

OLD KILN VILLAGE
Jia Pingwa

CHAPTER 14

In the afternoon, Full-bowl rang the bell that hung from the tree. It wasn't the strike—pause, that told commune members to go to work, but the series of strikes calling them to a commune meeting.

Grandma was just driving the pig towards its pen. Yesterday, it got out and rootled in the hole where the daikon radishes were buried for storage, in the corner of the yard, digging out a meal. It must have remembered the eating not the beating, because today it'd gotten out and done the same thing again.

Now her heart thudded with more urgency than the bell.

“Come and get this pig in!” she shouted to Mottlegill, going indoors to comb her hair.

Whenever a village meeting was called, differences would suddenly appear between one person and another. Grandma and Lamp-keeper definitely had to be there, and just as definitely would not be allowed to sit. Grandma knew that she'd either be “struggled against” or at least be made to stand right at the front, so she couldn't go without combing her hair first.

Mottlegill got the pig into the pen and wedged a stout stick across the top of the pen wall. He looked at Grandma, who was

sitting on the doorstep, with a basin of clean water in front of her, dipping her comb into the water and drawing it through her hair.

“What are you combing your hair for?”

“Aren’t I a woman? You saying I should go out with mussed-up hair?”

“But you’re old, and...”

“Even if I was two hundred years old, I’d still be a woman.”

“No one’s going to get struggled against this afternoon. The meeting’s to talk about the relief grain,” said Mottlegill.

“How do you know?”

“Cos I saw Lucky’s mother this morning.”

Grandma grunted. “That bell makes it all sound so urgent!”

Slowly she combed her hair, balled up the hairs snagged on the comb teeth and stuffed the ball into a crack in the wall. “We haven’t seen Caller for days.”

In the village hall yard, Joyous had tethered the oxen in their shed and was shoveling the yard clean of dung. Nearly the whole village was there, looking around for something to sit on. Some cushioned their butts on maize straw. Joyous scowled at them and grabbed the straw back again, and there were a few

angry exchanges. When Grandma got there, she stood in front of the table, where the Party Secretary was smoking a long-stemmed pipe. At each puff, white smoke streamed from his nostrils, like elephant tusks.

“What’s happened to Lamp-keeper?” he asked Grandma.

“Not here yet. He’ll be here soon.”

“You’re not standing today. Find somewhere to sit.”

Grandma hesitated, and Third Aunt said: “The Party Sec’s told you to sit, so sit! Come on, over here by me!”

Sitting behind them stitching shoe soles, Flower-in-her-hair stopped sewing and tugged at Grandma’s jacket to show her the paper-cut flower she’d made. The Party Sec was still smoking, his nostrils intermittently growing elephant tusks. It was the same with all the men, as if they had a smoky fire deep in their bellies. Shape-shifting smoke created fantastic shapes that parted then came together again, like water flowing from people’s heads.

The sun dropped below the eaves, and the platform beneath sank half into darkness, turning the Party Sec into a yin-yang figure, his front white and his rear black. He was slow to announce the start of the meeting. The audience began whispering. Old Shun was hunkered down to one side, hugging his dog to his chest, a piece of hemp twine holding his padded jacket together—he felt the cold.

The dog was looking around for Mottlegill. There-and-back was coming down the hillside from the temple, her eyes red. She had a bag of sweet potato strips in her pocket, which she was chewing on as she walked. Mottlegill, standing at the yard gate, caught sight of her and took off.

“Mottlegill, Mottlegill!” she called, but he pretended not to hear, finding himself somewhere to sit with Long-and-wide, Grain-full Feng and their friends. Grain-full was saying something to Long-and-wide and Mottlegill caught the gist: they’d fetched the relief grain to the village, but still no order had come down about the allocation. Then there were the key thefts.

“Anyone who’s lost a key and taken someone else’s shouldn’t get any relief grain,” was the Party Sec’s opinion.

“We haven’t found out who stole the first key, and if everyone involved isn’t allowed a portion of relief grain, then an awful lot of poor families will go hungry,” was the view of the Production Team leader.

“Then how’s it going to be allocated?” asked Grain-full Feng.

“I couldn’t tell you,” said Long-and-wide. “The cadres are all Zhu’s and Ye’s—we’re just outsiders.”

Grain-full Feng’s house was next-door to Skin-deep’s and Skin-deep had taken his key, so he had taken the key of the neighbors on the other side.

Now he whispered: “Maybe Skin-deep lost his key first, so he stole one, and then everyone else followed on. He’s a trouble-maker!”

He stared at Skin-deep, who sat a couple of rows in front of them. Skin-deep looked round, and Grain-full hurriedly coughed. But when Skin-deep looked back again, Grain-full began muttering to Long-and-wide.

Skin-deep was sitting with Ladle, and both men were wearing masks. Ladle’s was ‘so dirty that you couldn’t see the mesh was white any more. Seed-black came over and sat down with a thud, raising a cloud of dust. “Have you got asthma?” he asked Skin-deep.

Skin-deep was wearing a new lined jacket over his padded jacket: “You’re like a donkey taking a bath, look at all that dust you’re kicking up!” he complained.

Grain-full flipped up the hem of Skin-deep’s jacket: “Let’s see, any lice here?”

Skin-deep got up and went and sat by the table leg.

Grain-full said to Long-and-wide: “If Skin-deep gets any grain, I’m making a fuss.”

Long-and-wide took a hard draw on his pipe, while Grain-full said: “Last year, I didn’t get any and I put up with it. But I’m not putting up with it this year. The Zhu clan got some, the Ye

clan got some. Why are we outsider families such pushovers? We let them walk all over us!”

Long-and-wide went on puffing away at his pipe.

“I’m talking to you!” said Grain-full.

But Long-and-wide only said: “What kind of tobacco d’you call this? It won’t light.”

In another part of the yard, Sky-cloth was shouting: “Mottlegill, Mottlegill?”

“I’m here!”

“We need a light here, bring a light!”

Mottlegill had come equipped, of course, and took his fire cord over to light their pipes. The Party Sec rapped his pipe bowl loudly on the table. Thinking the meeting was starting, they all fell silent. But the Party Sec was only summoning Skin-deep to check and see whether everyone had arrived. Skin-deep got up again and looked around.

“Take that mask off,” the Party Sec told him. “What are you wearing an ox muzzle for?” There were hoots of laughter.

“My face is cold,” Skin-deep complained, taking the mask off.

“Mottlegill? Mottlegill!” he shouted. He already knew Mottlegill was there—he was just having go a ‘cos he’d been

laughed at himself, and Mottlegill knew that too. So he didn't answer.

"Where's Mottlegill gotten off to?" asked the Party Sec. Mottlegill stood up: "I'm right here!"

"Why didn't you get up when the Party Sec called you then?" said Skin-deep.

"But I *am* standing up!" said Mottlegill. Everyone burst out laughing. Skin-deep was putting him down again, and all Mottlegill could do was lower his head.

The Party Sec finally began: "Today's meeting is to allocate the relief grain, you all know that, right?"

There was a chorus of: "Yes, we do! We've been waiting for this meeting for days! Our eyes might as well be bleedin', we've been waiting so long!"

"Well I reckoned y'all knew, from the way you're packed in here today," said the Party Sec.

If his speech went the same as last year, as they all expected it would, it'd go: "This relief grain is a life-saver given us by the Communist Party. In the old days, if you were starving, who looked after you? In the eighteenth year of the Republic, the land was bare for miles around and none of the villages had any grain at all. People wanted to eat the dogs, and the dogs? They wanted to eat the people!"

“Here in Old Kiln Village, we had a hundred and thirty-two people dead. Forty-seven families were dead to the last branch. You all knew Sky-cloth’s granddad right? He was digging a trench out back to bury the sixty-two people who died that day, digging away, and half-starved himself, and he suddenly keeled over and fell head-first into the trench.

“And how did Iron-post’s aunt die? She was just a little girl and when she fainted from hunger right there on the threshing floor, the dogs got to her, tearing her limb from limb and eating her alive.

“And then Needs-a-name’s Second Granddad ate the flesh of people who’d died, which sent him raving mad. After that he tried to eat anyone and anything he saw, if he got hold of you, he’d take a bite out of you. Finally, the villagers caught him and bludgeoned him to death...

“But nowadays we live in a good society, we get relief grain every year. We must never forget to be grateful, never forget Chairman Mao, never forget the Communist Party!”

But that wasn’t what the Party Sec said. He started to talk about the missing keys. He said that Old Kiln Village had always been a good place to live, apart from occasional famines. No one ever locked their doors or stole stuff they found lying around.

If someone went into the mountains to cut firewood or tap lacquer trees, or out to Baixiaogou Mine to haul coal, if one of their straw sandals fell to pieces while they were walking, they’d

take the other off and leave it by the road-side for anyone who needed it to put on.

In fall, when the maize was brought back home, everyone left it out to dry under the eaves. Chicken coops and pig pens were never locked, and once you'd finished using them, shovels, hoes, scythes and rakes were just piled outside the door or simply left where they lay.

“Tell me, everyone: in the ten years I've been the Party Sec in this village, who's lost anything? Who's stolen anything?” he asked them.

“No one!” they chorused back.

Then Seed-black raised his voice: “So none of y'all has stolen even one lousy corncob? Or a persimmon? Has no one taken a honey locust fruit from Baldy's-gold? Or a plum or an apricot from Long-and-wide?”

“Well, there's always at least one bad apple in the barrel,” said the Party Sec. “As for you, what's with all the yelling? You wanna make sure we know you're here or something? Tell me, is there anywhere in the wide world where no one's stolen a couple of corncobs?”

“Or some sweet potatoes from the production team's storage pit? Or fancied a couple of the neighbors' plums or apricots? We're all the same—we all like eating something a bit different every now and then!”

Someone piped up: “Right, Seed-black never steals, if he had a load of dung, he’d never take a bite!”

“No one steals things, but they steal people! What about Third Zhang stealing Fourth Li’s wife?! Don’t tell me you’ve never seen no girls stealing no boys! Fathers-in-law stealing daughters-in-law?” Seed-black shouted back.

The Party Sec banged the table: “Seed-black, you shut your fucking mouth!”

So Seed-black sat down, muttering, “There’s more besides...”

There was a burst of laughter and shouts of: “Stupid fucker!”

The Party Sec banged the table again. “Stop laughing! Stop all this noise!”

And he carried on with his lecture: “Old Kiln villagers have always been kind-hearted folk living decent lives but recently people have started losing keys. Why keys? You can’t eat or drink stolen keys! I haven’t heard of any families losing anything else. Obviously, someone’s deliberately stirring up trouble in the village, causing panic, blackening the name of socialism ...and trying to put me over a barrel!”

He sounded so serious saying this that you could have heard a pin drop, and when he finished he just sat there, just looking each person in the eye, and each one looked right back because they were afraid that if they didn’t, their neighbors would think that they must be guilty.

Suddenly the Party Sec leaned over sideways and spat out some greenish bile.

Full-bowl called to Bottle-gourd: "The Party Sec's got an upset stomach again, have you got any hot water?"

"Where am I supposed to get hot water in an ox pen?"

Full-bowl turned to Apricot: "Bring the thermos from home."

"No, don't," the Party Sec waved him away. "And if you want to know why I'm talking about the theft of keys before the allocation of relief grain, it's because the key thefts have reminded me that there are always new situations, new problems, coming out of the class struggle.

"We can't ever let our guard down. Every year, the Party gives us relief grain, so we should show our love for the people's communes and the production team. Old Kiln Village has always been one of Luo Township's Red Flag Villages and we want to preserve that redness.

"And let me say something here: if there is anyone among you who tries to blacken the name of Old Kiln Village, I, Zhu Dagui, will never forgive them! And they can forget about eating one kernel of that relief grain!"

Full-bowl then talked about the relief grain distribution: "Two years ago, everyone got an equal share. But per capita distribution's not in accordance with the spirit of the relief

project. All families have problems, but even though you've got ten fingers not one of them is the same length.

“Some have their own particular problems, like they've built a house, or had a fire, or an illness, or a marriage or a death in the family, and these cost money. Some families have more manpower and men have big appetites. Some are just bad managers and can't count the days.

“Last year, when the village cadres shared out the relief grain, and you folks didn't like that either. This year, we're going to learn from the experience of the previous two years and do things differently: everyone will get evaluated, and the grain will be allocated to those most in need. We want everyone's opinions on which families deserve what and how much.”

At that, the yard fell silent as the grave. For the time it took to smoke a whole pipe bowl of tobacco, the only sounds to be heard were the oxen chewing the cud and swishing their tails. Mottlegill looked around, his eyes lingering on each face. He thought they looked like dried persimmons, or potatoes. Suddenly someone coughed, and then there was an outbreak of coughing.

The Party Sec spoke: “Just now, you all had verbal diarrhea, why's no one speaking now? What's all this coughing? Chicken feathers in your throat?”

Half-tasty said to Stove-flame: “What's that you're smoking? It's making me choke!”

“And the fire under your kang at home doesn't make you choke? Piss off!”

“But if I leave you're going to hog your portion for yourself!”

“Even if you stay, you won’t be getting any!” said Stove-flame.

“Why, eh? Why?” said Half-tasty.

“Stand up, Stove-flame, if you’ve got something to say,” said the Party Sec.

“I’ve got nothing to say,” said Stove-flame.

“Well, usually you can talk the hind legs off a donkey,” said the Party Sec, “I can’t believe you have nothing decent to say now.”

Mottlegill gave Stove-flame a vigorous shove, then farted loudly. Everyone stifled giggles.

“Hey, did you eat garlic for lunch?” asked Cow-bell.

Mottlegill stuck his butt out: “Have a good sniff!”

“You spoke first,” said Seed-black to Mottlegill, “so come on, out with it!”

Finally, no one could hold it in anymore and there was a burst of laughter.

“What’s all this noise about?!” shouted the Party Sec. They quieted down, but no one spoke. There-and-back was still eating dried sweet potato strips, so hard they gave off a loud crack every time she bit down on them. Old Shun lobbed his tobacco pouch at her and There-and-back stopped chewing.

Lucky spoke up: “No one’s speaking up but we’ve all got a bellyful of ideas. I say, let’s start with the families with most kids. Kids always want feeding, if they don’t get enough to eat they cry. All the kids in our village have big heads and skinny necks.”

Lucky had a lot of children, and in the mornings, he'd stand in the lane whacking his sons, complaining that they must have tapeworms in their bellies.

Lucky had hardly finished speaking when Quarry-stone said: "I agree with Uncle Lucky."

To which Field-sprout quipped: "Quarry-stone, your missus was due ages ago. Are you saying she's waiting for the relief grain to have the baby?"

"Childbirth is like that sometimes! It's not like I can stop the baby coming just on my say-so. Have *you* had a baby?" said Quarry-stone.

Field-sprout hadn't, and her mother-in-law wasn't happy. It was a nasty dig and Field-sprout was incensed: "So I haven't had a kid, so what?! And those of us without kids all have to squeeze into one room! Don't go telling me you need more room just because you're about to have a baby!" She looked at Flower-in-her-hair, who said nothing.

Long-and-wide: "What sort of bullshit is that?"

Field-sprout: "It's not right to be so nasty and humiliate people! I'm just saying it like it is! Your missus is about to pop one out too, so you'll get pounds and pounds of maize from the team, why do you want more?"

Dough-fish got to his feet to speak, but his words all came out in a jumble. His missus said: "That's to make wine. If anyone touches so much as a kernel, may they get gut-rot!"

Cow-bell: "The way I see it, you shouldn't score more for more kids, you should score more for having able-bodied adults in the family. When strong men go out to work they carry shoulder

poles of dung and they have a big appetite too. Kids get the same allocation as adults, but they eat a lot less so there's always plenty of food at home."

Lucky: "Kids grow into adults, don't they? What adult didn't start as a kid? If a kid can't work, what? Are we supposed to not feed it and let it die?"

Once these villagers had had their say, they sat down, huffing and puffing, and silence fell again.

"Anyone got anything more to say? Speak up!" said the Party Sec. There was complete silence, except for what sounded like snorts of laughter from the oxen.

Then Millstone stood up and said: "I've got a way of doing it."

Millstone had a squint, so whenever he looked at you, his eye went off to the side. Now he was talking to the Party Sec but his eye was on everyone else. He was flustered, his neck flushed red, and when he lit his pipe to calm himself down, his hand shook like a leaf.

Eighty-percent said: "Calm down, Millstone," and held the pipe bowl for him.

Millstone finally managed to light his pipe but didn't smoke it: "I've got a way of doing it," he repeated. "If you say we're going to score families, it's like when there's one pancake that everyone's got their eyes on—if you get one mouthful more, then I get one less, and we'll all be at each other's throats. How about we draw up guidelines, and whoever falls outside the

guidelines doesn't qualify, and we only give points to those who fall within the guidelines?"

There were exclamations of: "Good idea!"

The Party Sec said: "Right, so we'll use a process of elimination. So who's out?" No one spoke.

Seed-black: "That's too hard for us, just let the cadres decide."

Full-bowl: "But this time it definitely has to be everyone's decision, so no backing out!"

Seed-black: "Draw lots? That'll sort it!"

Full-bowl: "Don't you go stirring things up!" He got to his feet, slapping the dirt off his butt. "I'm going for a piss!"

He pushed his way out, calling to Eighty-percent: "Are you coming too?"

"Yup."

And the two of them left together, followed by another three or four who needed a piss, maybe because they'd had rice gruel for lunch and the time had come.

"Are you going too?" Stove-flame asked Long-and-wide.

"You're always going for a piss! Hold it in!" said Long-and-wide.

“Right, right, right!” said Stove-flame. “Besides, if I go, you’ll all start giving out points, and I’ll have pissed away 20 or 30 jin of grain!”

The Party Sec asked: “Millstone, this process of elimination of yours, I bet you’ve already got some ideas for how to do it. Come on now, tell us the rest.”

“How to eliminate people? I think people who’ve gotten in trouble with the law shouldn’t be get any points.”

“Stop beating around the bush, no one in our village’s been in trouble the law. Who do you mean then?”

“OK then, eliminate the Four Bad Elements first.”

There was an exclamation from Mottlegill.

“You said something?” the Party Sec asked him.

“Just Cow-bell poking me in the butt.”

Cow-bell was much too far away to have done that. The fact was that as soon as Millstone explained his process of elimination, Mottlegill knew that he and Grandma, and the Lamp-keepers, were out.

Even though they had never been allocated relief grain in the past, at the start of the meeting when the Party Sec asked if he was present or not, he had allowed himself to dream that maybe

this time they'd get some relief grain. But now Millstone had eliminated them for sure just like always.

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The Cultural Revolution is in full swing, and the two factions, the Red Swords and the Sledgehammers, are fighting it out in the village. Apricot is pregnant.

CHAPTER 64

Sky-cloth sent Open-and-shut to buy thirty bars of sulfur soap. But Mottlegill made Open-and-shut buy fifty bars. That way, the Red Swords would get their thirty bars, and Mottlegill told the Sledgehammers so could they take the remaining twenty. Everyone went home to have a good wash.

After Roughshod's row with Apricot, he stopped coming around, though Apricot was sure he'd be back. She made him a pair of shoes and was thinking of going to Luo Township for some knitting wool so she could make him a sweater as well.

But that very night, there was a storm and it turned cold. The next morning, the ground in the yard was littered with leaves. The tree branches were completely bare, and clattered as they knocked against each other.

Apricot felt unwell, really unwell, so she put an extra jacket on, and went to Mottlegill's house. She was well aware of Grandma's disapproval, but only Grandma would do.

The old woman was genuinely concerned about her, and had given her some useful tips: if she drank red sugar water, she could stop her belly sagging...what to look out for in the color of her first pee of the morning...if she lay on her front on the kang, with her butt in the air, for one mealtime a day, she could get the fetus in the right position.

When she arrived, Grandma had her ear infection again, but went back with Apricot, one hand clamped to her ear.

After the Red Swords started a firing of pots, everyone from the outsider families flocked to the kiln, Lamp-keeper too. Grandma got it into her head to have a quiet word with Stove-flame, and see if she could add her own pots.

Stove-flame said he couldn't care less who put their pots in, only they had to be with the Red Swords, or at least to support them. Grandma dropped the subject.

There was nothing for the production team to do. Dough-fish complained a few times to Millstone that there was no soil to bed down the team's oxen.

"Get someone to bring you another load, they can get work points for it," said Millstone.

But who could Dough-fish ask?

There was only Long-and-wide, Six-liter's missus, Open-and-close, and Grandma. Grandma did three days' work hauling loads of soil before she realized she could hardly hear any more.

Dough-fish offered to scoop the wax out of her ears, and she let him. It was excruciatingly painful, but he was kind and Grandma didn't want people to laugh at him, so she forced herself to grin and bear it.

But it didn't work. That very evening, the inflammation flared up again, and her ears wept a yellow liquid that looked like pus.

When Apricot arrived, she had to shout at Grandma: "I haven't slept all week! Is this normal in pregnancy?"

Grandma shouted even louder: “Do you have something on your mind?”

“No, nothing.”

“That’s good. Warm some sour rice-starch water and drink it before bed. Give your feet a good wash, turn in early, lie flat and relaxed, and don’t move.”

“I don’t move, but I still can’t sleep.”

“Ah,” said Grandma. “Well, what to do? Can you understand when animals talk?”

“No one understands when animals talk.”

Grandma squinted at her, with sadness in her eyes. Apricot looked back, and saw in her face how handsome she must have been when she was young.

Grandma spoke again: “So, when you shut your eyes, think of all the animals in the village—dogs, who can understand humans, honest good-natured oxen, greedy cats, pigs that never utter a sound, the fish in the river, the frogs in the fields, the herons in the reed beds, the grasshoppers, the bees, the ants...

“Just take ants, think of a long file of ants coming out of a hole in the bottom of the yard wall, such a long line of them, every one of them shiny black, with big heads and slender waists, such feisty creatures.”

Apricot gurgled with laughter.

“What are you laughing at?”

“You’re so funny,” said Apricot.

“There’s nothing funny about it. Just think of those beasts, all of them coming to pay homage to you and you’re their mistress, and they’re desperate for you to be able to talk to them, to get into your dreams.”

“That’s what you’ve taught Mottlegill, is it, Grandma?”

“It works! I’ve had times when I couldn’t sleep too. Once it went on for two weeks, I felt like hanging myself, but I knew I couldn’t die. Mottlegill was just a little kid then. I got better by thinking of those animals. If you can’t do that, then just think of the ants, so many ants, count them. Count, count, and that’ll put you to sleep.”

As Grandma was talking about ants, a stone plopped into the yard. Grandma didn’t hear it, but Apricot did. She wondered if Roughshod had come looking for her. It would be too embarrassing to meet him with Grandma here too.

She got up and went to the gate. Peering through a crack, she whispered: “What are you doing here? Grandma’s here!”

To her surprise it was Mottlegill standing outside, holding a catapult in his hand.

“I reckoned she’d be here, and she is!”

Apricot went scarlet. Furious, she said: “Were you throwing stones into my yard?”

“I was trying to hit the clouds but the stone fell in your yard.”

“Grandma’s with me, and she’s staying here,” said Apricot, standing with her back against the crack.

“Grandma!” yelled Mottlegill. So Apricot had to open up.

“I don’t see hide nor hair of you from dawn to dusk, but as soon I leave to have a couple of words with Apricot, you come running after me,” Grandma grumbled.

“Needs-a-name came to the house to ask you if it’s OK for him to carry some soil loads too.”

“How would I know? He’ll have to ask Millstone.”

“He’s with the Sledgehammers, why would he ask Millstone?”

“Then he can ask Roughshod.”

“Roughshod, Baldy’s-gold, the lot of them, are scratching themselves crazy, he’s not going to risk them flying off the handle at him.”

“Scratching themselves crazy? Why?” asked Apricot.

“Don’t play dumb!” said Mottlegill. But Apricot really was in the dark and insisted that Mottlegill explain.

“Roughshod came back from Luo Township with scabies, and now the rest of the village has caught them, too. The itching’s been driving them nuts, but now they’ve got sulfur soap to wash with.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Apricot. She stood rooted to the spot and was still looking dazed when Mottlegill dragged Grandma away with him.

Apricot picked up the pebble, smiled, then threw it into an old basket in the corner by the wall, which already held dozens of pebbles. Changing her mind, she fished it out again and threw it over the wall.

Suddenly she remembered that when Roughshod last visited, he’d come straight from Luo Township. They had talked about

the baby. He wanted her to get rid of it, but she had refused. She'd already had one abortion, and she'd heard that if you had another, it made it harder to keep the pregnancy when you wanted a baby.

"OK, have it then," he'd said.

"But what kind of life will it have?" she'd said. "If we don't get married, it won't be registered in the village, and no matter where it's born, how will I look after it? It's not like a cat or a dog!"

That set him off, and he shouted and yelled at her, finally stomping off and slamming the gate. Looking back though, she thought maybe it was the itching that made him lose his temper.

She felt she'd done him wrong, and decided to go and see him. She heated some water, washed her hair, then put on a flowery jacket over her padded one.

Apricot went straight to the Kiln God Temple, but the gate was shut and there was no sound from within when she banged on it. She peered through a crack: inside, stark naked men were washing themselves.

They scattered, startled by her knocking, but Follow-me grabbed a whisk broom from the steps and held it over his crotch: "Who is it?"

"Me," said Apricot.

"Roughshod's gone back to his old house!" said Follow-me.

Apricot headed there and let herself into the yard, but the house door was shut too. Roughshod was inside, washing. He was

their chief, so he got three pieces of soap. He ran water all over himself, then rubbed up a thick lather from the neck downwards.

When he heard Apricot calling him, he opened the window, but not the door: "Don't come in, I've got scabies and it's catching." That was when Apricot realized how serious it was.

"You should have told me you were sick!" she said.

"The first thing you find out about scabies is that the itching drives you mad. But now we've got the sulfur soap. Give it a few days and I'll be fine."

"How many days?"

"The others just washed in soapy water, but I lathered it all over me. I'll stay home five or six days, that should do it. Give me your mouth." And he poked his head out and puckered his lips.

"You won't let me in but you still think it's safe to kiss me?" said Apricot.

"I haven't got it on my mouth, come on, give me your mouth!" Apricot offered her lips. They had a long kiss and Roughshod's soapy wet cock stood up. He flashed it at Apricot: "Let's do it!"

"I can see the scabies rash! Even if you weren't sick, this isn't the time." She spat out a mouthful of saliva, then another.

"Well, get your titties out and show me then!" Apricot opened her jacket. Roughshod started working on himself, then a gob of stuff spurted out, and he laughed out loud.

"You're in a hell of a hurry!" exclaimed Apricot. "What's got into you, you've only been gone a couple of weeks! Were you up to no good when you were away?" She turned and saw the gate

was still open. "I never shut the gate!" She quickly shut it. "You're the Sledgehammer's chief, if people see you doing this, what kind of revolution is that?!"

"The more revolution you make, the more it makes you want to do it."

"Fine, fine, I'm off."

"Look after success for me!"

"Success?"

"Idiot! When the revolution's successful and the baby's born, we'll call it Success!"

"Huh! It's your Success, but it's putting me through hell! If you're staying home for five or six days, what will you eat?"

"I'll cook for myself."

"Don't bother—I'll bring you your meals."

Apricot brought him three meals a day, and each time passed the bowl through the window. And once Roughshod had eaten, he wanting some kissing too.

But five days passed and the scabies was no better. Roughshod starting having doubts about the sulfur soap. He got dressed and went to the Kiln God Temple. Baldy's-gold and the others had been washing with the sulfur soap, but were still suffering agonizing itching and had given up.

They reckoned Mottlegill had been lying to them about the soap, and Sky-cloth had him put to it. The soap was a waste of time and money and, what's more, it had given the Red Swords the chance to fire up the kiln.

Baldy's-gold was furious—it was clear as daylight that Sky-cloth had got Mottlegill to make fools of them.

Baldy's-gold didn't dare go to the kiln on his own, so he sat in the Kiln God Temple with the gate open, waiting for Mottlegill to come down the hill. It was twilight before he turned up. Mottlegill and Cow-bell were playing “paper, scissors, knife and stone” as they walked along the lane.

“You lost!”

“You got to win two out of three goes! Let's do it again!”

Cow-bell refused, and Mottlegill jumped on him. He was just stuffing something into his mouth when suddenly Baldy's-gold shot out and dragged Mottlegill into the yard.

Cow-bell was still shouting: “Ai! Ai!” when the gate banged shut.

Mottlegill was properly confused but put up a fierce struggle as Baldy's-gold pulled him along by his collar.

“What's going on?! What's going on?!” he protested in a muffled voice. When Baldy's-gold still said nothing, Mottlegill grabbed hold of the pillar in the yard. Baldy's-gold chopped at his hand and Mottlegill fell to the ground.

“You tell us! What in the motherfucker is going on?!” shouted Baldy's-gold.

After that, Mottlegill was too scared to utter a word.

Roughshod and the rest came out of the temple but didn't try to stop Baldy's-gold. They just stood there silently watching and scratching themselves.

Baldy's-gold gave Mottlegill a kick: “Get up!”

Mottlegill got to his feet. There was blood on the back of his hand and he bent down and rubbed dirt into it before straightening up again.

“Why are you spying for the Red Swords?” demanded Baldy’s-gold.

Mottlegill knew the word “spy”, it meant the same as “traitor”. The Sledgehammers despised Cow-bell as a traitor and it was true he’d betrayed them. But how did that make Mottlegill, a spy? Mottlegill didn’t know what to say. All he could do was squeak: “I...I...”.

Muddle-head came over then, and stood in front of Mottlegill. His left hand was down his pants scratching his crotch, and he didn’t take it out. “What are you eating?”

Mottlegill opened his mouth. Inside was a peeled hard-boiled egg, still whole. He took it out: “An egg.”

“Where did you get that egg from?! Was it a pay-off from Sky-cloth?” Muddle-head yelled.

“No, it’s from home,” said Mottlegill.

Muddle-head went to snatch the egg off him, but Mottlegill figured that was what he was going to do, so he tightened his grip on it and pulled his arm back.

But Muddle-head grasped his wrist and pinched the main artery hard. Mottlegill’s hand went numb and he retaliated by spitting on the egg.

Muddle-head didn’t fancy eating it with saliva all over it but he spat on it too, figuring that that way Mottlegill wouldn’t want to eat it either.

Mottlegill's hand finally went numb and the egg dropped from his fingers. He quickly stamped on it, scraping the bits into the dirt.

Muddle-head boxed his ears at that, and swore: "You fucking little squirt...."

Roughshod said nothing until Muddle-head finished boxing Mottlegill's ears. Then he shouted at Muddle-head to get back, and said to Mottlegill: "Right, you come here!"

He took him into the temple hall and shut the door.

"Roughshod, big bro, what's up?" said Mottlegill.

"Don't call me 'big bro', I'm no big bro of yours."

"I'm not in the Red Swords...." Mottlegill protested.

"But you work in the kiln, don't you?"

"I wanted to do some work there, but they won't take me on. I just went there with Cow-bell, to cook an egg on the kiln roof. We were playing 'paper, scissors, knife and stone', and I won so I got the egg.

"Cow-bell already ate one and he wanted mine too, but I wasn't going to let him have it so I put the whole egg in my mouth. Muddle-head had no right to it, the bastard!"

"I've got a question for you: who got you to tell me that sulfur soap cures scabies?"

"No one. When I found out Sky-cloth and the others were going to use it to wash themselves, I came and told you."

"Did the Red Swords really use it?"

"Yes."

“Did it work?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It didn’t work? And they’re doing a firing at the kiln?”

“Yes, that’s how Cow-bell and I cooked our eggs.”

“Have they stopped itching?”

“They’re still itching, except for Lamp-keeper and a few of the kiln stokers.”

“Tell the truth! Why have some of them stopped itching?”

“I *am* telling the truth. They didn’t get given any soap so they mixed the kiln ash with some starch water and smeared it all over them, and that got rid of the scabies. Now lots of people are using it.”

“Oh.”

“Anything else you want from me?”

“I want you to spend more time hanging around the Red Swords.”

“No, I don’t want to. I’m not going there ever again!”

“You’ve got to go, and keep your eyes skinned. Anything you find out, you come and tell me.”

Mottlegill looked at Roughshod.

“Got that?” Roughshod said.

“I’m not in the Sledgehammers,” said Mottlegill.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re our spy.”

“Spy?”

“What’s wrong with being a spy? It means you’ve got special tasks, you’re a revolutionary spy! When the revolution succeeds, then you’ll get a better ‘class origin’.”

“You better remember you said that!” said Mottlegill, blowing on the back of his hand. The dirt mixed with the blood had stopped bleeding, but it still hurt. “Is that all? I’ll be off then,” he said.

But Roughshod wouldn’t let him go. “Go and tell Grandma that the Sledgehammers have got Mottlegill, and she’s to send his dinner to the Kiln God Temple,” he told Baldy’s-gold.

Mottlegill was so frantic he nearly cried. He didn’t want any of the villagers to know anything about this business, still less Grandma.

“Let them know, the more people who know, the better,” insisted Roughshod. “The longer you’re kept here, the less the Red Swords will be on their guard against you, and the more they’ll trust you. And that’s good for you, right?”

So Mottlegill stayed put in the Kiln God Temple. Grandma brought his dinner over in a food caddy. Finally, in the middle of the night, she fetched him home.

She gave him such a telling-off that he didn’t dare tell her about becoming a spy.

As soon as they’d released Mottlegill, Roughshod called the Sledgehammers together. They would all go to the kiln, pick up Lamp-keeper, and hold a struggle session against him.

That would serve several purposes: it’d be a serious loss of face for the Red Swords, it would ensure that the pots didn’t fire

properly, and they could help themselves to some ash for the scabies.

The next morning, before even the pigs had woken up for a piss and while the Party Secretary's three remaining laying hens were still roosting in the tree branches, Long-and-wide went to a pig pen outside the village to collect dung.

On his way back, he bumped into Dough-fish, who had buckets full of water for the ox on his carrying pole, and stopped for a chat.

Suddenly Long-and-wide lit up red all over. He looked up: the clouds above had parted like a plowed furrow and turned a brilliant red, even though the sun wasn't yet up.

“Do you think it'll rain?”

“If it rains again, it's going to get colder,” said Dough-fish.

“We'd better hang a rice straw mat over the ox shed door to keep the warmth in.”

Just then, there was a thudding of feet and a crowd of men came running silently by, all armed with sledgehammers. Before Long-and-wide and Dough-fish had time to react, they were pushed to one side: “Out of the way! Out of the way!”

Muddle-head brought up the rear, having stopped to do his jacket up. All the buttons were missing, so he was pulling it around his middle and tying it with a piece of rope. He had half a cold sweet potato in his mouth.

“Muddle-head, are you going to a meeting?” asked Dough-fish.

Muddle-head took the potato out of his mouth: “We're going to smash up the kiln!”

Dough-fish dropped the shoulder pole to the ground and the buckets tipped over. The water spilt out and snaked off down the village street.

The Sledgehammers, meanwhile, took the lane from the Kiln God Temple up the hill to the kiln. When the clods of earth threatened to trip them up, they brought their sledgehammers down and bashed the mud from their shoes. When the wild jujube thorns on the banks caught on their clothes, they side-swiped the branches with their sledgehammers.

At the constant whirling of sledgehammers, the white-billed, red-tailed birds in the lacebark pine froze in place while the crows in the persimmon trees took off in alarm, filling the sky so that it seemed suddenly to be cloaked in a filthy black jacket.

Muddle-head had just said: “It would be good to get a hare,” when a hare popped its head out of a hole.

Muddle-head brought his sledgehammer smashing down—and the handle broke off below the hammerhead.

The hare streaked off up the mountain on its short forelegs and long hindlegs. There was no chance of catching it. It was running so fast it would have gone head over heels downhill.

“Why didn’t you lot in front catch it?!” he grumbled.

“What kind of a sledgehammer are you? Eh?!” they yelled back.

Muddle-head ran up from the back of the line to the front, carrying his sledgehammer handle, banging it against the ground to show them that at least he had a cudgel.

It was still early and hardly anyone was up and about at the kiln, only Lamp-keeper and Post sitting at the kiln opening, keeping an eye on the fire.

The Sledgehammers arrived at the clay pit and Muddle-head took a swipe at the muddy clay that had just been dredged up. It was like pounding a bag of cotton wool, the mud was so soft, so bits of mud splashed all over his face.

Post jumped to his feet: "What was that for?"

"Just watch me!" said Muddle-head and took a swipe at a pile of unfired pots. One corner of the pile collapsed and, within seconds, the whole lot had come crashing down.

Roughshod said quietly: "I want Lamp-keeper, get Lamp-keeper out here."

Lamp-keeper emerged. He took his pipe out of his mouth, lifted one foot, and tapped the pipe against the sole. "These pots aren't one of the Four Olds," he said.

"Huh! So you've changed your tune, have you?" said Roughshod. "If these pots aren't one of the Four Olds, what are you then?"

"I've got high class status now," said Lamp-keeper.

Roughshod scowled ferociously: "You jumped-up little...! Planning a counter-attack, were you? Or a revolution?"

"Ferret out this class enemy, get him out here!" he shouted to Muddle-head and Baldy's-gold.

They rushed Lamp-keeper and twisted his arms behind his back and up into the air. Then they pressed his head down, and set off at a thudding run.

Lamp-keeper fell to the ground and was ordered to get up. By the time he was back on his feet again, he was looking hangdog and wretched, just like he used to.

Post stood frozen with terror but when Roughshod crooked a finger at him, he obediently approached: "Roughshod, I'm just a poor peasant."

"Well, if you're a poor peasant, what are you doing here?"

"Firing the kiln," said Post.

"Who for? For the village?"

"Roughshod, you'll have to ask Sky-cloth that."

"I'm asking you! The kiln belongs to the whole village, not just to the Zhu clan! Who works the production team fields? Who takes the oxen to turn the millstone? Eh?"

"Are you stopping the firing? Then I'm off," said Post. Then he shouted: "Winter-born! You fucking come out here! What are you doing in there, anyways? Shitting a whole damn well rope?"

Winter-born had taken his chance while Roughshod was having a go at Lamp-keeper to sneak off to the toilet behind the kiln, pretending he needed to take a crap. If all the blame was heaped on Lamp-keeper and Lamp-keeper was taken away, then there'd be nothing to worry about.

But when he heard Post shouting for him, he hurriedly hitched up his pants and raced off down the hill, shouting: "They're smashing the kiln! They're smashing the kiln!"

"Smashing the kiln, are we?!" exclaimed Baldy's-gold, running after Winter-born.

Winter-born jumped down off the dyke, and Baldy's-gold, still on the dyke, nearly lost his footing. He grabbed hold of a tree, watching as Winter-born did a somersault and ran on downhill.

He picked up a clod of earth and threw it at him but missed.

“You fucking said someone was smashing up the kiln, then let's do it!” Baldy's-gold shouted, picked up a sledgehammer and brought it down on a cart used for carrying unfired pots. He damaged it but it didn't break up, just rolled down to the mouth of the kiln, then ran backwards and knocked him over.

Muddle-head started yelling: “Smash it! Smash it all!” He kicked over a pile of saggars with his foot, picked up a mattock lying on the ground and attacked the door of the kiln. It didn't yield, so he bashed it again.

Then Honesty grabbed the mattock handle and said: “Are you trying get yourself killed? If that door comes down, the flames will shoot out and roast you!”

Honesty was shoveling earth into the firebox, where the fire was still burning.

“Motherfucking firing! Don't even think about doing a firing if our share isn't in!”

“Sure enough, our share isn't in there. But the Zhu clan put all their pots together for this firing. If you spoil it, they'll have your guts for garters!”

“Let them! What do I care?”

“You may not care, but we've still got wives and kids,” said Honesty, and grabbed the mattock off him.

As Honesty and Muddle-head were pushing and shoving by the kiln, some Sledgehammers snuck into the cave dormitory.

Inside, there was a stove with some basins, but no food in them.

The pot with the corn porridge hadn't been washed yet, and the bowls and chopsticks were soaking. There were some mats rolled out on the floor, each with a brick at one end, nothing else, not even a tobacco box, just one long-stemmed pipe.

Lucky picked up the pipe. Looking at the pile of ash in the corner of the stove, he said: "Can we use this ash for the scabies?" He stuffed a handful into the crotch of his pants and rubbed it in.

The others had forgotten about their itching until then, but his words made them itch all over, and they grabbed handfuls of ash and rubbed it into their arms and legs.

After a while, they simply stripped off, and rubbed the ash all over themselves, raising so much dust in the cave that they began to choke and cough.

Outside, Roughshod gave a shout and planted the Sledgehammers' flag on the kiln roof, where it fluttered and flapped in the breeze. He regretted not bringing the drums and cymbals people with them.

Cocking his head, he smiled at Lamp-keeper.

Too scared to meet his smile, Lamp-keeper bowed his head.

"Tell me, are you thinking what I'm thinking?" said Roughshod.

"I couldn't say," said Lamp-keeper.

"If I tell you to say something, then you say it!"

“Driving the Red Swords into the fucking ditch?” hazarded Lamp-keeper.

“You really are a fucking bad one, all you have is bad thoughts. I was thinking of a poem by Chairman Mao.”

“Huh?”

“A high peak on the Liupan Mountains

The red flag unfurls in the western breeze...” Roughshod recited.

Follow-me and three others ran from the cave dormitory, where the dust was choking them, and carried on rubbing the ash on themselves outside. Follow-me took a handful of ash to Roughshod for him to rub on.

Roughshod was concentrating on the poem and snapped:

“What the heck are you doing rubbing it on here for? Take it back with you if you want to do that!”

His overtures rejected, Follow-me turned away. Lamp-keeper gave him an odd look, and Follow-me flared up: “What are you gawping at? If you look at me again, I’ll have your eyeballs out!”

“I’m not looking at anything, just appreciating Chairman Mao’s verse.”

“Hearse, did you say ‘hearse? How dare you use that word about Chairman Mao?!”

“I said ‘verse’, not ‘hearse.’”

“You don’t understand anything, piss off,” Roughshod said.

He was going to say more but suddenly lost interest in Lamp-keeper, because his legs started itching madly, then his whole

body. It was as if millions of flies were crawling all over him, as if a host of bugs were biting him, as if he was on fire, as if he was being jabbed with awls.

In a rage, he yelled at the men back in the cave: “Get your clothes on! I can’t stand the sight of all of you butt-naked!”

CHAPTER 65

Dough-fish went to report to Sky-cloth that the Sledgehammers' were on Middle Mountain. Sky-cloth had eaten something spoiled the night before and had the runs all night, so was still asleep at daybreak.

But when he heard the news, he set off in search of Millstone and Stove-flame. As it happened, they were on their way to see him to find out what was going on.

No one had any idea.

Sky-cloth's daughter-in-law came back from the spring with water buckets on her shoulder pole, and told them she'd seen Skin-deep standing in the doorway of his house, laughing and telling Earth-root's mom how the Sledgehammers had all gone to the kiln to struggle against Lamp-keeper.

"They went to struggle against Lamp-keeper?" said Sky-cloth.

"We put Lamp-keeper in charge of firing the kiln, and they went to struggle against him? Still, that doesn't mean they're out to stop our firing."

Millstone and Stove agreed: "If the Sledgehammers say they're only there to struggle against Lamp-keeper, it'll be hard to stop them. Time to organize a struggle session against Skin-deep."

And so Millstone went to see to it. Although Skin-deep had not openly thrown in his lot with the Sledgehammers since he'd come back, he had been heard laughing about the struggle session against Lamp-keeper, which proved that he was secretly on the Sledgehammers' side.

“The Sledgehammers attacked Lamp-keeper to get back at us, so we’ll hit on Skin-deep to get back at the Sledgehammers.”

With that decided, the Red Swords were sent to Skin-deep’s house.

When Skin-deep’s mother saw them coming for her son, she shouted: “Skin-deep’s already done his stint at the Mao Zedong Thought School! What’s the problem now?”

She stood blocking the doorway. “You’ll have to go through me first to get in here!”

Then she actually lay across the threshold, pulling her jacket up and showing a belly like a pig’s bladder. No one wanted to touch her so they all stared at the doorknocker instead.

“Drag that woman out of the way, There-and-back!” shouted someone. There-and-back was standing at the back while this was going on. She had snuck a bunch of dried cowpeas that were hanging by the window, and was busy chewing.

She didn’t move.

In the end, Stove-flame had to try and get his arms around Skin-deep’s mom, but the old woman hooked her arms and legs over the threshold, and Stove-flame couldn’t get a grip.

Finally, There-and-back went and tickled her under the armpit, making Skin-deep’s mother throw up her hands and feet so that Stove-flame was able to drag her away from the door.

But when they went in, Skin-deep wasn’t there, and the back window was open.

What with the fuss his mother was making at the door, Skin-deep had been able to jump out of the back window and do a runner.

The old woman held her head high and said: “Are you going to beat me? Go on then, beat me!”

She thrust her head forward belligerently until her face was almost in Stove-flame’s fist. Stove-flame’s fist bulged with blue veins, then suddenly he opened his hands and gently stroked her face.

Having her face stroked was far more humiliating than being punched, and Skin-deep’s mom burst into tears.

Just then, Winter-born came running from the kiln. He was covered in dirt, and wolves’ teeth thorns had ripped holes in his jacket, the tattered strips fanning out over his bottom like a sheep’s tail.

“The Sledgehammers are smashing up the kiln!”

“Didn’t they say they were just going to hold Lamp-keeper for a struggle session?”

“They did. But now they’re smashing up the kiln too. They’re smashing everything in sight. It’s all in pieces.”

“Is the kiln still firing?” asked Sky-cloth.

“How could it be?” said Winter-born.

Sky-cloth roared: “But that’s a collective firing, everyone put in their pots! What are they doing smashing them?!” His whole forehead went red, his cheekbones bulged and his mouth gaped so wide you could have put a fist in it.

The rest of them were scared into silence, even Skin-deep's mother.

Then Bottle-gourd's daughter-in-law began to wail: "Our family sold all our eggs to pay for our pots to be fired! My mom didn't even get one to eat!"

Millstone shouted: "These are our pots they're smashing! It's like they're digging up our graves, throwing our babies into the river! Let's go up to the kiln, let's smash the dog-heads who're smashing up our kiln!"

The Red Swords began mustering their forces. Bright-hall ran down the road, shouting "Get everyone up the mountain! Up the mountain!"

The key members of the group gathered at the top of Three Prongs Lane but the rest still had no idea what was going on: they were either at home feeding their pigs, or on their way to their allotments.

"The Sledgehammers are smashing up the kiln," they were told. "They're snatched your bowls of red-braised pork right from under your noses!"

"Impossible! The kiln's team property! And we put all our savings into that firing!"

"Well, they are! They're beating us across the face with the soles of their shoes! Crapping and pissing while they ride on our shoulders!" came the answer.

"Motherfucking Sledgehammers!" the cry went up. "We won't go to the allotments, we'll stop feeding the pigs, we'll go home and get our knives! We Red Swords have plenty of knives!"

And they did—everything from scythes with blades a foot long, to straight-handled wood choppers, to broad-bladed fodder choppers, to curve-bladed sickles, and wood-handled blades.

Armed with their knives and brandishing them aloft, they raced to the top of Three Prongs Lane.

Mottlegill and Grandma were at the spring washing daikon radishes and tassel greens, ready for pickling. Mottlegill still had his fire cord with him.

“What d’you want that for when you’re washing vegetables?” asked Grandma, but Mottlegill said he was just used to having it on him and hung it on the branch of a nearby tree.

A swarm of bees rose from the stream and buzzed in their direction. At first they paid no attention, but then there were more and more, until they filled the air like snowflakes, yellow snowflakes not white ones, sounding like a lot of spinning wheels all working at once.

“Did Bottle-gourd come by here with a bee hive?” asked Grandma.

“I never saw him,” said Mottlegill.

A few of the bees landed on Mottlegill’s back. Grandma dropped her vegetables and peered at him: “Keep still.”

Mottlegill didn’t budge, and the bees crawled around for a bit before flying away.

“Bottle-gourd must have come by here with a bee hive,” he said. “I’ve been seeing trucks with bee hives going along the highway, they started in late autumn, it’s the bee-keepers following the blossom south with their bees.

“When trucks are refilling with water at the township water tower some of the bees always fly off, and Bottle-gourd’s been filling his hives with them. He puts honey in his family’s hives, and leaves them behind the tower. When the trucks drive off, the swarm stays behind and he takes them home.”

“Well, he must have attracted a whole lot of bees this time!” said Grandma.

“That’s not ‘attracting’, that’s stealing!” said Mottlegill.

“Oh, quit your blabbing,” said Grandma. “He’s only doing it to cure his sick mother.”

Mottlegill knew that Bottle-gourd and his family were the only ones with bees in Old Kiln village, just like he knew they kept the bees to treat Bottle-gourd’s sick mother. The old woman had bad rheumatism so the daughter-in-law had to go out every day to catch four bees to sting her knee joints.

They thought that if they kept this up for a year, she’d be cured. But instead he said: “They sell honey too!”

“How’s some honey water sound right now?” asked Grandma.

“Sounds good!”

“Then give them greens a good wash and when we get back, I’ll go and barter some eggs for honey.”

“Don’t give ‘em eggs! Just ask for the honey! You’ve dyed cloth for that family. They should give you some?”

“Where did you learn to be so calculating?” said Grandma.

Mottlegill laughed out loud. He was still laughing when the Red Swords suddenly appeared, running stealthily along the

embankment above the stream, just like troops on the move. Grandma and Mottlegill's eyes nearly popped out of their heads, and their jaws dropped, showing all their teeth.

"Gran, Gran, what are they doing?"

"Making revolution! Keep your head down!" said Grandma, afraid.

Mottlegill did as he was told. He put himself into one of his dreams, and curled himself up until he was just a little lump, held his breath and kept still.

And it worked. The runners paid no heed to them, running right past. They probably never even saw them.

"Gran!" Mottlegill whispered. He was about to start braggin' to his gran about why they hadn't been spotted when he looked up at the embankment and saw Old Shun's dog trotting by, with a dozen other dogs on its heels.

Old Shun followed behind them, wielding a knife with a handle sawn from a plank.

He looked back: "Hurry up! Our pots are in the kiln too!" A very long way behind him, a dazed-looking There-and-back was munching on a daikon.

Mottlegill forgot all about his dream, stood up and shuffled his feet into his shoes, but Grandma grabbed him: "What do you think you're doing?"

"The Shuns' pots are in there too!"

Grandma poked him on the forehead and hissed angrily: "So what? What's that got to do with us?"

Then she gave the vegetable basket to Mottlegill to carry. Mottlegill collected his fire cord from where he left it on the branch, and the pair trotted off home.

They opened the gate to find Skin-deep hunkered down by the drain. Mottlegill was so startled he almost yelled, but Skin-deep hurriedly hushed him.

“This is our house! How’d you get in?” whispered Mottlegill.

“The Red Swords are over the wall, they’re trying to get me for a struggle session, let me hide here.”

“You know what our situation is. If you’re found here, we’ll be in big trouble. Get out, out!” He opened the gate to push Skin-deep out.

“Grandma! Grandma Mulberry!” begged Skin-deep.

Gran shut the gate, pulling him into the house and told him to hide in the store-room. The pig was tied up in there too, and there was a heap of straw bedding in the corner. Mottlegill pushed Skin-deep underneath.

“It’s dirty!” protested Skin-deep.

“If it’s too dirty for you then go home!” said Mottlegill. Skin-deep stayed where he was under the straw, just reaching out his mask to ask Mottlegill to hide the mask somewhere clean.

“What a neat freak!” Mottlegill said, picking up the bedding and throwing it in a heap on the outstretched arm and the mask. Then he opened the back window, sucked his belly in and crawled out.

It was true he couldn’t stand Skin-deep. But when Skin-deep told him that he wanted to hide here because the Red Swords

were after him for a struggle session, Mottlegill forgave him. He guessed that if Skin-deep was in for another struggle session, that meant there must be more disturbances in the village.

When he'd crawled out of the window, at first he didn't hear anything. Just then ahead at the top of the lane though, he saw a swarm of bees whirling in the air.

Bottle-gourd and Goodman stood underneath the bees, their heads covered in bee helmets, carrying a bee hive between them.

"Can you get the bees back into the hive on the mountain?" Bottle-gourd was asking.

"I can't get 'em back. I'll give you the hive and you do it," Goodman said.

"If you can't get them in, give me the hive and I'll do it." Mottlegill piped up. "I'll take it to the main road and coax them into it there."

Bottle-gourd turned and saw him: "Mottlegill, come here, quick! Give Goodman a hand taking the hive to his house."

Mottlegill thought that sounded like fun, but he still said: "He gets the honey and I won't get any, why should I carry it?"

"You drive a hard bargain!" Bottle-gourd said. "Come on, you know Goodman's got rheumatism and needs the treatment. If you had something like that, I'd give you a hive!"

"But how am I supposed carry it? I ain't got a helmet," Mottlegill replied.

Bottle-gourd ran a few steps so he could shake the bees off him. Then he slapped off the few that were left behind, pulled off his

helmet and net, and gave them to Mottlegill. "I've got some things to take care of," he said.

"This kid's hard-working, and he loves you to bits!" he crooned, singing a line from the old lullaby. "You carry the hive for Goodman and when you get back I'll give you a spoonful of honey."

"Just one? I want two!"

"OK, two then."

Failing to turn up Skin-deep, the Red Swords stopped looking for him once they heard Winter-born's report and marched up the hillside, their knives flapping at their sides.

Suddenly the sky darkened above the Southern Mountains, and clouds spilled across the sky like the water from pots in the wash, thick ones and thin ones all scudding overhead.

The sun was still shining high above, and the clouds cast shadows in black and white patches. The mountain slope looked as if it was covered in thousands of diapers.

At the kiln, the Sledgehammers realized that the Red Swords were on the warpath. Those who had their clothes on picked up their sledgehammers, those who didn't, frantically threw them on.

Baldy's-gold was in such a rush he couldn't get dressed properly—his sleeves were inside out, and he couldn't find his pant leg.

Muddle-head charged down the road, armed with the wooden handle minus its hammer head, to stop the attackers charging up, he said. But the Red Swords kept on coming, regardless.

Muddle-head couldn't stop his onward rush, and came head-to-head with the front runners. They stepped aside, Muddle-head skidded and fell on the pebbles and scraped his knees.

He got to his feet, though, and kept them all away from him by dint of whirling the sledgehammer handle around him. Round once, he went, then round again, the hammer handle whistling in the wind.

The mountain road was narrow and the Red Swords retreated backwards, until someone jumped up onto the escarpment and threw a jacket at Muddle-head.

The jacket got caught around his head, and someone brandished a chopper and knocked the sledgehammer handle from his hand. The flat of the chopper blade landed with a smack on Muddle-head's butt and he fell on the ground.

He got up again only to scramble back up the mountainside. Taking their chance, the Red Swords rushed forward, just as the Sledgehammers charged down from the kiln.

One rushing upward, the other downward, the two forces got to within five hundred meters of each other on the road before coming to a stop.

Five hundred meters of mountain road. On one side, the ravine; on the other, the escarpment, at the top of which grew three old locust trees.

Silence fell. The only sound was the cicadas in the locust trees.

The cicadas sounded as if they were chirping their names, just like the yellowhead catfish in the Zhou River: "Ci-ca-da! Ci-ca-da!"

Just then, a wooden box dropped onto the road from behind the locust trees, and a cloud of yellow bees swarmed out, followed by two figures who landed right beside the box and the bees.

The bees flew up into the air with a loud buzzing, before descending again to blanket the entire road.

The new arrivals were Mottlegill and Goodman.

Earlier that day, as Mottlegill was helping Goodman carry the hive up the mountain, he asked him: “Did something happen in the village today?”

“Cats caught mice and hens laid eggs, and life went on.”

“But something must have happened.”

“Do you want something to have happened?”

Mottlegill said nothing. The beehive wasn't heavy, but it was awkward to carry between the two of them. Mottlegill went in front holding the hive from the bottom, his hands behind him, but his grip kept slipping.

Then they swapped places and he went behind, but Goodman was too tall and that was awkward too.

“Get the hive onto my back,” said Mottlegill.

Goodman wasn't going to agree to that: “Why are you in such a hurry? We'll just take it slowly.”

So they went back to carrying it between them again. On and on they plodded, and Mottlegill began to feel ridiculous. “Have you really got rheumatism?” he asked.

“My legs hurt when the weather changes.”

“Then why don’t you talk to your illness, the way you do with other people’s?”

“You little squirt...” Goodman was about to give him a telling-off, when suddenly they heard shouting and yelling, dogs barking and hens squawking, in the village.

“So there’s something up after all, huh?” asked Goodman.

Mottlegill looked pleased with himself: “There must be, I said there was, but you didn’t believe me!”

They put down the hive and looked down the mountain. They watched as a crowd of people left the Kiln God Temple and started walking up the slope towards the pass.

They couldn’t see who it was through the bee nets though, and they didn’t dare take the netting off.

“Look at all those people at the kiln,” said Goodman. As Mottlegill watched, Goodman suddenly said: “Something’s wrong!” And he pulled Mottlegill up the slope, with the hive gripped between them.

With no path, it was slow-going, and they ducked down behind the row of locust trees above the road. In no time at all, the Red Swords were charging up the mountainside and the Sledgehammers charging down.

As it happened, they met head-on just below the row of trees. Mottlegill looked over at Goodman who was sprawled motionless on his stomach.

He couldn’t keep still, though. He wanted to carry on running uphill but was scared to move in case he was spotted. The Sledgehammers might think he had come up with the Red

Swords and the Red Swords might think he had been with the Sledgehammers.

He definitely couldn't run now.

He started getting scared. If a fight broke out, who would he fight? More likely than not he'd get sandwiched in the middle and end up pummeled by both sides.

He looked over again at Goodman, who was signaling to him to lay still. Mottlegill lay back down on his belly again, his heart pounding, and shut his eyes tight.

As soon as they closed, he remembered his dream, and for an instant it felt like he was dreaming. Holding his breath, he curled himself up as small as he could so that no one would see him.

A little while later, Mottlegill had sunk into a comatose state, like he was a stone. Then he felt Goodman tugging his arm.

“Get up, get up!”

Mottlegill opened his eyes, looking through the bushes down the mountain. The Sledgehammers and the Red Swords were moving towards each other, and the empty space between them was growing smaller and smaller.

Even though there was no wind, the grass beside the road started to tremble, shaken by the energies of both sides on a collision course.

Mottlegill was so frightened he had to shut his eyes again. But Goodman stood up and hauled Mottlegill up by the scruff of the neck: “Push the hive down, push it!”

How could they push the hive down? The panels would come apart, for sure, and all the bees would fly away and they would lose them all. Then Goodman wouldn't have any to treat his legs!

Mottlegill stood motionless. So Goodman tried to push the hive down himself. There was a rocky outcrop below and the hive rolled over a few times before getting stuck on the rock. Goodman went down to give it another push but it wouldn't budge.

"Hurry! They're going to fight!" Goodman called, and so Mottlegill finally ran down, grabbing a corner of the hive and heaving it up.

The hive tumbled away downhill, but Mottlegill's foot slipped and his body followed. He tried to clutch onto the outcrop, and got Goodman's leg instead, and the pair of them, limbs entangled, tumbled down to the road below.

Sure enough, the slats of the hive came apart and the swarm of bees burst out. Dancing like motes of dust in the air, they zoomed down and settled, covering the road surface.

No sooner were they all down, than they took off again in a knot, circling in the air. Goodman had kept his hat and net on in the fall, but Mottlegill's had come off and, in an instant, the bees were all over him.

He screamed and flailed his arms and legs wildly, as Goodman shouted: "Put your hands over your head, hands over your head!"

Mottlegill knew that all this flailing would only attract more bees, but he could not keep still. It was too late to tuck his head

under his body. Goodman rushed at him, pinned him down by riding on his neck, then sprawled on top of him and clutched Mottlegill's head to his chest.

The Sledgehammers and the Red Swords, who had been rooted to the spot, instinctively moved forward. But before they could come to the aid of Goodman and Mottlegill, the bees flew at them, and the front runners all hit the ground and covered their heads with their jackets.

The rest of the Sledgehammers ran away, and the bees zoomed after them. Having failed to catch them, the bees regrouped and settled once more on the road surface below the honest locust trees.

The patch of yellow expanded, then retracted, rose, then fell.

“Those are honeybees, don't worry,” someone said, but immediately someone else put in: “Yeah, but there are black-head wild bees in the locust trees, and the honeybees are gonna draw them down here!”

Some of the Red Swords began to shout: “Run! Run!”

They were shouting at Goodman and Mottlegill. Goodman stood up and pulled Mottlegill to his feet. Mottlegill, disorientated, lost his footing and started to roll down the hillside towards the ravine, followed by Goodman.

They were rolling at such a rate that the bees were soon left behind. They formed a seething yellow carpet in the road, blocking the Red Swords from going up and the Sledgehammers from going down.

Both sides stepped back and began trying to out-curse each other instead:

”You think you’re so fucking clever, you get up here!”

”You think you’re so fucking clever, you get down here!”

No one was interested in Goodman and Mottlegill anymore, and the factions hadn’t come to blows, so they could curse their opponents all they liked.

Roughshod knew that if the Red Swords really charged them, the Sledgehammers would be far outnumbered by the Red Swords, and had no hope of winning.

Sky-cloth was also content to stay put because, although the Red Swords were more numerous, the Sledgehammers were reckless hotheads and if it came to a fight the Red Swords would not necessarily come off victorious.

“Fucking get down here! Come and see us break your legs!”

“Fucking get yourselves up here! Come and see how we’ve smashed up the kiln!”

Stove-flame yelled to Sky-cloth: “Did you hear that? They’ve smashed our kiln, they’ve fucking smashed our kiln, we don’t want to go up there, we should go and smash their homes up, instead. Let’s go and smash them up!”

Stove-flame turned and ran towards the village, followed by all the Red Swords.

When they got to the Kiln God Temple, they found the gate locked. They broke in and kicked open the doors to all the cells, pulling down and throwing out all the flags, lamps, drums and cymbals, pens and ink on the tables, paper for writing big character posters, buckets of flour paste and long-handled brushes.

In the yard, they trampled everything underfoot, and what they could not tear or trample flat, they smashed to bits with stools. There was a tremendous ruckus.

Ladle pulled out the incident book and started leafing through it.

Cow-bell asked: "What's in it?"

Ladle looked at it and said: "It's about you, says you defected."

"If anyone writes about me, I'll fuck his mother!" shouted Cow-bell.

Sky-cloth grabbed the book and tried to tear it up, but couldn't because of the binding. "Mottlegill! The fire cord!" Stove yelled, before remembering that Mottlegill wasn't there.

"Who's got matches!" he shouted again. No one did. Some people were rifling through the bedding in the side rooms, but they couldn't find any matches.

They threw the bedding into the courtyard, and looked for matches on the cook top but there were none there either, so they threw all the pots and pans and bowls and chopsticks into the yard too.

Padlock smashed the full water butt on the main hall steps to pieces, so that water flooded out, soaking the bedding. Still enraged, they started digging at the foot of the steps, throwing earth all over the bedding, where it turned to mud.

Still, no matches, but they discovered a can of kerosene in the corner and Ladle carried it out of the yard, thinking he could stow it in the hay hole in the hillside and take it home later.

“I’ll go home and get matches!” said Cow-bell, running off. Just then, he caught sight of Ladle stowing the can of kerosene and ran back into the yard to report it to Millstone.

Millstone swore at Ladle and made him bring it back into the yard, where he sprinkled it all over the jumble of possessions they had brought out.

Cow-bell set off again for the matches, and just when he reached the temple gate, Long-and-wide poked his head out for a look. Then he saw Cow-bell and retreated.

“What are you looking at?” said Cow-bell.

“Nothing.”

“Are you going to help smash up the Kiln God Temple?”

“I’m not in the Red Swords.”

“Have you got any matches on you?” said Cow-bell.

“Yup.” Long-and-wide handed them to Cow-bell. Then he had second thoughts, but it was too late, Cow-bell had already run off with them.

“Hey! Hey!” shouted Long-and-wide, “don’t tell anyone it was me who gave you the matches!”

Cow-bell’s original idea had been to burn the incident book, but when the book caught fire, it flared up into a fire ball and burnt his eyebrows.

He flung it away from him in panic and it landed on the kerosene-soaked bedding. There were series of explosions and a great thick plume of smoke rolled skywards like a dragon.

From their vantage point at the kiln, the Sledgehammers could see the fire at the Kiln God Temple. They were aggrieved and angry that things had escalated to this point, and their tempers were not improved by the scabies.

They itched all over and the more they itched, the angrier they were. As the Kiln God Temple went up in smoke and flames, they vented their fury on the kiln, smashing all the pots, hurling the saggars down the cliff, digging out the clay pit, breaking down the kiln door, demolishing the chimney, and even smashing the buckets, stools, mattocks, shovels and shelves to smithereens.

The heap of coal went into the ravine too.

In the cave, there were sums scratched into the wall, how much Sky-cloth had spent, how much Millstone had spent, and Stove-flame, and Bright-hall, Field-sprout, Ladle, Promise, Star-gazer, Root-stock, Winter-born, Post, Lamp-keeper, Bottle-gourd, Somersault, and all the rest, how much money they put in, how much coal they'd bought, how much fuel they'd collected, strings of figures all over the wall.

Spike took a sledgehammer to each name, calling it out as he did so, until the tenon came loose from the mortise in the hammerhead.

And so the Sledgehammers lost their second sledgehammer, leaving them with just a cudgel.

It wasn't until that moment that they remembered Muddle-head:

“Where's Muddle-head?”

While the Sledgehammers were at the kiln, Lamp-keeper and Post, and Somersault and Promise (who had been there all night) sat docilely beside the clay pit. The clay had been dug out and water bubbled over their shoes but they didn't dare move a muscle.

Now that someone had mentioned Muddle-head, someone said: "He's down the hill."

It was true, Muddle-head was still lying on his belly on the hill in front of the kiln, rubbing his buttocks.

"Does it still hurt?" someone asked.

"Yup."

"Get up and walk a bit." But he couldn't.

They made him get up, but he still couldn't walk. "Why can't you walk?"

He put his legs together and took a step with his left one, then realized that the crotch of his pants were split and his what's-its were all dangling out.

"Hey! Brought 'em out for an airing have you?" said Quarry-stone.

Baldy's-gold pushed the wheelbarrow over: "Quarry-stone, this is no time for joking around. Go and push the wheelbarrow over the cliff!"

Root-stock looked at Promise, and Promise looked at Post, who said: "That wheelbarrow belongs to the Production Team, shouldn't we keep it?"

"Shut your mouth!" Baldy's-gold said, and with that the wheelbarrow was heaved over the edge.

Muddle-head climbed up the slope, peering at his crotch:
“Motherfucking bees!”

Post wanted to ask: “Did the bees sting your nethers?”

But he said nothing. He turned to look downhill, to see if he could spot Goodman and Mottlegill in the distance.

Out on the road, the bees were still visible as a seething patch of yellow, but Goodman and Mottlegill were nowhere to be seen.

[End of Chapter 65]

Translated by Nicky Harman.