill every day. I bring into play my energy to seek out ancient memories that faded long ago. I feel instinctively that there's no way to stop this kind of exercise. Beginning a long time ago and continuing until today, it is my purpose for living. When I face this world that is filled with material desire and immerse myself fully in the worldly roles, it is precisely what endows my worldly life with meaning. Without it, I

would be ashamed to show my face, I would have no foothold. Now, every day, I put into effect artistic activity and restrict my daily life to serve my artistic calling. I feel that I am mightier than ever!

In essence, there's no way for modern art to consider its viewers. Modern art cannot "consider" who its observers are. It can only provide information and summon people, inducing them to stop in their busy lives to think and self-consciously make time for a certain kind of spiritual activity. And so we can say that modern art—approaching human instincts ever more closely—as a spiritual pursuit, can only be an adventurous activity filled with initiative. The relationship between a successful work and its readers is described by the priest in Kafka's *The Trial* when he says to K, "It receives you when you come and it dismisses you when you go."

What I try hard to reach in my stories is this realm of freedom. I believe, when writers create their uncertain imaginary world, they are restless; their eyes are blurred, their hearts startled. But only when it receives affirmation from perceptive readers does this world exist. There must be this kind of reader. I deeply believe that humankind's soul is a shared place: humans are those who can reason, who are good at self-criticism. In the process of deepening their understanding of the self, people, uninterruptedly, have developed a high level of reason, and have begun to construct a spiritual mechanism forever at odds with "jungle culture."