

SHAANXI OPERA

Jia Pingwa

Chapter 1

If anyone had asked me, I'd tell them the Bai Xue was the girl I liked.

I wasn't the only one. The men of Qingfengjie followed her like a pack of wolves. I watched her and I watched them watching her. If someone gave her a little gift, a hair pin, a pear, or talked to her too long, or got too close to her, I'd notice. I'd climb the persimmon tree in your yard and cut a deep gash in the trunk. The tree would wither and die and she wouldn't know that I did it all for her.

She didn't live in the village anymore but when she did, I used to follow her down to the corn field. When she left to feed the pigs, I'd be behind her. My feet would find her footprints in the mud. I'd follow her deep into the cornfield.

When I stopped to piss, I'd look back at the footprints. I stood for a long time. I stood until white dandelion fluff blew down through the corn and filled them.

Behind her house, where the outhouse was, there was also a mulberry tree. I'd climb the tree and lay across a wide branch. Most days around sunset you could find me in the tree. I was in

the tree so that I could watch Bai Xue but her mother thought I was stealing fruit. The truth is, I never took a single mulberry. Her mother took a bucket of shit from the outhouse and spread it over the branch but even that couldn't stop me.

Once I fell out and landed on my head, but I didn't care. Nobody in the village understood my love for Bai Xue. They all thought that I'd cracked my head open just so that to fill my stomach with stolen mulberries. More than a few people thought I was crazy.

One day, while we were sitting on the stone roller by the old kiln, eating noodles, I heard Sanxue say: "I tell you this, there's no other girl like Bai Xue in Qingfengjie. Back in the day, a woman like that... I'd have snatched her up, like a bandit." I didn't like hearing anyone talking about Bai Xue like that, so I grabbed a clod of mud and crumbled it over his noodles. Sanxue grabbed me and we clinched up.

I broke away and got in a few good shots before he landed a punch that knocked me down and cut my cheek. After that he took my bowl and ate my noodles. Then he threatened to smash the bowl. Someone finally stepped in and stopped him.

They said: "That's enough. Tell Yinsheng to bring you a flatbread tomorrow." He traced a big circle in the air. Sanxue set down the bowl. He walked off, cursing me as he went.

I stood up. I traced the same size circle in the air. "Why the fuck

would I give him something like that? He can eat his mother's cunt," I said.

Nobody talks about Bai Xue like that.

"Yinsheng," he said, "you're fuckin' crazy."

I'm not crazy. Never have been.

I walked back toward the village center. On the way, I found some chicken feathers and put them on the cut on my cheek. From the doorway of the Daqingtang Pharmacy, Zhao Hongsheng called to me: "What's the matter, Yinsheng?"

"Nothin'"

"You've got feathers all over your face. Come over here and look in the mirror."

After opening Daqingtang Pharmacy a few years ago, Zhao Hongsheng had a big success with a patent medicine based on an herbal remedy, which he called: Daqing Ointment. After that nobody cared that he had a head shaped like a persimmon. Thanks to his success everybody already thought of him as a village elder.

The full-length mirror in the pharmacy had been a gift from Bai Xue's mother. She had a headache that wouldn't go away. Zhao Hongsheng finally cured it so she gave him the mirror. When I

looked in the mirror, I saw myself. After I blinked and looked again, I could see Bai Xue. That was my secret. I had never told anyone that I could see Bai Xue in this mirror.

I had another secret: when it was hot, I spit on my finger and rubbed it on my nipples. I wasn't going to tell my secrets to anyone, especially Zhao Hongsheng.

Wu Lin was in the shop, too. He had a headache just like Bai Xue's mother. Zhao Hongsheng left me at the mirror and went over to Wu Lin. He took a chip of porcelain and raked it between Wu Lin's eyebrows. A moment later, a drop of blood appeared. The blood was as dark as soy sauce. Zhao Hongsheng glanced over in my direction: "Keep your sweaty fingers off my mirror!"

A fly walked across the surface of the mirror. Even when I waved my hands, it stayed put. I said: "Zhao Hongsheng, why'd you bring a fly to work with you?"

Zhao Hongsheng looked over again and said: "Yinsheng, tell me something: is that fly female or male?"

I said: "It's a girl."

Zhao Hongsheng said: "How can you tell?"

I said: "Girls want to look beautiful and then they want to look at themselves in the mirror."

Wu Lin said: “Th-th-th-they say Yin-yin-yinsheng is crazy b-b-b-but he’s not crazy at all.” I didn’t bother replying, because I wasn’t interested in talking to someone like him.

Xia Tianzhi came to door carrying a bundle of red paper so I went and sat in the corner instead.

Xia Tianzhi was also carrying his copper pipe. He sat on a chair beside Wu Lin. The sound of the bubbling water in the pipe filled the shop as Xia Tianzhi took a long drag. He exhaled and turned to Zhao Hongsheng.

“I’m here to ask a favor. I need you to do some calligraphy for me.” The pharmacist found his brush and took the strips of red paper. He immediately began writing.

As he wrote he said: “When I heard that Xia Feng finally made the marriage official, I wondered when I’d get a chance to offer my congratulations! Tomorrow will be a good day to have a celebration here in the village. It’s finally time for Mr. Guest of Honor to hold a banquet of his own.”

Xia Tianzhi said: “Well, take this as your invitation!”

Zhao Hongsheng turned the paper for Xia Tianzhi to read. “What do you think of the brushwork?”

“Beautiful. You should write one for the opera theater, too.”

He looked up. “Is there going to be a performance?”

Xia Tianzhi said: “The provincial troupe is coming.”

He picked up the brush again.

Wu Lin shook with excitement and started gesturing with his hands, trying to squeeze a full sentence out of his throat. Xia Tianzhi said: “Don’t force it. Take your time.”

Eventually, they figured out what he wanted to say. Wu Lin wanted to offer a toast to Xia Tianzhi and congratulate him on his son’s marriage. Xia Tianzhi took twenty *yuan* out of his pocket and Wu Lin ran out of the shop to buy a bottle of liquor.

Zhao Hongsheng finished writing. He put down the brush and took the copper pipe. He took a slow drag, held it in his mouth and then sucked it down into his lungs. The smoke set him coughing and Xia Tianzhi laughed and took back the pipe.

Leaning back, Zhao Hongsheng said: “Like I’ve always said, there are two great families in Qingfengjie, the Xia Family and the Bai Family. Now, they’ll finally be reunited. It’s like the famous chess move: ‘The great roc spreads his wings to block the sun.’ You’ve sacrificing your most valuable piece to take the king!”

Xia Tianzhi waved off his flattery. “Don’t be ridiculous, just because we’ve got the bigger cave now doesn’t mean we’re going around eating people.”

But Zhao Hongsheng continued, laughing: “If you want to talk about morality, Fourth Uncle, you’re the most moral of them all. Look at Xia Junting! He’s the head of the whole village now. Do you really want me to believe that the virtuous Xia clan elders had nothing to it?”

“He’s got outsiders to thank for that job though!”

I coughed a few times but Xia Tianzhi ignored me so I spit in his direction. Wu Lin returned with his bottle of liquor. He smiled broadly and stammered out: “Fo-fo-fourth Uncle, the provincial opera troupe is putting on a sh-sh-show. Is Bai Xue performing?”

Xia Tianzhi said: “No, she’s not.”

Zhao Hongsheng said: “Nobody in Qingjiefeng performs after they get married.”

Xia Tianzhi said: “That’s the way it’s always been. The party is just because it happened to fall on the same date as the performance.”

He got up and stamped the mud off his feet before leaving the

shop.

Once he was gone Wu Lin cracked the lid of the bottle with his teeth. He called me over to have a drink. I wasn't going to drink. Zhao Hongsheng asked me: "What's gotten into you? You couldn't even say hello to Fourth Uncle?"

I said: "I bit my tongue."

Wu Lin asked Zhao Hongsheng: "Ca-ca-can I go to the banquet too?"

Zhao Hongsheng said: "Everyone in the village is going."

Wu Lin said: "I d-d-don't have any money to buy a gift."

Zhao Hongsheng said: "What are you, a weakling? You can't scrounge up some cash?" The two men drank while I bit my fingernails.

I said: "Zhao Hongsheng, where'd the girl who Xia Feng married come from?"

He said: "What are you talking about? Didn't you hear what I just said?"

I said: "Who is it then?"

Zhao Hongsheng said: “Quit acting dumb.”

“I really don’t know.”

“You know the Xias are different from you and me and Wu Lin. There’s only one family in the village that’s a match for him. Bai Xue—who else?”

I felt a buzzing in my head. There were sparks in front of my eyes. I said: “Bai Xue got married? Who’d she marry?”

Zhao Hongsheng picked up his cup of liquor and poured it into his mouth. His mouth was as big as a basin. He said: “What’s wrong with you, Yinsheng?”

I tried to talk and my voice came out strangled and pathetic: “But it’s impossible. Impossible.” I started sobbing.

Everyone in Qingfengjie hates it when I cry. Whenever I start crying, my jaws lock shut and my face turns blue. Since I’m not breathing usually I fall on the ground, so it looks like I’m dying. This time, Zhao Hongsheng ran over and said: “I’ve got a weak heart, Yinsheng. Don’t scare me.”

Wu Lin came over, too. He began dragging me toward the door, saying: “We-we did-didn’t hi-hi-hit hi-hi-him he-he ju-just died!”

That woke me up so I kicked him in the balls. As he staggered back, I grabbed the bottle of liquor out of his hand and smashed it on the floor of the shop.

I saw Wu Lin looming over me. His hand was raised. I said: "Come on, motherfucker. Try and hit me."

Wu Lin lowered his hand and picked up the bottom of the smashed bottle. There was a bit of liquor left in it. He took a sip, muttering: "I-I-I'm picking on you? I-I-I'm no-no-not picking on you. Yo-yo-you're crazy!" He took another sip.

I went home to cry until I coughed up blood. In the courtyard, I sat in front of the fulling stone that we pounded cloth on to make it thicker. I slammed my fists into the flat stone until the stone got soft like a bundle of cotton or a lump of dough.

God, why couldn't you send an earthquake? Tear down the mountains and shake the earth.

Who was going to save Bai Xue? Not Xia Feng. He couldn't save her. Only I could save her! I would do anything for her.

If we were all beggars that'd be fine, but if Xia Feng was a beggar would he still be good to Bai Xue?

I would.

If I was starving and found a single crumb, I would offer it to her. Or no—not an earthquake! Let a deep, red scar cut across her cheek. And one of her legs—let one of her legs wither until she couldn't stand on it.

Would Xia Feng still love her?

I would.

A breeze blew down the alley and smacked a shred of newspaper against the wall. It was my father's spirit. That's what happens sometimes. He just shows up. But he was the last person I wanted to hear from right then.

This was all his fault. He'd been successful in village politics. He'd been a respected Party member. But then he'd died. If he had lived, my family would still be respected and the village matchmakers would have come and begged him to arrange my engagement to Bai Xue.

But my father was dead. My anger slipped from my father and fell on Xia Feng. I hated him more. He was the real cause of this. He'd gone off to the provincial capital; he'd been a success—he couldn't marry one of thousands of girls in the capital? Why settle for a crumb when he already had a bowl full of pork?

I began to cry again, alone in the courtyard. I sobbed until my guts hurt. I choked and then I vomited. I looked down. Wriggling in my puke was a white roundworm.

Then I remembered my hatred. My hatred for—Bai Xue. Do you think this is fair, Bai Xue? Who do you think deserves you more?

That afternoon I hated everyone I saw until I felt a tooth wobbling in my clenched jaw. I opened my mouth and it fell into the dust. I picked the tooth up from the ground and held it for a moment then planted it where it had fallen.

This tooth, I vowed, this tooth will grow into a seedling and then it will grow up into a tree and the tree will have thorns and these thorns, I promise, will poison the marriage of Xia Feng and Bai Xue.

Their life together won't come to a good end.

Chapter 2

The next day, I went to the theater. The stage was already being set up with the lights and the backdrop. Below the stage, the older women of the village had moved in, occupying the space with benches and chairs. Their voices mixed in an unintelligible babble. Children squatted and pissed, their urine running under the benches and snaking across the dusty floor. Shu Zheng's daughter-in-law had set up an old stove besides the theatre. She was selling fried rice noodles. Black smoke puffed from the old stove.

Zhao Hongsheng was climbing a ladder to hang the red sheets with calligraphy from one of the pillars near the stage. The red dye in the paper was spreading to his hands and his face, leaving them stained a pale crimson.

Xia Wencheng, below him, watched the boy holding the ladder. He read the couplet that Zhao Hongsheng had written:

*Famous and profitable, the theatre's the best place to show off your
good fortune,
Hot or cold, even the best medicine can't cure every inflammation*

Xia Wencheng said: "Zhao Hongsheng! Is that to congratulate them on their marriage or an advertisement for your shop?"

A bat flew out of the eaves and Zhao Hongsheng wobbled on the ladder. As he grabbed for a better grip, he dropped his bottle of glue onto the boy holding the ladder.

The boy was a mute and moaned pathetically like he wanted me to help. I didn't bother. I wanted to knock Zhao Hongsheng off the ladder. I wasn't in the mood to help anyone.

On the north side of the theater grounds, there was a haystack with a pig rooting around underneath. The pig was staring at me. I walked over and kicked the pig in the teat. The pig thought I was playing, though. She rolled over onto her back. I spat and walked away.

Suddenly, there was a gust of wind. The wind was so strong it carried me, spinning, up onto the top of the haystack. Then the wind picked me up again and I sank back down to the ground as softly as a leaf falling from a tree.

Let me talk about Qingfengjie for a moment. Qingfengjie was a the most famous village on the Zhou River. The opera theater in particular had a long history. Across the top of the theater are three words, in gold: House of Mirrors. To the east side of the theater, there is the God of Literature Pavilion. The pavilion used to have a gold-plated dome. The dome was destroyed a long time ago. But the roof and walls of the pavilion were mostly intact.

My father used to say that it was because Qingfengjie had the God of Literature Pavilion that we were able to produce two college students.

The first college student was Bai Xue's half-brother. He had gone to Xinjiang to work. He came back once, a few years back. I remember he told us everyone that Xinjiang was so cold that you couldn't even piss outside. As soon as you started pissing, he said, the piss froze in a long rod of ice that was hard enough to hold you up if you leaned forward.

The other college student was Xia Feng. After Xia Feng graduated, he stayed in the provincial capital. He was a writer. His essays began appearing in the capital's newspapers.

Xia Tianzhi had been something of a scholar himself back in the day, serving as the principal of the local primary school. He was proud of his son's literary accomplishments and could often be seen rifling through newspapers in the village administration building, pulling on his copper pipe, and checking for new essays by his son. When he found a new essay, Xia Tianzhi would carry the paper around for days.

After that people started looking for new essays by Xia Feng that they could take to Xia Tianzhi. Always, there was the suggestion of a bottle of liquor to celebrate and every time it was the same: Even though Xia Tianzhi had money to spare he never carried

more than fifty *yuan*, which he kept folded up under the insole of one of his shoes. After taking the money out to pay for the bottle, he'd invite the person home with him.

When they arrived at his house, he'd call out: Bring out some food!

Fourth Auntie—this is what everyone called his wife, since Xia Tianzhi was the youngest of the four brothers—would rush to lay out dishes of cold tofu, pickled vegetables sprinkled with hot oil, and chili peppers with salt. That way they had the customary four dishes.

Xia Tianzhi would shout: “The chicken! Where’s the chicken?” And then Fourth Auntie laid the chicken out on the table. Most people just did the minimum, but Xia Tianzhi was a real stickler for this sort of thing.

The chicken was just looking at though, not for eating, since it was carved from wood.

The pavilion was a big open space, so without even tearing down any walls they'd been able to turn it into a cow pen during the Cultural Revolution. The cows were gone now and the it had been taken over by the local government who put up a sign that said ‘Cultural Center.’ Besides for a few pamphlets with boring titles

like How to Raise Minks and The Sichuan Peppercorn, or Fields to Forest, though, there was just a chess set, and mahjong, which is all people came for most of the time anyways.

Zhao Hongsheng climbed down from the ladder and called over to me. The wind blew hard again, messing up my hair. He muttered: "This wind is a bad omen." I told him about the wind carrying me to the top of the haystack

He looked worried and said: "Listen, if you aren't feeling well...."

I said that it really happened. I told him that there was a bird's nest on the top of the haystack and to check if he didn't believe me.

Xia Wencheng overheard. He carried the ladder over to the haystack. After he climbed the ladder everybody was surprised when he reached over and really did pull out the bird's nest. He tossed it to the ground.

When he saw that Zhao Hongsheng took me over to the entrance to the hall and asked if I wanted one of his medicated patches. "I won't charge you for it," he said.

I said that I'd really been to the top of the haystack. He ignored me this time and looked back inside. Someone was saying: "Was it a circle tile? My eyes aren't too good."

Zhao Hongsheng shouted: “You’ve been playing mahjong all day, no wonder you can’t see a thing!”

Xia Yu and the town treasurer Li Shangshan were both sitting at the table. Xia Yu had drawn a circle tile and was holding it to his forehead. When he pulled it away, the tile left a mark on his forehead. Shangshan muttered that when the game was finished there would be an extra circle tile left over, which got Xia Yu yelling again.

Zhao Hongsheng called over: “What are you doing here, Xia Yu? Your whole family’s busy and you’re playing mahjongg?”

Xia Yu said: “I came to borrow some tables and chairs and thought I might as well play a few hands.” He stood to leave.

Someone said: “Let me guess: Your brother’s got a new wife, so you’re in a hurry to get in there.” Someone else joked: “Sister-in-law’s ass, little brother gets half.”

I heard voices from the other side of the pavilion. A man’s voice said: “I wouldn’t even go out like this, normally, but here I feel like I’m overdressed.”

The man was one of the actors from the opera troupe. An older

actress said: “Think you’re a prince as soon as you leave the city, huh?” The man grinned.

He looked around and said: “Doesn’t seem very ‘cultural’ for a cultural center, does it?”

The actress said: “This is Xia Feng’s village. Of course they’ve got culture.”

Their conversation caught the attention of Gou Sheng, who had been watching Xia Yu and the others play mahjongg. Gou Sheng looked ghoulish. He was a wretchedly skinny man who was approaching sixty years old without vitality.

He walked over to the actors and stood with his deeply tanned face inches away from the face of the actress who had been talking. Suddenly he exclaimed: “You’re *Picking Up the Jade Bracelet*?”

The actress stared for a moment before realizing what he meant: Gou Sheng must have seen her playing the role of Sun Yujiao, the sweet country girl in *Picking Up the Jade Bracelet*. He probably didn’t know the name of her character. She smiled and nodded her head. Gou Sheng said: “I can’t believe it!” The actress smiled. “You’re all old and dried out,” he said. The actress’s expression changed, but Gou Sheng’s enthusiasm didn’t. He reached out to shake her hand but she shoved both into her pockets.

Later, I heard the full story. This same troupe had come to Qingfengjie about thirty years ago and the same actress had performed *Picking Up the Jade Bracelet*. Gou Sheng may have missed some of the details of the love story between the dashing young scholar and the beautiful maiden, but he fell in love with the actress anyways. When he went home that night, he asked his wife to play the part of the maiden. She was so mad they almost got divorced.

Gou Sheng didn't seem to care that the famous actress was angry with him, so Shangshan came over and apologized for him. He said that Gou Sheng just didn't know how to talk to women was all. Then Shangshan kicked him and told him to get lost.

Although she had performed many other roles, the actress had made her name playing with her part in *Picking Up the Jade Bracelet*. The incident with Gou Sheng left her in a state for the whole day. That afternoon she told them that she had a stomachache and was going back to town.

But the whole reason the theatre had been willing to put on the opera in the first place was because of the famous performers. Trying to save the day, Xia Tianzhi told Zhao Hongsheng to fetch his cups and needles. She told them not to bother because was already packing up her things.

Xia Tianzhi ran and got Bai Xue. Bai Xue begged the actress to stay and perform, taking out Xia Tianzhi's album of Shaanxi

opera masks. She showed her the one he had done for her.

The actress looked at the mask. She said: “Am I really that old?”

Bai Xue said: “You aren’t!” The actress said: “I must be. Everyone gets old.”

Bai Xue said: “Humans age but art is timeless.” The actress looked up from the mask. She looked at Bai Xue. The actress said: “Fine. I’ll perform. But I won’t be doing *Picking Up the Jade Bracelet*,” and I won’t wear a costume or act. I’ll sing arias instead.”

I hadn’t planned on going to the Xia family’s banquet but Shangshan forced me to.

I saw Bai Xue in the courtyard. I couldn’t look at her face, so I watched her feet. She was wearing narrow leather shoes. The leather of the shoes was delicate. The shoes wrapped tightly around her feet, showing off their delicate shape.

Her feet were beautiful. I thought about what Zhongxing’s father had told me about Bodhisattvas—Zhongxing’s father was a Buddhist—and how when Bodhisattvas walked, each footprint sprouted a lotus flower. When I watched Bai Xue walk, I saw rows of flowers trailing behind her, too.

Zhao Hongsheng saw me staring down at the ground: “What are you looking at?” He was a bastard. He knew I couldn’t look at her face. Why couldn’t I stare at her feet instead?

I turned and studied the courtyard instead. There were flowers there, too. There was a flower bed planted with Chinese roses. The flowers were blooming. The roses were bright red.

Zhao Hongsheng shouted: “Don’t drink too much today, Yinsheng!”

I walked over to the flower bed and reached out to pull on one of the petals of the rose. I saw the petal shiver. I realized I was hurting it so I let go.

Just then someone set off firecrackers in the courtyard to mark the start of the banquet. Shangshan was serving as the host of the party so he greeted the guests in the courtyard.

The Xia family hadn’t invited many people, but as Zhao Hongsheng had said, nearly everyone in the village was there. Wu Lin was the last to arrive in the doorway, calling for his wife, Hei’e, who had arrived earlier.

He said: “Are yo-yo-you coming back or not? They’re go-go-going to collect the gifts. Do you ha-ha-have any mo-mo-money?”

Fourth Auntie saw what was going on and called Wu Lin inside.

He protested: “I-I-I-I don’t have any m-m-m-money for a gift.”
She said: “Who asked you to bring a gift? Come and join us.”

After a pause, Wu Lin relented. He said: “Next month, fo-fo-for my mother, it-it-it’s the third anniversary of her passing, you can come and don’t bring any-any-any-anything.”

The village head Xia Junting and local Party secretary Qin An arrived together. Qin An stopped by the gate of the courtyard and read the couplet written on red paper:

*Without destruction, there is no progress
True feeling comes from conflict*

Qin An said: “Zhao Hongsheng, I presume? Very nice.”

Shangshan pulled Qin An and Xia Junting inside and got them seated before getting up in front to speak. Shangshan was a gifted speaker. He spoke for a long time and even though he spoke well most of the guests at the banquet stopped listening after a few minutes.

The speech was about scholars and beauties. Xia Feng was a scholar and Bai Xue was a beauty. The story of Xia Feng and Bai Xue was straight from classical literature. This match, he said, was

truly blessed.

Although the couple had already had a wedding in the capital, they'd come back to the village to extend greetings to their relatives and neighbors. Tradition was tradition, after all!

Shangshan surveyed the room. He began to list the family members that had arrived: The Xia family, of course, from the east side of the village, and Xia Feng's one aunt who lived in the middle part of the village, and the cousins from west side of the village, and the uncle from Nangou. Finally, he greeted the couple's classmates from Xishanwan.

He invited everyone to raise their glasses to congratulate their old school principal, and also to wish the new couple many years of happiness together.

Shangshan said: "Are all the glasses raised?"

Someone called from across the room: "My arm's tired already, you talked too much."

Shangshan said: "Then let's drink! Bottoms up!" Everyone lifted their glass and drank. "Now, don't sit down too fast. Let's refill those glasses. Let's have our Party secretary Qin say a few words!"

Qin An stood, protesting the invitation. He looked over at Xia Junting: "Junting, you should be the one to speak, I think."

Xia Junting said: “No, no, I’m family. You should speak first.”

Qin An raised his glass and spoke to the banquet crowd: “I’m not very good at this.” He paused. “Well, let me just say, to this new couple, one word: very good!”

From another table someone called: “That’s two words!” Qin An glared and then he laughed and sat down. Everyone drained their glasses and sat down.

During the banquet, the guests surprised Xia Tianzhi by smearing rouge on his face. He said that the tradition was to play pranks on the bride and groom, but they said they knew that and wanted to get the father of the groom instead.

Then they said Xia Tianzhi had to perform for them. He said: “What do you want me to do?” He looked around and then called for Fourth Auntie to bring his opera masks.

Fourth Auntie sighed: “They’ve all seen those!”

Xia Tianzhi said: “Bring them!” From a big cupboard, Fourth Auntie began pulling ladles painted with opera masks. The ladles had been painted with faces masked and made up in the style of Shaanxi opera. I knew Xia Tianzhi painted opera masks but I didn’t know he also did them on ladles. Guests began to crowd around the pile of ladles on the table.

A few picked up the ladles. Some of them even put them in their pockets and said they wanted to take them home with them.

When he saw that Xia Yu made to stop them but his father said: “No, no, if they like them, let them keep them.” So the guests chose their favorite pieces and soon enough the ladles were all gone.

His face shining, Xia Tianzhi said: “This is a banquet. I want everyone to enjoy themselves.” He went back to his bedroom and returned with a large radio. He put it on a table and fiddled with it for a while before turning up the volume. There was a broadcast of a Shaanxi opera performance.

When I heard the music I knew it was *Peach Blossom Fan*. A strange feeling came over me. It was like the sudden gust of wind, earlier, that had lifted me off my feet. I began to sing:

Before my eyes, buildings rise
Before my eyes, you welcome our guests
Before my eyes, buildings fall

I heard the guests shouting: “This guy is crazy.”

Shangshan put his hand on my shoulder and steered me out towards the courtyard. He said: “Yinsheng! You’ve got a voice like a gong and can’t sing for crap!”

He put a bowl of rice in my hands. From a table, he took a pair of chopsticks and heaped my bowl full of rice and even some meat, too.

Then he said: "Sit over there by the flowerbed and eat your heart out. If the spirit moves you again do us all a favor and let me fill your bowl instead."

He turned back to the guests: "If you want a song, I'll sing!"

The guests chanted: "Sing! Sing!" And then Shangshan really did sing:

*The king's throne is backwards, oh oh no!
Out sticks his stomach, ho ho ho
A step forward, a step back, just don't go
His great uncle's his uncle, don't you know?*

Just then a fly came and landed on his nose. He batted the fly away and stopped singing.

The opera kept playing on the radio. The mute boy led a dog into the courtyard. When the dog—his name was Laiyun—heard the music he stopped all of a sudden and let out a high, sad whine.

The dog's whine was in perfect harmony with the voice of the singer. All the guests were dumbstruck: they had never seen a dog sing opera before. One of them said: "Shangshan! That dog sings

better than you.”

The dog howled along with the radio until the mute boy brought him a pork bone from the table.

But Laiyun wasn't interested in the bone, he just looked at me. I looked back at him and said: “Laiyun! Laiyun!”

He came over and lay by my feet. I knew that Laiyun had been an opera singer in his last life. I didn't want to say anything, though. That was between me and Laiyun.

Zhao Hongsheng and Xia Feng were talking over by the crepeflower tree next to the flower bed. They'd been classmates in primary school.

Xia Feng said: “...that's the thing with my father. Everything has to be about Shaanxi opera.”

Xia Feng gestured at the radio. Zhao Hongsheng smiled: “Your father loves opera. I was thinking about how perfect is it, Bai Xue marrying into your family. She loves opera as much as your father. Xia Tianzhi deserves a daughter-in-law like her.”

Xia Feng sighed: “Personally, I can't stand it.”

“Can't stand what?”

“Shaanxi opera.”

Zhao Hongsheng said: “If you don’t love opera, then what about Bai Xue—”

Xia Feng cut him off: “I’ve got other things in mind for her. She won’t be singing opera.”

I bit down on a grain of sand and spit a mouthful of rice onto the ground.

Qin An joined the two men, then, asking Xia Feng if Xinsheng had arrived yet.

Xia Feng said: “I haven’t seen him.”

Qin An called over Xia Tianzhi, who walked over with his copper pipe.

I guessed that they were talking about gifts for the opera troupe because I heard Qin An say: “...five cartons of cigarettes, ten *jin* of eggs for each person, and a bag of apples, that shouldn’t be too hard to take care, should it?” Xia Tianzhi took a long drag from his pipe. He called over Bai Xue. She walked across the courtyard.

She was standing close enough to me that I could smell her perfume. I was close enough to her that I could see a little piece of fluff on her pants leg. If I wanted to, I could have reached out to

brush it off.

Bai Xue said: “Just make sure to give Wang Laoshi a red sash, she gets one of those wherever she goes, since she’s famous.”

Qin An said: “I’ll have to talk it over with Junting.” Junting was called over and they repeated everything for him. He said: “We invited the opera troupe so of course we should take care of it!”

Qin An looked over at me and I pretended to be eating. Qin An said, in a low voice: “But the performance was to celebrate Xia Feng and Bai Xue’s marriage.”

Junting said: “So what? Everyone enjoyed the performance. If it wasn’t for Xia Feng’s marriage, do you think we could even get them to come? Farmers can count on a harvest every season, but men like Xia Feng only appear once in a hundred years. He’s Qingfengjie’s business card!”

Getting into the spirit now, Junting continued, “I’ll make an announcement: If anyone of Xia Feng’s caliber comes along in the future, the village government will bring a basket of red envelopes to their wedding *and* their funeral. We don’t have anything to hide, do we?”

Xia Tianzhi started to speak: “I—”

Qin An cut him off: “Junting is absolutely right. The thousand

yuan to book the theater, plus a red sash, and the eggs and the apples—we'll get Xinsheng to look after those and have him just add it on to his fee for the theater." Xia Yu was sent to find Xinsheng.

Xia Feng whistled and Laiyun came to his side. As he walked toward the gate of the courtyard, he looked back at me: "Hey, Yinsheng. Come on, let's go."

I looked over at Bai Xue. She was going from table to table, offering toasts. I said: "I'm not going." Xia Feng scowled, grabbed a pack of cigarettes off a table, and left.

The chickens were dozing. The day was not yet dark. The sun shone red like firelight through curdled clouds. I was in the yard, using a stick to beat the dust out of my bedsheets. Lai Shun looked over the fence. He said: "There's an opera tonight and that's a lucky sky! You sure don't see that every day."

I said: "I don't know what's so lucky about it. You're still bald and the sky has a fever."

Lai Shun said: "You've got a fever!"

I felt like I had fever. When I got back from the banquet I'd fallen asleep. I slept for a while and then I woke up and my whole body was burning hot. I was beating the bedsheets to see if I'd burned any holes in them. It didn't look like it—all that I turned up were

some bedbugs.

I looked out over the yard. A white cat passed from the shade of a tree into the sunlight and his fur was stained pale red by the setting sun. The cat walked along the side of the house and scraped himself along the old stove, powdering his fur dark grey with soot.

Lai Shun followed the cat out of the yard. He was headed for the opera theater. I wasn't ready to go yet. I wanted to hear the sound of the trumpets and drums that would mark the beginning of the show. I scooped up a ladle of pickle juice but before I'd even finished it the sound of the drums thundered down the alley.

Chapter 3

When I got to the opera theater it seemed like everyone in the village was already there. The women and children that had seats were trying to keep sitting but the late arrivals crowded in all around them until they ended up standing on the benches. Their feet were planted firm but the bodies of the standing people swayed back and forth. I thought they looked like a field of wheat, swept by the wind in midsummer.

Kids began to climb the walls around the edge of the theater grounds and then a few boosted each other up to the stage itself. Some of the troupe tried to shoo the kids from the stage but they climbed back again.

I heard a voice call from the crowd: “Yinsheng! Get Yinsheng over here to deal with the kids.”

I went over to the stage and began pulling the kids down one by one. I heard another voice from the crowd, maybe more than one, calling me crazy. They said: “Are you trying to kill them?”

But I didn’t mind. I knew I was the only one that could restore order.

I left the front of the stage and saw Wencheng and a few of his friends slip around the back of the theater. I followed them and saw them lying on the floor looking through the gap under the

door that led to the dressing room for the performers.

When they left, I went over to take a look. I was hoping to see Bai Xue but she wasn't there and the only person visible was the actor from yesterday, who was putting on makeup.

That afternoon, Xia Qingyu and the actor had been sitting together, playing mahjongg. Qingyu had offered him a cigarette. The actor said he couldn't smoke because he needed to protect his voice.

Qingyu asked: "What are you going to sing?" The actor said: "Guess."

Qingyu said: "The jing role." That would make sense, a strong male role, like Judge Bao or a warrior. The actor said: "Nope."

Qingyu asked if he would be playing the sheng role, the male lead, usually a scholar or official. This was another perfect role for a seasoned male performer. The actor said: "No."

Qingyu said: "The chou role?" That was the comedic role, the clown. The actor said no again.

Qingyu was getting annoyed and so he said: "Are you playing the Mountain God of Wei?" The actor said: "You were getting close."

Qingyu said: "Oh! The dan role! The female role!" I almost

laughed out loud when I heard that an old man was going to play the part of the young woman in the play. That's when he that I was watching him so he stood and leaned against the door.

I was tired of watching, anyways so I left the back of the theater and walked along the front of the stage where everything had already gone back to mayhem again.

I went to the haystack. The stars were starting to appear, winking in and out but the number of stars never seemed to be the same. I laid back against the straw. That was when I heard voices from the other side of the haystack: "Did you see the crowd?"

"The village eats this kind of thing up. Opera is a rural art."

"Come on, don't talk like that. If anyone overhears they'll give you an earful."

"If you go to see a big concert in the capital, you'll see how pathetic these little village opera shows are."

"It wasn't always like that. Wang Caiwa, back in the day.... When she performed Hanging Pictures, everyone saw it. They even had a saying: I'd rather see Caiwa's Hanging Pictures than be the leader of the whole the Republic of China."

"But that was back in the 1920s!"

“Well, we have Wang Laoshi now. She’s made a name for herself with Picking Up the Jade Bracelet. She gets celebrated wherever she goes for that role.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I’m serious.”

“—go backstage and try and tell her to perform it then!”

“No way! There are too many people running around as it is. I’m going to find Hongsheng.”

I knew right away that it was Bai Xue and Xia Feng. I heard their voices coming around the haystack. I shrank back into the shadows. I didn’t want them to see me. They seemed to have finished their conversation. Xia Feng was going one way and Bai Xue was going the other way, toward the theater.

I watched Bai Xue’s legs. Her legs were straight. Her legs were so straight that it looked like she didn’t have knees.

Bai Xue, Bai Xue, if you could ever love me, sneeze to give me a sign! But she kept walking.

Back on the stage the cymbals crashed for what seemed like half an hour. Two people parted the heavy red curtains and the performance began.

Members of the troupe took the stage singing folk songs and excerpts from operas. They didn't wear makeup or elaborate costumes. The curtain pullers introduced the performers as being this famous opera singer or that famous opera singer when they came on stage, but nobody recognized any of them, so they didn't clap and just shouted about how fat or skinny they were, or who had big eyes who had a long face like a horse.

The program continued. An actor playing the role of an old man flipped across the stage acrobatically and his false beard fell off. The crowd booed him and someone said: "We want to see the stars!"

Wang Laoshi followed him. The actress who had made her name in the elaborate makeup of Picking Up the Jade Bracelet took the stage without makeup and wearing a simple dress. She was fat and her legs looked very short. She performed a few excerpts from Shaanxi operas.

The crowd started getting mad and Sanxue got up on the stone roller and shouted: "You're fucking kidding me!" After that the crowd cheered and Wang Laoshi stopped singing. She tried to storm off stage but the curtain pullers blocked her way and tried to get the audience to clap for her. They laughed instead.

Then someone shouted that she should perform Picking Up the Jade Bracelet. All the shouting had gotten me riled up, so I started

running toward the stage.

It seemed like everybody had the same idea all at once, because a little kids started crying and adults started cursing and three different shoes hit me in the head.

I tossed them back shouting: “Fuck your mother’s cunt!”

Qin An cut through the crowd and grabbed me. He said: “Yinsheng! Control them!” Then he jumped up onto the stage and shouted at the audience, who ignored him. He came back down from the stage and said: “Where is Junting? He didn’t come?”

I said: “Junting went up to the reservoir after dinner. He didn’t tell you he was going?”

The opera troupe’s director came down from the stage. Qin An’s forehead got all twisted up the way it did when he was worried and said: “This is getting out of hand. I think we need to get Tianyi.”

The troupe’s director said: “Who’s that?”

I said: “He’s the old village head.”

Qin An said: “Yinsheng, you lead the way. Find Uncle Tianyi. Bring the director with you to make sure he comes.”

I led the director over to the east side of town. There was the sound of a dog barking somewhere. A car passed on highway 312. The car's headlights lit up the wall across the way.

I said: "Did you see that?" The director said: "What?" In the instant the car's headlights had lit up the wall, I had seen Xia Leiqing's daughter, Cui Cui, and Chen Xing. Cui Cui and Chen Xing were wrapped up in each other, their legs twisted together. I couldn't see their hands but I shouted into the darkness: "I see how it is, making out is better than watching opera, huh?"

The director said: "Mind your own business. We've got to hurry if we're going to save my actors!"

But I didn't move. I picked up a clod of mud and threw it their direction. There weren't any headlights from the highway but I heard them running away in the dark.

I led the director on, down a winding alley. The director looked at me and asked me how the old village head could live in a creepy place like this.

I said: "Sure, it's nothing special to look at. But it's a good old cave."

The director looked even more confused. I took a deep breath and said: "It's the middle of the night but if you go up Sleeping Ox Hill during the day, you can see the whole village. From East

Street to West Street it's shaped like a scorpion. Middle Alley makes one of the claws, and West Street the other claw. But the old village head's home is at the tip of the scorpion's tail, on East Street, where the poor people have always lived. West Street is where the landlords lived, and the richest ones were always the Bai family.

“But the Bai family had two sons that got into an argument about something. The younger of the two moved to East Street, but he didn't have any kids, so after their parents died the older brother took over his house on East Street. That was Bai Xue's grandfather. He ended up becoming the village head.

“When Liberation came, Xia Tianyi was put in charge of land reform. He wanted to have Bai Xue's grandfather declared a landlord. That would have been that for the whole clan. But the county government sent down a guy that ended up being a distant relation of the Bai family. As soon as the meeting started he passed them a note to let them know. They gave up their house on East Street so that he could have them declared middle peasants.

“The Bai's house on East Street ended up going to Xia Tianyi's family, of course. There were four sons in that family. Their father had used the character tian, heaven, in all of their names. He named the sons: Tianren, heavenly benevolence; Tianyi, heavenly righteousness; Tianli, heavenly ceremony; and Tianzhi, heavenly wisdom.

“The four brothers lived together in the East Street house for ten years. After that, they split up and built their own homes. As the eldest, Xia Tianren was the first to move away. He went to North Alley. Xia Tianren was Junting’s father. He was something fierce, but he died young. He wasn’t even sixty when he dropped dead. The third brother, Xia Tianli moved to the very tip of the claw in Middle Alley after working as a clerk in Tianzhu village, which is about fifty li away from here. He’s been retired for a couple of years now.

“The second brother, Xia Tianyi stayed on East Street at the tip of the scorpion’s tail. He and Zhu Qing had five sons. The first four, he used the character qing in their names, celebration. The first four sons were named Qingjin (‘celebrate gold’), Qingyu (‘celebrate jade’), Qingman (‘celebrate fullness’) and Qingtang (‘celebrate the home’)—from the saying “May gold and jade fill your house!”

“When Zhu Qing was pregnant with their fifth child, Xia Tianyi decided he wanted a daughter. But when the child was born, it turned out to be another boy. Not only that but he was ugly Xia Tianyi called him “Xiaxia,” or ‘no eyes.’

“The five sons eventually all moved out and built their own homes, but Xia Tianyi stayed where he was at the very the end of East Street.” That was all I was going to say about that. Even if I tried to explain, the director wouldn’t understand.

The director said: “So, the old village head is Xia Feng’s uncle?”

I said: “Hey, you’re pretty sharp. That’s right!” The director said: “But Xia Feng’s house is fancier than the old village head’s, isn’t it?”

I pulled the director along, ducking under a willow beside the pond. I was about to say: “Obviously, because that house used to belong to the Bai family, too!” Right then, though, Zhu Qing walked over.

She pulled hard on a cigarette and wobbled on bony legs like a stork. She squinted at me and I said: “Auntie Zhu Qing, is Uncle Tianyi at home?”

Zhu Qing said: “He’s drunk and probably asleep.” I shook the iron bell above the door. From inside the courtyard, I heard Laiyun barking.

I said: “It’s me, Laiyun.” Laiyun barked. I said: “I’m looking for Uncle Tianyi.” Laiyun growled.

I said: “Is Uncle Tianyi sleeping? You gotta get him up. There’s going to be trouble’.”

I heard a voice from inside: “Who’s that out there?”

I said: “Uncle Tianyi, it’s me—it’s Yinsheng! Open the door.”

The door creaked open.

Laiyun had slid the bolt open with his teeth. Xia Tianyi was standing behind him. He was a big man, whose frame filled the doorway. With the lights of the house blazing behind him, he looked even more intimidating than usual since you couldn't see his face.

The director bustled forward. He fumbled with his pack of cigarettes and tried to offer one to Xia Tianyi, who waved him off. Xia Tianyi said: "What do you want?"

The director told him about the audience at the theater, how the performance had been disrupted; he was worried there might be a riot.

Xia Tianyi said: "That's it? Where's Qin An?"

I said: "That soft-boiled egg Qin An couldn't do anything. You know how he is!"

Xia Tianyi said: "That motherfucker." He walked toward the door then stopped and shouted: "Hey, you! Bring me my jacket. And my glasses, too."

Xia Tianyi never called his wife anything other than 'hey you.' Even though Zhu Qing was blind after a moment she appeared with the glasses and the jacket.

His glasses were big ovals of tinted quartz. Rather than put his arms through the sleeves he draped the jacket over his shoulders.

I told Xia Tianyi that he looked like a general. He ignored me but when walked out the door he said: “Bullshit.”

Back at the theater the audience was milling around like a hot bowl of congee, throwing things onto the stage. Qin An was pulling two kids apart who had gotten into a fight. He was sweating.

One of the kids said: “Fuck your mother.” The other kid said: “Yu-yu, Zhang Yu.” That was the name of the kid’s father. When the kid heard his father’s name, he started to cry.

As Qin An pushed them off the stage, he said: “Who cries when they hear their own father’s name? Look at Mao Zedong. Everyone says his name.”

Everyone laughed except for Qin An. The stage lights lit up his sweaty face. Qin An had the actors bow for the audience but below the stage everything was still chaos. He tried to speak but nobody was listening to him.

Xia Tianyi climbed the stairs at the side of the stage, his jacket still draped over his shoulders. He held his hands behind his back.

I shouted: “The old village head is here!” As soon as Xia Tianyi walked into the center of the stage everyone fell silent.

Xia Tianyi said: “When they told me they wanted to invite an opera troupe I said no. The harvest isn’t in, and it’s not New Years, so why hold a performance? But when I asked what everyone thought, they all said you wanted one. And now that you’ve got what you want you won’t let them perform. What’s gotten into you?”

Whap!

The stage lights had attracted a cloud of mosquitos. One of the insects had landed on Xia Tianyi’s cheekbone and he slapped it.

Xia Tianyi continued: “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Qingfengjie lose face like this! If you don’t want to see opera, go home, and go to bed. If you want to watch the performance, shut up and be respectful.”

He turned his back to the audience to look at the director, and I could the skin on his neck was full of creases and folds. He shouted at the director: “Perform!”

This time the performance began to a respectful audience.

Xia Tianyi left the theater, looking proud of himself. I followed him.

“Uncle Tianyi, Uncle Tianyi, Uncle Tianyi, you look like you could kill someone!” He waved a hand dismissively.

I said: “Qin An always brags that he went to school longer than anyone else around here, so he’s an intellectual! Intellectuals can eat shit, though! To run a village, you have to be tough.” Tianyi just waved me away again.

I followed Tianyi for a while and then turned back. If he was going to give me the cold shoulder then fine, I didn’t care.

Back at the theater I snuck up behind Wu Lin and punched him in the neck. He was so scared he started hiccupping. I could tell he wanted to curse but between his stammer and the hiccups, he couldn’t get a single word out.

The performance continued until near midnight. After everyone left, I helped the mute and Xia Xi Xia and his brother Xia Yu carry the opera troupe’s costumes and props to their father’s house on East Street.

When we went back to the theater to pick up the last trunk, I saw Han Shuzheng was still there, long after the audience had left. I waved to him but he didn’t seem to notice.

He was walking back and forth. I knew he was looking for things left behind by the audience so I joked: “You won’t find any wallets

but there's a few bricks over by that wall, if you want them.”

He didn't say anything but then he really did take the bricks and leave.

The performers met at Xia Tianzhi's home after the performance for pickled noodles. Most of them wanted to go back to the city that night but Xia Tianzhi tried to get them to stay. He finally gave up and asked Xia Yu to go to ask Xia Leiqing to drive them back home.

Xia Yuqing ran a transportation company, driving a bus between the county seat and the provincial capital. He drove that route every day and came back every night to the village.

Xia Yu went to get Leiqing but he ran into his wife, Meihua, on the way over to their house in Middle Alley. She didn't want her husband driving anyone that night. She said: “Leiqing got back late tonight and didn't even get to toast your family at the wedding. And now you want him to take people into town in the middle of the night?”

Xia Yu didn't know what to say so he went back to Xia Tianzhi and told him what she had said. Xia Tianzhi said: “I didn't tell you to talk to his wife. Get him over here.”

Bai Xue decided to go instead. She knocked on the door. Xia Tianli, Leiqing's father, heard the noise from his bedroom and

came to the window. He asked who was there. Bai Xue called out that it was her.

Xia Tianli yelled for his son to wake up. Meihua came to the door. She said: “Oh, Bai Xue, it’s you! I went to opera tonight just to watch you perform. I can’t believe you didn’t sing!”

Bai Xue said, modestly: “Oh, I’m just an amateur. Especially here in the village, it wouldn’t be right to get up on stage. Is your husband awake?”

Meihua said: “He’s asleep, but I can get him up for you!”

Bai Xue said: “If it’s no trouble, we wanted to ask him to drive the theater group back.”

Meihua said: “Well, trouble or not, if he doesn’t do it, who else will? The Xia family, we’re always there for each other, whether it’s a wedding or a funeral, Leiqing is always there to take them there and take them back after.”

After that she called for Leiqing to take the opera troupe into town. There were three men and two women from the opera troupe staying behind.

The men went off to play mahjongg with Xia Yu at a local official’s house while the women planned to stay at Bai Xue’s mother’s house on West Street.

Bai Xue told her mother-in-law that she wouldn't be back to their home that night. Bai Xue's mother-in-law wasn't happy and clucked her tongue. Bai Xue laughed and called for Xia Feng to take the women from the opera troupe to Bai Xue's mother's house.

After the arrangements were made, I should have gone home. Instead, I stayed at Xia Tianzhi's house, watching Xia Tianzhi's wife, Sishen, sitting under a lamp, counting the money given to the family by guests of their banquet.

I got up to leave but just then Shu Zhen showed up. She said she was there to see Bai Xue. She wanted Bai Xue's opinion on something: her son Guangli had a good voice and was always singing with Chen Xing. She was debating buying a tape recorder for him. She wanted Bai Xue to hear her son sing so that she could tell her if it was worth the investment.

Sishen said: "Oh, just get one. We don't need to hear him sing at this time of night. It's just a radio, how much can it cost?"

Shu Zhen said: "No, this is a tape recorder, not a radio."

Xia Tianzhi's wife said: "Oh, is that more expensive?" Shu Zhen said it was like comparing a wristwatch to a clock.

Xia Tianzhi's wife licked her thumb and went back to counting bills. Shu Zhen said: "Did you turn a profit?"

Xia Tianzhi's wife said: "What do you mean, turn a profit?" Shu Zhen forced a smile.

Guangli got distracted and started to wander around the room. Shu Zhen scolded him. In a low voice, Shu Zhen asked Bai Xue: "What's your cut?"

Bai Xue said: "I don't know." Shu Zhen said: "All the gifts, it's probably just stuff that they gave to people before. But the money, well, there were a lot of guests. You should get a portion."

Bai Xue said: "Oh, don't be silly."

Shu Zhen said: "Xia Feng isn't their only son, you know. They have Xia Yu, too. Are they going to give it to Xia Yu? Even if they don't give you anything else, you should at least get to keep the money from your classmates and family!"

The two women were whispering but Xia Tianzhi's wife heard enough of the conversation to get the gist. She shouted: "Bai Xue, can you go check the chicken coop? Make sure the door is closed. And watch out for weasels."

Bai Xue stood and went to go. She said: "What weasels?"

In an even lower whisper, Shu Zhen said: "I don't think she wants me here." She stood to leave.

Xia Tianzhi's wife said: "Oh, Shu Zhen, you're leaving already?" She took some of the bills and tried to hand them to Bai Xue but Bai Xue wouldn't take them, saying it wasn't right.

Shu Zhen's face turned red. She hurried out, scolding Guangli the whole way.

Chapter 4

Years breeze past and the months fly by, but some days just seem to go on forever.

The day after the banquet, Xia Tianzhi was the first to wake up. That was normal enough. For the last few years, no matter what time Xia Tianzhi went to bed, he always woke up at the same time—5 A.M. on the dot. After he woke up, he'd go to the south side of the village and walk along the Zhou river dike.

Marching back toward East Street, he liked to rattle the doors of people in the village and shout: "Wake up! Out of bed!"

When he got home that morning, he opened all of the doors and windows of the house. He boiled water for tea. He lit his copper pipe. He sipped tea and smoked his pipe while admiring the calligraphy and paintings hanging on the walls of his courtyard until the figures in the paintings seemed like they were just about ready to climb down off the walls.

Bai Xue was the next one up. Since she'd just married into the family, it wouldn't be right for her to stay in bed. She swept the courtyard and then went to the spring to fetch water. On her way back from the spring, she saw Shangshan. He was singing an opera set to a folk tune, *Zhang Lian Sells Cloth*:

Why oh why

*Did you go and sell our big iron pot?
I put it on to boil, but the water never got hot!*

Bai Xue put down her carrying pole, laughing. When Shangshan saw Bai Xue he stopped singing.

Bai Xue said: “What are you doing up so early, Shangshan?”

Shangshan said: “That bastard Xia Tianzhi wouldn’t let me sleep.”

Bai Xue laughed again.

Shangshan said: “But you’re quite the new daughter-in-law aren’t you? Out dumping your new parents’ chamber pot!”

Bai Xue said: “Hah, they wish.”

Shangshan said: “Look at you, smashing the traditions!”

When Bai Xue got back, Xia Tianzhi had already finished his first pot of tea. He dumped the tea leaves in the flower bed and asked Bai Xue why Xia Feng wasn’t up yet.

Before she could answer, he said: “Just look at the time! Our guests from the opera troupe are waiting for him over at town hall on West Street!”

When Bai Xue heard that, she rushed over to their room to wake up her husband.

The opera troupe who had decided to stay overnight in Qingjiefeng had already been fetched by Xia Feng and were just finishing lunch when Liu Xinsheng came to the door.

Xia Tianzhi wanted to know if he'd brought the gifts, but before he could ask Xinsheng started making a fuss about not having been invited to the banquet.

Sishen coughed: "It was just relatives. We didn't invite anyone from West Street or Center Street."

Xinsheng said: "I thought you'd forgotten about me!"

Sishen said: "How could we forget about you? Didn't we ask you to take care of the gifts for the opera troupe? You never showed up!"

Xinsheng said: "I was in Xishangwan collecting eggs!"

Xinsheng sent Xia Yu to pick up the apples at the orchard, before turning to the music director of the opera troupe to show him a drum score he'd composed.

Xinsheng was a farmer but he wasn't very good at it. His real talent was for the arts. I'd always thought he would have ended up

like Xia Feng, if he'd had the chance to move to the city.

Xinsheng was like a golden bell that had gotten buried in the mud where it would never make a sound. Like his late father, Shuixing, Xinsheng could only read a couple of characters. But that didn't stop him from memorizing whole operas word for word, from sheng to jing to chou to dan. He'd played Kuche music and even performed the dan role in some of the local opera productions.

Then, while celebrating the New Year one year, he'd been too slow with a firecracker and blown the first two fingers off his right hand. No longer able to execute the finger patterns of the female opera roles, he turned his attention to the percussion instruments that accompanied the performances.

After that whenever the village held festivals like shehuo, Xinsheng would supply the drums and woodblocks.

The music director was in the middle of taking a drag from Xia Tianzhi's water pipe when Xinsheng came over and addressed him as shifu. Pulling out a rolled up piece of paper from his pocket, Xinsheng asked him what he thought. When he unrolled it, the director saw it was filled with cramped musical notation.

The music director said: "Hum it for me."

Liu Xinsheng really threw himself into the performance. He

hummed until he was blue in the face, clicking his tongue and taking off his jacket to beat his own belly. Everyone in the courtyard wanted to laugh but managed to hold back.

When Liu Xinsheng finished, the musician said: “It’s amazing, really. If you go to the city, you’ll see there are professors and politicians that, deep down, are really farmers. In the village, there are farmers that are actually artists!”

When Zhao Hongsheng later told me what the music director had said, I said I agreed one hundred percent.

I said: “Just look at Xia Feng! He might look sophisticated but actually he’s a bum. That’s right. He’s corrupt!”

Hongsheng said: “You just hate him because he married Bai Xue.”

I said: “I don’t care that they got married, but everybody acts like he’s her knight in shining armor!”

Hongsheng said: “Man, you’ve got a mouth on you, don’t you? Go find your own girl to save already.”

I said: “Better to go naked than wear rags! It’s a fur coat or nothing for me.”

Hongsheng said: “Well I guess that’s the end of your family line then.”

I said: “Ah, what the hell the do I want sons and grandsons for? They’d all be farmers. Like our lives aren’t hard enough! You want my sons to deal with this shit, too? I’d rather plant a tree—what’s a tree got to worry about?”

Hongsheng said: “You’re starting to sound crazy again.”

That morning, while Liu Xincheng was drumming on his abdomen, I was out for a walk. The men that had been sent to collect the apples and other items for the opera troupe were returning to Xia Tianzhi’s home with baskets of apples—not to mention some shocking news from the orchard. It turns out that Xincheng had left half of the orchard fallow that year, not watering it that season. Qingfengjie was a town of gossips and even an egg missing from under a hen started people gossiping.

The news of Xincheng giving up on half the orchard had everyone furious. For a few years, Xincheng had made a fortune selling apples, but the year before, there was an early frost. When the orchard was sucked dry by drought this year, Xincheng figured he’d cut his losses and only kept half the trees.

The orchard was collectively owned, did Xincheng think he could just do what he wanted?

Someone said: “What if there’s a fire?”

But everybody else just said fuck Xincheng's mother and fuck his father, until one of them took an apple and started eating it. When everyone saw that they knew it was eat or miss out. Pretty soon the apples they'd collected were all gone.

Liu Xincheng had already smacked his belly scarlet by the time he noticed a kid walk by snacking on an apple. Xincheng said: "Where'd you get that apple from?"

The kid answered: "Everyone's eating apples out there."

Xincheng dashed for the door where he saw it was the ones he'd packed himself—they'd already cleaned out two boxes worth. Just then, Li Sanwa's wife was carrying off a half-dozen in her apron and when Xincheng grabbed for the apples, she made a dash for it, throwing one of the apples to her kid. Xincheng caught hold of her apron, pulled her to the ground.

When they saw that, someone in the crowd said: "Oh, you're going to beat people up now?"

Xincheng said: "Those are for the opera troupe. Why the hell is she eating them?"

The same person said: "That orchard belongs to Qingfengjie. If you can eat them, why can't we?"

Xincheng said: "I signed on to look after the orchard and I paid

the village so they're my apples!"

The same person said: "You sure you paid?"

Liu Xinsheng said: "I paid."

The same person said: "How much?"

"I paid half."

"What about the other half?"

"I'm only harvesting from half the orchard."

The two went back and forth for a while before I butted in:
"Xinsheng, everyone knows you're looking after the orchard, so why are you trying to get out of paying half the fees?"

Xinsheng said: "So what?" He tried to grab my arm but his missing fingers made it easy to shake him off.

I said: "When there's a bumper crop, you're there, but when the pickings are slim, you're nowhere to be found. Who do you think you are, our grandpa?"

He glared at me and said: "I'm not talking to you, you're nuts."

I reached into one of the boxes and picked out two apples. I took a

bite from one and tossed the other on the ground.

Sanxue, who had been pacing at the edge of the crowd, smoking a cigarette, chose this moment to butt into the conversation: “So, you’re saying you changed the contract you had with the village? Let’s have a look at that contract.”

Liu Xinsheng barked back, spittle collecting at the corners of his mouth: “You want to see it, I’ll show it to you!”

He shouted for Xia Yu to take the eggs and what was left of the apples into the courtyard of the Xia house and then stormed off toward the orchard.

When Xia Tianzhi saw how few apples were left over, along with the eggs he was livid. After dividing everything up into smaller boxes there was hardly anything worth giving.

The music director came over and said: “Listen, forget about everybody who went home yesterday. If you only give eggs to those of us who are still in the village, you have just enough to give everyone two boxes!”

Xia Tianzhi said: “No, no. I can’t do that. Everyone worked so hard on the performance!”

Xia Tianzhi went into the bedroom to consult with his wife. He decided that the quilts that they had received as gifts would be redistributed to the remaining members of the troupe.

His wife said: “Why are you getting involved here? The village was responsible for putting on the performance so the village should pay for. Besides, do you have any idea what these quilts are worth?”

Xia Tianzhi said: “You know they only put on that performance for us. And anyways, what do we need so many quilts for? We might as well live large as long as we’re alive—don’t be so stingy!”

His wife said: “Whatever you decide, that’s fine.”

He took a half dozen quilts and went out into the courtyard, saying: “I liked it better when they were putting rouge on my face!”

At first the members of the troupe wouldn’t take them of course, but in the end they accepted them before getting into the trailer pulled by Ding Bacao’s walking tractor.

The tractor left the courtyard and went down the road, turning onto Route 312. I watched them go with my own eyes. I was feeling depressed because I knew that with the opera troupe gone, I didn’t have an excuse to go to Xia Tianzhi’s home anymore. I

didn't even want to talk to Sanxue and his group.

When I turned to go, Sanxue said: "Xinsheng isn't back yet. Where are you going?"

I said: "The hell do I care what he does with the orchard?"

Sanxue said: "Back in the war years, you'd be a fucking deserter."

I said: "Back then, I'd be carrying a rifle, going door to door, looking for my woman!"

After I spoke, I saw a man dragging a sheep out of the alley. Xia Tianli appeared behind the man, shouting for him to stop.

Xia Tianli said: "You're being unfair."

The man leading the sheep said: "I already paid three hundred yuan, like we agreed."

Xia Tianli said: "You're right, the sheep is three hundred. But the rope you're leading him with, that's a good hemp rope. Not even counting the leather loop around his neck, I paid five yuan for it. Let's settle on eight yuan and call it even."

The man leading the sheep said: "That's not going to work for me."

Xia Tianli said: “Well, that’s just the way it is.” He reached for the sheep’s lead.

The man leading the sheep said: “Alright, alright. I’ll give you five yuan. But I don’t have it on me right now. Few days later, when I come through Qingfengjie again, you’ll have it.”

Xia Tianli looked over and saw that everyone was watching, laughing at him. He waved me over. Xia Tianli said: “This is Yinsheng. You know him?”

The man leading the sheep said: “Crazy old Yinsheng. Sure, I know him.” He knew me but I sure didn’t recognize him.

Xia Tianli said: “Yinsheng is going to be our witness, right? Make sure I get that money within three days.” The man left, leading the sheep.

Xia Tianli asked me what everyone was doing out on the street. I told him about Liu Xinsheng and the orchard. Xia Tianli turned and walked away, as if he hadn’t heard me.

I called after him: “What’s got into you?”

He said: “I don’t have time to stand around on the corner bullshitting with you guys.”

I said: “Where you going?”

He said: “The market. Got some business.”

I paid attention when he said that. I saw he was carrying a black plastic bag. I said: “What’s the exchange rate right now?”

He turned and walked back to slap me on the cheek.

He said, in a low voice: “What the hell kind of bullshit is that?”

The truth was, it wasn’t bullshit at all. For a while now, Xia Tianli had been in the business of buying and selling silver currency. Nobody else knew about it, but I knew about it. I’d been at the market at Chafangcun and seen him standing at the foot of the village wall with a man. When I caught sight of him, he was chomping down on a silver dollar, testing it.

Xia Tianli clamped a hand over my mouth. He said: “Who else did you tell?”

“Who did I tell what?”

“Huh? Tell me what you told them!”

“I told them Leiqing was kind enough to bring you a sheep. He wanted you to drink milk every morning. And then you went and sold it.”

He laughed and said: "I don't like fancy things. No harm in that." He saw an apple that had fallen in the gutter. He picked it up, brushed it off and put it in the plastic bag.

I stood in the road for a while after Xia Tianli left. I felt deflated, felt like I could still hear the air hissing from me. The two retarded girls from the Center Street Liu family appeared at the archway of their house. They looked up at the sky.

One of the girls said: "Look at the sun."

The other girl said: "That's the moon."

They argued for a while. They stopped a man walking by to ask him.

He said: "I'm not from Qingfengjie. I'm not sure."

I tried to laugh but nothing came out. I turned and walked toward Funiuliang. That was where the village government was undertaking the Return Grain Plots to Forestry plan. The old field was now full of young trees, arranged in careful rows. Each tree was painted with a white stripe of lime around its trunk.

My father's grave was in this field. When I didn't feel right, I

liked to visit my father's grave. That was one of the days I went there. I talked to him.

I told him: "The woman I love has been married off to the Xia family. Why? Why to the Xia family? I can't figure it out. Her name's Bai Xue.

"I understand why she didn't marry me. I could even understand if she was married to someone outside the village, maybe, and she was never around, but now she's married into the Xia family."

My father didn't answer. A wasp busied itself among the brambles on the grave.

I cried out: "Father! Your son is so pitiful!"

And the wasp flew up and stung my forehead. I blocked a nostril and blew snot into my palm and wiped it where the wasp stung me. Then I went around the back of the grave and pissed on the ground.

After I pulled up my pants, Gou Sheng appeared in the field. Gou Sheng had lived a hard life, making his living collecting shit. He was so hard off that I'd heard he didn't even have enough money to buy salt.

Just when I was feeling bad for him, though, the first thing he said was: "Yinsheng, all that grass you just pissed on turned retarded.

Why not take a shit instead?”

So I got mad and said: “Why don’t you go take a shit somewhere?”

He said: “You think you’re such a big deal?”

I said: “You want some shit to pick up? I’ll give you a fresh one.”

He started coming at me with his shovel so I picked up a piss-soaked rock and tossed it at him.

After Xia Tianzhi saw off the opera troupe, he went back to bed and slept until midday. Xia Tianzhi’s wife made lunch and then set about preparing thank you gifts to send to relatives on West Street—cane sugar liquor and bundles of dried noodles.

She called Bai Xue over and asked her how many relatives she wanted to send gifts to. Bai Xue said that there were too many families to visit but she’d stop by the closest relatives at least, so there were at least six families that needed gifts.

There was plenty of cane sugar liquor, but there weren’t enough noodles left, so Sishen divided the five remaining bundles of noodles into six, and re-packaged them in red paper. When Xia Tianzhi woke up he got up and sat on the edge of the kang, watching her wrap the noodles. He asked her if they were still making trouble over on East Street.

Xia Feng said: "It's still going on. Xinsheng went to get the contract and came back with it. Junting and Qin An are there, now, too. Qin An's name is on the contract. When Junting saw the stamp, he lost it. Qin An tried to explain it but he started shaking and couldn't get a complete sentence out."

Xia Tianzhi said: "Give me a light." Xia Feng lit the pipe for his father. Xia Tianzhi sucked in a lungful of smoke.

Xia Feng said: "My man Junting was like a tiger! Who knew he had it in him? Just cause Qin An's stamp was on there doesn't mean he shouldn't stand up for him, you know? But he raked Qin An over the coals, right in front of Sanxue and everyone."

Xia Tianzhi snuffled, exhaled smoke and said: "You've been in the city too long. Issues like this, down in the village, can turn into major things." He trailed off. He turned his head and asked: "What was the sound? Thunder?"

It was thunder. The sound cracked through the big, clear sky and a single cloud rolled in to cover the whole of Tiger Head Cliff down in Nangounao.

Chapter 5

The thunder was like the sound of stone on stone. That whole summer, thunder had rolled down the valley but it hadn't rained once. The people in Qingfengjie had stopped paying attention to the clouds that rolled overhead. When clouds began to pile up against the Tiger Head, though, the whole town came out to look. Having finally been paid some mind, the clouds let a single raindrop fall onto the town, landing in Chen Xing's doorway with an audible thud.

The raindrop sent a cloud of dust into the air. Inside, Chen Liang was sleeping on a bamboo mat. He was still half asleep when he heard Chen Xing shouting that it was raining. When he got to the door he didn't see any signs of rain though, so he spread out his tools in the doorway and got to work repairing a tire, singing to himself as he worked.

Chen Xing was famous for being the first person in Qingfengjie to start singing pop songs. He sounded exactly like the singers on TV and the radio. He was singing a song called "The Wanderer":

*There's a wanderer out there
Missing you, mother dear
Oh the wanderer, far and wide he roams
Always missing you, mother dear
He ain't got no hooooome....*

Whenever the kids in the alley heard Chen Xing start singing, they'd run over to listen. Chen Xing always ignored them, looking off at some distant place down the road.

I was sitting in Ding Bacao's doorway on Center Street, drinking tea. The street was lined with houses set right up against the road. When Ding Bacao came back from the city, he scrubbed himself down with cold water. Ding Bacao wasn't even as tall as me, but he had a big puffed up belly like a toad. I said: "Hey half pint, how'd you get your name?" Ding Bacao said: "What's wrong with my name? My dad came up with it. He wanted me to have a strong name, not some good-for-nothing loser name. He wanted me to be tough enough to look after myself."

He turned and called over to his neighbour Auntie Wang: "Auntie, what are doing still working on a hot day like this? Come and drink some tea with us."

She was working the loom and her clothes were sweated through from front to back.

She looked up and said: "If I had a son like you, Bacao, I'd probably be lying in a chair fanning myself, too. Did you hear the price at the dye-house went up?"

Ding Bacao said: "Yeah, sounds about right."

Auntie Wang said: "The price of everything's going up and up,

seems like.” The shuttle fell from the loom and Auntie Wang bent to pick it up but couldn’t reach it.

I said: ”But Bacao is still as short as ever!”

Just then Wu Lin walked by with a pole across his shoulder, carrying two buckets: ”Tofu! Sweet beans! To-tofu!”

Auntie Wang got up from the loom and reached in her pocket. She fished around in her pockets for a long while before finally pulling out a tattered bill. By then Wu Lin had already walked down the road.

She called after him: ”Hey, dummy. Are you selling tofu or running away from the scene of a crime?”

The day was hot. Tendrils of heat seemed to be snaking up from the ground. Looking east toward the elaborate gate that marked the beginning of East Street, and then west toward its mirror on West Street, where Wu Lin was selling his tofu, the air looked like it was shaking. Things looked as if they were melting.

”Doggie! Doggie! Laiyun!” I called for Laiyun in a loud voice. I knew he would only answer to his real name.

Laiyun heard his name and stopped short. He was busy chasing Saihu, the black dog that lived down by the village administration offices.

Apparently the Xia family had such a good relationship with the village administration and that it extended to canine relations as well—Laiyun and Saihu were the perfect match for each other.

Laiyun barked and nipped at any dog that approached Saihu. Laiyun escorted Saihu to the door of the dye-house, yapping alongside her all the way.

The dye-house had been run by the Bai family on West Street for as long as anybody could remember. They were known for being good at business. Besides for Zhu Qing's hair salon, which had been financed by her inlaws, the Xias, pretty much all of the businesses on Center Street belonged to the Bai Family: from the noodle seller to the blacksmith to the tailor to the stationary shop.

The dye-house used to be quite small, but the fabrics and the patterns and the colors that the dye-house offered had been increasing by the day. Pretty soon the drying racks outside the dye-house had spread all the way to the field in front of Qingfeng Temple.

Walking south down the narrow lane running past the dye-house, you would come to the temple, with the opera theatre on the opposite side of the big muddy field.

When was the Qingfeng Temple built? Nobody knows for sure, but everybody knows that the front hall of the temple is larger

than the one behind it. The eaves of the two buildings are off by about a chi, so whenever it rains, the water collects on the steps between the them and runs off into the gutters to the east and west.

Being the larger of the two, the front hall was divided into four rooms by old wooden folding doors. The doors had gotten so warped that even when they were closed, there was enough of a crack left to slide a hand into.

In the rear chamber, there was a long altar and a bench. If you sat smoking on the bench you could look out the window of the rear chamber and see the large ginkgo tree in the courtyard.

A family of birds used to live in the ginkgo tree, but three years ago, a hawk had come to the tree and attacked the pair of birds that lived there. It was a fearsome battle. The ground below the tree was covered in white and grey feathers. People tried to help out the birds by throwing rocks up at the hawk but nobody could hit it.

The battle lasted for three days and three nights and in the end the male bird was pecked blind and fell from the tree, dead.

The female bird fell out of the tree shortly after. She could still open her eyes but she died a short time later.

The strange thing was the hawk never occupied the nest. He flew

away after killing the husband and wife. Not long after, the village was hit with a sandstorm that lasted seven days and the nest was blown from the tree. Two fledglings were found in the nest, dead and dry.

That was around the time that construction on Route 312 started up. The original plan was for the highway to avoid the village, running from Mount Yijia and along the river, where the embankment could serve dual purpose as roadway and dyke.

This plan meant they wouldn't need to use farmland for building the road. But eventually, it was scrapped and the highway ran across the plateau, ruining the village's *fengshui*.

That turned out to be a serious problem, because once the village's *fengshui* was ruined, Xia Tianyi was forced to step down.

His whole life, Xia Tianyi had been the right hand of the Communist Party in the village—they said punch and he punched. When land reform came the first time, he'd measured out the plots and when the village was organized into communes a couple of years later, he tore out the boundary stones he'd put in. During the Four Cleanups, he stayed in office and he'd weathered the storm of the Cultural Revolution without a scratch.

So when the next wave of reform came with Deng Xiaoping, he was there to divide things again. He set up the brickyard and expanded the apple orchard. Xia Tianyi was the Mao Zedong of

Qingfengjie. He did what he wanted and his word was law. Rumors started going around that they were planning to promote him up the ladder to the next layer of the bureaucracy in the township—Xia Qingjin had already bought his father a bundle of houndstooth cloth, and the tailor on Center Street had received an order for the overcoat for Xia Tianyi was going to wear when he went to his new position in the township government.

But just then, when everything seemed to be going his way, Xia Tianyi got cocky and decided to help the villagers block the construction of the new highway. They set up a roadblock and the workers arriving to build the new road were turned away. When the excavator arrived, he even had a group of old men and old women from the village lay down in the path of the machine.

The young county head came to personally oversee negotiations at the roadblock, telling Xia Tianyi to order the villagers to disperse. Xia Tianyi demanded that the county head apologize.

The county head was furious. He said: "I'm responsible for the nation itself!"

When the public security bureau sent their men to drag off the old people, Xia Tianyi was also dealt with.

After that Route 312 plowed straight through northern tip of Qingfengjie, running along the plateau and cutting Mount Yijia in half, destroying forty mu of farmland and a dozen mu of orchard,

not to mention the partway reclaimed land in Qiligou which had to be abandoned.

Xia Tianyi had had enough. He gave up his position. I knew that he'd actually been trying to send a message to the county government., though—when I went to visit him and he rolled me a smoke on his knee, with the sesame oil tobacco he prepared at home. I waved it off and he asked what I'd heard from the villagers.

I decided to flatter him: "They're saying if you step down, Qingfengjie is doomed."

Xia Tianyi laughed and showed a mouthful of black teeth: "You really know how to kiss ass!"

I said: "No, really! It'll be the end of the village."

Xia Tianyi said: "Well, if it ends, it ends then."

But instead of asking Xia Tianyi to come back, the county government gave the village Party Secretary job to Qin An, an outsider who'd originally been on the public security committee.

Xia Tianyi's oldest nephew, Junting, meanwhile, got tapped to serve as village head. The announcement of his candidacy was made and there were no objections within the allotted five days, so that was that.

The next day, Xia Tianyi got up early and prepared to go out. His wife tried to stop him. She cooked eggs for him. He ate the eggs and prepared to head out.

He said: Get my jacket!" His wife brought his jacket and he said: "No, no, the one Qingjin had made for me!"

His wife said: "What do you want to wear that for? Aren't you worried they'll laugh at you?"

Xia Tianyi said: "It's not like I'm running around behind your back am I?!"

With the houndstooth jacket draped over his shoulders and his smoked-quartz glasses on, he walked out the door with a cigarette in his mouth. When he passed the public announcement board, people called out to him: Village head!

Xia Tianyi went into a restaurant and ordered his favorite: *liang fen*—cold noodles in vinegar and chili sauce. That day, he paid with cash instead of putting it on the government tab.

Xia Tianyi ate his big bowl of *liang fen* with a couple bottles of liquor and ten *jin* of pork ribs.

He said: "I didn't get to finish what I started, but now's the time for the younger generation to bear the burden—and for me to go

home and take a nap!”

Now, where was I? I can be a bit absent-minded.

Ding Bacao said: “Yinsheng, Yinsheng, say something.”

I said: “Xia Tianyi...”

Ding Bacao said: “Call him Uncle!”

I said: “I think Uncle only wore his houndstooth one time, that jacket.”

Ding Bacao said: “We were talking about the dye-house. How come you suddenly jumped to talking about Uncle Tianyi’s jacket?”

I said: “Who said I can’t jump?”

That’s how conversations go, from one topic to another, without rational order.

Ding Bacao ignored me: “We’re not going to get anything done, sitting around here like this. I have to get some money together.”

I didn’t reply so he said again: “How do I start making real money?”

Making real money? This guy, even with money in one pocket, he's thinking of how to fill the other pocket.

He was getting on my nerves, so I said: "Go down to the credit co-op with pantyhose over your head, rob them."

As soon I said it, I knew I shouldn't have. The only reason Ding Bacao had any money now was because he used to work at the credit cooperative. The local bank had opened it in Qingjiefeng a couple of years back and Ding Bacao was one of the first people they hired.

I said: "I guess I should watch my mouth."

Ding Bacao said: "You can start by getting those chives off your teeth."

I rubbed at my teeth and found a shred of green. Looking up, I saw Junting trotting down the alley, glowering.

Ding Bacao said: "Who pissed in his pants?"

Chapter 6

Junting had panted with rage the entire way to the meeting of the Two Committees members. Junting really looked like his late father, Xia Tianren. If it wasn't for the scar over his left eyebrow, the resemblance would be perfect. Junting was much less patient than his father, though—he even moved and talked faster.

One time, I was in the bathroom when he came in. I said: "Village head, are you here to take a piss?" He grunted in acknowledgement.

I said: "I have something to report."

He said: "What's the issue?"

I said: "It's about my father."

He said: "You have to go to Qin An for that."

I said: "Qin An doesn't know the thick and thin of it."

He said: "Alright, let me look into it, when I get the chance. There's three guys waiting outside for me to take care of things for them!"

He put his dick back in his pants, hiked them back up and went out. He was in a hurry. It looked to me like he hadn't even

finished peeing before he pulled up his pants.

Junting arrived at Qingfeng Temple huffing and puffing. A sign on the temple gate read: Two Committee Meeting Office. Someone had used a charcoal cinder to sketch a phallic-looking tortoise.

Junting cursed and used his toe to rub off the sketch and kicked in the door of the temple. Shangshan was sitting in the courtyard of the temple, drinking tea with one of the female committee members.

The woman was Jin Lian. Shangshan and Jin Lian had their shoes off. Their feet were resting on a stone bench. The two sat half in the shade of the ginkgo tree and half in the dappled sunlight coming down through the leaves of the tree, stripes of shade and light spread across them, leaving them looking like a pair of Dalmatians.

That year, there hadn't been enough rain and the tree had produced far fewer nuts than usual. Zhao Hongsheng was under the tree, collecting the leaves that had fallen from the tree, filling a large bag with the leaves to take back to his shop and turn into an herbal medicine.

Junting glared at two committee members on the bench, and Jin Lian hurriedly slipped her shoes back on. Silently fuming, Junting went straight into his office.

Zhao Hongsheng said: "What's Junting upset about?"

Jin Lian said: "It's probably because he saw you collecting the ginkgo leaves! That's what they use for their spending money, you know."

Zhao Hongsheng said: "Ginkgo nuts are only at two mao this year. With the way the trees around here are producing this year, you'd have trouble putting together enough to make it worthwhile."

Jin Lian said: "But they were at five mao last year! Anyways, when there's a big harvest, the leaves aren't worth anything, either—why else would be here every day scooping them up?"

Zhao Hongsheng said: "Is Junting really that petty?"

Zhao Hongsheng continued sweeping up leaves, while looking over at the window looking in on Junting's office.

He said: "I've heard he's always like that, comes in, doesn't say anything until he's at his desk. No matter what the emergency is, you have to be sitting across from him before he'll listen! And he hates it when someone sits in his seat, right?"

Jin Lian look surprised: "Where'd you hear that?"

Zhao Hongsheng said: "Actually, I think it's the right way to go about things. That's preserving the dignity of the position. You don't want to see the manager of the store sweeping up the aisles."

Jin Lin lit up: "Yes, that's absolutely right."

Just then Junting's office window clattered open and he shouted out into the courtyard: "Zhao Hongsheng, you fucking quack!"

Zhao Hongsheng turned crimson. Not daring to defend himself, he bent down and picked up his bag of leaves and hurried out of the courtyard.

Having dispatched Hongsheng, Junting called Shangshan into his office. Shangshan came in and poured a cup of tea for Junting, who didn't drink it—everyone knew Junting sweated water out like a sieve. He told Shangshan to bring in the ledgers. He wanted to see what the village owed and what was owed to the village.

Shangshan said: "What's this about? Are we being audited?"

Junting said: "Everyone around here talks too damn much! I'm the village head. Why shouldn't I know what our accounts look like?"

Shangshan said: "It's simple, thirty-thousand left in the budget, with eighty-thousand owed to the provincial government, eleven-thousand three-hundred, a hundred and thirteen-thousand owed

to the cadres, and twenty-two thousand owed to restaurants.”

Deep furrows appeared on Junting’s forehead. He said: ”Why do we owe our staff so much money?”

Shangshan said: ”That’s been building up over a few years now. When it comes time to pay, the provincial and county governments are first priority. The village cadres have had to pay their own expenses, some out of pocket, but most of them have gone to get loans, in their own names. There’s back subsidies, too, from sixth months to a year’s worth. We owed Yinsheng’s father three months of subsidies when he died. Yinsheng has come by the office to curse me out about it a few times now.”

Junting waved him off and said: ”How much is owed to us altogether?”

Shangshan said: ”We’re still waiting on twenty-thousand in agricultural taxes from West Street, plus eight-thousand five-hundred from Center Street, and sixteen-thousand from East Street.

“The fees from the orchard, we’ve collected five-thousand and we’re still owed three-thousand. Electricity bills, we’ve only collected about a third of what we have to pay to the provincial government. And the trees we were trying to sell along the river, we’re still waiting for that to be settled.

“Yinsheng’s father wrote that he had sixty trees. I went and had a look and I counted at least eighty-one. We made the deal at a hundred yuan a tree. Somewhere along the way, he made a deal to sell forty trees to the nephew of the head of the township government. We found out he made that deal for fifty yuan a tree, since they were buying so many. Once he died though, things got complicated.”

Junting was silent. He reached in his pocket for a cigarette but came up empty.

”You got any cigarettes?”

Shangshan said: ”Just smoked my last one.”

Shangshan reached back behind the broom in the corner. Before he could scavenge a butt, though, Junting had dumped his tea out on top, soaking everything. He sat fuming in his seat.

Shangshan went to the still open window. The cicadas hissed their dying song in the ginkgo tree. He watched Laiyun squeeze into the courtyard through the open temple door, followed closely by Saihu.

When Jin Lian saw them, she rose and shooed Saihu out of the courtyard.

Outside Saihu, barked for Laiyun. Laiyun, stuck inside, barked

back. Shangshan shrugged, and Jin Lian opened the door again and pushed Laiyun out.

Shangshan turned back: "There's another thing, I'm not really sure how to bring it up."

Junting said: "Just say it."

Shangshan said: "When Qin An went to the county government to ask for the money to cover the reinforcement of the dike, he said he didn't want to show up with a knife to a gun fight, so he ended up borrowing twenty-thousand yuan for expenses. We never got the money to cover the work on the dike and the twenty-thousand never got paid back."

Junting said: "Ask him about it!"

Shangshan said: "How am I supposed to ask him about that?"

Junting exploded: "You're the accountant! What do you mean, how are you supposed to ask him? That money belongs to the village, are we supposed to just look the other way?"

Shangshan didn't say anything. In the distance, he heard the long hee-haw of the donkey pulling the stone roller behind the dye-house. That donkey that was the only one in the village.

Junting softened a bit: "What about this thing with Xinsheng?"

Everyone's asking questions now. Sanxue is going to be a problem on this one. What are we going to do?"

Shangshan said: "I was just talking about it with Jin Lian. I know the stamp on the contract is Qin An's but we were wondering if you knew anything about it, before he went ahead and approved the changes."

Junting said: "I didn't know shit!"

Shangshan said: "They really fucked this one up. If you take a shit, you should wipe your own ass, I always say."

Jin Lian entered with a kettle of tea. Seeing that Junting was waiting for her to leave before he kept talking, she set down the kettle down and quickly left the office, going back out onto the bench to paint her nails.

Junting said: "He took the shit alright, but do you really think Qin An's still going to be able to wipe his ass clean after all this?"

Shangshan said: "Sanxue is fired up and doesn't care who ends up getting the axe. If he really goes after him, it's going to be bad for Qin An, but it's not going to be good for us, either.

"For now, the best option is for you to be seen to be dealing with it. Put some pressure on Sanxue and buy us some time."

Junting said: "I tried to protect him and I've gotten no gratitude. Instead, they say he's making nice with my uncle!"

Shangshan said: "I'm not sure about that. But the last three times I was at Xia Tianyi's place, Qin An was there too, all three times. Maybe he thinks the former village head still has some pull with the higher ups..."

Junting said: "Sounds like my uncle isn't thinking straight, either."

Junting got up and left Shangshan in the office, going over to the well in the courtyard. He drew up a bucket of water from the shallow well, poured it into a copper basin and then dunked his head into the basin. Water splashed on the ground.

It really pissed me off when Junting and Shangshan brought up my father.

Li Shangshan was like those people you hear about who dress up like ghosts to scare people into giving up their homes. Whenever anybody brought up a problem in Qingfengjie, without fail Shangshan would start talking shit about my father. The dead can't argue their case, though, so all that pig shit and dog shit became my father's shit! When my father was still alive he was son strong he could have kicked the door in, and he was always carrying a chicken or an old pumpkin or with him to give away to people. That's how it was with my father.

On rainy days, he'd make a mess of the steps, tramping mud in and out and not giving a fuck. One day Shangshan came to our house. My father told him to come inside, but Shanshang insisted on using a stick to scrape every last bit of mud off of his shoes.

Shanshang told my father that the trees along the river dike needed to be thinned, and that they could use the wood to repair the primary school which was falling apart. Someone had offered to buy some of the trees too. Shanshang told my father that they should agree, since the buyer was the township head's nephew. The township head was the one who would be paying for the repairs on the school, so they couldn't really turn down his relative, could they?

And then, after the trees were cut down, who helped move them?
Li Shangshan again!

Qin An had fucked things with the funds for the reinforcement of the dike, but my father had been the only one of them with the balls to get in touch with the Bureau of Finance offices in the first place.

My father had gone with a bag of dried persimmons and a bag of peanuts to offer a gift from the village to speed things along. They took the persimmons and the peanuts and hadn't let him actually meet anyone. That's probably why when the twenty-thousand went missing, everyone knew not to bother looking for a receipt.

Idiots!

So, after a lifetime of working for the village, what did my father get? Busted down shoes and nobody willing to give him the time of day. When he went out to eat, he brought stale bread with him would ask for a bowl of used noodle water to soak it in and soften it up.

Who was he going to complain to about his stomach ache? The village still owes him his last paychecks!

While Junting washed his face, Shangshan rushed over to the walnut tree in the courtyard and picked three leaves.

He brought them to Junting, telling him to tuck them in the waist of his pants, cool him off.

Junting waved him off: "Come over here and scratch my back, will you?"

When he lifted his shirt, Shanshang saw that Junting's back was red from heat rash. After scratching for a while, Shangshan's felt his back starting to itch too, so he went over to the walnut tree and rubbed his back on the trunk.

Jin Lian followed Shangshan and Junting back into the office. She tried turning on the electric fan.

Shangshan said: "Did you check if the power's out?"

Jin Lian went to the lamp on the desk and fiddled with the cord. The lamp was dead, too. She said: "The power's out again!"

Junting waved off Shangshan and said: "Go, call up everyone from the township government and tell them to meet us at the Liu family restaurant."

Shangshan said: "We're bringing the township government down here?"

Junting said: "Sanxue going to report the orchard situation for sure. Let's get to them first. I have another idea, too. Get the power station cranked up, too. It's so dry out, it might as well be for irrigation. Everyone's roasting. They can't even turn on a fan to cool off. West Street is riding me so hard, I can almost hear them complaining from here. We'll get the township government to cover the expense."

Shangshan said: "Should we invite Qin An to the meeting?"

Junting said: "Of course."

Jin Lian said: "I'll go let him know."

Jin Lian left the office. Shangshan prepared to leave and Junting said: "Oh, and tell Liu Laoji to cook us up some *qianqian rou*."

Jin Lian was waiting around the corner for Shangshan.

She reached up and fixed a hank of hair to cover his bald spot.
"What we're you talking about when I came in that Junting didn't want me to hear?"

Shangshan said: "He thinks Qin An is too close to the old village head."

Jin Lian said: "Even his uncle's taking precautions, huh."

Shangshan said: "If Qin An and Junting keep going like this, we're the ones who are going to end up suffering."

Jin Lian said: "It's Qin An's own damn fault for being a soft touch. People are saying that the township government might be pushing for Qin An and Junting to switch positions. Have you heard anything like that?"

Shangshan said: "I asked him about it and he wouldn't stop asking me who I heard it from. I didn't dare asked again."

Jin Lian said: "Do you think the township head might make the announcement tonight at the dinner?"

Shangshan scratched his bald spot: "You know, you could be on to something! I can't believe I overlooked that!"

He glanced around and then reached down and pinched Jin Lian's ass.

Jin Lian swatted him away, and rushed off to Qin An's home.

Busty and with curves in all the right places, Jin Lian had always considered an equal of Bai Xue, when it came to beautiful women in the village.

Her only flaw was the freckles on her cheeks that forced her to cake on foundation. In the summer, she was always sweating the powder off, so kept a mirror in her pocket for touch ups.

As she walked, she checked her mirror three times.

When she arrived at Qin An's house, the door was locked from the outside—nobody was home. On the way back, she happened to run into Qin An's wife, who was sitting outside the dye-house.

Jin Lian called to her: "Sister, I'm looking for Secretary Qin."

Qin An's wife was absorbed in a piece of fabric and didn't seem to have heard her. She was sitting next to a couplet that had been pasted either side the door of the dye-house:

*When you arrive
We'll know your length.*

*When you leave
You'll know our depth.*

Another masterpiece from Zhao Hongsheng, she thought to herself.

Jin Lian called out again, louder this time: "Sister, where's Secretary Qin?"

Qin An's wife said: "Secretary! He's as useless as ears on a deaf guy—they should've cut him loose a long time ago."

From inside the dye-house, Bai Enjie said: "What do you call a man with no ears?"

Qin An's wife said: "I don't know, what?"

Bai Enjie said: "Can't figure it out, huh?"

Qin An's wife said: "Nope!"

Bai Enjie said: "Dummy! Let me tell you a story. An elephant was strolling down a path and a snake was coming the other way. The elephant said: Get out of my way. The snake said: Who the hell are you? You look awful funny with that long thing on your face. The elephant said to the snake: You look awful funny with your face on the end of that long thing."

Qin An's wife jumped up and pinched shut Bai Enjie's mouth shut. Coming back out of the dye-house, she pulled Jin Lian to the side and said: "What are you looking for him for?"

Jin Lian said: "The Two Committees are inviting the township government to a dinner in the village tonight. I can't find him anywhere, though."

Qin An's wife said: "He's at home."

Jin Lian said: "I just went there and the door was locked."

Qin An's wife said: "He doesn't want to see anyone. He asked me to do that when I went out, so that everyone would leave him be. Jin Lian, you know just as well as I do, Qin An's a sucker for a sob story. Xincheng said he couldn't handle the other half of the orchard after the bad harvests and owing so much money, because he was looking after his sick wife. When Qin An saw that Xincheng was in trouble he agreed to change the contract. Now, Sanxue is getting involved and Junting is pissed off. They want him to change the contract back. But what's the point in crying over spilt milk? Not that anyone gives a shit about what my husband has to say about it!"

Jin Lian didn't offer an opinion. She just listened. When the door was unlocked, she saw that Qin An was in fact home.

He was sitting on the stairs leading to the second floor, using a

funny looking knife to peel taro into a basin.

When Jin Lian told him about the dinner, Qin An said he wouldn't go.

Qin An's wife said: "You're pathetic. Why aren't you going?"

Qin An said: "I don't want to see Junting."

Qin An's wife said: "You're a disgrace. What are you scared of Junting for? You think he's picking on you? That's fine. Let the cadres from the township see how he treats you."

Qin An said: "Fine. I'll tender my resignation to the township government, then."

When Qin An and Jin Lian arrived at the restaurant, the party had already downed three rounds of drinks. Liu Laoji's son had returned from Xishanwan where he'd been sent to buy *qianqian rou*. Liu Laoji was complaining that they could have raised a donkey in the time he was gone. His son grumbled that no one in the market had had fresh ones, so he'd had to convince them to give him the frozen ones they'd been saving for the township government.

Before they could stop him, Junting opened the package himself and saw the two donkey penises. Each penis had a strip of paper attached to it. One strip had the township head's name on it and the other had the township Party secretary's name on it.

Junting joked: "Looks like we'll be enjoying the organs of our guests from the township government!"

Everyone laughed, except for Qin An, who said he was resigning.

The township head said: "What's wrong, Qin An? We're having a good time here. What are you talking about, you're resigning?"

Qin An said: "I'm not going to be the Party Secretary anymore."

The table went quiet, everyone staring at Qin An.

Qin An said: "I just wanted to tell you in person." He got up to leave.

The township head stopped him: "Have a drink! Let's drink and eat some of this *qianqian rou* and then talk!"

Qin An said: "I quit. I'm serious." Qin An had a one track mind. Having said what he wanted to say, he wasn't going to let them distract him.

The township head changed tacks: "You think you can just quit?"

Qin An said: "What do you expect me to do, make a Buddha out of mud? I'm not cut out for the job and it's not going to change."

The township head said: "Qingfengjie is right at the tip of our nose, so to speak. We see everything that happens here. Qin An, we know you get things done! Sure, you can be a soft touch, sometimes, but that's why we set you up with Junting, the hothead from the machine shed!

"When we selected you two to take over, we were thinking of two voices harmonizing. We knew the two of you would fill the positions perfectly. One of you would be the good cop, the other the bad cop. One would rush in and the other would carefully survey the situation. In a village like Qingfengjie, a big village, we have to be sure of ourselves. Situations can't be dealt with the wrong way. I know there have been a few problems here recently. There's no need to panic. Whatever problems come up, we can handle them."

He paused, and then said: "For our work in the village though, for the greater good, we've looked into this and we think it might be a good idea if you two switch...."

Junting had been drinking heavily. His face was flushed bright red. He lifted up the platter of *qianqian rou*. The dish had cooled and been sliced thin, looking like its namesake, a string of copper coins.

Junting said: "Director, let's eat some of this first. Tell me what you think. If it's time for a switch, let's switch, right?"

The township head said: "I'll listen to your suggestions, of course."

Junting said: "I don't think it's appropriate. I'm still young, still lacking in experience. Maybe I should continue as Qin An's assistant."

Qin An said: "Just forget about me already!"

The township head said: "Then let's go with that. Tomorrow, I'll make the move public." After he spoke, there was silence.

The township head reached for the *qianqian rou*. Over a mouthful of food, he said: "They say this stuff is good for you, right?"

Shangshan said: "Nowadays, you only get the small ones. Over in Xishanwan, they sometimes get the big ones still. Those ones have some power!"

Junting said: "Shangshan here married into a Xishanwan family. His wife makes a mean *qianqian rou*."

Shangshan said: "You need to get a donkey at least two years old. You can't make the cut when the penis is soft, either. You have to get it hard. The way to do it is to bring over a nice looking female donkey. Once it gets full of blood, you take the knife and—" He made a chopping motion. "You make the cut."

Blushing, Jin Lian stood and left the table.

The township head laughed and said: "Fine, fine. Laoji, what are we having now?"

Liu Laoji said: "How does noodles in sour broth sound?"

The township head said: "One bowl of noodles for everyone, then."

Qin An said: "None for me."

Junting and Jin Lian and a few others also refused, saying they were full.

Liu Laoji yelled to the kitchen: "Bring out three two bowls." Shortly after, a group of three entered, also wanting noodles.

Liu Laoji called to the kitchen again: "Bring out two three bowls!"

Jin Lian said quietly to Shangshan: "What does Laoji mean by that, 'three two bowls,' 'two three bowls'?"

Shang Shan said: "'Three two bowls' is three portions of noodles in two bowls. 'Two three bowls' is two portions of noodles in three bowls. Understand?"

Jin Lian said: "Why that thieving old—"

Shangshan stamped on Jin Lian's foot and lifted a cup of liquor: "Even if you haven't officially announced your decision yet, your word is bond! Brothers, lift your glasses! First, I'd like to pay my respects to the township government leadership and their loving concern for Qingfengjie. I'd also like to congratulate Junting and Qin An. As always, the township government's knows best. Likes the gods up in heaven, everything is in its right place!"

Qin An didn't drink, but they finally got him to lift his glass and drank half. His face immediately went red and he sprouted spots on his arms.

Junting said: "Brother, I'll finish the half cup in your place!"

After he drank, he said: "Since I finished his drink, I have another request. Qingfengjie would like to have their quota of electricity raised, and we wanted to ask the township to cover the expense!"

The township head said: "The old Qingfengjie government were the kind of folks that only showed up when called, making this town a real 'waste no, want not' kind of place. But things are changing thanks to you Junting! Okay, we'll raise the quota, and the township government will pitch in. But let's be clear, it's not a gift: we're splitting it sixty-forty. Once I get your portion, we'll pay our portion. Sound good?"

Junting said: "I rely on the leadership of the township government. Please, allow me to pledge this half bottle, downed in one gulp!"

He lifted the bottle but Shangshan stopped him: "Your ulcer...."

Junting said: "A bleeding stomach is a small price to pay for their portion of the electricity payment!"

He put the bottle to his lips like a trumpet.

After Junting drained the contents, the township head began to ask about local affairs: anti-drought efforts and the Return Grain Plots to Forestry scheme at Funiuliang.

He finally got around to the orchard: "Oh, before I came here, Sanxue came to me."

Qin An went pale.

Calmly refilling Qin An's tea cup, Junting said: "Sanxue is already filed a complaint, huh? It's nothing, really, just some small changes with Liu Xinsheng's contract. Qin An and I discussed it, and the original terms were based on a normal year. But then there was the early frost last year, and the drought this year. I saw it myself, the harvest was really pitiful! We can't blame Xinsheng for that, can we?. But don't worry, now that word's gotten out that we're splitting up the orchard there are lots people

who want to rent it from us. There's nothing to worry about. We'll have the problem solved before you know it!"

The township head said: "That's good to hear. Sanxue really made it sound like you two were fighting tooth and nail over this."

Junting laughed: "Can you really believe anything he says? If Sanxue's not complaining, then he's freeloading or making a mess for other people to clean up. Everyone here in Qingfengjie knows all that bastard has ever cared about is looking out for number one."

Having said his piece, Junting slipped off to the bathroom and Qin An followed him. As they pissed, Qin An said: "You told the township head lots of people want to take over the other half of the orchard, but how can that be, with the state it's in now? If he finds out we're lying to him, what are we going to do?"

Junting said: "I've got just the guy."

Qin An said: "Who?"

Junting said: "Chen Xing."

Qin An said: "He'll really agree?"

Junting said: "I'll deal with that. You just worry about getting the

bank rent from Liu Xinsheng.”

When they got back to the table, Qin An’s face had recovered some of its color. He raised a glass to Junting: ”Brother, I’m no match for you. I’ll let you take care of things with Chen Xing!”

The township head asked: ”Who’s Chen Xing?”

Junting said: ”Young guy who just moved here. Originally he wanted to set up a shoe store but our local taxes and fees were too high to make it feasible. We were thinking, if outsiders want to come and do business in our town, we should make it as easy as possible for them. Taxes are taxes, but maybe we can wave some of their other fees. Does that sound reasonable to you?”

The township head said: ”I’ll leave it to you two to decide what’s best. As far as people moving to Qingfengjie, the more the merrier, I say! Sesame seeds are easier to miss than pumpkin seeds, but that doesn’t mean they’re worth any less. Don’t let an opportunity like this slip through your fingers!”

Overjoyed, Junting told Jin Lian to go fetch Chen Xing and have him brought to the restaurant to meet the township leadership.

[End of Chapter 6]

Translated by Dylan Levi King.