A BOOK TO BURN, CONTINUED

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

34 chapters
79,391 words

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CHAPTER 1

1

The razor went at eleven-forty.

It had lived three drafts. In the first it was a barber's tool and in the second it was an instrument and in this one, the honest one, it opened a man's throat in a prison cell and took two days to finish what it started. Lin Li drew the line through it in a single motion, the way she had been taught — a cut is one gesture, not a squabble of strokes — hooked the tail so the compositor would know the mark meant business, and wrote the running count in the margin with the flat side of her pencil: 31.

She struck the next clause without lifting the pen. *The books were condemned in his own lifetime, burned by order of the throne, and burned again seven years after his death, and were read anyway, in copies that left the country the way children leave bad homes.* That came to twenty-two. She took *by his own hand* as well, four more, because if you keep the throat you cannot keep the hand, the mark would contradict itself and a contradicted mark is how lawsuits happen, her first editor used to say, and lawsuits were the least of what a contradicted mark could do. And she took the small clause folded after it, five more, the one that said he had never asked anyone's pardon, because a man who is not sorry is a problem on every page he appears on, and the entry could not afford a problem on page one.

In the margin, under the running count, she wrote the total as her teachers had written it, the tally with its little hook: **cut 62**.

Sixty-two characters. She sat back and let the rain have the room for a while.

The house occupied the second floor of an arcade building on the south reach of Zhongshan Road, above a shop that had sold joss

sticks and paper houses for the dead since before the renovation. By eleven each morning the stairs carried the smell of it up through the floorboards — sandalwood, and under the sandalwood the sweeter scorch of paper cut and stacked for burning — so that the editorial floor existed in a permanent state of mild funeral, which Lin Li had long ago stopped noticing and had noticed again this morning for no reason she could use. Outside, the arcade dripped. March in this city was the month the walls wept: the south wind came back across the bay, warm and carrying the whole history of the sea as vapor, and every cool surface in the building put out a skin of water. The paint on the north wall — new in the renovation year, the year they'd done the arcades up in fake-antique white — had begun to blister in map-shaped blooms, and behind the file cabinets the mold had worked its way up to the height of a seated woman. The dehumidifier chugged in the corner and filled its little bucket with the sea, and someone, every few days, emptied the sea down the stairwell drain, past the joss shop, toward the gutter, where the old drainage channels under the streets took it, as they had taken it for seven hundred years, out to the river and the bay.

She had joined the house nine years ago. Local-history readers, school supplements, the anniversary commissions — the books a city buys about itself. The work was called telling the city's story well, and she was good at it; she was, by the useful arithmetic of such places, the most reliable editor in the building. Her drafts went back and forth in Chinese like everyone else's; the Chinese is given here as English, once, and will not be remarked on again.

The morgue folder sat in the second drawer of her desk — she had named it that herself, years ago, after the cages in the basements of newspapers where the back issues sleep — and it held every draft of everything, stamped by date, going back to her first month. You never knew when a killed sentence would be needed alive. That was the official reason. The true reason was that she did not trust deletions to be real. A sentence deleted on a screen was a sentence with its pulse

stopped, not a sentence buried; and her private conviction, never spoken at any staff meeting, was that in this city buried things kept better than archived things. The folder held the honest draft from two in the morning, the one with the razor alive in it. It held, unexamined, whatever else the night had produced.

She had written the honest draft longhand, on the back of a print-shop invoice, with a stub of hexagonal pencil the rice-paste shop on Water Gate Lane gives you to mark your order with. Twenty-four hours, the shop's stamp said, in gold that was wearing down to the wood in her pocket the way the city's names wore down. Pencil for the first pass, always; the red pen came out only for things already dead. The pencil was down to four fingers of wood and she kept using it, because it was the only pencil she had ever finished.

The commission had come down in February with the new year's planning: the birthday fell in 2027, the volume would be printed for it, and the entry was hers — one entry, eight hundred characters. Not a long leash. She had done what she always did with a short leash, which was to write the thing long first, at full length, in her own voice, at two in the morning — write it true, in other words, once, for the drawer — and then fold it down to the length and the temperature that could be printed. Nobody had asked her to do it that way. Nobody had to ask. It was the house style of her whole career: get there before the scissors, hold the scissors yourself, and what the committee never sees can never be cut by anyone whose hands you cannot watch.

So: the razor, gone at eleven-forty. The bans, gone. The hand, gone. She read back through what remained. *Li Zhi was born above the harbor in a house of interpreters, in the years when the tall ships first learned the coast; his family had been Muslim once, and traders long before that, and readers only lately, and the boy grew up in the smell of three vocabularies.* That survived; it was warm, it was verified, it smelled of the sea in an admissible way. The offices politely failed, survived. The tonsure, survived — a man who shaved

his head and kept his beard made a fine detail; no committee had ever been frightened by a haircut. The students survived as a word, *students*, unqualified. She read the way she had been taught to read, by absence, the way a doctor reads a face: the sentence a draft circles without landing on is the sentence it means, and what a draft will not say is its subject. What this draft would not say, now, was a list of sixty-two characters long.

Then she found the sentence she did not remember writing.

It stood at the end of the second paragraph of the two o'clock draft, a sentence in her own handwriting, in her own idiom, set down in her own pencil, and it was not hers. Not the handwriting — the handwriting was hers, she knew her own a's the way you know your own walk — but the sentence itself had arrived from somewhere with the furniture. It read:

To praise a man you helped to burn is to sweep his ashes into the incense burner and call the smoke prayer.

She sat with it for some time. Below her feet the joss shop tore a length of red paper off its roll. The kettle on the side table ticked as it cooled.

She had been drafting at two in the morning with the approved corpus open on the second screen; sentences assembled in sleep come out wearing other people's clothes; that was all — some cadence absorbed off a page at the bottom of her attention, surfacing in her hand with the ink still wet. That was the explanation, and it was a good one, and it took her eleven seconds to think of it, which was eleven seconds longer than explanations usually took, because the sentence was not a paraphrase of anything in the approved corpus. The approved corpus did not talk about ash. She read it twice more, and her ears went warm, the way they did in committee when a number was wrong and she hadn't yet found which one.

Then she deleted it — deleted, not struck; no margin count, no hook, no place in the morgue ledger — from the working file, and saved, and closed the file, and did not open the two o'clock draft in

the morgue folder to delete it there too, because the morgue's rule was that the morgue kept everything, and rules you make for yourself in good weather are the only rules that survive bad weather. The sentence stayed in the folder where the folder could hold it. She would not look at it again for a year.

She did, however, do what she did with every sentence she had not written on purpose: she went looking for its parents. The approved corpus — the selected works, the school-certificate biography, the museum's own 2,400-character wall text, all of it downloaded and searchable — was open on the second screen, and she fed the sentence to it in pieces. *Sweep*. Nothing. *Ashes*. Nothing but a tour‑ism paragraph about the temple fair, where ash meant incense ash and meant nothing. *Burned and read anyway*. The corpus had plenty of the burning and none of the reading. Its Li Zhi was a man assembled entirely out of safety, a progressive thinker in a glass case, and a glass case is a kind of wall too, she thought, and then put the thought away the way you put away a knife someone had left out. The sentence had no parents. It had simply been in her hand at two in the morning. You do not go looking for who gave you a fever.

The kettle clicked off. In the stairwell someone from the joss shop was laughing about a delivery.

At noon exactly, because it was noon, the director came out of his office with the assignment sheet and the tea things.

Director Geng poured the tea himself. This was noted, and not commentable on. He was the director; the building's geometry said that other people poured for him, had poured for him for twenty years, and yet he stood at her desk with the tieguanyin — his own tin, not the tin in the pantry, which was for guests and tasted of the pantry — and filled her cup first, and then his own, and set the sheet down on the struck draft, and stood there for a moment with his hand flat on the paper as if taking its temperature.

"The five-hundredth," he said. "The city's calling it a homecom‑ing."

“Is it,” Lin Li said.

“He came back to them once already, in a way. They buried him well, the ones up north. But the books came home, you know. They always find their way back to the place that burned them.” He turned the sheet so it faced her. Eight hundred characters, said the sheet, with the volume’s dead title and the working group’s list of names, four of which she knew by their revisions alone. “Start from the approved list. Ask Danran for the timeline — she’s fast, and the stele dates disagree with the gazetteer in three places, and she enjoys that kind of disagreement more than is normal.”

Then his eye crossed the struck draft, and the tally in the margin, and stopped there like a man’s eye on a familiar face in an unfamiliar street. He read the count. He looked at the three clauses, hooked and tailed and counted, cut before anyone had asked for anything to be cut.

“Good,” he said — to the draft, not to her. “This way it can’t be done to you.”

He refilled her cup without being asked, which he had done once before that she could name, and which she could not name now, and then he took his cup back to his office and shut the door with the sound of a man declining to have said anything.

Danran’s desk stood under the north window, in the cooler quarter of the floor where the mold got ambitious, and it was the only desk in the building with a ring light and a phone clamp on it. She was the junior fact-checker, twenty-four, hired out of a master’s program in Quanzhou history that no one else in the office had heard of, and she checked facts the way her grandmother cleaned fish — fast, total, and with an air of having done the fish a favor. The rig was for the videos she cut on her lunch hour. What the videos were of, the office had not yet fully worked out; the office believed the answer had something to do with her grandmother.

The notebook came out before the tea was cold. It was a slim cloth-bound thing, school-supply cheap, no system and no index, and

the ritual of it was four lines: date, source, killed sentence, period. She entered the morning's work. *12 March 2026. Entry, Li Zhi, 800-char. The razor clause — struck, 31. Same. The double ban — struck, 22. Same. The hand, the pardon — 9.* The pencil was the rice-paste pencil; the notebook was the only place the red pen never went, because the red pen was for things already dead and the notebook was where dead things were kept company.

Flipping back toward the front to find blank space, she passed the first page. It was blank. It carried one line, a date — April 2013, written the week the notebook was bought — and nothing under the date, no source, no sentence, in nine years of a book whose whole idea was sentences. She turned past it the way you turn past a door you have decided not to have.

The art editor, two desks down, was on the third cover for the volume. The first cover had been the twin pagodas and had been rejected for looking like a tourism brochure; the second had been a detail of a stone lion and had been rejected for looking like a bank. The third was a single flower on black. Nobody had rejected it yet. Nobody had approved it yet. In the quincentennial year the whole building was having this problem at different scales: what do you put on the outside of a man the inside of whom you are still negotiating.

At half past two Danran came over with three printed pages and put them down on the struck draft, on top of Director Geng's sheet, face down, and turned them over herself.

"Lin-jie. Before five."

The draft had a title and a first line. Lin Li read the first line, and then read it again, touching a tooth already known to be loose.

The city that burned his books now sells his postcards.

"Where did this one come from," Lin Li said.

"The museum shop," Danran said. "I took one. It's a nice postcard." She was already walking backward toward her desk, pleased with the world, her lanyard swinging. "The dates are checked. Even the ones that fight."

Lin Li looked at the pages. Three of them, printed single-sided, which meant Danran thought of them as a draft and not as a text; a text you print both ways to save the world's paper, a draft you print one way so the red pen has somewhere to stand. The girl had left her a place to stand.

Below the floor, the joss shop weighed out sandalwood by the jin. The rain kept its own count on the arcade. Lin Li set the red pen on the desk, parallel to the draft, the way you lay a tool down before you have decided to use it, and picked up the rice-paste pencil instead.

CHAPTER 2

2

The three pages were better than they had any right to be.

Lin Li read them twice, once as a fact-checker and once as herself, and the two readings disagreed, and she had learned long ago that when the two readings disagreed the second one was the one that could get a person hurt. As a fact-checker she found nothing. The girl's dates held. The girl had even done what no one had asked her to do and gone to the stele in the museum courtyard with a ruler, and her transcription of the ninth line was correct where the gazetteer was wrong, which meant the girl had stood in the drizzle holding a ruler against a dead man's stone while the office believed she was at lunch. As herself, Lin Li read the draft the way she had been taught, by absence, and the draft's subject stood up off the page at once, the way a heron stands up out of a wet field: it was not about postcards, and it was not about the birthday, and it was barely about Li Zhi. It was about who does the burning. The draft never once said the word *court*. It said *the city*, it said *they*, it said *the shop now*, and every pronoun leaned the same direction, and not one of them would sur‑vive a meeting with the working group's list of names.

The draft had three spine lines, and Lin Li marked them in pencil, because pencil was opinion and red was death, and she was not ready to say out loud, even in the privacy of a margin, which this was.

For context: the house's account had been running, since the new year, a countdown nobody had assigned to anybody — the art editor did the pictures, the distribution girl did the scheduling, and the copy had been drifting Danran's way because everyone else's copy came back from the working group looking like it had been folded and mailed. The account had some forty thousand readers, most of them the kind who arrive for a temple fair and stay for a postcard. The

girl's draft was pitched as the birthday month's opener. It was also, though the girl had no way of knowing this and the office would never say it, the first text in nine years to walk into that account wearing the register of a blog that had been deleted before the girl got her first phone.

The first was the line she had already read twice. *The city that burned his books now sells his postcards.*

The second sat in the third paragraph, dressed in the girl's lightness so neatly you could walk past it: *For most of four hundred years, copying him was a crime, and people copied him anyway — that is what a book is. Now he is two for five, and the scan code takes WeChat*. Under it Danran had bracketed a photograph she had taken herself: the museum's donation stand, the little laminate card with the collection code, propped against a saucer of sandalwood chips.

The third was the ending, and the ending was the one that would have to go, and Lin Li knew it as she knew a bus schedule, without looking: *He was never sorry and he never asked, and the questions he left are still leaking. So — what do you keep?*

And there, in the middle of the second page, back from the dead in a girl's clear hand, was the razor. *The record says that in the spring of 1602, old and sick, summoned to answer for his books, he asked the jailer for a barber, and took the razor, and opened his own throat, and it took him two days to finish.* The girl had even cited the source. The source was the one everybody cited, the gossiped mem ‑ oir, the one the approved corpus footnoted and then walked around. Danran had written *it took him two days to finish* with no idea at all that the same clause, in the same city, on the same morning, had already been through the pencil once, counted, hooked, and tailed.

Between the second spine line and the third the girl had done something Lin Li had not seen anyone do in years: she had reported the readers. There was a paragraph on the students who came out of the museum with quotes copied onto their wrists in ballpoint, on the

fan clubs that traded annotated postcards, on a girl from Guangzhou who had visited nine times and had begun, Danran wrote, to sign her reviews with Li Zhi's own punctuation. Lin Li read that paragraph twice. It was good. It was, in fact, the warmest thing in the draft, and it survived the fold almost whole, because it flattered the museum and cost nothing — the fold's favorite kind of keeping.

Lin Li put the pages face down and went to lunch.

The rice-paste shop on Water Gate Lane had been there since be‑fore the renovation, which in this city was a way of saying since always; it occupied the ground floor of a house older than the arcade, and the lane outside it had once been a water gate — you could still see the sill-stone in the opposite wall, worn to a saddle by ropes, though nothing floated through now but the drainage department's rubber boots. The shop gave away pencils. There was a tin mug by the till full of them, hexagonal, gold-stamped, and you marked your order on a slip and clipped it to the rail. Lin Li had been taking two or three pencils a visit for a decade, the way other people took mints. She had never once been charged for a pencil and had never once been to the shop without thinking, at the mug, of the difference between taking and stealing, and how it was the shop's to define, and how the shop had defined it: the pencils were free, and the taking was the relationship.

She ordered the small bowl, with the vinegar-and-pepper on the side, and marked the slip with one of the shop's own pencils because hers was in her coat, and ate standing at the shelf by the door, the three folded pages propped against the vinegar cruet. The paste was hot and soft and tasted the way it had tasted when she was eight. Rain came off the lane in diagonals. A man under the arcade across the way was re-hanging a shop sign, and the drill kept skidding on the old brick, and the shop owner, who had known her mother's family longer than Lin Li had, put an extra spoon of the fried shallots on without being asked and went back to the vat.

Opposite, in the wall across the lane, the sill-stone of the old water gate sat worn to a saddle — one of the last of them, the grooves the tow-ropes had cut still readable, the way grain stays readable in a plank. A customs house had once kept its doors down here, in this ditch; the empire's whole interface with the ocean had been a set of doors that opened into a drain, and the men who worked the doors had grown rich, and been hated, and been dissolved, and the drain was still on duty. Lin Li had written a two-hundred-character box about it once, for a readers' series, and had cut it to one hundred and twenty, and the cut had been correct. She watched the drain swallow the lane's morning and thought, without affection, that she had become very good at knowing the exact size of what could be said.

The girl's razor sat in the middle of the second page like a stone someone had left on a rail.

Here was the thing Lin Li did not say to herself, because saying it would have made it true in a way she was not prepared to manage: the entry was due in eight hundred characters, and the post was due on the house's account, and the two texts were now the same subject in the same season, and if the girl's razor went out to forty thousand readers in April, then the first razor of the quincentennial would be a junior fact-checker's, not the senior editor's — and the senior editor had spent nine years making sure that the sentences she was not allowed to finish were sentences nobody knew she had wanted to finish. A girl with a ruler and a light hand could undo nine years by accident, by being twenty-four, by having no idea what the year 2013 had been.

And here was the thing she did say to herself, in the voice of the office, which was the voice of care: the girl was twenty-four. The account had forty thousand readers and the working group had a list of names and the volume was a city project, and the girl's draft, the best thing in it, the spine of it, was exactly the kind of line that reads as courage in March and reads as a file in December. The fold would cost the girl a lede. It would not cost her the account, or the job, or

the years. You fold a hem so the cloth does not fray. Anyone who has ever watched a hem unravel understands.

Both of these were true, and they stood in her together, and she finished the bowl and marked the slip for one pencil to take away, and walked back up the arcade with the rain behind her and the girl's three pages folded once, lengthwise, against her chest.

At the desk she folded the draft with the pencil.

Not with the red pen. That was the whole art of it, the part no one teaches: the fold done in red is a verdict, and verdicts get appealed, and appeals get remembered; the fold done in pencil is an opinion, senior opinion, the kind that arrives already agreeable with itself. She folded the lede first. *The city that burned his books now sells his postcards* became *This year the city that once condemned his books will print its own edition of them* — condemned instead of burned, once instead of now, and the postcards gone entirely, because the postcards were the joke, and the joke was the sharp part. She folded the scan code into a sentence about how things come back around, and she folded the two-for-five out, and the four-hundred-years-of-copying she kept but clipped — *that is what a book is* — because the girl had made a definition there, and definitions are load-bearing, and load-bearing things get inspected.

The razor she cut.

Not struck, not tailed, not counted. She lifted it out as you lift a wasp from a car by the open window — whole, unharmed, released elsewhere. In its place she set one quiet sentence of her own: *In the end, having been summoned to answer for his books, he did not survive the year.* Died, not killed; not suicide, not razor, not two days; a season with weather in it. It was even true. That was the technique and the horror of the technique, that it was true — the fold does not lie, it declines. The record said he did not survive the year. The record would say so forever, and beneath it, in some archive, in some margin, the two days and the barber would wait the way the pencil line waited under the eraser, present, recoverable, unargued.

The ending she rewrote by hand into the girl's own grammar: *So — come and see what was kept.* A question about keeping had become an invitation to visit. The museum would like it. The working group would like it. It was, in the office's own currency, a better draft than the girl's, warmer, rounder, likelier to be reposted by the very institutions it had walked past on the way to being true.

She signed nothing. Senior folds are unsigned; they travel as the girl's own second thoughts.

At four-forty she called the girl over and gave back the folded pages, and gave with them, in the tone of a woman handing over something warm out of her own kitchen, the sentence.

"The wind is changing; fold it yourself before it's folded for you," Lin Li said.

It came out in one piece, the way sentences do that have been carried a long time in a pocket with keys. It came out warmly. It came out fluently — too fluently, she heard the fluency herself a half-second too late, the voice of a woman who has said this before, to someone, somewhere, and been thanked. Danran took the pages and read the fold, and read the new ending, and Lin Li watched the girl's face do the arithmetic that twenty-four-year-old faces do when the best thing they have written is explained to them in the language of care.

"Okay," Danran said. "For the volume year. I get it."

"That's all it is," Lin Li said. "A year like this one, you fold before the season does it for you."

The girl nodded and went back to her desk, and Lin Li watched her click the pen she used for her own notes, and write something on the back of a museum postcard, and press the postcard to the top edge of her monitor, where it stuck, white side out. In a week it would be joined by another, and in a month by a dozen, the small white backs of a private library going up at the north window like swallows under an eave. Lin Li turned back to her own desk before she could read any of them upside down.

The folded post went up on the house's account at six, scheduled, with the museum tagged. It did well. It did, in the office's currency, very well.

The original pages — the pencil-silenced lede, the lifted razor, the ending that had asked a question — Lin Li did not throw away. She squared them, folded them once along the girl's own crease, and opened the second drawer, and set them in the morgue folder behind the two o'clock draft of the entry, where the house's paper slept in the dark by date, all of it alive, all of it dead, all of it hers.

Then she took out the notebook and made the day's last entry.

12 March 2026. Danran draft, house account. Razor clause — folded, penciled, source intact. She looked at the line for a moment, the way you look at a receipt for something you are not sure you should have bought. It was the first entry she had ever made in the notebook that was not her own sentence. The notebook had been, for nine years, a ledger of her kills, and now it held one of somebody else's, and there was no rule against it, and the absence of a rule felt exactly like a door standing open in a house at night.

She closed the notebook on it, then opened it again, because there was one more thing the day had produced and the ritual demanded a place for it.

The wind is changing; fold it yourself before it's folded for you. Her own mouth had sent it out into the office that afternoon, warmly, fluently, to a girl who had written it down. Date: today. Source: —. The pencil stopped at the line. Every entry in nine years had a source, even the ones she had cut from her own drafts; the source said where the sentence had lived before it died. This one had no source she could write. It had come to her already carried, the way you inherit a stove or a scar, from somebody, somewhere, in a room she did not let herself visit; and a ledger that cannot say where a sentence came from is a ledger that has started lying by omission, so she left the line out entirely — the second sentence today to go unrecorded, the second one she owned and could not file.

The notebook closed on the empty line as the morgue folder had closed on the girl's razor: gently, and with everything still in it.

Downstairs the joss shop was folding its red paper for the evening gods, and the fold came through the floor as a dry sound, like a page being turned by someone with patience.

CHAPTER 3

3

The working group's liaison came to the house on Friday morning with a one-page document and her own teacup, because she had been sent to enough meetings to know that the tea in other people's buildings was an insult you were expected to drink smiling.

Her name was Su Min. She was from the district's culture bureau, seconded to the quincentennial working group, and she was perhaps forty, with the clipped hair of a woman who had decided the mirror was not a career. She set the teacup — chipped at the lid, a mineral crust inside like the inside of a kettle — on the conference table, laid the document in the middle of the table as if feeding something, and asked, without preamble, who had been assigned the Li Zhi.

"Lin Li," Director Geng said.

"Lin Li." Su Min turned it over. "The 2019 one. The remittance houses. My mother kept that book on the shelf with the almanacs." She looked at Lin Li directly, once, the way you look at a tool you are deciding to trust, and then became a bureaucrat again and began.

The document was a single page and it was called, at the top, in a boldness that suggested it had survived argument, *Reference Frame for Historical Entries: Li Zhi*. Lin Li had worked in this city long enough to read a page like it the way sailors read weather. It did not say what to write. It said, in the passive constructions and harvested phrases of a dozen earlier documents, what the entry would be understood to have done to itself if it came out wrong.

"Eight hundred characters," Su Min said. "The volume is a gift volume — it goes to delegations, to the schools, to the sister cities. So the register is: what this city gave the world's thinking. Not a study. A face we show at the door."

"Which face," Geng said. It was not quite a question.

“Progressive thinker of the late Ming.” Su Min let the phrase sit on the table like a plate. “That’s the settled line. The older books said *anti-feudal fighter*. The books of the seventies called him — you’ll laugh — a legalist, a pioneer. Both of those are retired. We say *thinker* now. A thinker can belong to everyone; a fighter belongs to one side, and the sides change.”

“And the other word,” Geng said. “The one the foreigners’ biographies use.”

“Heretic,” Su Min said, “is retired as well.” She did not look down at the page when she said it, which meant the page did not contain it; the word was carried in her, in the place where a bureau keeps the words it has been told to walk around. “The entry will not use it, and the entry will not need it. He thought early things. He thought them early. He thought them in this city, which has been thinking with the sea for a thousand years — that is the frame. The open port. The city that let the world in and got ideas the way it got pepper. That’s not a sideline, that’s the *story* — his family is the story. Interpreters, traders, the mixed marriages, the old registration — four hundred years before anyone coined the phrase, this was a household where the world came in the front door. The volume wants that. The volume wants him to be what the port produced.”

“Port openness,” Lin Li said, writing it down, and heard how it sounded, and did not look up.

“Excerpts may also go to the school readers, eventually,” Su Min added, tapping the page. “So write nothing you wouldn’t hand a fourteen-year-old. It focuses the mind wonderfully.”

“And the household registration is real, use it,” Su Min said. “The clan’s old registration down in Jinjiang — the Confucian scholars’ line is one ledger and their line is another, and the other ledger says Hui. It still says Hui. I checked, for the questionnaire.” She smiled for the first time, a small door opening in the file-cabinet face. “A Ming thinker with a minority registration. The port didn’t just let goods in. It let people in, and the people became us, and the proof is a form

nobody ever got around to changing. That's the kind of detail a gift volume can be proud of."

"Positive energy," Su Min agreed, with the mild unembarrassed fluency of a person saying the office's own liturgy. "The entry should leave a reader warm toward the city. It can be intelligent. It should not be — " she searched for the word, found the one under it, " — *spicy*."

"There's the matter of the death," Geng said.

"The death is four words." Su Min turned the page toward them, and there it was, in the document's own hand, a sentence already built, waiting to be inherited like a borrowed coat: *He died in prison*. "The volume's other entries use the standard formulations. We don't do manner-of-death detail for anyone — not for the general who was strangled, not for the poet who drank. It isn't concealment, it's genre. A face we show at the door doesn't bleed at the door."

"No manner of death," Lin Li said.

"Four words," Su Min said. "You'll find they fit."

Then she gave Danran the reading list. It was a printed sheet, fourteen titles, and Danran scanned it as a customs officer scans a manifest, her face doing the small arithmetic of the things not on it. "The letters," Danran said. "The correspondence with the son-in-law's family, and with the friend in Macheng — the full texts. The museum has the excerpts."

"The volume will use the excerpts the museum uses," Su Min said, and gathered her teacup, and stood, and became at the door a person rather than a document again. "My mother underlined your book," she said to Lin Li. "She underlined it in pencil and then went over the pencil in pen, so the underlines would survive her. Whatever you write, write it so it survives being gone over in pen."

The door closed. The conference room held its air a moment, as rooms do when a document has been read aloud in them.

"She walked around the razor without saying the word," Danran said. "Four times. Did you count?"

“I counted,” Lin Li said.

“And the birth date’s a fight, by the way.” Danran had the stele transcription out of her bag already, folded to a soft fiber along its folds. “The courtyard stele gives the tenth month, twenty-sixth day. The county gazetteer converts it to the nineteenth of November. The certificate biography converts it to the twenty-third. Same stone, same book, three days apart.” She laid the three sources side by side on the table, like a woman laying out cards she already knew were going to disagree. “Somebody upstream made a rounding error in 1962 and we have all been inheriting it ever since. The working group will vote.”

“Vote.”

“On when he was born.” Danran smiled at the ceiling. “Five hundred years, and the first thing we do is give him a birthday he didn’t have.” She folded the sources away. “I’ll send you the matrix.”

The approved corpus arrived that afternoon in a cardboard box that had once held photocopy paper, and Danran unpacked it onto the long table like a nurse laying out instruments. Fourteen titles. The certificate biography, thin as a hymnal. The selected works in two volumes, the allowed pages softened at the fold where the censored leaves met the spine. A children’s picture book in which the heretic appeared as a kindly, slightly comic old man drawing in the margins of convention, his beard reduced by the illustrator to a calligraphic suggestion; on the last page he smiled at a child reader who had been born four hundred years too late to be dangerous to him, and the child, in the drawing, looked bored, which Lin Li suspected was the illustrator’s whole testimony, hidden where the text could not punish it. The museum’s wall text, laminated. A CD-ROM of the 2011 symposium proceedings. And the working group’s own binder.

Lin Li stood over the box for a while. It was, she thought, a library built like a net: everything the present could still say about him, gathered by the mesh size of what the present could bear.

The working group's own binder was the strangest instrument on the table. It collected four hundred years of other people's sentences about him, arranged by decade, each era's verdict flagged in its corner — the seventies in campaign red, *the progressive legalist who dared*, the eighties in hopeful blue, *the pioneer of legitimate want*, the tourism years in the green of money changing hands, *the soul of an open city*. One man, five coats. The binder did not seem to notice. It turned him over decade by decade like a market stall turning over stock, and on every page, whatever the color, the same four words waited at the bottom like a watermark. She closed the binder.

The last thing in the box was not on the list. Danran set it down without comment: a fat printed PDF, dog-eared, self-bound with two binder clips — an English translation of the burned books, published by a foreign university, with a preface by three names Lin Li didn't know. "It isn't on the list," Danran said, "but the letters are in it. Whole. Nobody cut anything, because nobody here was checking." She said it lightly, the way you hand over contraband disguised as a favor. Lin Li held the book a moment — the heaviest object in the box, and the only one with no frame to obey — and gave it back, and said nothing, and noticed that she said nothing, and filed the noticing where she filed things.

She took the certificate biography to her desk. It was sixty pages long. She knew, without opening it, the exact sentence it would use for the year 1602, because it was the sentence the whole shelf used; she had read it first at eleven, in a school reader with a cloth cover, and had not needed to read it since. She opened it anyway, to the page, and there it was, four words long, wearing its paragraph like a borrowed coat: *He died in prison*. Books that repeat a sentence like that are not telling you how a man died. They are telling you how a sentence survives.

She wrote the eight hundred characters in two hours, which was as long as they took. She wrote them warm. She gave the port its in ‑ terpreter-household; she gave the beard its haircut; she gave the

students their unqualified word; she set the four words at the para ‑ graph where the man's breath ran out, and she wired the whole thing to the open sea like a lamp to a harbor, and when she read it back it was — and this was the part she sat with longest — *good*. It was good the way the folded post had been good. Eight hundred characters, door-ready, bleeding nowhere. In the morgue folder the two o'clock draft lay in the dark with its throat intact.

She did not print the new one. She sent it up the internal route — draft, attachments, one line in the memo field: *per reference frame, for your review* — the same five words she had put in that field for nine years, in the same polite temperature, so that her outbox read as one long sentence about willingness — and watched it leave her the way you watch a boat leave with your own luggage on it, and went home in the rain.

Her flat was on the south bank of the river, fourteenth floor of a tower with a name that promised a garden. From the window the old city lay across the water like its own model: the two stone towers lit, the clock tower lit, the lanes a warm scribble between them, and beyond the towers the black length of the bay where the lights stopped and the sea refused to be a neighborhood. Between her glass and his stone lived one river, four bridges, and the year 1997, when the map had been redrawn and her grandmother's village had changed countries without moving. She ate standing up, watched the old city glow, and did not think about the four words, which by now could travel without her.

That night she dreamed of the sound.

Not of a razor — she never saw one, and never saw the hand; the dream had no faces in it and no floor she could name. There was a room in it like her office if her office had been a room two hundred years ago, with the same north light and the same weeping walls, and hanging from a hook on the wet plaster there was a barber's strop, and someone out of sight was making an edge. Shik — shik — shik. Steel drawn along leather, slow, unhurried, the sound of a blade

being made patient, each stroke a little longer than the last, as if the hand were rehearsing something the wrist had already decided. She stood in the doorway of that room and could not see the man and did not need to; the sound was doing the seeing. Shik. It was the most careful sound she had ever heard. It was the sound of someone taking a very long time to be certain.

She woke at four with it still in her ears, exact, dry, patient, and lay in the dark listening to the real room until the real room came back — the gutter ticking its three-four time off the arcade's lip, the dehumidifier downstairs drawing its long breath and letting it go, the rain, the rain. The gutter. The compressor. The rain. She lay and gave the sound back its parents, one by one, the way you feed a stray to make it leave. By five the sound had parents again and she could have testified in a courtroom that no strop had ever hung on her wall.

She got up anyway, and turned on the lamp, and took out the notebook, because a fact is a fact even when it is yours and not the world's.

13 March 2026, she wrote. *Dream. A razor being stropped, slowly, somewhere out of sight. No face, no room I know. I have never in my life heard a razor stropped. Source: dream.*

She looked at the entry for a long time. It was the first thing in nine years that the notebook held which had no source except itself. She drew no line under it. She closed the book on it gently, the way you close a door on a sleeping animal you have decided not to name, and turned off the lamp, and lay back down, and the rain went on counting for both of them.

CHAPTER 4

4

On Saturdays at the Xunpu market, Lin Li read the fish prices to her grandmother, loudly, in Mandarin, and the neighbors approved.

The ritual had a shape. Ah-ma set off from the house at six with the oyster knife and the flat basket, and Lin Li, arriving on the late bus from the city with the week's newspapers, would find her at the third table from the sea wall, selling by touch and by argument, buying what she did not grow, banking what she did not spend. At seven the two of them walked the length of the market, and at the village committee's board — the fish prices, the tide table, the typhoon notices, the health-insurance deadlines, all of it printed by the district and pinned under plastic — Lin Li stopped and read aloud. The neighbors drifted past with their baskets and nodded at the sight, the old woman with her rings of flowers and the city granddaughter doing the letters for her, and the nodding was the point. Ah-ma stood straighter while she was read to. She asked follow-up questions she could not have asked if she had read the board herself, and the questions were always the wrong questions, the questions of a woman who cannot read, and Lin Li answered them in the loud patient Mandarin of the city, and the neighbors approved, and the performance was so old that neither of them heard it anymore.

It had not begun as a performance. It had begun as ethnography, which is the word Lin Li used for it in the years when she used words like that — the years right after university, when she came back to the village with a camera and a collector's eye and a coldness she mistook for accuracy. The returnee's eye: it took the village apart in her notebooks, the mended nets, the blown-in polyurethane, the old women's hands cracked like dried squid. Nothing was flattering in

those notebooks. She had been unflattering on purpose, the way a person is unflattering to a face in a mirror they intend to argue with. The reading ritual had started as one of her observations: the fish market had a literate economy now — prices from the city by phone, payment by scan, the young sellers reading the numbers off their screens — and the old women worked by voice, by memory, by the smell of the water, and were winning. She had put that in a notebook in the winter of 2011, the observation that would feed a sentence later, a sentence about her grandmother and the market and who loses arguments to whom, and the sentence had gone out of her like a letter dropped off a bridge, and she had never once thought of it as a stone.

That was the origin. The ritual stayed. The coldness stayed too, folded into the flattery like a wire in a hem.

Saturday's dispute was about the tide. Lin Li had the app open — the district's official tide table, the harbor-mouth station, the one the tourism office linked to — and it said, in its confident blue digits, that the big ebb would peak the following morning at 6:40. Ah-ma said the flats had gone out that morning.

"The paper says tomorrow," Lin Li read to her, loudly, for the neighbors.

"The paper measures the harbor." Ah-ma did not raise her voice. She was looking at the sky with an expression of account-keeping, her lips moving over some arithmetic of cloud and wind. "The moon came up round and early last night, and it pulled the water out through the channel before the harbor knew. My flats have been open since the fourth watch. The Xus went out at five. You could hear their scoopers from the wall."

"The harbor-mouth station is the official station."

"Then the harbor can eat off it." And she turned to the sea wall, and looked, and made a small sound of confirmation, and Lin Li looked too, and there they were, far out on the shining brown flats that the table had promised for tomorrow, the oyster women of the

village bent double at their upturned stools, working a sea that had gone out a day ahead of its own paperwork.

By ten o'clock the buckets were full, by eleven the app had con‑ceded nothing and the flats were still open, and the two of them sat under the eave of the house in the second lane past the temple, shelling. The house was four hundred years old in its oldest wall and fifty years old in its leak, and Ah-ma shelled oysters the way other women knit — the knife finding the hinge by feel, the thumb turning the shell over, the meat flicked into the basin — while the tourists came through the lane in twos and sixes and photographed whatever was oldest, which was the wall, and whatever was flowered, which was her.

Lin Li watched them work the lane with her collector's eye, cold as ever, and the eye found what it always found: the wall of the lane-end house was beautiful, and the beauty was structural. The oyster shells had been laid like scales, hollow sides down and out, and the pointing between them had gone the color of old bone except in one place. In one place, behind the change of season where the headboard of Ah-ma's bed stood against the inside face, the re-pointing was newer and worse — a seam of shell-lime clumsily struck, done by someone in a hurry, or done by someone who knew exactly what she was doing and wanted it to look hurried. Lin Li had registered that seam for years the way you register a patched sleeve on a proud man. It was the only botched thing on her grandmother's house.

"You're doing it again," Ah-ma said, without looking up from the shells.

"Doing what."

"Counting my walls like money." The knife found a hinge; the shell gave. "Your pen eyes. Your mother had them too, before she decided words were for other people." She put the shelled meat in, and the empty shell went onto the pile with a click, half-past, half-past, a sound like a very small door being decided about. "Read me the no‑

tices. All of them. The neighbors are pretending not to listen, and it does them good."

Lin Li read. The typhoon season's drill schedule. The free blood-pressure morning at the clinic. A call for the village's photographs of the Mazu procession, for the district's archive, prize for the best. And the fish prices, which Ah-ma repeated back to a passing neighbor — from memory, exact, having heard them once — and undersold by half a yuan, on principle, to a widow with a bad hip.

Danran had come out on the late bus with the stele rubbings and a camera she was too shy to raise, which in her case meant she raised it constantly. The timeline matrix was due Monday; three of the dis‑puted dates lived in the village — the temple's founding stone, the procession banner's embroidered regnal year, and a lintel over a well — and Danran wanted photographs of all three, squared and lit, to settle the birth-date argument by weight of agreement. Lin Li made the introductions at the oyster table. Ah-ma looked at the girl for a long, unhurried moment, the way she looked at an oyster before committing the knife.

"You're the one who writes the small words under the videos," Ah-ma said.

"You've seen them?"

"The whole lane has seen them. The Xus' granddaughter sends them to the family chat." A pause, the knife resting. "You film my hands but not my face."

"Faces need permission," Danran said.

"Hands don't?" Ah-ma considered this, and something moved behind the performance like a fish under ice. "You may film the face Sunday, at the temple, when I'm wearing the crown. On Sunday I am somebody." And she went back to the shells, and Danran looked at Lin Li with an expression that Lin Li pretended not to translate: the girl had just been given a gift and a commission in the same breath, and neither of them would ever be able to say afterward who had agreed to what.

The application crossed her desk on Monday.

It came up through the internal route in the ordinary afternoon stack, between a printer-tender invoice and a request from the school district, and it did not announce itself. *Heritage-dwelling activation, preliminary dossier,* the cover said — one of the homestay conver ‑ sions the district had started permitting in the old fishing settlements since the listing, the kind of paper Lin Li's desk touched because the house had ended up, absurdly, as the city's unofficial proofreading desk for anything with heritage in its blood. Plaques, panels, audio-guide scripts, the little museum texts that went up all over the coast: everything passed across her desk to have its dates checked and its adjectives lowered.

The dossier was good. That was the first thing. It was bound properly, the plans were drawn to scale, the drainage was thought about — a designer had loved this project before any money had touched it. The property was a two-bay oyster-shell house in the second lane past the temple. Ah-ma's house. The west half of it: the half with the room Lin Li had slept in as a child in summer, the half with the bad pointing behind the bed.

And there, at the head of the design statement, quoted entire, set in a serif at fifteen percent grey above the plan drawings, was a photograph and a line. The photograph was eleven years old and slightly too warm, the color of that year's cameras: her grandmother at the wall of the lane, one hand flat on the shells, wearing the morning in her hair. The line beneath it was her own.

The oysters arrived as ballast, the old men say, and stayed on as walls. In Xunpu the sea is recycled into armor, and armor worn long enough starts to look like decoration.

Her sentence. The first fixed sentence of the entry that had gone out of her in 2012 like a letter off a bridge, uncredited, riding the project the way a figurehead rides a prow. The designer had found it — everyone found it; the sentence had been copied so many times it had come loose from any author and floated free, a piece of the city's

public language now — and set it over the plans the way you set a saint over a doorway, for luck.

In the margin of the design statement, in a small precise hand, the designer had written her notes. *Do not sand the east interior wall — the whitewash layers are the house's age rings; the 1966 layer stays. I would rather the rooms read slightly rough than read as new.* And beside that, small, almost hidden: a tiny drawn circle, the kind a child draws for the sun.

Lin Li read the disclosure line on the approval form. *Relationship to the property or parties:* it asked, and gave a ruled space for the answer, and the ruled space looked out at her like a flat at low tide, wide, honest, and empty. Her grandmother owned the west half. Her own childhood slept in the west half. The sentence on the plans was her sentence, the photograph her grandmother, the whole dossier a machine that could only have been built by the thing Lin Li herself had set loose in 2012, and the honest answer to the form's question ran four lines minimum and ended in her resignation from the re-view.

She picked up the pen — the red pen, the one for things already dead — and set it down again, and took the rice-paste pencil, because this was not a death, this was an opinion, and opinions filed in pencil could be lived inside for years.

She checked the technical annexes: drainage, structural, fire. She corrected two dates in the heritage copy and lowered one adjective. She wrote *approved with corrections* in the space that decides, and left the ruled line about relationships blank, and signed, and the pencil moved across the signature more smoothly than a pencil has any right to move, and the small pleasure of that smoothness was noted somewhere in her, filed, and not read.

Roof: the west half's ridge had wept for a decade; the project would rebuild it, and Ah-ma would have a dry winter for the first time since her husband's boat came back without him. That was the reason she wrote in the memo field, in five words, when the form

asked for one: *family property, informed consent*. Two of the five words were even true, and the third was the love, and the love was real, and she let the realness of the love sign the paper after her hand had finished with it.

Used: the dossier's last page was the deck page from the investor's pitch, and the investor's pitch had her sentence in fifteen percent grey as its epigraph, and some junior had kerned it beautifully. Her own words, set by a stranger, wearing her grandmother like a locket. It is not nothing, she told the bathroom mirror that evening, to be quoted by money. The mirror declined to reply.

The renovation began the following week, which was the last week of March, and the mason came up from the shore end of the lane with two apprentices and a hand cart of tools, and his name was Guo, and he was a Xunpu man who had learned shell pointing from his father, and his father had learned it from the men who could still remember the ships.

He was forty-odd, built like a mooring post, and he had a habit Lin Li noticed on the first morning: before he touched anything, he looked at it. He stood in front of the west wall for a full minute, hands in his apron, and then he took out his phone and photographed the re-pointed seam behind the headboard's ghost — the one bad seam, the hurried seam — before anyone had moved a single shell.

"For my father," he said, catching her watching. "He won't believe it otherwise. Pointing like that — shell lime over boat putty, laid in weather that wants to fight you. Nobody in this lane has done it in fifty years, because nobody in this lane could." He shook his head slowly, the way other men said *unbelievable*. "Someone treated this wall like a boat. You don't caulk a house, auntie. You caulk a thing that has to hold out water."

He said it with respect, and he touched the seam with one finger, as you touch the hull of a dry-docked ship, and Lin Li stood in the lane with the rain starting again and felt the words go into her and settle somewhere below the place where she kept her reasons.

The plaque went up at the lane gate on Thursday, district-issued, the new laminated kind with the pinyin for the tourists. She stopped in front of it with her shopping and read what the city had decided her grandmother's house was called.

The plaque by the lane gate spelled it out for visitors — 蚵壳厝 — Ké Ké Cuò, the oyster-shell house — the doubled syllable like the sea repeating itself, though in Ah-ma's mouth the same three characters were older than the spelling.

Under the official name, in smaller print, was a second line, the district's attempt at poetry, the same grey serif as the deck: the sea is recycled into armor. Her own sentence again, clipped at the waist, working for the district now too. She stood in front of the plaque while two tourists read it slowly aloud in an accent from very far away, and photographed the shells, and photographed the old woman who had just come around the corner with the flat basket, and the old woman gave them the face — the sweet, creased, delighted, illiterate face, the face that had won every argument on the flat for sixty years — and Lin Li's collector's eye took the picture too, and filed it, coldly, in the place where the wire was.

That night the first video went up. *Ama Says,* the account was called. Fourteen seconds: the hands, the knife, the hinge, the shell giving, the flowers at the edge of the frame moving as the old woman laughed at something out of shot. Danran had filmed it at the oyster table on Sunday, before the temple, before the crown, and she had captioned it in the girl's own clear hand: *Eighty-six years. No gloves. Ask her anything — she'll answer the question you meant.*

By Friday it had twenty thousand views, and the lane had its first car that came looking for a wall.

CHAPTER 5

5

The wall opened on the second of April, the day before the festival when the living sweep the graves of the dead, and it opened the way walls do: the mason's youngest apprentice picked at the seam his master had photographed, the shell lime that had been laid in a hurry sixty years ago gave up first, and a hollow breathed out of the wall into the room.

Lin Li was not there. She was at her desk in the city, lowering an adjective in a panel text about the temple fair, when the phone rang with the mason's number and his voice, careful, the voice of a man standing very still: "Auntie. There's a jar in your grandmother's wall."

Not a jar hidden the way a housekeeper hides keys — the photographs he sent made that clear before he did. The crock had been set into the fabric of the wall itself, in a pocket the masons of some earlier century had left between the structural courses, the way the sea leaves a pocket in a reef. Squat, salt-glazed, of the kind every fishing kitchen had once kept full of the year's salted fish; and around it, packed behind and above and below, the wall had been rebuilt course by course, shells reset in their old pattern, and the pointing at the pocket's mouth had been struck by someone who knew hull work and had not cared who knew it later.

The photographs arrived one after another, five of them, and Lin Li looked at the fifth for a long time before the first. It was the widest shot, and it showed the opened pocket in the wall the way an airport X-ray shows a suitcase: the crock seated dead center, its mouth facing the room, and around it, unmistakable even in a phone photo, the wall's own grain bending around the void — the shell courses flowing over the jar like water over a stone, decades of pattern growing to include it. The wall had known. Walls are made by people, and some

people had known, and the knowledge had been mortared in and plastered over and lived with, for sixty years, four feet from a radio.

She called the mason back. She was already reaching for her coat.

"Don't open it," she said. "Don't force the lid. Don't put it in the sun. Wrap it if you have to move it, and move it like it's dynamite, because it might be — no, it isn't," she said, correcting herself, correcting the year. "It's paper. Move it like it's paper."

"Auntie," the mason said, with the calm of a man who had already decided all of this, "I do boats." The line went dead in the manner of a man returning to work. Lin Li stood in the corridor with the rain on the arcade behind her, and understood that she had just been given instructions by a mason, and had taken them. The mason had widened the opening with his hands, no tools, shell by shell. His message said: *Not broken. Waiting.*

Ah-ma was in the east room when they carried it out, and she did not come to the doorway, and that was the first strange thing, be - cause Ah-ma came to doorways the way harbors come to tides.

By the time Lin Li got there — the bus, then the lane, the tourists parting around her at the smell of speed — the crock stood on the oyster table in the courtyard on a folded tarpaulin, and the mason and his apprentices had withdrawn to the gate with the delicacy of men who have opened something in a hull and are waiting to learn whether the sea is finished with it. The afternoon light came off the shells across the lane and lay on the salt glaze in a long grey smile. Word had gone round the lane the way word does — two old women had come as far as the corner by the Xus' wall and stood there with their baskets, at the exact distance at which one can see everything and admit nothing — and the mason's youngest apprentice was guarding the gate with a broom and the solemnity of a boy guarding an airport.

The lid was capped with wax. Dark wax, built up in coats, each coat the print of some patient thumb, and under the wax a lashing of oilcloth corded with what looked like net-twine, and under that the

lid itself, seated so fast that the mason had refused to force it. “Sixty years in a wall,” he said, “and it talks when you knock. Dry as a church.” He knocked it once, gently, with a knuckle, to demonstrate, and the crock answered with a sound like a full jar, like something packed to the shoulder, and Ah-ma, in the east room, turned her radio up.

Lin Li cut the cord. The wax she took off in plates with the mason’s own knife, warmed against her palm, and it came away in the shapes of the coats, six coats, maybe seven, a record of some evening when a twenty-six-year-old woman had sat in this courtyard with a kettle and done a patient thing over and over until it was done. Under the wax, the oilcloth was stiff as bark. Under the oilcloth the lid lifted with a sigh of trapped air, and the smell that came out of the jar was not salt fish.

It was paper. Old paper, cold and faintly sweet, the smell of a library that has learned to live without hands.

Inside, packed upright, was a book.

Lin Li took it out with both hands. It was heavier than its size and cooler than the afternoon, and it came up out of the crock trailing a dry whisper of its own wrapping — a sleeve of oiled paper, gone amber, folded around the boards with a medicine-packet care. Thread-bound, the way Chinese books had been bound for a thou‑sand years: no spine, no glue, a stitched spine of four eyes, the thread replaced once, you could see, a paler thread among the old. The boards were paper over paper over paper. The leaves, when she fanned them at the light, were bamboo paper gone the color of weak tea with a tan floater in it, and here and there, sewn into the gather‑ing at intervals like rivers threaded through a country, ran leaves of a different stock — blank leaves, whiter, newer, added when the book was bound. Someone had built blank pages into this book on purpose. A book with rooms added for the future.

And the margins were not empty. She saw that before she saw anything else, before she read a word: the book had been kept by

readers. Down the outer edges of page after page, in the careful dry band that good readers keep between text and destruction, ran writ‑ing — hands, plural; a hand and then another hand and then, in the newer blank leaves, a young round hand she almost recognized from somewhere. She did not read them. The courtyard was not the place, and the light was going, and a margin read in the wrong order is a margin spoiled. But she saw the spread of them, four centuries deep, the way you see from the air that a country is inhabited before you land.

The outside slip said one thing. The inside slip said another.

The slip on the outside said 藏書 *— Cangshu, a book to keep hidden.*

She turned it in the light. A slip of the same bamboo stock, a title in a strong, unhurried hand, the characters cut in the old full-faced way that printers had used when she was a child and nobody used anymore. She knew the title. Every child in the county knew the title; the title was on the wall of the museum, on the postcards, on the spine of the school reader, in the names of teahouses. The book to keep hidden. The man's safe book, his careful book, the one he had expected the world to permit.

Beneath it, older, in another ink: 焚書 *— Fenshu, a book to burn.*

A second slip, a different ink, gone the brown that old iron-gall ink goes, the hand smaller and quicker, the characters cut with a blade that had been in a hurry — and the title underneath it was the other title. Not the safe book. The burning book, the book whose name was a sentence about itself, the book that had been carried out of the country in order to go on existing. This hand-copied thing, this village thing, this jar thing, wore the burning title under the safe title the way a house wears new paint over old — and anyone lifting the first slip, as Lin Li had lifted it, would have shelved it in the mind as the harmless one, and would have carried home the other thing en‑tirely.

A *Fenshu* inside a *Cangshu*. A book to burn, filed as a book to keep.

The courtyard was very quiet. The mason's apprentices had stopped pretending to sort shells. Down the lane a tourist was read‑ing the new plaque to her boyfriend in the accent of very far away, the doubled syllable going by like a gull.

She thought about the order of the slips, because order was her trade. The burning title was the older one. Somebody had written *Fenshu* first — had taken up the brush and named the thing, to its face, a book to burn — and had then, in a different ink, at a different speed, added the safe title over it, outside, for the world to lift. The safe title was the younger lie. Whoever had made this book had done the arithmetic of this city in two brushstrokes: name the truth first, then clothe it, then put the clothing where the hand goes and the truth where the heart goes, and let the wall do the rest. It was a two-slip sentence, and she had spent her whole career writing its opposite — the safe version first, the true version later, if ever, in a folder.

Lin Li looked up and found her grandmother in the doorway of the east room at last, come as far as the threshold and no farther, one hand on the door frame as if the floor of the courtyard were the deck of something in motion. Ah-ma looked at the book in her grand‑daughter's hands, at the wrong title lying open on the table beside its honest cover, and her face did nothing at all. Sixty years of faces were behind the nothing, and the nothing was load-bearing, and Lin Li, who had been raised inside that nothing and had mistook it all her life for an old woman's simplicity, stood in the courtyard holding the book and did not know what she was looking at. Then Ah-ma said, in the tone of a woman declining a second helping:

"Old paper draws new trouble. Burn it."

She said it as she said the fish prices — public, carrying, a proverb for the lane to hear. And she turned back into the east room, and the radio came up, and the opera that filled it was one about a siege.

Lin Li did not burn it.

She finished the unpacking instead, because the jar was not empty, and an editor's hands, in the presence of an unsorted archive, will act on their own. Under the book, wrapped in a twist of the same oiled paper, was a photograph — she saw, before her training closed the lid on it, a courtyard, rows of small solemn figures, a light that belonged to some other century's autumn — and she set it face down on the tarpaulin, unlooked-at, the way you set down a letter you can feel is not addressed to you yet. Under the photograph, in its own wrap, separate, was a pen.

She did not look at the pen. She registered that it was there, and put it down beside the photograph, and her eyes went to the book instead, because the book was the thing with a title, and titles were her jurisdiction, and the two slips were lying on the tarpaulin like a bet someone had laid sixty years ago on the far side of a wall.

The mason broke the silence first, from the gate, with the practical reverence of his trade.

"There's lime in the pointing that isn't lime," he said. "Boat putty. My father's recipe — tung oil, and the lime burned from these same shells. That wall didn't get a patch, auntie. It got a launching." He looked at the crock, the wax plates, the amber sleeve. "Whoever she was," he said — assuming, reasonably, a woman; the hand on the wax had been small — "she didn't hide that jar. She *berthed* it. There's a difference. Hiding is what you do with stolen goods. This was cargo with a destination."

Lin Li wrapped the book in its sleeve, and the slips in their own fold of paper, and the photograph, and the pen, and the mason car ‑ ried the empty crock to the east room's threshold and set it down there, outside, at the door — not inside, not thrown away; set down at the threshold of the woman who would not come to the doorway, as if returning a boat to its mooring. Ah-ma's radio played the siege. The apprentices picked their shells back up. Down the lane the tourists had found the oyster women at the flats, and the shutter-sound of the

village went on, click and half-past, click and half-past, all evening, the sound of everything being kept.

She did not photograph the book. She did not call Danran, or the working group, or the museum, or the number on Su Min's card. Her hands had unpacked the thing with the confidence of a profession, and her profession's whole architecture — the reference frame, the approved corpus, the four words, the door-ready face — stood up in her, fully staffed, ready to receive the find, catalogue it, settle it, protect it; and she thanked the architecture and walked out of her own head with the bundle under her arm, the way you walk a sleeping child past a barking dog. Some things you do not report until you know what you are reporting. The city had waited five hundred years. It could wait for a bus.

Lin Li took the bus back to the city with the bundle on her lap, both arms around it, holding a sleeping child on a night crossing. The bus crossed the bridges with the old city strung out along the water to the right, the towers lit, her own tower coming up to meet them on the left, fourteen floors of glass with one lamp on in it. She did not open the bundle again. She did not look at the pen. She rehearsed, without knowing she was rehearsing, the sentences she would need if anyone on the bus had asked what she was carrying — *family things, papers, my grandmother's* — and was appalled, quietly, professionally, at how good they were.

The thing she did not do — the burning, ordered by the one person on earth with the standing to order it, declined by a woman who edited the past for a living — sat in her chest on the bridge between the dark water and the lit towers and did not resolve, and did not need to resolve, and came home with her.

CHAPTER 6

6

The festival of the dead fell that year on the fifth of April, and for three days the city did what it always did for its dead, which was to burn paper at them on an industrial scale. The queues for the cemetery buses started at the overpass at six in the morning. The joss shop below the house sold out of paper villas by Thursday — two-story paper villas now, with paper balconies and paper air-conditioners, and, at the deluxe tier, a paper motorcar with a paper driver, because the dead of this city were assumed to have kept their licenses. The smoke stood over the lanes in columns. Half the city hearth-smoke; the other half, for three days, was also hearth-smoke, and the immortals kept indoors.

Lin Li did not go sweeping. Her father's family had its hills and its tablets in Jinjiang and its own arrangements, and her grandmother's dead were mostly water, and water does not keep graves. She stayed home with a book that had come out of a wall, and she observed the protocol of her trade.

She washed her hands before touching it, not from reverence — reverence was a thing she had seen done to books and had never once seen change a page — but because dirt is a fact and facts were suddenly precious. She cleared the desk to the wood. No gloves: gloves are for things you fear damaging more than knowing, and she had decided, in the dark on the bridge, that knowing came first. She read in the mornings, before the day could put its oar in, and she read slowly, the way you walk a floor that might be hollow.

The first leaf inside the cover was a contents leaf, and the hand on it was dry, and terse, and unsigned, and it was the finest piece of editorial work she had ever seen. It said:

Kept the letters, kept the women, kept the child's heart. The rest of him is in other books that other people kept.

Fourteen words and a policy. She sat back. Her whole profession — the reference frames, the three readings, the four words, the folders of drafts morgued by date — her whole profession was an argument with this leaf, and the leaf won in fourteen words without raising its voice. A compiler who refuses totality; who states, on the first page, exactly what was kept and hands the rest to other keepers; who does not pretend that a book can be a man. The city's volume, the one her eight hundred characters were being sewn into, promised the reader a man in a page and a quarter. This leaf promised nothing, delivered three things, and named its own finitude as a virtue. She thought of the reference frame document, with its harvested phrases, its retired words. She thought: this widow ran a tighter shop than the bureau.

She had made herself one rule for the three mornings, an editor's rule, and it was this: the text first, the readers after. The margins ran down page after page — she had seen them in the courtyard, hands plural, centuries plural — and every professional instinct she owned wanted to start with the margins, because margins are where the living are, and the living are where the stories are. She deferred them. You read the dead man clean once, before you let his readers introduce themselves; you owe the text that much before you owe the people their entrance. So she read the text, and when a margin grew too long at the edge of her eye she moved her thumb over it, the way you put your hand over a name on an envelope until you're ready.

The women's essay came third, and she nearly missed its importance because the first paragraph is a dismissal. Some person, unnamed, had written to him — the leaf said the letters were kept entire, receipts and all. *It is a pity,* the man had written, *that women's seeing is short. It is the one thing about them that cannot be taught, and the one or two who try are an exception best left*

unencouraged, for their own protection. The essay answers him. It answers him the way you answer a man who has mistaken you for the doorman, from height, without heat, and it was in its third sentence that Lin Li stopped being an editor and became, for the length of a page and a half, simply a woman in a room with a book.

So: the dead man wrote, *to say that people are male and female — that may be allowed. To say that seeing is male and female — how could that be allowed? To say that seeing has its long and its short — that too may be allowed. To say that men's seeing is all long, and women's all short — how could that be allowed? Set a woman's body on a man's road, with a man's range of sight — hearing true arguments and knowing street-talk for what it is worth; learning the way out and knowing the floating world for what it is worth — and I am afraid the men of this age, seeing her, would sweat with shame and not dare to make a sound.*

Sweat with shame and not dare to make a sound. Lin Li read it twice. Below the essay, in the outer margin, in that same dry hand, somebody had written a sentence she did not let herself read — the margins she had resolved to defer, the way you defer dessert; the text first, the readers after; the dead man speaking, then the people who had kept him speaking. But her eye took the margin's shape anyway, its length, its certainty, the way your ear takes the shape of a sentence in a language you don't speak. The margin was exactly as long as it needed to be. Nobody had padded it. Somewhere in the last two hundred and sixty years a reader had known exactly how long her sentence was, and had written it once, and left it.

The childlike-heart essay she read on the second morning, and it was the one that diagnosed her.

The childlike heart is the true heart, the essay began, or near enough — the initial mind, the first thought, entire and unprocessed; and everything else — the classics learned, the phrases inherited, the great sentences swallowed before you could ask who was doing the feeding — everything else is the sound of that first mind being paved

over, lane by lane, until the person walks on asphalt and calls the asphalt a self. And then, further in, the sentence that made her stand up and go to the window: *the classics have become,* he wrote, *the phrase-book of the false and the fishing-pool of the liars.* The best words of the age, he said further down, were not being said in the examination halls at all; they were being said by storytellers in the market lanes, by people the registers never learned the names of, and it was the registers' silence that proved the point. The phrase-book of the false. She stood at the window a long time. Fourteen floors down, the model city lay in the morning haze, the towers lit, the lanes a scribble, and somewhere in the scribble was her office, which manu‑factured, at industrial scale, out of the first thoughts of dead people, phrase-books. That was the trade. That had always been the trade; she was good at it; she was the most reliable phrase-book maker in the building. The essay did not say her name. The essay had been dead for four hundred years and it did not need to; it had described the job with the accuracy of an audit.

She went back to the book. That was the strange thing, and she noticed it: the essay did not make her put the book down. It made her hold it differently.

The Geng correspondence she saved for the third morning, as you save the strong liquor. The letters ran long — the leaf had not lied; one of them ran thirty pages in this hand, and Lin Li, who had spent her career cutting men's thousand-character essays to four hundred and hearing about it for a week, understood that she was looking at a man who had never once in his life been edited. The correspondence was a war conducted at the level of quotation. The other party — a magistrate, a moralist, a patron turned prosecutor, a man of the same generation of exams — wrote to him in the tone of a headmaster, and Li Zhi answered by the simple expedient of copying the headmaster's own sentences, entire, at the top of the page, and setting down beside them, without comment, the behavior. The sentence above; the life below. The reader left to be the verdict. Once he reproduced, she saw,

a whole sermon the headmaster had published on men who build their gates too tall, and set directly beneath it — no dates, no sourcing, nothing but the date — the measured dimensions of the headmaster's own new gate. The gate was still there; she had walked past it in a museum town in another province, years ago, and had photographed it for the arches, and had never once thought about the hands that built it. Receipts, the leaf had called them, and Lin Li felt the word arrive in her professional blood like a transfusion: this was the technique she had watched the good committees use and the bad committees deny — quote the man in his own words, date it, sign nothing, and let the double image do what adjectives cannot.

The name at the top of the letters, the headmaster's name, was Geng.

She worked for a Geng. She had poured-out tea from a Geng for nine years. She looked at the name for a moment — a common enough syllable, a whole province of Gengs between here and the lakes — and filed the coincidence in the place where the office filed coincidences, which was nowhere, and moved on, and the name moved with her, patient, patient as the sound in a dream she was not letting herself think about.

The last letter of the third morning was the short one, and it was the one that finished her. He had walked a long road, the letter said — this was its whole mechanism; she translated as she went, the English arriving of itself — he had walked this road a long time, meeting on it only people going the other way; every conversation a negotiation, every friendship an audit, every reader a superior. And reading — this was the sentence she copied out, because the notebook was right there and her hand moved before the caution did — *reading is a man walking a long road in the hope of bumping into one other person going his way. The road is nothing. The walking is nothing. The whole of it is arranged for the bumping-into, which is rare, and which is the only event.*

She sat with that until the dehumidifier shut itself off and the flat filled with its own silence, and she understood that she had been on the road a long time herself, and that the wall — the absurd, four-hundred-year-old, boat-caulked wall — had just bumped into her.

The death material came last, and it was not what the four words had prepared her for, because it was not an account of dying at all. It was letters. Three of them, from the spring of his arrest, to the friend in the north who had taken him in — letters about the Classics he was still correcting, about the money he owed his host, about a sore on his leg that would not close, about the transport home that was being arranged for him with what the letters made plain was courtesy, even kindness; the empire could be gentle in the ways that mattered least. In the third letter, the one written nearest the end, there was a sentence about the road home — the long road south, at seventy-six, past every town where his name was currently worth a reward — and the sentence declined the road, quietly, in the manner of a man de‑clining a second helping, and what it proposed instead was not said, because the letter stopped soon after, mid-thought, the way a man stops when he hears steps in the corridor.

After the letters, in a different hand — the dry hand, the widow's hand — came the account. She read it once. He asked the jailer for the barber, it said. When the shaving was done he asked to keep the blade, and the request was granted, because who fears a seventy-six-year-old. He opened his throat. He lived two days. Asked why — he could not speak — he wrote with a wet finger on the table: an old man has nothing left to seek.

Beneath the account, the dry hand had written one line of its own: *They are burning his books again this year. This one was born for it.*

Lin Li put the volume down and did what she would have done for any text in the building, because the discipline was the discipline: she checked the approved sources. The certificate biography: four words, and around the four words a paragraph of honors. The selected works: the year 1602 appeared in a chronology, between an edition

and an edition, four words, no barber, no two days, no wet finger, no road declined. The museum wall text: the four words, plus the word *spirit*, twice. She searched the corpus for the letters. Nothing. She searched it for the account. Nothing. She searched it for the word *razor*. The corpus had plenty of the burning and none of the reading, and none of the razor either; the razor had been sanded off the man the way you sand a hull, and the four words were what floated.

The razor had reached her by hand, from inside a wall.

On the morning of the festival itself she finished the book, and closed it, and found what close readers find last. On the final leaf, in the dry hand, the colophon:

Copied by a widow with no one to leave it to. If a later hand finds this, add yours. A book only kept is a corpse.

And on the flyleaf at the front, where she had opened the book three days before and seen without reading, in a different hand altogether — a woman's hand, round and unhurried, no date, no name — one line:

I am not brave. I am only tidy.

Lin Li sat with the closed book on her knees while the city burned paper for its dead below the window, and the smoke went up in columns through the drizzle, and somewhere in the scribble of lanes a shop weighed sandalwood by the jin for strangers. The book had asked for a hand. Outside, every grave in the hills had its name carved deep, and none of them had ever asked for anything, being stone; but this one — this paper one, this jar one — had asked, in fourteen words, three hundred years ago, and had waited through the burning and the banning and the tourism for the hand to come, and the hand, which was hers, which was the most reliable hand in the building, had read the whole book and not yet answered.

It was the first commission of her professional life that she did not know how to bill.

CHAPTER 7

7

The six weeks between the festival and the seventeenth of May were the quietest of her professional life, and the quiet was load-bearing, like everything else in that city.

The entry went into layout. The volume's production schedule ran on rails she knew by heart — copy-edit queries answered in her own hand, one of them mine, she thought, I wrote that rule, in 2019, in a meeting, before either of us knew what we were ruling on — and the art editor's third cover, the single flower on black, was approved without a meeting, which everyone understood to mean the working group had stopped looking at it. Danran's timeline matrix arrived, immaculate, three disputed dates resolved by weight of stone: the temple's founding stone, the banner's regnal year, the well lintel, each photographed squared and lit, each carrying a little note in the girl's precise hand — *source outranks summary; stone outranks print*. Lin Li read *stone outranks print* and thought of the wall, and said nothing, and the saying-nothing was becoming a discipline, like the pencil, like the folding.

At the north window the postcard had been joined by others — five now, six, white backs out, a private library going up swallow-pace. The channel had a name now, *Ama Says,* and a rhythm, Sundays, and a growing body of strangers who wrote things like *my grandmother too* in the comments, and Danran read the comments the way sailors read weather, at dawn, before anyone could watch her face do it.

On the seventeenth of May, a Sunday, Lin Li opened a new account and called it *A Book to Burn*.

The name came off the second slip. The slip beneath the honest cover — the older ink, the hurried blade — had named the thing to its

face, and the thing had waited a hundred and forty years inside a wall and sixty years inside a crock for somebody to call it what its maker called it. She was not going to give the account a clever name. The account would wear the burning title the way the book wore it: underneath, where the hand goes.

The platform knew her name. That was the arrangement everywhere now; the phones had seen to it years ago, one politely worded update at a time, and every register in the country was real at the back and whatever it liked at the front. The platform would know her sleeping hours, her typing cadence, the make of her restlessness. The readers would know nothing. In her experience the arrangement suited both parties, and the fact that it suited the platform best of all was the kind of thought she had learned, in 2013, to have on her way to some other thought.

Creating the account took four minutes, most of which was the agreement. She read the first page of the terms — she was the only person she knew who read the first page — and then she agreed to all the rest of it at speed, the way everyone agrees to everything now: a single gesture, total, revocable by nobody. Somewhere in the terms was a clause about authenticity, and a clause about harmony, and a clause that let the platform take the account's bones if the account's flesh ever inconvenienced anyone. She had agreed to that clause before, in 2012, in a different color of logo, and she agreed to it again. The Men in the private room had not needed terms of service. That was, she thought, closing the dialog, the only real difference between the years: the room had become a checkbox, and the checkbox had become a way of life.

2013 had also taught her the sound of a private room's air conditioning, and the weight of an envelope of cash being set on a table by a man who wanted her to know it was an honor, and the specific loneliness of walking home through a city in which, for the first time in her life, she could feel the lines being drawn around her — the knowledge moving through the town faster than she walked, arriving

ahead of her at every corner, so that by the time she reached her own stairwell the doorman's face already wore it. None of that would be in the new account. The new account would carry sentences. Sentences were what she had that the room had wanted, and sentences were what she would spend, and if the room came for her again it would find her older, and slower to thank anyone.

The first post went up at nine in the evening, into the road, with nobody on it. She had four followers, three of them bots, and the fourth was a poetry account that followed everyone. It did not matter. She had not come back to be read, not yet; she had come back to obey an instruction, which is a different thing, and older, and she had the strange sense — standing at the window afterward with the sea doing its numbers across the river — of being the four-hundred-year-old party in the transaction. The widow had copied a book with no one to leave it to. Lin Li had an account with no one to read it. Between those two conditions there was so much symmetry that she refused to look at it directly.

Some housekeeping, she wrote. *The old account is gone. This one begins at 214, because the numbers are the only furniture that survived the move, and because I don't intend to pretend the shelf was empty. What happened in April 2013 happened. What happened between then and now also happened, and none of it will be explained here, because explanations are how you feed a thing you should be starving.*

House rules, for as long as anyone is here: no real names, mine or anyone's. No previews. No explanations. The numbering will not be broken again.

She read it back. It was the old voice — her voice, the one from before, the one that had been deleted — and it came back to her hand the way a bicycle comes back, badly at first and then all at once. She posted it, and sat in the dark, and felt — nothing dramatic; that was the surprise; she had expected the feeling of a convict back inside the

wall, and got instead the feeling of a woman opening a window in a room she had kept shut for reasons she could mostly still remember.

The second post took two weeks, because the second post was the reason.

On oyster-shell houses, she wrote. *The old men say the shells came as ballast — that the fleets of the Song, heavy going out with silk and porcelain and light coming home, filled their hulls with the coast of Africa on the way back, and dumped the coast of Africa at the tide-line here, and the village, being competent, built with it. Engineers will tell you the shells are local, that ballast is a story, that stories are how coasts do arithmetic they can't do any other way. Fine. The engineers are right about everything except what the story is for. The story says: the sea came here in the holds of ships, was unloaded by the poor, and was worn by them until it protected them. That is the whole history of this coast in one shell. The houses face the water with a material the water shipped for free. The pointing between the shells is oyster-lime, burned from the same reef the shells were raided from, so the wall is the sea binding the sea to itself. In Xunpu the sea is recycled into armor, and armor worn long enough starts to look like decoration, and decoration worn long enough starts to look like prayer — and nobody who lives behind one of these walls would thank you for saying so, because to them it is none of those things. It is a wall. It keeps the rain off. That it is also the other three things is the wall's business, and the tourist's, and mine.*

She posted it at dawn, because dawn felt truer than evening for a piece about walls.

Then, with the coffee still hot, she did the thing she had been not-doing for two weeks. She searched her own sentences.

It was research, she told herself — the researcher's oldest lie, told to the researcher by the researcher, and believed, because the al‑ternative was vanity, and vanity was the thing she had once been told she had too much of, by two men in a private room, in the years when

men still told you things like that in person. She searched the ballast claim, to see what the engineers were saying. She searched *oyster-shell house,* in Chinese and then in the romanization, in images and then in text. And on the fourth page of the fourth search, in a forum thread about where exactly to photograph the walls at dawn without crowds, she found a sentence she knew the way you know a scar under a shirt.

The sea is recycled into armor, and armor worn long enough starts to look like decoration.

Posted by a user named for a mountain in another province, in 2019, in a thread with three hundred replies, quoted by a later user with the comment *stealing this,* and below that by another, *where is this??,* and below that, an answer from 2024, precise to the lane. Her sentence. From the post that was deleted before this forum account was created — deleted, taken down, unindexed, the takedown notice still in her files with its eleven words of regret-shaped plastic — and there it was, alive, in a stranger's thread, wearing no name, doing work.

She searched further, because the discipline was the discipline and because the feeling in her chest had no other exit. The sentence was everywhere. It was on a travel agency's page, translated into English and back, slightly wrong — *the ocean is recycled into armor* — the wrongness its own kind of preservation, a fossil preserved by being slightly not the animal. It was in a Xiaohongshu note with forty thousand likes, attributed to *network*. It was in a municipal cultural-tourism booklet, set in the same grey serif the district favored, uncredited, doing its job. It was on the lane-gate plaque two streets from her grandmother's door; she walked past her own prose every Saturday like a woman walking past a mirror she has decided is a window. And it was in a high-school student's blog post about her hometown, where the sentence had grown a second sentence of the girl's own, shyer, better in places than the first, the way a remora travels with a shark and sometimes swims better.

Eleven words of hers, outliving their own deletion, reproducing in the wild, mutating slightly, feeding strangers. The mirrors had taken it the way the sea takes anything you throw off a bridge — every‑where, instantly, and gone from your hands forever.

She sat with the search results for a long time. This was the economy the men in the private room had feared, and taught her to fear — the copy that cannot be recalled, the past that will not stay past — and here it was, her own deletion, undone not by the platform and not by the state and not by her, but by three hundred strangers who had found a sentence true enough to carry. The men in the room had believed that deleting a thing deleted it. The engineers believed the ballast was a story. The forum believed the sentence was every‑one's, and the forum, of all the courts in the land, had ruled most nearly correctly.

She closed the search. She did not post about the mirrors. There would be a post, someday, about the mirrors — she could feel it waiting, patient, the way a ferry waits — but not now, because a thing said too early is a thing said for the wrong reader, and she had just learned, from a widow's colophon, about waiting. She screenshot the forum thread, the agency page, the student's blog, and filed them in a new folder on the desktop, and named the folder *SOURCE*, which was, she reflected, the closest thing to a joke she had made in nine years.

The bundle itself lived at the flat now, in the bottom drawer of the writing desk, wrapped in its sleeve, the slips in their fold of paper on top like a hat. The photograph she had still not turned over. The pen she had still not looked at — it lay in its own wrap at the drawer's edge, the one object in her home she treated the way the superstitious treat a god, with avoidance. And the crock stood at Ah-ma's threshold in the village, empty, lid off, holding rain and one acacia leaf, because Ah-ma had not brought it inside and no one else had dared.

At the office on Monday, Danran mentioned, over the printer, that someone had linked the channel's oyster video to a discussion of

shell-lime chemistry on a building forum, and that the chemists were being very rude about a very old technique, and that the girl had spent her weekend reading about hydraulic lime and had won, in her own estimation, every argument. “Somebody should write the real history of these walls,” she said. “Not the plaque version. The real one. Who pointed them, and when, and what it cost.” She said it to the printer, not to Lin Li, the way people say true things to machines.

“Somebody probably will,” Lin Li said, to the printer, and both of them heard the sentence go by and neither of them caught it.

The first typhoon watch of the season went up that week for the sea south of the strait — a number and a woman’s name, the arith - metic of the Pacific doing its June arithmetic — and the village, from the office window, was invisible anyway, but Lin Li found herself checking the map anyway, the way you check on a sleeping parent. At Saturday’s market the village board carried a new notice, laminated like everything now: *Preparations for the 500th Anniversary Cultural Season* — the temple courtyard to be repointed, the pro - cession route repaved, submissions invited for the village’s own exhibition of photographs, *especially pre-2000*. Ah-ma read Lin Li reading it, and said, “They’ll want the 1947 one. I have the 1947 one.” And she said it to the flat basket, in the voice of a woman mentioning a spare key, and walked on, and Lin Li stood at the board with the notice in her hand and did not ask, because the asking would have broken something whose shape she could not yet see.

The second post’s first reply came on Wednesday, from the poetry account, the one that followed everyone: a single line of verse about shells that Lin Li read four times and did not trust, because it was either very good or very much nothing, and in her experience the two were the same size. Below the post, in the account’s quiet metrics, the morning’s numbers were doing what numbers do at dawn — small, unverifiable, alive. Somewhere out on the long road, a reader or two was walking the other way. She refreshed the count once, then closed the platform, and made coffee, and opened the volume to the widow’s

leaf, because the instruction said *add yours,* and she had come to understand — with the slight shock of a woman discovering she has been obeying a rule all month — that the account was the margin. The blog was the adding. The widow had asked for a later hand and Lin Li had given the internet one, which was either exactly right or a joke at the widow's expense, and she would find out which when the road told her.

CHAPTER 8

8

The working group met in the middle of June, in the conference room with the weeping wall, to hear the entries read aloud. The stain behind the file cabinets had grown all spring and now reached, at its tallest tentacle, the height of a standing woman with her arm raised, as if the wall were keeping its own conference. The pantry tin was on the side table; the tea it made tasted, as always, of the tin.

There were nine of them around the table. Director Geng, of course, and Su Min with her chipped-lid cup, and the volume's two editors, and the art editor with her flower cover rolled under her arm like a diplomatic pouch, and Danran, allowed in for the timeline, sitting at the far end with the matrix and the air of a person attending a customs inspection of her own luggage. And the working group's own members: Deputy Secretary Zheng, retired the year before from a career of teaching the certificate biography to every fourteen-year-old in the district, who did not need to open the binder because he had the binder inside him; and Wu Xiaozhou, young, from the planning office, who had fought the only fight of the winter — the fight to print the word *thinker* instead of the word *figure* — and had won it in a corridor, and was accordingly the only person at the table whose victory was invisible.

Geng read the entries aloud. That was the protocol he had set, years ago, and nobody had ever found a way around it: entries are read aloud, because a sentence that cannot survive being said in a room full of colleagues is a sentence that cannot survive the street, and everyone should hear the dying together.

He read the port entry, and the bridge entry, and the archaeology entry, and then he read hers.

He read it well. That was the thing about the man; he read better than anyone in the building, and he used the gift with a precision that was itself a kind of editing. Where the sentences were hers — the interpreter-household, the three vocabularies, the tonsure and the beard and the students — his voice had air in it, a warmth at the bottoms of the phrases, the sound of a man reading something he would not have minded writing. And where the sentences were the frame's — *progressive thinker of the late Ming*; *a son whose family embodied the city's openness to the world*; *positive energy that crosses the centuries* — the voice went flat. Not cold. Flat. The warmth withdrawn like a hand off a table; the words arriving level and dry, each carrying exactly its dictionary weight and nothing more, so that the frame's language sat in the room like furniture still half in its wrapping. Everyone heard it. Nobody looked at anyone. The flat voice was the director's one licensed commentary, and it had been running, in one building or another, since before Lin Li was born.

He died in prison. Geng read the four words in the flat voice, and then, in the same breath, read the sentence Lin Li had built to receive them — the sentence about the road south being the only thing longer than the man's life, declined — and that sentence he read with the air in it, which meant the room heard both at once: the four words flat, the road warm, and the difference between them lying on the table like a document nobody had tabled.

"Changes?" Su Min said, into the pause.

Before the changes, the birthday. Danran presented the matrix — stele, gazetteer, certificate biography, three dates within a week of one another, the rounding error of 1962 sitting under all of them like a coin under a cup — and the working group voted, as it had resolved to do in February, on when the man was born. The certificate biography's date won by six hands to three, because six of the nine had been taught from the certificate biography, and the man's birthday was settled at last, five hundred years late, by people he had never

met. Danran wrote the result into her matrix in her small clear hand, and under it, in the same hand, she kept the three sources, still fighting, like witnesses held on the record against the verdict.

There were changes. There were always changes. Deputy Secretary Zheng had three, all gentle, all memorized decades ago in a school hall: the phrase *broad-minded*, which he wanted restored — it had been in the 1985 readers, and he could recite the paragraph if the table wished, and the table did not wish, and he provided it anyway, from memory, standing, with the exact cadence of the school hall, and sat down to a silence that respected him. Wu Xiaozhou wanted one number checked — the number of the man's students, which the draft left uncounted, *students*, unqualified, and Wu wanted a figure or a hedge, and the room gave him the hedge. Su Min had the regis‑tration sentence moved up two paragraphs, so the Hui registration arrived earlier and warmed the entry sooner — "the port's own re‑ceipt," she said, "should come before the doubts" — and the room agreed without anyone noting that the doubts had been named.

And the art editor, when they turned to the cover, unrolled the flower on black, and Deputy Secretary Zheng looked at it for a long time. "My wife grew that flower in a jar on our windowsill for forty years," he said, and named it — the market name, the one the flower sellers call it, not the dictionary name — and the art editor wrote the name down, and the cover was approved with a name from a win‑dowsill, and that was the only uncontrolled sentence in the whole enterprise, and it went to press inside a flower.

The tracked changes came to Lin Li's inbox that evening, and she entered them as she entered all changes, without a face. The entry that went to layout, folded and approved and wearing its coat, read as follows:

※

LI ZHI (1527–1602)

Li Zhi was born on ~~a day in the tenth lunar month of~~ **November 23,** 1527, above the harbor in a house of interpreters, in the years when the tall ships first learned this coast. ~~The family had been Muslim once, and traders long before that, and readers only lately, and the boy grew up in the smell of three vocabularies.~~ **His family — merchants, mariners, and interpreters for generations — embodied the open, inclusive character of the city, and the boy grew up at home in the world.** At twenty-six he took the provincial examination ~~and discovered, by his own account, that the examinations could not teach him what the harbor already had~~ **and entered a career of public service.** He served with distinction in Henan, in Nanjing and Beijing, and finally in Yunnan, **winning the love of the people wherever he governed.** In 1580 he set the accounts of the Yao'an prefecture in order, laid the seal on the magistrate's desk, and walked out of official life — the famous resignation — into twenty-two years of thinking.

He was a **progressive thinker of the late Ming, a son whose family embodied the city's openness to the world.** He taught that *clothing and food are the moral order* — that ethics begins in the daily bread of ordinary people, ~~and the empire understood the danger of that better than the schoolbooks ever would~~ **an idea far ahead of its time**. He held that **the worth of a person is not set by birth or by rank**; he opened his lectures to **students of every background** at a time when this was rare; and his essay on the childlike heart taught that truth belongs to the mind that has not been paved over by received opinion — ~~a sentence that has been paving roads of its own ever since~~ **a teaching that still speaks to young people today, on walls and screens and postcards across this city**.

In 1602, arrested on charges arising from his writings, he died in prison.

Five hundred years later, the city that raised him — open, generous, inseparable from the sea — continues his work of welcoming the world. **His positive energy crosses the centuries like the tide.**

※

She entered the changes without a face, and the entry that went to layout was her sentence wearing the frame's coat, the way the wall-copy wore the safe title over the burning one, and she noted the resemblance nowhere, because noting resemblances was how you got invited to meetings about your noticing.

The uncle came on Friday.

She found him at nine in the morning sitting in the arcade below the house, on the bench by the joss shop, with a nylon bag of dried longans on his knees and a roll of paper under his arm, and he rose when he saw her the way older men of his generation rise — all the way, from the hips, an act of policy. The joss shop's owner had brought him tea he had not ordered, in a cup Lin Li had never seen the shop use for anyone, which meant the two men went back further than she was old, and were, by the look of the silence between them, still mid-quarrel about some temple subscription from before the renovation. He was seventy-three, her grandfather's younger brother's son, from the Jinjiang branch, and she had last seen him at the enshrining of her grandfather's memorial tablet, an event she remembered mainly for the smell of the incense and the sound of her father being asked, politely, by everyone, when the family would produce its sons.

"Ah-Li." He said her name the clan way, the short way, the way that made it a claim rather than a name. "You've grown a city. I can see it from here."

They took tea at the shop downstairs, because he would not come up — "the stairs are for people with business; I have courtesy" — and he ordered by pointing at the menu and paying before she could, and pushed the dried longans across the table to her, and unrolled the

photocopy with the flatness of a man who has unrolled this exact document across many tables and watched it do its work.

It was the genealogy page. Her branch: her grandfather, her fath - er, herself, the line running up the page in the beautiful ruled dis - cipline of clan printing, each generation a generation apart, the columns straight as scaffolding. And at the head of the page, where the branch broke off the main stem, the name that the whole city was about to spend a year celebrating, printed in the clan book in a larger hand, because the clan book had been reprinted in the eighties, when the man had become safe to print.

"You are the words woman of the city now," the uncle said. "The quincentennial. The hall is doing an exhibit — the biggest thing the courtyard has held since the tablet repairs. The lineage wants a wall of the living. Doctors, teachers, the boy in Xiamen doing ships. And you." He tapped the page, once, where her name would go. "Daughter of the branch. Editor of his entry. It writes itself."

"I can't confirm descent," Lin Li said. "From him. You know the line is — "

"The line is a line." He waved this away with the fondness of a man shooing a chicken. "The paper doesn't ask the blood. The blood asks the paper. Ask any grave." He poured himself more tea without ce - remony and settled into the arithmetic that he had, clearly, been carrying to this table the way other men carry a hymn. "You know what this clan did, across all those centuries? It knew when to be silent. That's the whole genealogy, Ah-Li, between the covers: who married who, who was born, who kept the name by knowing when to be silent. In 'seventy-four, when they made the ancestor into a legal - ist and hung his picture in the commune hall, our hall hung it too — a copy, you understand, we gave them the copy. In 'seventy-six we took it down. In 'eighty-five the county asked for the tablets, and we gave the county copies again. The originals never left the inner room. Silence, and copies, and the original in the inner room — that is the

whole technique, and it is four hundred years old, and it works.” He beamed at her, a man at his ease in the one subject he had mastered. “And now the heretic sells tickets. Both things are true at once. That’s Fukien.”

She looked at the genealogy page — the straight columns, the name at the head, the empty ruled space where her name would go — and felt the full weight of what the clan had built its survival on, which was exactly the folding she performed every morning before the committee arrived, performed by men with worse pens for four hundred years, and she disliked him for saying it cheerfully, and disliked more that he was not wrong.

“The exhibit needs words,” the uncle said. “A preface. Short. You are the words woman. The hall will pay in the currency it has.” He named the currency: the lineage’s memory, a seat at the winter feast, a branch of the tree on paper. “Your father’s side,” he added, at the door, with the longans repacked and the roll under his arm, “has been reading since the Song. It’s the Xunpu side that keeps its women clean of it.” And he went off down the arcade toward the bus, upright from the hips, a man who had delivered a courtesy and a claim and could not see — or could not afford to see — the difference between them.

She stood in the arcade with the longans and the unasked-for place on a page, and did not notice — because there was no reason on earth she would notice — that the roll under his arm had a second document inside it, folded inward, the photocopy of a photocopy, with a strip of something older glued down its spine. She peeled a longan instead, because her hands wanted employment, and the shell came away thin and papery, the fruit inside like a small dark period at the end of a long sentence, and she ate it standing up, and it tasted the way the summers of her childhood had tasted, which is to say of sugar and of other people’s decisions.

The committee’s tracked changes went to layout. The flower cover went to press. And at the market the first tour bus of the summer

discharged its passengers into the lane with the sound of a town being poured.

And Lin Li's eight hundred characters, warm at the bottoms of the phrases where Geng's voice had put the air, flat where the frame had put the furniture, went into the galley proof of the volume, and waited there, in metal, for the world.

CHAPTER 9

9

The summer did what summers do on that coast, which is to arrive like a decision. The rains thickened. The tour buses ran doubled. The volume went to layout, then to galley; the flower cover came back from the printer as a proof so beautiful that the art editor taped it above her desk facing the room, so that everyone had to look at it upside down and could not say why it moved them. Danran's channel passed ten thousand subscribers in the middle of June, and the white backs on her monitor's edge reached eleven, and the village board posted the Cultural Season notice, and the temple courtyard was scaffolded for repointing, and down at the flats the oyster women worked the summer tides with the typhoon maps already taped in - side their kitchen doors, because on this coast you plan the season with one eye on the Pacific.

The galley proof came up from the typesetter on the third of July, in a folder with a stiff board back, and Lin Li read it standing at the kitchen counter with the rain off the sea coming sideways past the fourteenth-floor windows, because a typhoon was curving up from the south — the season's first, a number and a woman's name, still two days from landfall — and the building's glass hummed at its edges like a struck bowl.

She read the whole proof as she read everything, by absence first. The volume was beautiful; that was not in question; the house could make a beautiful book in its sleep, and often did. The port entry opened it, then the temples and the churches in their careful even-handed grid, then the bridges, the kilns, the shipwreck with its cargo of aromatics, the archaeology, the scholars, each in its clean column, each carrying its load of approved adjectives with the good manners of a man carrying a monitor through a crowd. What the volume

would not say assembled itself, for her, as she read: a list with walls around it. It would not say what the port's profit had done to the families who, one night in the Yuan, had been ordered out of their quarter and into boats. It would not say the famine that ate two daughters while their father buried his grandfather three provinces away. It would not say the wife — the woman who had twice packed a household onto a northbound road, who had run a house on remittances and gleaning, who had gone home to Quanzhou to die within sound of her own family's tombs while her husband declined, in letters, to come to her — because the volume had no entry for her, and the widow's question, *where is her book?*, was the one question a net cannot hold. It would not say the word *heretic*, or the word *razor*, or the two days, or the wet finger, or the word *woman* in the plural, or the thirty li a girl's questions walked to reach a teacher who would answer. The volume was a net of the city's own choosing, meshed to keep exactly what the city could bear, and everything else — everything she had read in April with her thumb over the margins — lay outside it, in a crock, in a drawer, under the winter quilts, alive.

And there, on the left-hand page of the third gathering, was her entry, typeset at last. The interpreter-household with the smell sanded off it, the ports and the years in their coats, the students unqualified, the birth-date the working group had voted for, the four words set dead center of the final paragraph like a keel under a boat.

He died in prison.

In galley, in metal, in the exact typeface the city's certificates used, the four words stopped being a sentence. They became a place on a form. They had the smoothness of something handled so often it has lost its print — the water-gate's sill-stone worn to a saddle, a coin worn faceless. Somewhere behind the four words, two days waited, and a barber's blade, and a wet finger writing on a table, and a road south declined; and none of it could be printed, because the frame had retired it all, and the frame was the city, and the city was throwing itself a birthday.

She set the galley down. She stood at the window a long time. Across the river the old city was beginning to draw its quilt to its chin.

On Saturday she went out to the village, because the night before a typhoon the village does its oldest arithmetic, and she had learned, sometime in the spring without noticing the lesson, that she now counted the village's arithmetic as hers.

They were ready for the water. The boats had been hauled to the second line and lashed in families, gunwale to gunwale, as the elders said boats slept in the old days before the seawall. The shutters were down over the tourist screens; the new steel frame in the temple courtyard — the signboard for the Cultural Season — had been laid flat and weighted with the scaffolding's own sandbags; and in the lanes, taped diagonally across the glass of every shopfront, the village's oldest text had gone back up: strips of red paper, charms from the temple censer, the goddess's name in a grandmother's hand, the same characters taped over the same storm-lights since the pro‑cessions were young. Inside the Shunji temple the processional Mazu, the palanquin goddess, had been carried up to the high shelf and wrapped against the season, the way the ancestor tablets had once gone into the inner room, and anything loved on this coast travels upward when the water gets ideas. The great bell in the courtyard had been muffled with a rice sack — you could hear the difference already, the bell saying its hour through cloth, as a person says a thing through a locked door. The oyster women had worked the morning tide like women stealing, because the water before a storm goes out far and strange and stays away too long, and everything on the flats has to be taken before the water takes it back with interest. The Xu granddaughter was filming the boats lashing for the family chat, phone in a plastic bag, and the lane's aunties took turns holding the bag steady for her, which was as close to a blessing as the weather was going to get. Ah-ma had worked too. Eighty-six, and the whole lane had told her to stay in, and she had gone out at the fifth watch with the Xus and come back at ten with two full buckets and a cut

that was not hers, on the knife-hand, from a shell somebody's grandfather had mortared into a wall.

Lin Li found the threshold empty. The crock was gone from the east room's door.

She found it inside — inside the east room, on the low table under the radio, wiped dry, lid on, the acacia leaf shaken out. Ah-ma had carried it in herself. The one object in that house she had refused for sixty years to touch, the vessel of the thing she had ordered burned, and she had carried it in out of the weather like a kitchen pot, without ceremony, before the guests could see, and put the radio on top of it, and turned the radio to the storm channel, where a man with the exhaled calm of the bureau was reading coordinates to a province.

"The water says Tuesday," Ah-ma said, by way of good afternoon. "The paper says Monday night. The paper is for the harbor." She was wrapping the radio's aerial in plastic bag, taping it to the window frame, up on a stool at eighty-six, in the rings of flowers, because the flowers go in the hair and the hair does not come down for weather; the crown is not for the sky's opinion. "Typhoons have names now. In my day they had numbers. The numbers were worse — a number follows you. A name, you can quarrel with." She pointed the scissors at the window. "The flats will flood to the second wall. Your wall is repointed now, so it will hold, if your mason's lime was honest. Bring me the basins from the west room tomorrow, before you go back. And take the mangoes." A nylon bag of mangoes, windfall from the tree in the temple yard, stood packed by the door with the competence of a woman who had been pre-positioning fruit against typhoons since before the family had a telephone. "The girl films me in the morning, before the wind. Then everyone goes home."

The girl came, and filmed, and the wind arrived on schedule be‑hind her, and Lin Li drove back over the bridges with the mangoes beside her and the wipers losing their argument with the rain.

Sunday night the storm found the harbor mouth and the ferries stopped and the coast ran up its shutters, and Lin Li, in the humming flat, did what she had not done since April: she opened the account.

Five posts, four followers, the poetry account and its gentle non-sense, and the road in both directions empty. She had not come back to be read. She had come back to obey an instruction, and she had obeyed it twice, and the obedience had begun to feel — she had noticed this at the rice-paste shop, at the market, at the committee table — like the other thing. Like the road. Like the walking of it.

She opened the compose field, and agreed to the terms again, all of them, at speed, one gesture, total — and the thumb that clicked *agree* paused, for the length of one breath, over the button, because the last time a room had asked her to agree to something in order to continue, she had thanked it; and then the thumb came down, because the terms this time were terms she already lived by, and the only way out of terms is a road, and she was done waiting for roads to open on their own. The sentence was already there, the way the alien one had been there in March — except this one she remembered writing, had been writing it since January without knowing, in the morgue folder, in the margins of other people's proofing, in the grocery lists of her attention; it had been assembling itself all spring at the bottom of her mind, the way the storm had assembled itself at the bottom of the Pacific, and it chose the eve of its own landfall.

She typed it, and looked at it, and did not edit it, because there was nothing in the sentence that needed protecting. It was short. It was even, in its way, true — and that was the trick of it; the sentence was nothing the reference frame could retire, because the frame had retired the verbs already, and a sentence with no verbs the frame can keep has a terrible freedom.

This year my city celebrates the five hundredth birthday of a man it helped to burn.

She added one line beneath it, because a sentence that stands alone can be photographed out of context, and she wanted the context inside the frame with it:

The entry will be eight hundred characters. The man was not.

Then she posted it — Sunday the fifth of July, 9:11 in the evening, the storm's first proper rain arriving in the city exactly on schedule, coming in over the towers in ropes — and sat back, and the room did its room things, and the post went out along the wires to the road.

It was the first sentence in years meant to live.

She had not understood, until she watched it go, how much of her working life had been conducted in the other mode — the mode of the morgue, the folder, the pencil, the folded hem; sentences written in order to be made safe; drafts kept the way you keep a wasp under a glass, alive because admitting it was dead was admitting something. The eight hundred characters in the galley were that mode, perfected: good, warm, foldable, hers. This was the other thing. This was a sentence she had written knowing it would be read, by someone, someday, as something she had chosen to say — knowing it could be copied, and mirrored, and screenshotted, and quoted back to her, at her, in a room with humming air conditioning, by men who paid in cash and called it an honor — knowing all of it, and posting anyway, on a night when the wind outside had begun to learn the weight of doors.

She took out the notebook, out of habit, and left it shut. The notebook was for the dead. This was the other kind, and there was no column for it, and starting a second book — a book of living sentences, a book with a column marked *still standing* — felt like the kind of boast the weather punishes. She let it go unrecorded. The road does not keep a ledger; that is the road's only mercy and its whole difference from an office.

The numbers came in through the storm. First hour: eleven views. The poetry account, its bots, and one curious wanderer off the tag. Second hour, as the typhoon found the harbor and the whole coast

went dark-to-grey: nineteen. At midnight she refreshed once — a habit she would have to watch; the numbers were a door that opened onto a room she did not intend to live in — and the count stood at thirty-one, and the followers stood at five, and one of the five was new: a user with no picture and no posts, someone who had walked into the empty road from somewhere and stopped, the way you stop when you hear, far off down a long street, footsteps keeping your own time.

She closed the platform. She put the galley in the writing desk's bottom drawer, on top of the bundle — the man's book under the city's book, the wrong title and the four words sleeping one above the other like the two slips — and she stood at the window with the lamp off and watched the storm work the harbor. The old city's lights were up and down in the gusts. The sea had come up over the flats where the oyster women worked, taking back the tables, the stools, the four hundred years of pointing; tomorrow the water would give it all back, and the women would walk out at dawn and read the flats, and the paper would be wrong again in some small particular, and the water would be right — the way it had always been right, the way it would be right after everyone now breathing was a name on a wall.

Half the city hearth-smoke, half the city immortal. From the fourteenth floor, in the wind, you could see the exact place where the halves met: it ran down the middle of the river, and the river, being neither, carried both out to sea without comment.

Cangshu

CHAPTER 10

10

The working city kept different hours, and by October Lin Li kept them too.

Four in the morning, and the fish market was already two hours old. The generator hum came first — you heard it from the sea wall before you saw anything, a low institutional snore from the row of stalls where the ice-crusher and the scale-lamps and one stubborn refrigerator ran on gasoline the grid hadn't reached yet — and under the hum, the tapping: a hundred oyster knives going at a hundred hinges, tick-tick-tick, arrhythmic the way rain is rhythmic, the sound of the village's whole morning being opened by hand. The lights made islands in the dark. Between the islands, women moved with baskets on their hips, stepping around puddles of their own making, and the first haggling had already begun at the far end, where a hotel buyer from the city was being told, politely, at volume, in a melody, exactly what the market thought of his offer for mantis shrimp. Lin Li watched the close from the sea wall. The buyer's interpreter was a boy with a spreadsheet, and the spreadsheet said one number, and the sea wall's side of the negotiation said another number, and between the numbers moved an old seller's forefinger, tapping the crate-lid in the rhythm of the price she would actually accept — a third number, unspoken, the real one, the one the boy's spreadsheet would never see because it lived in the finger and not in the ledger. The boy went away rebudgeted. The forefinger had been right. It was always right. Somewhere in the district's statistics the finger's number would appear next week as the market price, discovered, and credited to supply and demand.

Lin Li had not meant to become a four o'clock person. It had happened as everything on this coast happens, by tide. The

homestay's fit-out ran all day — the sanders, the lacquer, the delivery vans backing into the lane with their warning voices — and the house shook from seven to six, and Ah-ma, who had moved her radio, her stool, and her operation to the east room's threshold "until the dust settles," which meant until further notice, slept through it like a woman sleeping beside a waterfall. But the book — the book Lin Li had brought out in September and now kept, wrapped, in the village, in the east room's cabinet, an arrangement no one had proposed and no one had objected to — the book wanted quiet, and quiet on this coast was a tidal resource. It came at four. So Lin Li came at four: out of the east room while her grandmother slept, down the lane with a flashlight she didn't need because the market's islands lit it, and into the two hours when the working city was all body and no commentary — the ice, the knives, the weight of the baskets, the sea going out and the money coming in — before the town put its face on and the tour buses began their morning migration from the city, discharging at nine the people who had come to photograph the authentic.

The renovation dust was its own weather. The sanders had eaten the west half's interior paint down to the incised layers, and the lane wore the fine white residue of shell-lime on every surface the wind could reach, so that by October the bicycles at the gate had gone grey, the transformer box had gone grey, the tourism plaque — her sentence, fifteen percent grey over forty percent grey — had gone grey on grey, legible now only if you knew what it said. Which, she thought, standing in the middle of it at four in the morning with her flashlight beam full of drifting lime, was the most honest thing the renovation had produced. The dust said what the brochures wouldn't: that keeping a thing meant wearing it.

The door was the reason Director Geng came out to the village on the third Thursday of October, and the door was the reason she was glad to see him, which frightened her a little, because she had learned at the committee table what his presence cost.

The door in question was the east room's door, Ah-ma's door, and it was the oldest object on the property and a nuisance to everyone whose job was the future. It was a double-leaf Minnan door, wood, and it was a palimpsest — the designer's word, delivered with the reverence other people reserved for jewels. The outermost layer was door gods: two guardian generals, freshly repainted in the eighties by a sign painter in Shishi whose gold had gone green with salt air, their faces bulked and mild, their weapons ceremonial. Under the gods, where the paint had flaked at the hinge-side, you could raise with a fingernail the ghost of an older painting — a red field, a white character's stroke, the flattened geometry of something printed, not painted. And under that, when Qiu the designer had taken a scraping with her kit and sent it to a lab along with everything else, the whitewash: a lime skin over a lime skin, and printed on the deepest skin, in stenciled characters the lab's report rendered with bureaucratic tenderness, a slogan from the year the wall got its patch. *Grasp revolution; promote production*. The report said the characters were in a regional stencil style, the paint a cheap enamel common to the period, the layer "of high documentary interest." None of the report's sentences were false, and all of them together were the biggest lie Lin Li's desk had processed that year, though she could not have said what they were lying about, and had not tried, because trying was the one tool her trade had taught her to put down before it drew blood.

Qiu wanted it conserved. Conserved, exposed, lit — the slogan raised under glass in the door's own frame, a wound kept open as a feature. Her design statement called it *the honest layer*. She had drawn the little sun beside it again.

The application to expose it had come through the desk, through Lin Li's desk, and Lin Li had approved everything in the dossier except the door, and had sat on the door with no reason she could write down, and the reason had walked out to the village on a Thursday in October wearing a good jacket, with a folder of com-

promise drawings under his arm, because the Cultural Season was six weeks away and the district's heritage trail wanted its honest layer and Director Geng had learned when a matter needed his face and not his signature.

They set the table in the courtyard. Ah-ma presided from her stool with the kettle at her elbow, and the negotiation that followed was, Lin Li thought afterward, the finest pure display of the older woman's craft she had ever witnessed — and she had watched her conduct fish markets for thirty years.

Geng opened with the drawings. He was respectful; he was sin - cere; he believed in the layers, you could hear it — the whitewash over whitewash, the stencil under the gods, the years the house had stood through printed on its own skin in enamel. The district would pay for the conservation. Glass, not varnish; reversible; the gods repainted above, the slogan visible below at the hinge-side where the flake already lived. "It's the century," he said. "Your house has a century in its door. The young people come looking for exactly this — the texture. The years the village stood through. It would be the most photographed door on the trail."

Ah-ma drank her tea.

"History," she said at last, "can stand in someone else's doorway."

"The conservators are very careful—"

"My door," Ah-ma said, "is not careful. My door is tired. You want to put sixty years under glass so the tourists can read my door like a timetable." She refolded her hands on the stool. "The answer is no. The next answer is also no. The answer after that costs you the Cul - tural Season's opening, because I know what I'm worth in a doorway, old man, and so do you."

Geng looked at her for a moment — an appraiser's look, the look of a man re-pricing an object he had priced too low — and Lin Li, pouring, kept her eyes on the spout and thought: she has done this before. Not the words. The posture. There was a posture that went with winning, a stillness in the shoulders, and her grandmother was

wearing it the way she wore the flowers, without appearing to notice it was on.

They traded for an hour. It was not a hostile hour; it was a good one; two professionals working a problem with the pride temporarily removed. Midway, Geng telephoned the designer for instructions and got, over the speaker, a voicemail played back at the sea, in which Qiu's voice said, with real grief, that a door's layers were a house's rings, that you do not sand a tree to please the tree, and that if the grandmother said no then the grandmother was the structural en ‑ gineer of her own door, and the call ended with Geng agreeing with a dead voicemail against his own schedule. The housekeeping jobs: Ah-ma wanted them for lane women, at the district wage, on the books. Geng agreed before she finished the sentence. The east room: hers for life, the homestay's boundary line drawn at her threshold, guests warned in three languages. Granted — it had never been in the plans; the west half was the project; the east room was the grandmother, and the designers had learned in August that the grandmother was load-bearing. The opening ceremony: Ah-ma would preside, would wear the crown, would be photographed — she set her own price for her own face, and Geng, who had spent a career renting other people's faces, recognized the rate and paid it. And through all of it, the door held. No slogans. Not under glass, not in a trail, not *the honest layer*, not for the century. The door came back to the gods, all the layers asleep, and the young people could photograph the walls.

"Then we're settled," Geng said finally, "and I'll write it tonight," and he took the concession paper out of his folder — the short form, the one-page understanding, already typed except for the terms they had just agreed — and put it on the table between the teacups.

Ah-ma took it. She held it at the middle distance, at the length an old woman holds anything she intends to look at for form's sake, and her eyes moved across it left to right, once, the way eyes move, and then she said:

"The fourth line from the bottom. 'The grandmother's residence in the east room continues for as long as she lives.' Good. But *as long as she lives* is a landlord's phrase. Write *always*. If you're giving a thing, give it in the word that doesn't run out."

The courtyard went quiet as courtyards do — the kettle's hiss continuing, a shell dropped somewhere beyond the wall, the sea not pausing at all — and Lin Li, standing at the kettle with the pot in her hand, felt the air of the whole morning tilt.

"Fourth line from the bottom," she said. "Ah-ma, how would you know it's the fourth line from the bottom?"

"Because he read the top half out loud like a man reading a fine," Ah-ma said, unblinking, to Lin Li, not to Geng, "and the bottom half he read like a man reading a gift, and a gift is always at the bottom. Any fishwife knows where the gift is. The eyes have nothing to do with it." And she picked up the concession paper, and turned it around, and pushed it back across the table to Geng with one finger. "*Always*. Then I'll press my thumb."

Geng looked at the paper. He looked at the old woman. He took out his pen, and crossed out the clause, and wrote *always* above it in his small correct hand, and initialed it, and said, "We'll call it always," in the voice of a man agreeing to a thing he had privately agreed to before he sat down, and Ah-ma pressed her thumb into the ink pad Lin Li was holding — the pad was for exactly this, the thumbprint rig traveled with the house now — and the negotiation was over, and she had taken three things for one and made him like the taking.

He stood to go. At the threshold — the courtyard's threshold, not the door in question — he stopped, and turned, and looked back at the old woman on her stool for one second longer than courtesy spends, the look of a man rereading a clause he had skipped. Whatever file he put that look in, he took with him.

"Grandmother," he said, "good health. Doors are cheaper than eyes." And he was gone down the lane, past the grey bicycles, past the plaque, out to where the car waited with the engine running, and Lin

Li stood in the courtyard holding the ink pad and the concession paper with its new word, and her grandmother said:

"Close your mouth, girl. You'll catch dust."

And went back to the radio.

That night Lin Li did not sleep, and did not open the notebook, and did not ask. She lay in the west room's guest bed — the homestay's model room, finished that week, smelling of lacquer and of the sea that came through the new glass anyway — and she did the arithmetic she had been refusing since April. A woman's hand, round and unhurried, on a flyleaf, with a tide-date under it and no year. A girl's questions that had walked thirty li. A cut on a knife-hand from a shell in a wall. A photograph, face down, in a drawer, in a city, while the woman who was *in* the photograph lay twelve feet from her through a plaster wall, sleeping beside a radio that was talking about the weather. And now the fourth line from the bottom, counted from the bottom, corrected for tone, negotiated upward in a word that doesn't run out.

She had known — as you know a floor is hollow before proving it, as you know a hem has been folded before seeing the fold. Knowing it would make it a thing to be handled, and handled things in this family had a way of ending up in walls. So she did not ask. She lay in the model room of the house her sentence had renovated, four meters from her grandmother and two meters from an empty crock, and let the not-asking be, for one more night, the shape of her love.

CHAPTER 11

11

October was the month of the second reading.

The first reading, in April, had been the dead man's — text first, readers after, the thumb over the margins. The second reading was for the readers, and she gave it three nights, in the model room of the half-finished homestay, evenings, at the east room's cabinet with the lamp angled low, while her grandmother slept one plaster wall away with the radio ticking its last weather of the day. She had promised herself this discipline all summer and had broken it every Saturday at the oyster table, one margin at a time, the way a person eats a box of something in secret; now she did it properly, in order of the hands.

There were three hands. That was the finding, and the finding rearranged the book.

The first hand was the widow's — the dry, terse, brown-inked hand of the contents leaf and the colophon, the hand that had copied the book and said so and asked for nothing except a successor. Her letters stood like fence posts, and she had come back to the book for years: the margins ran in two inks, the first brown and sure, the second grayer and smaller, an older woman returning, and Lin Li laid the two inks side by side at the lamp and understood that she was looking at twenty years of one person's evenings. Her margins were the oldest and the shortest, and they were not commentary, whatever an archive would someday call them. They were a keeper's ledger. Where the text made a claim, the widow kept the receipts: a date corrected, a name spelled the way the family had spelled it, a word flagged as the copyist's and not the author's — *the slip is mine; the thought is his* — the honesty of a woman who would not let a dead man take the blame for her typing. Beside the famine material she had written: *He was not at the granary when it mattered. Neither*

was the granary. Beside the Geng correspondence, whose letters ran thirty pages of war by quotation: *He fought a Geng with ten thousand words. I fight mice with lime. Both of us defend the interior*. And beside the essay on the childlike heart: *The child's heart is in the hands. Mine shuck oysters. He would not mind.* Lin Li read that one a long time. It was the driest sentence in the book and the wettest.

The second hand was the round hand — the young hand from the blank leaves, blue-black ink, the hand she had almost recognized in April and now recognized in full, because the hand signed itself. *Grace*. The margins came signed with an English name and dated by the western calendar, a teacher's hand, round as quarry tiles, the mission-school hand that ruled its own lines in a book with no rules, the two calendars lying side by side in one volume like two tides that had agreed to meet. And the margins were not annotations. They were a school. *Big class,* said the first, beside the women's essay, dated 1946. *Mei-yu wrote her own name, then wrote it on the courtyard wall too. Corrected the wall. Kept the name.* Beside the bumping-into letter, dated 1948: *She walks thirty li to ask. That is the whole of my method. — Grace.* Lin Li sat with the wall until the meaning of it got all the way through: a girl writing her name on a wall, and a teacher correcting the wall instead of the girl. The wall had been an exercise book. The village had been a classroom with the roof off, and the reading lessons had been conducted in the only textbook that could not be confiscated, which was the village itself, and the tuition had been courage.

The third hand was the tidy hand — the flyleaf's hand, the hand with no date and no name, even, unhurried, a hand that had been taught by a ruler and had outlived the ruler. In the second reading she found it twice more. Once on the last healthy leaf before the damaged gathering, where a passage about patience had been un ‑ derlined — underlined, not annotated; the mark of a reader who agreed with a thing and wanted the agreement on the record. And

once at the head of the women's essay itself, above the dead man's opening line, where the tidy hand had written a single word: *again*. Lin Li looked at that word for an hour, on the third night, with the radio silent and the sea doing something out in the dark. *Again*. Meaning: this argument had been made to her before. Meaning: someone in this book had needed it twice. She laid the tidy hand against the round hand in her mind, the way the lab had laid the door's paint layers side by side, and could not make them meet, and could not stop trying: the girl on the wall in 1946 and the underliner of the patience passage, one woman grown along the years, or two women, or a school of women passing a single pencil — the book would not say, and she was done pretending the book owed her say‑ings. Meaning, at minimum: the essay was not a monument to the tidy hand. It was a maintenance document, and the tidy hand was the maintenance log.

Three hands. A widow who kept receipts, a teacher who ran a school in a margin, and a woman who underlined. And the book bound with blank leaves built for the future — she understood now what the blank leaves were; they had been waiting the way a guest room waits — for a fourth hand that had not come. The colophon had said *add yours,* and she had added a blog instead, and the blog was not the same thing, and the knowing sat in her like a debt with no due date.

The women's essay spread carried the heaviest margins in the book, and she read that spread last, on the third night, both pages, the way you read two people who are talking about each other through a wall.

On the page with the dismissal and the answer, in the widow's dry brown hand, the oldest voice in the book had written:

He says the seeing of women and men is one seeing. He was right about the seeing and blind to the seer. His wife brought the living children home to Quanzhou. Where is her book?

Two hundred and sixty years, Lin Li thought. The museum had not asked it. The certificate biography had not asked it. The reference frame did not contain a question mark large enough. A widow copying a book in the Qianlong years had set the audit question in the margin of the women's essay — *where is her book?* — and the question had been waiting there, patient, in fence-post letters, for the book to be found by someone whose job was books. Lin Li had no answer. She had an entry with four words in it, and a volume with a net in it, and a drawer with a photograph face down in it, and the widow's question sat on the spread like a stone on a well-cover, and under the stone, water.

On the facing page, in the round blue-black hand, beside the sentence about men sweating with shame, the teacher had written the Question. It is on the record here exactly as it was written, in her hand, dated in her calendar:

Reading makes the girls harder to marry and harder to fool. Which am I meant to want? — Grace, 1947

A question with two right answers in it, asked by a woman whose salary came from a mission and whose students came from the flats, and Lin Li read it four times and could not have said which answer she wanted either, and understood that this was not failure. The Question was a doorway built exactly her height.

The last leaf she left alone. It hung, at the back of the book, by the pale thread — the replaced thread, the newer sewing, the one repair in the binding that had been done by someone with an audience in the house — and it carried writing, you could see the block of it through the paper's back, dense, a whole leaf. She left it hanging. Some pages you read when you know what you are looking at, and she did not yet know what she was looking at; she knew only that her heart had begun to move whenever she came near it, the way a dog's does at a door it is not allowed to scratch.

She posted the women's essay that week — entire, the burned man's answer to the man who pitied women their eyesight — and under it, instead of a byline, she set the credit the book had taught her: *a hand, mid-century*. The post went out onto the empty road and stood there. Then the road did what the road had started doing lately, which was produce walkers. A comment arrived the next morning from an account with no picture: a single line, no punctuation, reading *my grandmother read, nobody knew*. Lin Li looked at it for a long time. Then she opened the compose field and drafted a reply — three drafts, actually, in the small window, the way she drafted everything: one warm, one correct, one true — and de-leted all three, and closed the field empty, because there are replies you make in a margin and replies you make in a life, and she had not yet worked out which currency the stranger was asking for, or whether it was the same currency she was holding, or whether the reply, like the account, was already real at the back where it counted and only pretending to be nothing at the front.

That night she dreamed of the voice.

The dream was a courtyard — her grandmother's courtyard, but with the light of some other decade in it, a heavier, grainier light, the light of photographs from before color was trusted. There were girls in the courtyard, sitting in rows on low stools, and they had flowers on their heads, whole load-bearing architectures of flowers, and they were not looking at the flowers; they were looking at something out of frame that the dream refused to turn the camera for. And a voice — a woman's voice, old, warm, carrying the particular grammar of someone who learned her Mandarin late and her patience never — said, once, clearly, the way a teacher says a name to take attendance:

"Grace."

Lin Li woke with the name standing in the room.

She lay in the dark with her heart going and did the unpacking a professional does. *Grace*. She had read the name that week — read it three times, signed in the margins, dated in a foreign calendar; the

name had been in her eyes for hours, and a dreaming brain files names under voices, that was the mechanism, that was the whole mechanism: the reading voice she used for the margins had a sound in her head, and the sound was an old woman's sound, because she had been reading the margins in the east room's lamplight, a wall away from an old woman's breathing, and the dream had simply cast the reading voice in the nearest available face. The voice was Ah-ma's, of course it was; the only old woman's voice her interior life kept on file. Names read at midnight become voices heard at three. There was nothing in the dream that a printing of the margins could not have mailed her.

It took four attempts and most of an hour, and the explanation worked as explanations work: completely and not at all.

In the morning she watched her grandmother's hands at the oyster table — the hinge, the turn, the flick, the click — and listened to her argue two prices at once, and thought: *a woman's voice, old, warm*. And did not say, and did not ask, and put the dream in the folder where the not-asking lived, which was getting fuller, which was going to need a shelf.

At the table, the one morning, Ah-ma nodded at the cabinet across the courtyard. "You and the book. Like a courting couple. Read it out tonight, the loud way. My eyes are gone and the neighbors like to hear the big words."

"Neighbors," Lin Li said, "or neighbors."

"Read it out," Ah-ma said, "and let the neighbors decide," and went back to the shells, and Lin Li stood in the courtyard holding a basin of shelled meat and understood that she had just been given an instruction and a cover story by a woman who could not read, in a household where everything was exactly what it seemed, and she carried the basin in, and the morning continued, and the big words stayed in the book until a quieter hour.

The week after, she posted the Question — the teacher's own words, the margin set free from its essay, the one sentence in the

whole book that was a wound instead of a wall. She anonymized it further, though the book had left the name on it; she took even that away, because the woman who wrote it had signed in a schoolroom that no longer existed, and schools for poor girls get closed twice, once in fact and once in memory. *A hand, mid-century,* the credit said. *Which am I meant to want?*

The road carried it. Somewhere out there, she thought, closing the platform, there was a girl of twenty-four with eleven postcards on her monitor and a grandmother of her own somewhere being impossible, and that girl would read the Question and would not know it had been asked in a courtyard by a woman with a borrowed name who taught reading to fisher children against the rules of two empires. The road didn't need the biography. The road needed the bumping-into.

And the voice in the dream — the one her filing system had cast, the one the explanation had parented and parented until it slept — said nothing more, all month, in any dream. It had said what it came to say. It had said a name. She had read the name; the name was in the margins; the voice was her own reading voice wearing her grandmother's weather.

That was the explanation, and she wrote it nowhere, because the notebook was for the dead, and the voice was not dead, the voice was hers, and some explanations you keep in the body, where they can be revised.

CHAPTER 12

12

The summons came at the oyster table on the last Sunday of September, in the voice Ah-ma used for information rather than re‑quest.

"Next week," she said, shelling without looking up, "bring the book."

Lin Li kept turning the shell in her hand. "The book's in the city."

"I know where the book is. I know where everything in this family is; it's my one talent, and I didn't get it from reading." The knife found a hinge. "Next week is the big ebb. The ninth moon's own ebb, the first one, the real one — not the paper's ebb, not the harbor's ebb. Ours." The shell gave; the meat went in; the empty half went on the pile, click, half-past. "Bring the book out on the ebb. A thing should be in its owner's hands on its own water."

"The book isn't mine to bring," Lin Li said. "You said burn it."

"I said a lot of things in sixty years." Ah-ma picked up the next oyster and considered it, and her voice did not change, and that was how Lin Li knew the next sentence had been carried a long way. "The book was in my hands when I was younger than you. It went into the wall over my bed, at my ear, where I could hear it not existing. It can come out to the courtyard for one ebb. Bring it Sunday, girl, before the water turns."

So Lin Li brought it.

She brought it out on the eleventh of October, the second day of the big ebb, wrapped in its amber sleeve in a cloth bag that had once carried a school lunch, and the crossing from the city was the strangest of her life, because she was carrying the four-hundred-year-old book of a burned man on the 9:10 tourist bus, between a teenager asleep on a threaded-steel bracelet and a woman with a carton of

durian, and no one looked, and the book rode the potholes of the Fenghai Road like a boat's passenger, settling at each shock the way ballast settles, and she understood that she would never again be able to watch cargo move without reading it.

At the lane gate a tourist with a telephoto lens asked her what was in the bag — people ask; the village has become a place where people ask — and Lin Li heard herself say, in the market register, without one heartbeat of hesitation, "My grandmother's sewing patterns," and the tourist nodded and lifted the lens toward the flats, and the lie walked off with the truth inside it, as the best lies on this coast have always done. She was becoming fluent. She noted her own fluency the way you note a new mole, and kept walking.

The flats that day were the flats the paper had refused to predict: open to the horizon, shining, steaming faintly where the sun hit the wet, the whole harvest floor of the village laid bare two tides ahead of the harbor tables. The oyster women were out to the far line — the far line itself out farther than it stood in any other month, so that the boundary of the village's world had physically moved, and everyone worked at the new edge as if the sea had set them an exam they had studied for. You could hear the scoopers from the sea wall, a sound like distant applause. The mason's crew had the day off from the west half, and the homestay's fresh pointing stood in the courtyard like a bandage on a face, white and certain and new, and Ah-ma sat at the oyster table under the eave with the big ebb going out in front of her like a crowd leaving a stadium.

Lin Li unwrapped the book and put it in her grandmother's hands.

What happened then happened slowly, and she would spend the winter not telling anyone how slowly. Ah-ma held the book on her knees for a long time without opening it. The wind came off the flats and moved the flowers in her hair — the crown was in, it was a Sunday, the flowers made their whole argument about her at the edge of her grey hair — and the old woman sat with her hands on the cover of the burning book the way you rest your hands on the back of a

neck, and her thumbs moved, once, along the stitched spine, finding the four eyes, finding the paler thread, counting the repair without looking at it. Sixty years since her hands had last done that, and the hands remembered; that was the thing Lin Li watched and never afterward described to anyone: not a discovery, a *resumption*. The hands had done this before. The hands came back to it like shoulders coming back under a load.

"You wrapped it in the sleeve," Ah-ma said. "Good. The sleeve is part of it. The teacher's own wrapping." She said *the teacher* the way other women said a daughter's name.

Then she opened the book — to the flyleaf, of course; keepers open at their own entry — and took from her sleeve a ballpoint with a cracked cap, a school-and-market pen of no particular vintage, the kind that lives in every kitchen drawer on this coast next to the string and the spare fuse, and she uncapped it against her thumb, and she wrote.

Lin Li watched her grandmother write. She watched the hand that could not read move across the flyleaf with the sure, unhurried economy of a hand that had written on this earth before, and she stood in the courtyard of the house her sentence had renovated and felt the ground of the last six months rearrange itself quietly under her feet, all the way down, like a tide taking a beach. The old woman wrote four words and a date — she saw the shape of it, the numerals, the small firm characters — and beneath the flyleaf's one old sentence, the one about bravery and tidiness, the fresh line went in like a boat coming back to its slip.

Ah-ma recapped the pen. She closed the book. She set it on the oyster table, square, with the flap of the sleeve tucked, and looked out at the flats, where the water had gone all the way to the far line and the far line was steaming. Then she bent to it once more — the keeper's last courtesy, the smell; she lifted the book and breathed it, at the spine, the way you breathe a child's head coming in from the cold,

checking by scent alone whether the years had been kind — and whatever the paper told her made her nod, once, and set it down.

"There," she said. "Now it's sixty years even. Now the wall and I are square."

"What did you write?" Lin Li asked, and her voice came out in the register she used for the market, loud, for the neighbors, because the neighbors were not there and the loudness was for herself.

"You read," Ah-ma said. "That's the arrangement. I keep; you read. Keepers don't read out their own pages; the page tells you when. It isn't ready to tell you." She looked at her granddaughter then — fully, frontally, the way she looked at an oyster — and for a moment the performance and the woman inside it were both visible at once, like a door standing open onto a room where another door is also standing open. "It will tell you soon. You'll be finding out at midnight, I'd think. Keepers read at midnight. It's when the house can't see you."

"You've read it," Lin Li said. The loud register had gone; what was left was barely sound. "You've read it all along."

"The book has been in this family's keeping since before your mother could walk," Ah-ma said, "and in my keeping since before you could walk, and not one line of it has gone out of this courtyard into any trouble anywhere, and it will not start today. It's the safest book in Fujian province. It spent sixty years inside a wall that I built, and it spent those same sixty years inside a head that the district used to photograph as its favorite illiterate." She picked up the knife. "Both of them held. Now you know why the door gets no slogans."

Lin Li stood in the courtyard with the sea going out and out, past the far line, past the women, past the end of the paper's authority, and the sky sat on the flats the way a lid sits on a jar, and her grandmother shelled oysters three feet away from her with the com‑petence of sixty years, and the book lay on the table between them with its fresh line drying, and the whole architecture of the spring — the folder, the morgue, the folded hem, the four words, the flat voice,

the margin she had added to the internet instead of to the book — stood revealed in the noon light as the newest coat on a very old wall.

At the far edge of the flats, the water had gone back beyond the stone marker — the boundary stone the village set to its own harvest map, out of the wet for the first time since the great ebb of 2016. Two of the Xu women had walked out to it and were standing on the dry sand of the impossible, small in the light, and the whole shore had come to look, the way the lane looked at anything the sea did out of schedule. Lin Li walked out as far as her shoes allowed and stood at the marker with her grandmother's tide logic in her ears — *ours, not the paper's* — and the flats steamed around her to the horizon, and for one minute she let the thought come that the book had come out of its wall into exactly this: a world widened past its maps, by forces the paperwork would catch up to eventually, or wouldn't.

That midnight, coming in for the basins her grandmother had ordered for the storm season — the east room's roof wept at one joint since the repointing, and the grade-one alert custom on this coast was basins, one under each known drip, the sound of the weather being given somewhere polite to land — she found the east room's door ajar and the lamp burning on its low shelf, and her grandmother sitting up in bed against the headboard with the drugstore glasses on her nose — the glasses that had not existed that morning, produced from somewhere behind the radio like the second half of a magic act — reading.

Not skimming. Reading: the thumb moving down the outer mar ‑ gin, the lips moving, the flowers on the windowsill in a jar making their one shadow on the wall that held the hole where the book had lived for sixty years. She had the volume open at the women's essay. She was in no hurry. She had, the posture said, been in no hurry for sixty years, and was not going to start for her granddaughter.

Lin Li stood in the doorway with the basins in her arms and the wind of the whole year going through her, and her grandmother

looked up over the drugstore glasses, and neither of them performed anything.

“There’s water on the table,” Ah-ma said. “Drink it before it gets warm. Then put the basins by the door and turn off the lamp when you go.” She went back to the page. “And girl — the book goes back in the cabinet tonight, not with you to the city. It stays with the keeper.” A pause, the page turning, the tiniest sound of an old woman settling an account. “The cabinet and I have an arrangement.”

“Burn it,” Lin Li said. “That’s what you said. In April. Why is it in the house now, if the answer was burn it?”

“Because in April it was a book in a wall, and nobody had read it, and that was safe,” Ah-ma said, to the page. “And now it’s a book in a drawer in a city flat, and a girl has read it, and a director has looked at me like a contract, and a designer wants to put sixty years under glass in a lane where every window already has a phone in it. The safe thing was never the burning, girl. The safe thing was the wall. The wall is open now. There’s no wall coming back.” She turned another page. “So now the question isn’t hiding. Now the question is which of us it hurts first, and I intend to be done being hurt before my answer is needed. Burn it or keep it, it has to go through one of us. I’m eighty-six. I’ll go first either way. That’s the whole of my strategy, and it’s a good one.”

“It’s evidence,” Lin Li said. “The letters are the only copy of themselves in the world. Burning it is what the committee has wanted for four hundred years. You’d be finishing their sentence.”

“Evidence for who?” Ah-ma said. “The court is closed, girl. It’s been closed since the widow died. Evidence is what you carry into a room where somebody has to look at it. Nobody has to look at any‑thing anymore. They scroll past.” The page turned. “Your committee wouldn’t burn it, anyway. Your committee would do worse. It would put it in a room with a lock and a sign, and charge twenty yuan, and dust it on Tuesdays, and in ten years nobody could tell you what was in it, only that it was valuable. I’ve watched them do it to a whole

city." She looked up over the glasses, once, and the look was the oyster look, the one that opens hinges. "The burning is quick and the keeping is slow, and I've done the slow one. Ask me which I'd rather, and I'll tell you the truth: I'd rather be done."

"And in the spring," Lin Li said, "the Cultural Season will ask you for the photograph. On the district's schedule. With gloves and glass and a form in triplicate."

"Everything the district loves, it laminates," Ah-ma said. "Yes. That's the spring. That's why the autumn is mine."

Lin Li set the basins by the door. She drank the water. It was already warm.

"Say the line," she said. "The one you wrote this morning. Say it out."

Her grandmother looked at her over the drugstore glasses for a long time, and the lamp hummed, and out on the flats the tide stood all the way off, holding its breath the way the whole village held its breath when the grade-one alert went up.

"Kept you sixty years," Ah-ma said. "Who kept me?"

And she turned the page, and read on, and Lin Li turned off the lamp as instructed, and stood a moment in the dark of the east room with the reading light gone and the radio's last weather ticking, and the sound of a page turning in the dark, and went to the model room, and did not sleep, and did not burn anything, and in the morning the flats came back exactly as promised, and the oyster women walked out onto them at dawn, and the wall the book had lived in stood open to the courtyard with its bandage drying, waiting for whatever the family was going to decide walls were for now.

In the model room, awake, she thought about the flyleaf. Two lines on one leaf now, sixty years apart, both in the same unhurried hand: *I am not brave. I am only tidy*, and *Kept you sixty years. Who kept me?* — and between the two of them lay the whole sealed lifetime, and after the second one lay whatever came next, which was a sen ‑ tence with her own name on it, unwritten, in a book built with rooms

for exactly that. She did not get up. She did not write anything. The night before a keeper's summons is not the night for a fourth hand, and the water would be back in the morning, and the water, as everyone on this coast agreed, was right.

CHAPTER 13

13

She turned the photograph over on the second Sunday of November, at the flat, with the drawer open and the rain coming down the towers in ropes, because the unmasking had changed the terms of everything in the house and a face-down photograph was now the only conversation in the family that had not been had.

She had carried it home from the village in September without looking at it, and it had lain in the writing desk's bottom drawer all summer under the galley and beside the bundle's empty place, face down, doing the thing photographs do when they are waiting, which is nothing, at enormous intensity.

The front was a courtyard.

Not a courtyard like her grandmother's. It was her grandmother's courtyard — the same squat wellhead at the back, the same eave throwing its diagonal, the same shell wall with its scales — and it was not, because the light was from another nation. Photographs from that era carried a heavier light, a grainy silver weather that made even noon look remembered, and the twenty-two girls sitting in rows on low stools in this light sat inside it the way people sit inside weather. They wore the crowns. The crowns were enormous — festival architectures, whole gardens balanced on small heads, wired and pinned and serious — and the girls' faces above them were solemn as magistrates, because a camera in 1947 was an event with a name and a cost, and nobody in the frame was going to waste the cost on a smile. And on their laps, in most of their laps, were books. In the front row, at the left, a girl of no size at all held a thread-bound volume with the four stitched eyes catching the silver, and she held it the way the other girls held theirs, which was not like a prop. It was like a plate at a table where food had finally arrived.

Lin Li sat down on the floor with the photograph and read it as she read everything, by absence first. The absence was the adults. No teacher in the frame. No men. No audience. Twenty-two girls, crowned, books in laps, in a courtyard with the roof off, photographed by someone standing where the doorway stood — and the doorway was empty, and the empty doorway was the loudest thing in the picture, because in every other courtyard photograph of that era on this coast, the doorway was full of elders proving the event was sanctioned. Here the doorway held nobody. And once she saw the emptiness she saw the answer to it, because the caption was signed, and the signature was the photographer's, and the photographer had stood in the exact spot where a sanction should have been standing and made the picture herself — the authority of the mission, the age, the ledger, all of it on loan to a woman with a borrowed name, spent on one photograph of twenty-two girls with books. The doorway wasn't empty. It was occupied by the person the doorway was afraid of.

The caption was on the front, lower right, in English, in pencil, in a small round hand she now knew the way she knew her own.

Temple courtyard class, autumn 1947 — twenty-two, crowned, and none of them here for the crowns. — G.C.H.

She read it four times. The dream stood in the room with her while she read it — the courtyard, the heavier light, the girls not looking at the flowers — and the explanation arrived one sentence late, the way all the honest ones did: the dream had been taking attendance. The voice saying the name, the rows of stools, the crowns nobody was looking at — the dream had simply held the photograph up to her ear, the way you hold a shell, and the photograph had said what it said. A woman's voice, old and warm, reading a school list: her interior filing system had cast the reading voice in the only face it kept, and the face was correct, and the file was correct, and nothing supernatural had occurred, and something had.

The names were on the back, in the same round hand, ruled in pencil the way a teacher rules a register, twenty-two of them in two columns with the seating order preserved, and the back of a photo‑graph is where the truth of one gets written, because the front belongs to whoever paid. It is on the record here as written, the register's first column, in the teacher's hand:

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Huang Ama, 7 — loses no arguments.

Cai Mei-yu, 9 — writes her name on walls. Washes it off herself when told.

Hong Jimei, 11 — limps from the net-needle; quick at numbers; does the market's sums for the old women at night.

Weng Shuang, 8 — gave her crown to her sister after the picture.

Shi Yin, 10 — left 1948 for Xiamen; writes letters; the letters are good.

(the second column: seventeen more, in the same pencil, the same date)

※

Seven years old, the first entry. The year was 1947. The woman sleeping across the river from rationality had been seven in the autumn of 1947, and the teacher had known her for seven weeks and had already filed the fact that the whole city would be told, in a hundred years, by her granddaughter, as an observation: the girl who does not lose arguments. The teacher had seen it in seven weeks. It had taken the family sixty years and a national tourism economy to arrive at the same sentence, and when it arrived — when it arrived it arrived in Lin Li's hand, in English, at two in the morning, as an epiphany, as *her* sentence, as the one true thing she had ever put into the world with her name under it.

She got the printouts. They were in the folder called SOURCE — the mirrors, the screenshots, the forum thread with her own sentence

living in it uncredited — and she took out the oldest capture, the repost of the 2012 post, her post, the one with the photograph of Ahma at the wall and the three fixed sentences that had built a tourism economy, and she laid the 2012 post on the floor beside the 1947 photograph, and put the photograph in one hand and the post in the other, and read the two of them the way she read facing pages, because that was what they were.

My grandmother cannot read, and she has never once lost an argument at the fish market.

Huang Ama, 7 — loses no arguments.

Sixty-five years. One sentence. Not copied — she checked herself as she checked everything, for the comfort of procedure — not copied, because she had never seen this photograph until tonight; never read the caption; had not known the class existed, had not known the register, had not known that a teacher with a borrowed name had written her grandmother's defining fact in English pencil on the back of a picture while the grandmother was seven years old and the ink of the century was still wet. And yet the sentence was the sentence. The observation had gone into the teacher's register in 1947 and into the granddaughter's post in 2012, and between the two of them it had traveled the only way true things travel in a family that keeps its truths in walls: by mouth, by repetition, by a little girl growing up into a woman repeating, at the market, at the stove, to a child on her knee, the line about herself that a teacher had written down once with a pencil — until the line was so old in the family that it sounded like the grandmother's own voice, and the granddaughter heard it, and wrote it down, and the internet called it hers.

She could even name the afternoon the rhythm had entered her. She was nine. The market, summer, the height of the oyster war: her grandmother, one stool down from a rival, shelling with her back perfectly straight, saying to no one and everyone, in the flat tone of settled fact, *Ask anyone on this flat. I have never once lost an argument*. Not boasting — filing. Saying it the way the harbor says its

depth. And the girl with the pencil eyes had filed it too, as children file the sentences their elders are, and twenty years later the sentence had surfaced in her hand at two in the morning wearing a 2012 URL, and she had called it hers, because by then it was hers the way the air in a house is hers.

Her best sentence was a relay. It had been run to her like a cup of water down a line of hands, and she had drunk it and described the taste as her own.

She sat on the floor of the flat for a long time with the two pages touching. The rain had moved off; the typhoon season was folding its tents; the towers across the river had their lights back on. And the relay had a second leg, she saw, and the second leg was the one that hurt, because the post's other claim — *my grandmother cannot read* — was the same sentence's evil twin. The teacher had written *loses no arguments* about a girl holding a book. The granddaughter had written *cannot read* about the same woman, and been *praised* for it, retweeted for it, invited to explain the village's charm on that basis; the camouflage aestheticized, the Illiterate Granny with the quick tongue and the flower crown, a persona so old in the family that Lin Li had certified it in print without once asking for its papers. Even the post's gentler sentence — *at seventy-two she still wears the morning in her hair* — was the teacher's caption wearing a flower: *none of them here for the crowns* had said it first, in English pencil, about a courtyard of weeping girls — that the flowers were never the point of the women who wore them. The teacher had seen a reader. The post had certified a mask. And the mask had been her grandmother's for sixty years, and Lin Li had grown up inside it, loved inside it, published inside it, and had written the mask's advertisement in the exact cadence of the mask's inventors, and the internet had made the advertisement the village's front door.

Her best sentence was a relay, and the baton had been passed by a woman who was not allowed, for sixty years, to say what she was carrying.

On Monday she took the photograph out to the village, and the bus, and the lane, and the courtyard, and she put it on the oyster table in front of her grandmother, face up, the crowns to the sky, and said nothing, because the photograph said the thing that had to be said first, and it said it in English pencil, in a round hand, and it had been saying it since 1947 to anyone who turned it over.

Ah-ma finished the oyster she was shelling. Wiped the knife. Set it down parallel to the photograph, the way tools are set down when the work is changing. Then she put on the drugstore glasses, which she did not need for photographs, and looked at the front of the picture for the length of one long breath, and then turned it over and read the back, all of it, every name, moving her lips at her own seven-year-old entry, and Lin Li watched her grandmother read the register of her own mind being opened in 1947 by a woman with a borrowed name, and when Ah-ma reached the bottom of the second column she took the glasses off, and folded them, and looked at the flats, where the tide was doing exactly what she had said it would do, because she had said it.

"She took the picture the day of the crowns," Ah-ma said. "Be ‑ cause we all cried when the crowns went on. Twenty-two girls crying, and her laughing, and the film only had one shot left." She turned the photograph over again, to the crowns, to the weeping girls in their gardens. "Crying because of the weight, girl. Nobody told us the crowns weighed like that. You carry a garden, you carry it all day. She said — put it in English, the way she said it — *the crown is heavy because it is true*. Then she took the picture. So we would know the crowns were not the point." She slid the photograph across the table with two fingers. "The books were the point. We were holding the books."

And that was how the telling began — not with a beginning, with a photograph set down and a weight explained — and Lin Li, who had come out to ask, sat down on the low stool across from her grand ‑

mother and did not ask, and the telling started where tellings start, which is wherever the teller decides the hearer can survive.

CHAPTER 14

14

The telling took three Saturdays, and it took place at the oyster table, which was the only room in the village where Ah-ma could talk and work at the same time without the work stopping.

The surviving classmate came on the first Saturday. Auntie Hong, ninety-three, from the lane by the fish-cleaning slabs, walking unassisted at the pace of a woman who has decided walking unassisted is a policy, and she sat down at the table uninvited in the way of oldest neighbors, took up a knife, and began to shell, and the two of them — the keeper and the classmate — worked side by side for twenty minutes before anyone said anything at all, and what Auntie Hong said first was not about 1946 at all.

"They washed my wall off in 'sixty-six," she said. "The name. Did they wash yours?"

"Mine went in a jar," Ah-ma said.

"Mm," said Auntie Hong, shelling. "That was tidier."

And that was the whole of the old women's preliminary remarks, and Lin Li, who had brought the photograph and the recorder she was not allowed to use and the notebook she had promised herself not to open, understood that the telling was not going to be performed for her. It was going to be conducted across a work surface, at the speed of shelling, in the Minnan of two women who had earned every sentence, and her role was the role the class had always assigned to the city: hold the book, read when asked, and keep up. She had left her hands empty on purpose — no recorder, no pencil, nothing that could make the old women into sources — and the emptiness was the fee, and the fee was the right seat.

The class, then. 1946.

"There was a scrap bundle," Ah-ma said, to the shells. "Down by the salt shed, where the recycling men came before there was recycling. Paper by weight. Someone's library had died — a teacher's library, or a clerk's; who knows. The bundle had books in it with the covers off, and ledgers, and old newspapers, and this." She nodded at the cabinet across the courtyard, where the volume slept. "The teacher found it. She was living up at the mission then, walking the flats every day for the fisher girls, because the mission had told her the fisher girls were her assignment and she had told the mission the fisher girls were her assignment, and those are different sentences." The knife turned a shell. "She bought the bundle by weight. That's what she always said — I bought you by weight, which is the cheapest way to buy anything and the only way to buy a book that everyone has decided is worth nothing. The stall man thought she was crazy, buying ruined paper by the catty. Some of the leaves were glued together with salt water. She steamed them apart over the kettle. Weeks. She said the book arrived in the village as cargo, like the shells, and like the shells it was worth nothing until somebody worked it."

"A cargo with a destination," Lin Li said, before she could stop herself, and Ah-ma's eyes came up over the shells and rested on her for a second — the daughter quoting the mason to the mother — and went back down.

"The class was the courtyard. Twenty-two of us the first winter, and it moved; when the weather came in we sat in the temple, and when the temple was wanted we sat here, and once — the picture — we sat where the light was. She taught us what she called the four competences, which were: your name, your numbers, the tide words, and one sentence you could say to any official in any office that would make him put his stamp on your paper without reading it." Ah-ma paused. "The first three she taught us straight. The fourth she taught us by teaching us to read everything he was going to hand us, slowly,

in front of him, moving our lips. An official will stamp anything a woman reads back to him slowly, because a reading woman might be recording, and no stamp-man in history has ever wanted his name beside your paper. That was Grace's discovery. It wasn't on any syl‑labus anywhere in the world. It came out of this courtyard."

Hong Jimei — the register's *quick at numbers* — was there that first Saturday, ninety-three to Ah-ma's eighty-six, and she put in, to the shells: "She made us write our names until our wrists ached, and then she made us write them on the courtyard wall, and when the neighbors complained she corrected the wall. Her own hand. Higher than we could reach, so it would last."

"That's in the book," Ah-ma said. "You're in the book, Jimei. In English."

"Good," said Auntie Hong, and shelled three oysters in a row like a woman signing something. And then, unprompted, the one lesson — the single thing ninety-three years had kept from two winters of a courtyard school, delivered to the shells in the tone of a woman reciting her only possession: "The first day, she taught us our names before she taught us anything else. She said a woman who can't write her name signs with a cross, and a cross is what they nail to doors to keep things out, and we were not doors. I never signed a cross again." She shelled two more. "That's the whole school. The rest was home‑work."

The class's rules, the ones no ministry ever prints: you came with two catties of shells; the shells paid the lamp oil. You brought your sister if your sister was small; the small ones learned by hearing. You wrote your name until it stopped being a picture and became a handle, and then you wrote it on the wall, and the wall was the re‑gister, and the register was public, and being public was the whole security system — a thing the whole lane has read cannot be quietly unwritten. And when the district's man came at the end of the first winter to ask what the teacher was teaching, the twenty-two girls

read him the market's prices aloud, in unison, at full width, and the man went back to the county and reported a literacy class, which was true, and no politics, which was also true, and the class survived its first inspection the way the wall had survived its first washing: by being exactly what it said it was, in front of everyone, at volume.

The courtyard's product line, over its two winters, was women who could not be fooled at tables. Jimei did the market's sums at night for the old women, off the books, in the dark, at a whisper. Shi Yin wrote letters for half the harbor and went to Xiamen and kept writing. Mei-yu wrote her name on walls. And Ah-ma — Huang Ama, seven, front row left — went home to a household where the men were at sea and the accounts were kept in knots of string, and began, quietly, at nine, ten, eleven, to be the person in her family who knew what the papers said. It was not a thing anyone announced. It was a thing the string stopped needing to say.

Fifty-five was the handover. Ah-ma told it with her hands, which is how the old tell it — the objects doing the verbs. The courtyard again, autumn, after the class had been closed by arrangements nobody explained to children: the mission consolidating, the teachers redistributed, the courtyard quietly returned to being a courtyard. Grace was being moved inland to a normal school, to teach teachers. On the last afternoon she called Ah-ma — a girl of fifteen, the only one of the twenty-two still reading, because reading, as the register might have noted, makes girls harder to marry and the marrying had begun — and the handover was three things, and the telling held up each one.

The book. *Keep this until reading is safe,* she said. *You cannot stop reading the way you cannot stop the tide, and you should not, and one day the two of those facts will be a problem. Until then, the wall.*

The pen. *It was her teacher's,* Ah-ma said, turning the empty air of the word *pen* in her fingers, because the pen itself was in a drawer in a city under a photograph's gaze, undescribed to this day. *She said*

a nib wears to the angle of the hand that holds it, and hers was worn to teaching, and mine would wear to keeping, and the girl who wears it third will wear it to whatever she is, and that is the pen's whole biography, and pens outlive their opinions.

And the third thing was the sentence — not the flyleaf; that came later, that was Ah-ma's own, written in a bad autumn — but the instruction inside the instruction, the one the telling gave in Minnan and the book gave in English and the margin gave in neither: *a book only kept is a corpse.* The widow had written it. Grace had underlined it, twice, in the round hand, and said aloud, in the courtyard, in 1955: *It is not your job to keep it safe. It is your job to keep it. Safe is a rumor the powerful start about themselves.*

Ah-ma told all of this to the shells. And Lin Li, on the low stool across, understood that she was receiving the family's succession document — the will, read aloud over a work surface, with the executor shelling — and that the date of the reading was November, and the date of the inheritance had been 1955, and the delay in probate was sixty-one years long.

Fifty-eight was not told that Saturday. Fifty-eight was told with the knife down.

Ah-ma set the knife in the seam of the table, which she did perhaps twice a year, and looked at the flats for a while, and the telling lost its Minnan music and became plain.

"They took her in the spring of fifty-eight. From the normal school, in a car, for the old business — the mission, the foreign connection, the years in the treaty port. The category was *historical counter-revolutionary,* which meant they were not saying she had done anything. They were saying she had *been* something. She had been educated by foreigners and employed by foreigners and loyal to a book with a foreign binding, and in those years that was a biography's whole case." The flats ran out to the far line. "She was gone nineteen months the first time. Then out, then called in again, the

way the weather does. In sixty-one, or sixty-three — the visits blur; the years were the same weather — I was allowed one visit. In the town with the normal school. A room with a table, and a woman from the school's office knitting in the corner, watching my hands."

"She was different," Ah-ma said. "They had her teaching again — under watch, teaching the children of the school's own staff, because she was the best teacher in the district and the district could not admit that and also could not spare her. They had her signing things. I did not ask what. We were given an hour and a table, and the office woman with her knitting, and so we shelled oysters." The old woman looked at her own hands, which had done the thing. "I had brought them from home. She asked about the girl. Not the book. The girl — was she reading, was she stubborn, did she lose arguments. I said she was losing them less and less. And Grace laughed — one burst, the old laugh, out of the side of her that the years had not been at — and she said: *Good. Stubbornness is the reading that doesn't need the book.* And then, quietly, so the knitting would not hear it: *Tell her the tide words. Teach her the words the water uses. Everything else can be printed; the tide words can't; they live in mouths.* And the hour ended the way those hours ended, with a stamp, on a form, in trip‑licate, and I walked to the bus past the knitting, and that was the visit. The one visit."

And the visit's room had a window, and the window had a view of the normal school's wall, and on the wall, in a child's hand, someone had chalked a single name — an old courtyard name, the kind the rains take — and Grace had looked at the wall for the length of the visit's second half, and Ah-ma had followed her eyes, and neither of them said the name aloud, and the knitting woman's needles went on, and the visit ended at the stamp, and the stamp was the last thing the visit said, the way stamps are.

And she wrote none of it down. Not that night, and not at any of the tables after. The family's texts traveled by mouth; that was the whole security system, and it had worked for four hundred years, and

she was the mouth now, and the mouth does not carry a pencil. The notebook in her bag stayed shut on purpose, the way a church stays shut on a weekday, and the silence of it was the first draft of a fidelity she did not yet have words for.

And that was fifty-eight, and the visit — and Lin Li sat without writing any of it down, holding the whole chain in her head the way you hold water, and Ah-ma picked the knife up, and the knife did what it always did, hinge, turn, flick, click, and the telling went into the wall years, which was the part the old woman told with her back very straight, the part that took the second Saturday and a change of weather.

CHAPTER 15

15

The second Saturday came in with the wind, and the telling changed weathers with it.

The night the tip came was the ninth moon of 1966, and Ah-ma told it the way she told the weather, which is to say she told it as something that had been coming for weeks and had simply chosen a door.

"Huang Kun," she said. "Your grandfather's sister's boy. Nineteen that year, and a red armband, and proud the way only a nineteen-year-old with an armband and no fish to catch can be proud. He came over the wall at dark — the back wall, the courtyard wall, the way he'd come over his whole boyhood to steal longans — and he stood in the courtyard with his armband under his jacket like it was warm in there, and he said: Aunt, tomorrow there's a squad. Third Street first, then the temple, then the flats. Books, tablets, the gods, the registers. Anything with old words on it goes to the fire at the school yard." The knife worked. "And then he said the sentence I have kept longer than the book. He said: *Aunt, I'm not supposed to be here.* And he went back over the wall, and that was the tip. One boy, one wall, one sentence he wasn't supposed to say, in a country full of boys not saying sentences."

"Did you know him after?" Lin Li asked. "In the years after?"

"He led the squad down our street two nights later," Ah-ma said. "Past this house. His voice had gone formal two doors down — you'd have thought the armband was reading from a card. He didn't look in. He didn't have to; he knew what wasn't here. And after the years turned, he'd sit two stools from me at the market and neither of us ever bought the other's oysters, and that was the etiquette, and it held for fifty years, and it will hold at my funeral, because some debts are

paid by never being mentioned, and he paid his that way. He's sev - enty-nine now. He'll stand at the edge of the lane when it happens, and he won't say anything, and you'll watch him not say it, and you'll understand everything about 1966 from a man not saying a word."

The second night was the curation, and the curation, Ah-ma said, was the part nobody tells, because nobody else's house had a night two.

"Every family on this coast became the editor of its own house that autumn. You think of the burning as them. Some of it was them. But the first editor through every door on the third street was somebody's grandmother with a kettle and a washtub, deciding what the house had been. What could be seen. What could be survived. What a daughter should grow up without. We were not hiding from the squads, child. We were deciding, in one night, what our houses had meant — and the squads were just the deadline."

What she did, she did in order. The letters first.

"Thirty-three of them. From the teacher, over the years — reading lessons dressed up as fish-market news, because a letter that arrives at a fish house has to smell like a fish house. *The mackerel came early this week, and here are three characters you will need for the market.* That kind of letter. Thirty-three of them, and every one with the lesson folded inside the fish, and I knew every fold, I could have recited them — and I burned them. Myself. In the courtyard, in the washtub, one at a time, unread. Not skimmed. *Unread.* Because I knew if I read one I would read them all, and if I read them all I would keep them, and if I kept them the house would die for the sake of my tuition." The knife paused, above the shell, the first pause in two Saturdays. "Do you know what it is to burn a letter unread? It is the only way to burn a letter. If you read it first, you're not burning a letter. You're burning a copy, and keeping the letter." The kettle went on before the wall of his going was cold. That was the arithmetic of the tip: one night's warning bought one night's work, and the work was done by lamplight, at a boil, by women, while the men slept the

sleep of men who had carried gods all day. Nobody wept. You cannot weep and sort at the same temperature.

Lin Li's throat did something she did not authorize. "I remember the mackerel," she said. "That's in the book. You wrote it in the flyleaf year."

"I remember the mackerel," Ah-ma said. "The characters are gone. That's the trade we made that night, and I would make it again, and that is why your grandfather married me and no one else on this flat, though he was too polite to put it in those terms while he was alive." One letter survived the tub, and only in the form every keeper's memory keeps things: the opening line, and the loss of everything after it. The book records the pair of sentences the way a wall records a tide — one high-water mark, one low:

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"The mackerel came early this week, and here are three characters you will need for the market."

"I remember the mackerel. The characters are gone."

※

Thirty-three letters, and the surviving text of the entire corres ‑ pondence is a fish and an absence. Ah-ma said it without self-pity, the way you read a gravestone you did not commission.

The wrist came next, and Ah-ma showed it — turned the left arm over on the table so the lamp of the overcast fell on the pale comma at the base of the thumb, the mark Lin Li had seen at every oyster table of her childhood and had filed, in the family's grand taxonomy of unexplained things, as a kitchen scar. "A corner of the fire got me. The letters were dry and the wind turned, and a flame came off the washtub and took the skin here, in one lick, the shape of a comma." She turned the arm back. "I've read enough since to know what a comma does. It's the mark that says the sentence isn't finished. I've decided to believe she would have enjoyed that."

The crock was packed on the second night, and the packing was an editorial act, and Ah-ma told it as one.

Lin Li heard her own trade in it, and heard it with the skin off. *Every family on this coast became the editor of its own house that autumn.* The house edited by its keeper, one night, under deadline; the past curated for survival by the only person who knew what the past weighed; the fold made before the scissors arrived, and made so well that the scissors found nothing. She had not left the family business in 2013. She had only moved it indoors, and put it on a salary, and called the folding an office.

The book went in first, in its sleeve — the sleeve the teacher had wrapped it in, the amber paper, part of the object. The photograph went in, and the pen, each in its own twist of oilcloth, because the photograph was the register and the register had to survive separately from the text, and the pen — "the pen was the succession," Ah-ma said, "and a succession travels separately from the estate; ask any clan that's survived a government." Then the lid, and the wax — six coats, seven, cooked in the kitchen kettle in the dark with the shutter down, each coat cooled before the next, the thumbprints hers, and the wax was not for sealing, it was for *reading* — a wax seal tells the next person that the thing was sealed on purpose, by a hand, with time spent. Anyone could have buried a jar. Only a keeper would wax it.

And then the wall. The pocket behind the headboard — the masons of some grandfather generation had left it, the way this coast leaves pockets in everything it builds, and Ah-ma had measured it against the crock with a piece of string, and the string fit with two fingers to spare. The crock went in on a bed of the dry lime, mouth outward — "mouth outward, girl, always; you bury a thing facing the room it belongs to" — and then the wall was rebuilt around it, shell by shell, in the old pattern, her hands and her husband's hands, and the pointing at the pocket's mouth was laid with the shell-lime and finished with the boat putty — her husband's tin, the tung-oil putty he

caulked the netskiff with, taken without asking because asking was the one thing that would have made it impossible.

Dawn came up on the third morning, and the patch was fresh, and her husband — home between the fleets, awake before the light the way boat men are — walked the courtyard on his way to the water and stopped at the wall and put his thumb on it, because a boat man knows his own putty the way a keeper knows her own wax.

"You took my putty," he said.

"I'll buy more," Ah-ma said.

And that was the marriage's entire conversation about heresy, and it held for seventeen more years, until the sea took him, and it had held ever since, and it was, Ah-ma said, the best marriage on the flat that year, and possibly that decade, and the reason was the putty: he asked the question that had one safe answer, and she gave it, and neither of them ever spent another word on the largest thing either of them ever did.

The sweep came that afternoon — the third night's mob, the squad from the school yard with the numbers and the armbands, Yao Gen‑sheng at its head, seventeen, reading the fishing almanac upside down the way seventeen reads everything. The ancestor tablets went out first — her husband carried them, himself, before the squad touched the house, walking them up the lane to the temple "for safe‑keeping," in the sight of everyone, a man moving his own gods to safety in plain daylight because daylight was the only cover left. The Huang genealogy burned in the school-yard fire with the rest of the street's registers. The door gods were whitewashed and the slogan went over them, wet and stinking, in characters Ah-ma would spend sixty years declining to look at. And the almanac — the fishing al‑manac, the tide book, the one thing openly kept because openly use‑ful — Yao Gensheng misread it. Read the big-ebb entry as a flood warning, declared the flats unsafe, ordered the harvest tied to the seawall for the week.

The almanac error was two characters, one radical apart. The book said the characters for the great ebb. The boy read them as the char - acters for the great flood. The two words wear the same water on their heads — one sends you out to the flats, the other sends you to the seawall — and a seventeen-year-old with an armband and a bor - rowed authority read the water and stopped reading, and the village lost the year's richest ebb to a single unturned stroke of a syllable. Ah-ma told this part with her whole face toward the water.

"And nobody corrected him," Ah-ma said. "Not one woman on this flat corrected a seventeen-year-old with an armband, and the village lost a week of the best ebb of the year to a misread word, and that" — she pointed the knife at the flats, at the water coming back in on schedule, at the whole unsentimental sea — "that is what it was, girl. Not the fire. The misread word. They had all the paper, and they could not read it, and we could not tell them so, and the oysters paid."

The flyleaf was written that night, with the squad's paint still drying two streets away, in the bad autumn, before the wrist was bandaged: *I am not brave. I am only tidy.* And under it, the tide-date, no year, because years were the enemy's units. And all that autumn she wore white buds in her hair — the Mourning garland, the one the lane gives its own dead — though no one had died, and no one asked, and the flowers said for her the one thing that could not be said, which was that something had been buried in the house and the house was in mourning for it, and the lane, reading flowers the way this lane reads everything, nodded at the buds and asked nothing, and that is how the calendar of fear was kept on this coast, girl: in flowers, at the temples of the women who wore them.

The house after the sweep smelled of whitewash and burnt lacquer for a month, and the slogan on the door dried into the wood the way instructions dry into a house. Ah-ma looked at it once, from the courtyard, the morning it dried, with the baby's-laxative face of a woman memorizing an insult so she would recognize the handwriting

later — and then never looked at it again, and had the door repainted with gods the first spring the paint shop opened, over the slogan, without asking anyone, which is how the door got its fourth layer, and why the demand, fifty years later, was never a preference.

The telling stopped there, on the third Saturday, because the tide was coming in and the light was going, and Ah-ma washed the knife and dried it and said the last of it to the sea.

"Nineteen seventy-two, I took your mother out of school. You'll want to ask why, and the answer is: two secrets cannot share one room, and she was the cleverer child, and clever children ask at dinner. One of us was going to carry it and one of us was going to be spared it, and I chose, and I chose the way you choose in a flood — which child to lift. She has resented me for it for fifty years, and she is right to, and I would do it again, and that is three truths, and you may have them all at once, because you're the one with the book now."

She stood, and folded the cloth, and the telling was over, and the tide came in across the flats the way it comes in on this coast, all the way, quietly, to the line.

CHAPTER 16

16

The envelope had no stamp and three words, in the hand she had been correcting for nine years: *Saturday. Nine. Nothing.*

She read *nothing* twice. An editor reads a summons as a doctor reads a chart, for what is not ordered, and nothing was not ordered, which meant the meeting was not business, and the only thing between them that was not business had a room of its own.

The building on Saturday was a held breath. The renovation air was gone from it; the joss shop below was shut, its grille down, the smell of sandalwood locked in the stairwell like a tenant; the corridors ran to the doors of dark offices, and the house's one wall-stain had the north conference room to itself. His door was open. He was at the window with the kettle already going, and on the desk, squared to the desk's edge, sat a folder she had never seen: thin, buff, tied with the cotton tape that government files use, the knot the kind you tie when you are not the one who will untie it.

He poured. Three times over the morning, unasked, the second and third without comment, and she counted them the way you count anything that has happened to you before, in another room, in another life, and neither of them said the number.

"You were born in the spring of 'eighty-nine," Geng said. "In the autumn of 'eighty-nine I was twenty-four, and I sat where you're sitting, and Zhang sat where I'm sitting, and there was tea, and there was an envelope, and it was the same room. They keep a room like that the way a temple keeps a bronze bell. It outlasts the priests."

"What was the sin," Lin Li said. "Yours."

"Essays." He said it as other men say a disease they are long past, one they still take the pill for. "The culture-fever essays. The ones you wrote at twenty-four when the whole country was asking out loud,

and you believed — I believed; the belief is important; the belief is what they price — that asking was the job. I had a series running in the window of a reform journal. Three thousand characters a fort‑night. The drawer in this desk was their drawer first." He put his hand flat on the desk, on the wood, as if the drawer were a sleeping animal he was not going to wake yet. "Zhang edited two of them. He was the best editor I ever met, and he edited me like a man watering something he intended to transplant. And then the autumn came, and the journal folded its window, and the essays could not live where they had been living, and Zhang — who understood, before any of us, that the essays would not die, that they would sit in a drawer and breathe — took me to the room."

"And the envelope."

"Was newer then. The country was newer. You could still be bought with a future instead of an amount." He refilled her cup. "He offered me the desk. This desk. He said — and I have kept the sen‑tence in the drawer with the essays because it is the best-edited sentence I never wrote — he said: *A man who publishes is a man who can be found. A man who edits is a man who is trusted.* And I was twenty-four, and my wife was — " the smallest pause, the first crack in the level voice, " — my wife was pregnant with the boy. And I folded the way twenty-four folds, which is completely, and with the ‑ories."

He opened the drawer.

She had imagined the drawer for nine years, as you imagine a country from its stamps. It was shallower than a legend. It held a stack of manuscript pages, typewriter paper, typed on one side, each stack squared and flagged — eleven stacks; she counted; counting was the only organ she could trust in that room — and the flags were dated in his hand, and the last date was October 1989, and nothing in the drawer was younger than the protagonist.

He lifted the top stack and held it out. The title page said, in his typing, *The Uselessness of Use*.

"Read a page," he said. "Out loud, if you would. I have never heard it. A man should hear his own silence once."

She read. The essay was about the years when the whole country had debated whether culture was useful — whether a poem could outargue a contract, whether a philosophy could carry a shipment — and it was built, she saw within a paragraph, on a hinge: every argument for usefulness was made at full strength, and then made to listen to its own costs, and the costs were made to listen back, and the essay did not resolve. It couldn't. The hinge was the design. She read a page aloud in the empty building, her voice the only voice on the floor, and his face did not change, and when she reached the end of the page she stopped, because the next sentence was going to be one of the two best sentences she had ever read or one of the worst, and the sentence was constructed so that she could not tell which, and she looked up, and he was watching her with the expression of a man watching a scale that will not settle.

"You can't tell," he said.

"No."

"Neither could Zhang. That was the autumn's last review. He read it and he said: *I cannot tell if this is the best thing you have written or the most frightened.* And I could not either. That's why it stopped. A man can live in a drawer for thirty-seven years if the drawer won't tell him what he is." He took the pages back with both hands, squared them, and returned them to the flags, and the flat of his hand went on the stack once, and rested, and came away.

"There was a winter after," he said. "I tried to hold my own knife that winter. The body votes last, and the body voted no, and I woke up, and the drawer sealed itself after that — the essays had already stopped, in the autumn, and the man stopped in the winter, and the two facts have lived in the same desk ever since, and my wife took the boy to her mother's for a year, and came back, and we do not open

that year either. Every family on this coast has a wall with a jar in it. Ours just files its papers."

Lin Li held the cup in both hands and did not drink, and the tea went on cooling at the exact rate of everything else in the room.

"The young ones fold in writing now," Geng said, and it was the closest he came to the present tense all morning. "A form. A check-box. *I acknowledge*. The young ones are not cowards; they are inventory. At least my generation had to sit in the room and smell the tea. We were cowards with craft." He looked at the drawer. "I say that in front of the drawer because the drawer knows."

"The wind line," Lin Li said. "Zhang's line. Where did he get it."

"Ah." For the first time the director sat back, and something almost like pleasure crossed the penitence. "That is the one thing I can give you whole, because Zhang gave it to me whole, in this office, the year before he died, when I asked him the same question you have just asked. He heard it in the eighties, he said — before my time, before the drawer, when he was the one being edited and someone old was doing it with tea. An old man's sentence, from an older man's mouth, in a room that the country kept for the purpose. He asked the old man who had said it first. The old man said: *It doesn't have an author, young comrade. It has custodians. That's why it works. Arrest the author and you've got nothing; the sentence just changes pockets.*" Geng looked at her. "Zhang delivered it to you the way it was delivered to me. Not as a threat. As an inheritance. *The wind is changing; fold it yourself before it's folded for you.* And then he added his own rider, the letterhead rider, because Zhang could never leave a good sentence without trying to marry it."

"This isn't a warning; warnings come on letterhead," Lin Li said.

"That's the one," Geng said. "He was proud of that rider for the rest of his life. He'd earned it in a room too."

The three refills were gone. The pot sat between them like a fourth person who had heard everything and would be leaving with neither

of them. And now the telling came to 2013, and it came from his side, in fragments, against the ones she had carried since the blank page, and the room filled with a tea that no single witness had ever drunk.

"The trigger was the province," he said. "Not the district — the district would have handled you with a phone call and a lunch. Your numbers crossed a line in the spring of 'thirteen; sixty thousand readers is a town; a town that reads is a different instrument than a girl with opinions. And there was a post in April — you know which post; I have never said its number out loud and I am not going to start — that used the newspaper word. The new-year word. A province that has just spent the new year confiscating a newspaper does not enjoy finding the same argument in a flower village." He turned his cup a quarter-turn, the way the bureau turns a document. "The bureau called Zhang. Zhang called me. The room was booked through a restaurant manager who owed Zhang his grandson's schooling, and the envelope was Zhang's own money. I checked, years later, after he died. It was never an expense. He paid for the fold out of his own pocket, which was either the most corrupt thing or the most loyal thing I ever saw a man do, and I have decided not to decide, and I would thank you not to decide either, because deciding is what the room was for."

"What was I to you," Lin Li said. "In that room."

"You were the best young editor this house had produced since me," Geng said, "and the most reckless, and the two facts had the same source, and Zhang could fix one of them and I could fix the other, and between us we fixed neither, and saved both. They were going to take the account and flag the file. Flagged files don't stay files; they become careers' understudies, waiting. We bought you the warning instead of the case. Zhang said it plainly, in the room: *We can be the knife, or we can be the letter that arrives before the knife.* You chose the letter, and the letter cost you a blog, and the blog was the cheapest thing on the table that day, and you paid like it was the whole bill."

"You watched the road home," Lin Li said. "The car. You talked about your son's exams the whole way, and you watched the mirror."

"I watched the fold happen," Geng said. "In the mirror. You looked out the window the whole way, and somewhere past the overpass your face closed like a shop, shelf by shelf, and I drove slower to give the fold room, and I talked about the boy's examinations because the examinations were the only safe subject in the car, and because a man driving a folded girl home needs the car to be full of something, and the boy's marks were what I had." He looked at the drawer. "He's a good boy. He manages a shop that sells nothing I understand. We have tea at Spring Festival. I have never told him about the drawer, or the room, or the year his mother took him away, and he has never asked, and that is not silence, that is a marriage of silences, and there are worse marriages."

"You saved my career," Lin Li said.

"I saved your career," Geng said, "and I am not sure I saved you."

The room held that for a while. Downstairs, in the shut shop, something the owner had left on a timer switched itself on and off, one click, the building's own heartbeat.

"You'll want to hate him," Geng said. "Zhang. He's the one who counted your readers out loud; he's the one who put the envelope down like a tip; he's the one who told you the thing about letterhead that you have been carrying in your pocket like a coin ever since. Hate him; it's the correct first feeling. It won't hold. It didn't hold for me either. He was the best reader either of us ever had — yours, mine, the city's — and the proof is that the fold was accurate. He quoted your sentence back to you, from memory, with admiration, because he *had* read you, closely, the way nobody else had, and the room used his reading as the weapon, and he let it be used, and that is the biography of every good man I have ever worked for, including the one in the mirror."

And then the thing neither of them had said, the thing the whole morning had been walking around, the way a tide walks around a

channel marker, arrived, and it arrived from him, quietly, at the end, the way the worst documents arrive:

"There's a fact from the room. I've heard you tell the village things; I've read you for nine years; I know what you leave out, because leaving out is the family style, yours and mine. But this fact you have never said, and I have never said, and I am going to say it now because you are going to publish something soon — I don't know what; I know it's coming the way you know a customer is going to skip a bill — and the fact should be in the room with your decision." He set the cup down, and aligned it with the desk's edge. "When it was finished — the deletion arranged, the envelope on the table, the tea gone cold the way tea goes in that room because nobody drinks it, they just pour it — you looked at the two of us, and you thanked us. You said thank you. You said it like a girl at a graveside, quiet, both hands around the bag you'd brought. And I have lived on that thank-you for thirteen years. It was the only receipt the fold ever produced that had me down as the good man. A man can raise a child, run a house, edit a city, on a receipt like that. And I want it back on the table before you do what you are going to do, because the thank-you was not a detail. The thank-you was the fold *taking*. That is how you know a fold took, girl. The folded person says thank you."

The clock on his wall did what clocks do in empty buildings, which is announce itself.

Lin Li put the cup down. She had not drunk it; the level had not moved all morning; the three refills had gone into a cup she had only held, and they had warmed her hands, and that was all the tea had done, in either room, in either life.

"I know," she said. "I've known since April. The notebook's first page is dated the day after the room, and it's blank, because the thing I cut that day was the thank-you. I cut it out of my own record, and I have been calling it a morgue for nine years, and it's not a morgue, Director. It's a confessional, and the first entry was yours."

He looked at her for a long time. The penitence and the appraisal were in the same face, as they had been at every tea for nine years, and then he nodded, once, the nod of an editor accepting a sentence he will not change.

"I'm not brave either," he said. "I'm only tired."

She stood to go. At the door, the ritual of the room reversed itself for one second — she turned back, and took the pot, and topped up his cup, the first pour she had ever given him in that building, and he let her, and did not say anything, and did not drink it, and she understood that the not-drinking was the permission, and that the final version of this scene was thirteen years away or none, and put the pot down.

At the outer desk, passing, she saw his monitor wake under the vibration of her steps. The screen held a reader view — her account, post #217, the women's essay, scrolled to the margin credit, *a hand, mid-century*, the page held open all morning at the Question. He had been reading it when she came. He had been reading it, probably, since July.

Neither of them said anything. The knowledge crossed the desk and took its seat in both of them, and she went down the stairwell past the shut grille of the joss shop, out into the arcade, into the sound of the sea doing its numbers beyond the wall, and the city received her back without comment, the way it receives everything it has decided to keep.

CHAPTER 17

17

She did not sleep. That was expected; the room did it every time the past came home with luggage. What she had not expected, at two in the morning, with the thank-you sitting in her chest as the envelope had sat on the table — an object of no weight that dominates whatever it is placed on — was to find herself opening the folder called SOURCE, and inside it the thread.

The thread was still alive. Twelve years old, three hundred and forty replies, the last one posted eleven days ago. She had screen-shotted pieces of it in June and filed the pieces under proof. Tonight she opened it whole, from the first post, and read her own original sin in the font of a travel forum, and the confession downstairs sat beside her like the office woman with the knitting, watching her hands.

※

Re: The Village Where the Houses Wear the Sea — reposted from a personal blog, May 2012. Original dated 4 April, Qingming. Poster's note: *found this and asked permission to mirror — the blog it came from has been taken down. Shame. Best thing ever written about this coast.*

※

The Village Where the Houses Wear the Sea

You take the 9:10 bus and the city lets go of you in stages — the ring road, the kilns, the aquaculture rafts lying in their rows like ruled paper — and then the bus turns along the bay and there is a village on the mud flats with oyster shells for walls, and if you are me, and it is Qingming, and you have just spent the morning watching your city burn paper at its ancestors, you get off the bus.

The old men say the oysters arrived as ballast, packed in the hulls of Song ships, and stayed on as walls. In Xunpu the sea is recycled into armor, and armor worn long enough starts to look like decoration.

I will be honest, because it is Qingming and you owe the dead honesty: I came here to be moved, and for the first hour I was not moved, I was taking notes. The walls are beautiful the way a tool is beautiful, which is to say they are not trying to be. The mortar between the shells is burned from the same reef the shells were raided from, so the wall is the sea holding the sea to itself, and after an hour I stopped writing and started carrying.

My grandmother cannot read, and she has never once lost an argument at the fish market.

I want to be careful with that sentence, because the city would make it cute. It is not cute. It is the most functional sentence I know. She reads the water the way the harbor office reads its instruments; she reads a buyer's shoes before she reads his offer; she runs the flat's prices in her head to the third decimal and has never written one down. The women here do not read. They do everything else. They haul the catch, run the stalls, raise the money the boats borrow, and settle, out loud, at volume, in a language the paperwork has never bothered to learn. The men go to sea and the words stay home with the women, and the words work for them, and I have watched my grandmother make an official put his stamp on a form by reading it back to him — slowly, moving her lips, the way the sea reads a seawall.

And here is the thing the city will not understand, so I will say it here, where the city does not read. She cannot read, and so she has never once been lied to by paper. Every scam in this province arrives as a document — the contracts, the compensation schedules, the fees with the small print like weather — and the paper cannot catch her, because paper has no grip on a woman who reads faces, water, and prices. I watched an official from the district hand her a

compensation schedule for the harbor works, three pages, and she listened while I read it aloud and heard, in the fourth line, the sentence that was not like the other sentences, and made him read that line again, twice, in front of the lane, until the number changed. The literate women in that line signed. My grandmother read the reader. You can keep your literacy. I have watched what it protects, and it is not the person holding it.

At seventy-two she still wears the morning in her hair.

The young ones are leaving, of course. The young ones should leave; the boats are mortgaged and the flats are shrinking and a girl with strong hands and no diploma has a future exactly as wide as the nearest factory gate. Go, girls. The village will hold. The walls know how to hold; it is the only thing they have ever done. But come back at Qingming, and look at what your grandmothers built out of what the sea threw away, and understand that when the concrete comes — and it is coming; you can see it from the flats, stacked in the second road's new lots — the concrete will not be wrong. It will just be a wall that has never been underwater, which is a thing this village does not know how to trust.

If you go: an hour and a half south of the city; the bus will not tell you where to get off, because the bus does not know this village exists, and neither, I have decided, should you, unless you are the kind of person who gets off buses.

Wear flowers. Everyone does. There is a photograph with this post. My grandmother, at the wall of the second lane, one hand flat on the shells, the flowers up, the tide out. She posed for it the way empresses pose for coins: she knows exactly what the flowers are doing to you, and she let me take the picture anyway, because the flowers were her idea before they were yours. Look at the hand on the wall. That hand has opened more oysters than the harbor has seen sunsets, and it is resting on the wall like it owns the sea's receipts.

The women here carry the whole shore economy in baskets on their hips — the catch, the stalls, the loans the boats survive on, the school fees, the incense money — and the men carry the boats. Ask the women whether this is a division of labor or a division of courage, and they will look at you the way the wall looks at weather, and go back to work. The men are at sea; the words stay home; the words work for the women; and the women work the words the way the flats work the tide, which is to say completely, twice a day, without once writing it down.

※

She had written it in one sitting, at the flat, on the fourth of April, and posted it at eleven at night, and gone to bed, and the next morning her grandmother was on the cover of somebody's life.

The thread unrolled beneath the mirror like the record of a wave. May 2012: the repost note. June: *the light at five is unreal, I got the walls with the fishing boats coming in.* 2013: *does anyone know if the blogger is okay? the blog is gone* — and no answer, for eleven years, because the answer was a private room and an envelope and a girl saying thank you. 2014: *anyone been recently? is it still there?* 2016: *a magazine shot a fashion thing here last month, crews and rails and a very famous face, don't ask which* — the photographer, arriving on schedule. 2019: *the flower-crown girls were on the ferry platform doing a tourism board shoot, it's officially A Thing.* 2021: *UNESCO listed the whole emporium, village included, we called it.* 2023: *crowds are insane now. go at dawn or don't go.* 2024, the answer to a question asked in 2012: *second lane past the temple, ask for the flower Ah-Ma, everyone knows her.* 2025: *the homestay in the old wing of that house is taking bookings — restored, they kept the shell wall, the deck has photos.* And eleven days ago: *stayed in October. The grandmother sits in the courtyard. She doesn't speak to guests. She watches everything. Worth the trip just for that.*

2015: *bumped into a documentary crew at the temple; they would not say what for.* 2018: *the new broadwalk has ruined the approach a bit; the walls forgive it.* 2019: *does anyone know what happened to the woman who wrote the original? the writing was too good to stay deleted. I think about the sentence about the grandmother constantly.* 2022, at the height of the closures: *stuck inside the village for two weeks by the lockdown — the gates were chained — best trip of my life. The grandmothers taught us to shell. We paid in instant coffee. The walls held the sea out and the epidemic out and neither got a thank-you.*

The chain assembled itself in her with the click of a channel marker being set, and she set it link by link, because setting is her trade: the post, written for the road, hoping for one walker. The thread, which hunted the village down for twelve years like a kind - ness. The photographer, who arrived because admiration hires cam - eras. The wave, which arrived because the camera was good. The in - vestor, who arrived because the wave made the house a property with a story, and whose deck wore her sentence the way the door wore its fourth layer of gods. The application, which crossed the desk of the one person on earth who could not refuse it cleanly. The signature. The chisel, aimed with love, swung by a man who photographed what he opened. And at the end of the chain, where no planner had put it, the jar.

Love aimed the chisel. There was no malice anywhere in the chain; that was its beauty and its horror and the reason it could not be stopped; every single link had been an act of admiration — the repost was admiration, the thread's twelve-year hunt was admiration, the photographer was admiration, the deck was admiration, her own signature was admiration and love and the roof — and the chain had terminated, through her, in a wall being opened by an expert who treated it like a hull. No one had done anything wrong, and the wrong had been done perfectly, by everyone, out loud, in public, at scale,

and the one person who had tried to slow it down was an eighty-six-year-old woman saying *burn it* to a basin of shelled oysters.

And the chain had one more link, the one that had no business existing. The chisel that cracked the wall — aimed by the traffic her sentence built — had found the book. The village had answered her sentence with its own keeping. The traffic came for the walls, and the walls, opened, had paid the village back in the only currency the village had ever held: a thing kept past all reason, past the burning, past the burying, past sixty years of a radio turned up at doorways, and the keeping had been waiting — the blank leaves had been wait-ing — for the exact granddaughter whose sentence had sent the chisel. You cannot design a loop like that. You can only be in it.

At 1:47 in the morning her phone lit once on the desk, unasked: the channel. Danran had posted — a forty-second clip of the court-yard after the storm, the wet shells shining, her grandmother's stool upturned and lashed, and beneath it the caption, in the girl's clear hand: *the wall held. the door held. the old woman held. see you Sunday*. Ninety views in fourteen minutes. The two of them, posting into the same small hours from the same coast, neither telling the other, the way lighthouse keepers on adjacent capes blink at the same water without coordinating.

She closed the thread at four. The rain had stopped; the typhoon-bent trees across the river were uprighting slowly, one degree an hour, the coast putting itself back the way it had learned to. Some-where south, the real village was dark, and the homestay's west half stood empty of guests — the storm had emptied it — and her grand-mother's lamp, if it was on, was on behind a plaster wall with no jar in it, an ear against nothing for the first night in sixty years.

The thank-you was still in her chest. She examined it once more, professionally, as you examine a document that has changed meaning on rereading. The men in the room had folded the author and missed the text, and the author had said thank you, and the text had walked,

and twelve years of strangers had carried it to the exact lane, and the lane had produced a chisel, and the chisel had produced her grandmother's closet, and the closet had produced the fifth hand, which was already copying somewhere, or would be. The fold had taken everything except the thing it was for.

She sat with the gratitude itself, finally, because the confession had made it evidence. Why had she said it? The first answer was fear's politeness — the tongue does for the powerful what the body does for cold — and that answer was true and insufficient. The second answer was the one she had never filed: they had read her. Closely. The two men in the room were the only people in the world who had read her work the way an enemy reads, which is to say completely, and being read completely by your enemies is a kind of intimacy that no friend has ever matched, and some animal part of her had recognized the reading as reading, and had thanked it. That was the horror under the horror of the thank-you: it had been sincere. The fold took because the gratitude was real. Geng was right to want the fact on the table. A person who publishes should know that the most complete reader she has ever had was working for the other side, and that the reading was the best thing he ever gave her, and that it was not his to give.

She did not write a post. There was no post in tonight; tonight was a reading, and the road could wait. She closed the laptop, and the room went to its one light, and the river kept moving under the bridges the way it had moved under every argument ever won on this coast, which is to say without stopping, without credit, and toward the sea.

CHAPTER 18

18

The working group's Jinjiang day fell on the second Friday of November, and Lin Li rode out with it — the minibus, Geng in the front seat with the folder, Su Min with her chipped-lid cup, the art editor, Danran with the matrix — across the river and into the country of shoes.

Jinjiang did not look like a birthplace. It looked like a decision that had been made in 1979 and executed every day since: a flatness of sheds and showrooms, a mile of logo walls for brands that did not exist twenty years ago, mold shops, last shops, a museum of sportswear with its own arch, and over all of it the faint industrial smell of hot rubber and ambition that Lin Li had grown up calling, without knowing it was a smell, the future.

Past the showrooms, the clan hall's gate stood in scaffolding — the uncle's exhibit, rising — and nobody on the minibus looked at it, which is how you could tell the bus was full of people who had all been asked for donations.

Her father stood at the first container with a clipboard he did not need, because the load was planned in a system and the clipboard was for the pleasure of crossing things off, and he wore the factory jacket, not the office jacket, because the visitors were coming and the jacket said something the office jacket could not.

"Ah-Li." He said her name like a delivery confirmation. Then, to the group, with a small sweep of the clipboard at the containers, the lane, the sheds beyond: "This is what the scholar's city pays for. Everything you people print comes out of a box like these."

"Everything we print comes out of a box like these," Geng agreed, genially, a man matching registers with a host.

The tour went as the father wanted it: the cutting floor, the molding lines, the wall of lasts in graded rows like a choral society for feet, the quality bench where a woman tapped each pair twice and set it aside with a motion so old it predated the factory, the line, the brand, the century. And then the office, which was glass, and in the glass office, on the good table, under its own light, in a case built like the ones that hold jade seals: a shoe. One shoe. Heavy, hand-stitched, four nails at the sole where the last had been, the leather gone the color of strong tea.

Danran asked her about the two taps. The woman held up a fin ‑ ger: one for the pair, one for the buyer. “The first tap is for the feet. The second is for the money. If the money tap sounds the same as the feet tap, I do it again.” Danran wrote it into the matrix, under no date at all, in the margin where her own best material lived.

“1979,” her father said, to the room. “My uncle made it. There were eight pairs, then one. The sole came off a rubber sandal someone brought from Hong Kong in a goat’s feed bag. The nails were ours. Everything else was saved.” He let the room look. The room looked. Su Min wrote something down that was true. “The county calls this the first shoe. The banks call it collateral. I call it the receipt for every container you saw in the yard.” He turned to Lin Li, and for a second the clipboard lowered, and the man under it was visible, the way her grandmother’s face was visible under her per ‑ formances when the light came from the right. “Your grandmother’s people would tell you the shells did it first. Fine. Two receipts. The harbor and the road. The family holds both.”

Then the arithmetic, which he gave them standing at the loading bay with one hand on the container’s flank, in the cadence of a man who had given this arithmetic to buyers and to bureau men and to his daughter at dinners, and had never once given it the same way twice:

“That lady in your maritime museum — the one from the mud, 1974, you people love her — she carried maybe two hundred tons if they loaded her brave. Silk, tea, the fragrance woods, the little green

jars. Took her the monsoon out and the monsoon back, and half the crew praying to a goddess the other half had never heard of, and the margin was whatever survived the emperor's men at both ends." He patted the container the way you pat a horse that has carried you. "One of mine does twenty-eight tonnes of finished shoes, door to Rotterdam in eleven days, insured, tracked, and the buyer's money moves before the ship clears the strait. I run forty of these a month." A pause, the clipboard leveling. "They gave her the museum, and they gave me the tax bill. History keeps the romance and bills the tonnage. I'm not complaining. I'm the tonnage."

"Two hundred tons of silk," Lin Li said, "paid for the temples your uncles prayed in, and the school your aunt taught in, and the wall your mother's book is hiding in."

The yard went quiet as yards do. Her father looked at her — a long, level look, the contract look — and then at Geng, and then at the container, and Lin Li understood, with the lurch of a person who has said the number out loud for the first time, that her father had known about the wall. Not the book — the wall. The bad patch behind her grandmother's bed that was suddenly, this year, professionally re‑pointed by a homestay budget. He had known the way boat men know their own putty, because the family's silences were contracts too, and he had countersigned his own without a word since 1966, and the first time anyone said a number about it in his presence was his daughter, at a loading bay, in front of a bureau man with a folder.

"Your mother's family keeps its books where it keeps them," her father said at last. "And my containers keep the roofs over the people who do the keeping. Words are for contracts, Ah-Li. Everything else is weather." And then, because he was her father, and because the visitors were watching, he added, in the tone of a man reading an inspection certificate and finding it in order: "Your galley came to the house last month. The one with the scholar's page. I read your entry twice." A beat. "The four words at the end. I checked them against the

contract style." Another beat, the longest of the morning. "They hold."

He said it like a notary. He meant it like a father. And Geng, beside her, said nothing at all, and did not need to, because the whole bind of the volume had just been stated by a shoe manufacturer in contract grammar, and stated better than the bureau man with the folder could have stated it.

At the gate, leaving, her father handed her the factory's own envelope — the clan-hall donation receipt, the uncle's exhibit, paid to the last digit, because the Lin of Jinjiang does not let a quincentenary pass unsubscribed — and inside it, folded around the receipt, one photograph: her at nine, at the oyster table, pencil in her fist, the flat behind her. He had carried it in his wallet long enough for the crease to silver. "For the reader girl," he said. "The matrix should have a picture of what the words are for."

The bind was stated again, in the guest hall, over tea from the factory's good tin, when Su Min raised the Cultural Season's schedule and the question of the launch events, and Geng set his cup down and said it to Lin Li the way you say a thing to family in front of guests, which is to say obliquely, with the whole weight under the table.

"The volume buys things," Geng said. "You've seen the requisitions. The school readers that come out of the surplus — the Minnan readers, the ones with the courtyard alphabets in them. The repointing grants. The girl's videos get the district's platform now, which is worth more than the district knows. Every warm page in that galley pays for a cold page somewhere that a child will hold." He turned the cup. "Roof first, truth later. That's not cowardice, Ah-Li; that's accounting. The truth costs a print run. The roof costs a winter. I've done the sum in both directions, and I did it in a year you weren't born in, with an envelope on the table, and I'm still doing it, and my position has one flaw, which is that it works."

Su Min nodded at the table, a woman approving a form. Danran, at the end, wrote *roof first* in her matrix, in her small clear hand, under the timeline, and Lin Li saw the two words go into the girl's system beside *stone outranks print*, and said nothing, and the bind held the room the way the containers held the shoes, which is to say completely, and for money, and without malice.

That night, at the flat, she wrote the post.

The granary material had been in her since April — the wall-copy's famine pages, the widow's dry margins, the canal that was cut while two daughters starved — and the yard had put the last piece in: the arithmetic, the tonnage, the containers standing in for the granary the way everything in this province stands in for everything else. She wrote it in one pass, posted it at nine, dated it in both calendars, and slept without dreaming for the first time since the wall opened.

And then, at the flat, before the post, the notebook — open, pencil out — and she wrote the date the new way, the way the month had taught her hand without asking: *15 November 2026 — ninth moon, water high, ebb past*. Two calendars in one line, like the book's own margins, like a household that has stopped translating itself for any‑one.

※

#218 — On granaries. 15 November 2026.

In the spring of 1563, in a county in Henan, the granaries were full and the roads out of the county were watched, and a minor education official's family — his wife, three daughters, left behind on two mu of bought land while he buried his grandfather a province south — was starving in the way of families whose water has been redirected into a canal that feeds the tax system. The canal was the granary's servant. The granary was the state's argument for itself: that order feeds. The daughters did not eat the argument. Two of them died of it, the second and the third, and the man who would spend his old age teaching that the moral order begins in clothing

and food — that ethics is a grain issue before it is a philosophy issue — learned it with his body, on a road, at a canal's edge, pleading for the whole county's water because he would not ask for his own field's.

They let him plead. They declined. He said, and the wall-copy has it, and I have copied it into a notebook I keep the way he kept his accounts: If I can watch ten thousand acres go unwatered, how could I beg irrigation for my own few mu? Even if they granted it, I would not take it.

Clothing and food are the moral order. I used to read that as philosophy — a great heretic's way of annoying the ascetics. I read it differently now. It is logistics. It is a scheduling complaint. The moral order is a question of who eats in which month, and every civilization in history has answered it with a canal, a granary, a harbor schedule, a container — a system for moving weight from where it is to where it isn't, and a queue, and someone standing at the queue with a stamp.

I spent Friday in Jinjiang, in a yard where boxes move the weight of a Song ship's hold every eleven days, and the woman with the quality bench taps each pair twice, and the wage list is a moral order too, arguable, audited, alive. No canal runs through it that I could find. That is not a compliment to my century; it is a field report from one family's yard. The scholar's city pays for itself out of boxes now. The granary is a schedule. The queue still has a stamp in it.

And the wall-copy's margin, in the widow's hand, beside the famine pages, says the only thing I trust on the subject: He was not at the granary when it mattered. Neither was the granary.

※

The post stood on the road all night and into the morning, and nothing came for it, and she understood that this was not safety. This was the queue, moving at its own speed, with the stamp at the far

end, and the stamp had read #218 twice already, somewhere, in a room she paid taxes toward, and the post would stand or fall by a logic that had never once explained itself to the people standing in line.

CHAPTER 19

19

The channel filmed on Sundays, because Sunday was the day Ah-ma was somebody, and the season's first cold front had come through on Friday and taken the tourists' sweat with it, and the courtyard had never been so ready for a camera.

A-Yang arrived at seven with the box — the long flat lacquer box that held the serious flowers, the ones wired individually, each bloom threaded onto its red string the night before at her own shop two lanes over — and she set the box on the oyster table and opened it the way Ah-ma opened the morgue book, which is to say like a woman who knows the value of what she keeps and has decided not to men‑tion it. A-Yang was forty, third-generation shell-wall people on her mother's side, and she had learned the garland in the lean years from the only customer who ever paid her in fish, and the fish had been good, and the garland had turned out to be a language, and neither of them had ever charged the other for it since.

The crown the hairdresser was building had a name the tourists never learned — 簪花围 — zanhua wei, a wall of flowers. A-Yang said the name once, to the box, while she worked, not for the camera, which was still in its bag, and Lin Li understood that she was hearing the term the way the lane heard the tide: inside the trade, at working volume, the word living where it lived before anyone decided it was heritage.

The build took forty minutes. First the bun itself — Ah-ma's hair, still black at the crown, wound around a horsehair donut and pinned with the ivory slide whose asymmetric tip told the lane everything it needed to know about the year 1983. Then the base ring: buds, tight, unreadable, the way a sentence is unreadable before the reader adds the verbs. Then the live rings — three of them, seasonally sorted, the

jasmine from the Yunglu hedges going in first because jasmine ar ‑ rives believing in the sea. A-Yang worked with two pins in her mouth and the whole history of the village in her fingers, and Danran filmed the fingers, close, no faces, the B-roll that her editors' eye had learned was the channel's blood: hands, hinges, shells, the work the comments called *so satisfying* and the village called Tuesday.

The box was sorted by season, as the lane had sorted it for a hundred years: the autumn layer on top — chrysanthemum, the small composite blooms that hold their petals in wind — and under it, wrapped in wet cloth, the hardy standbys that carry a crown through any month the coast asks for. A-Yang built the way the old builders built the walls: base first, load tested by eye, ornament last, every element doing structural work while pretending to be beauty. The wires were her own, cut and blunted by hand, because a wire end in a grandmother's hair is a wound in the village's body, and she had told the tourism board that once, at a seminar, to a slide that said AU ‑ THENTICITY.

Then Ah-ma put on the performance, and Lin Li watched her grandmother become the other woman, the one on the posters, and it was flawless.

The bit was simple and it had run for a year: Danran would hold up a notice — the clinic schedule, the weather bureau's typhoon ad ‑ visory, a form from the district — and read it out with the camera running, and Ah-ma would listen with her head tilted, the crown trembling, and interrupt with the wrong questions at the right times, and Danran would patiently explain the big words, and Ah-ma would grasp, and the two of them would land the notice's whole meaning between them, the illiterate granny and the granddaughter translator, and the comments said what the comments said — *queen behavior*, *grandma understands the system better than the system*, *protect her at all costs* — and the numbers on the bit were the best numbers the channel had, and none of the strangers knew that the woman

playing illiterate had been correcting the district's forms since before Danran's mother was born, in a hand that ruled its own lines.

Today's notice was the Cultural Season's schedule, and it was good material, because the schedule had Ah-ma's own name on it — the opening ceremony, the presiding elder — and she handled it beautifully: *Who wrote this? The characters are fancier than the ones on my medicine. / That's the district's printer, Ama. / The district prints everything fancy and changes nothing. Read the dates.* And Danran read the dates, and Ah-ma made the small face of a general reviewing terrain, and the wall behind her — the shot always drifted to the wall behind her, Danran had learned that much without knowing why; the east room's cabinet sat in every good frame like an extra producer — held the book that was watching all of it from inside its sleeve, the burning title asleep under the honest one.

A stranger's comment, two weeks back, had asked what was on the shelves behind her, and Danran had replied, *family things,* which was true as the best captions are true — and the question had moved to the second page of the comments and stayed there, unanswered, as good questions do on this coast.

"Again, Ama," Danran would say, from behind the camera, in the voice of a girl directing a national treasure who is also her grandmother, "the medicine face — you did the medicine face." And Ah-ma did the medicine face, and the medicine face was perfect, and somewhere under it, behind it, forty years deep, the woman who had corrected the district's forms with a ballpoint and a ruler watched her own performance the way a keeper watches a fire — with respect, and from the other side of a grate.

Between the second take and the third, with the camera bagged, Ah-ma washed her hands at the courtyard tap. Slowly. Up to the wrists. She dried them on the towel with the resolution of a woman closing a ledger, and Lin Li, who had come out to watch and was pretending to read the district's visitors' code, understood that the

washing was the performance's other half — the half the camera never got — and that her grandmother had been washing this role off for a year, at this tap, between takes, and that the tap was the only witness of the whole enterprise who knew both women.

"Her numbers are wrong," Ah-ma said at the tap, quietly, to the basin, in the false illiterate's true voice. "The opening date. The district moved it and printed the old one. Tell the girl before the video goes up, or tell her nothing, but somebody in this courtyard has to be able to read."

The girl checked the district's site that evening, as the courtyard's best students check a teacher who is never wrong: the opening had been moved a week; the printer had printed the ghost of an older schedule. The video went up with the correction built into its last ten seconds — Danran's voice, off-camera: *the district moved it, Ama saw it before the printer did* — and the comments did their arith - metic, and the channel's numbers did theirs, and the woman under the performance washed her hands at the tap and did not post any - thing about being right, because being right was the performance's least interesting product.

Monday, at the office, the desk did what desks do, which is give you the room you were avoiding.

Danran was at lunch. The printer had jammed on the Cultural Season's program, and Lin Li went to the north desk to pull the job — the jammed page, the tray, the small violence of office machinery — and while the machine ground and reversed and surrendered, she stood where Danran stood, at the monitor's edge, at the height of the taped cards.

Eleven of them now. She had watched them accumulate since March as you watch a reef grow, without reading, without letting her eyes do anything that could be called reading — her own discipline, the envelope-hand rule, the thumb over the name on the envelope. But the printer was grinding and the cards were at eye level and the

light had changed since March, and the first card, the museum post - card from the first week, had curled at its edge, and the back of it was facing the room.

She read them. All eleven. It took less than a minute; they were one-liners; they had been written to be carried in pockets, which is why they had survived the deletion that was supposed to kill them.

The wind is changing; fold it yourself before it's folded for you.

Delete a sentence and it becomes a rumor about you.

Every reader is a keeper who hasn't decided yet.

A wall is a book that has decided to keep quiet.

Censorship is a compliment from the future.

The wind line she knew — she had handed it to the girl in April, in the fold scene, warm and too fluent, and watching it taped to a monitor in Danran's handwriting made her feel like a woman who had given a child a knife and then seen the child using it correctly. But the other four were the blog. The blog's own lines, from 2010 and 2011, from posts whose numbers she could still recite, composed at the string-table of that other life, deleted wholesale in a private room, mirrored by strangers, carried by strangers, taped to a monitor by a girl who thought she was taping anonymous wisdom from a dead account.

The other six cards were older — longer lines, from the posts of 2012, sentences she remembered writing in a flat that had a different river in its window — and their half-familiarity was worse than the wind line's clean authority, because these were sentences from the years when she still thought the fold was a thing that happened to other people.

Her killed voice, living in a twenty-four-year-old's field of vision for a decade.

She read them again, because a professional reads twice, and on the second reading she saw what the girl had done without knowing it: the cards were curated. The girl had chosen the five coldest lines out of two hundred and thirteen posts and put the wind line first, and

the arrangement was an edit, an editorial argument about which sentences were the spine — and it was the right edit. The girl had edited her better than the room had. The girl had edited her better than she would have.

The printer surrendered the program. The jam was a staple. She freed the pages, squared them, took them, and did not say a word, and walked back to her own desk past the north window where the white backs of eleven cards stood in their row like a small locked gate, and behind the cards, invisible from this angle, on the other side of the paper, the sentences were facing the room, saying the things she had said before the room said no.

The fear, when she finally let it have a sentence, was specific: not the men in the room, not the platform, not the strike. The fear was un-anonymizing. If she told the girl — one sentence, over tea, *the wind line is mine, the other four are mine, the account is mine* — the cards on the monitor would change species. They would stop being anonymous wisdom from a dead account and become a daughter-of-the-house's inheritance, and the girl's channel would become the fold's second generation, and the fifty-cent word would attach itself somewhere, and the comment sections would do what comment sections do to a woman who turns out to have been alive the whole time. The girl would also, and this was the part Lin Li could not get past, look at her the way the granddaughter looks at the grandmother in the photographs from before the fall — with the love that has to revise itself.

She said nothing. She sat down with the Cultural Season's pro‑gram, and squared it, and read it by absence, and what the program would not say was that the opening ceremony's elder had been read‑ing since 1946, and that the printer's jam had been the week's only honest event, and that her own dead sentences were at this moment taped to a monitor a meter from her elbow, edited better than she had edited them, keeping watch over the girl the way the book kept

watch over the lane — quietly, under a false title, in the one room with the mold.

The whole coast was converging — the Cultural Season, the volume, the homestay's opening, the account, the girl, the grandmother's crown — everything the year had been building was moving toward one week in the spring, and when it arrived it would arrive with her name on the right documents and her sentences on the wrong ones, and the only question left to her was which door she would be standing behind when the two stacks of paper were finally compared.

At five, the girl posted the notice bit. The numbers did what the numbers did. And the top comment, from an account with no picture, arrived within the hour and said: *she reads the notices like a woman grading them.*

Lin Li saw it before the girl did, because the girl was at the oyster table being somebody, and the comment sat there under the video being true, and nobody in the whole apparatus of watching — the platform, the district, the working group, the men in rooms — had ever once noticed the thing this stranger had noticed in one viewing: that the performance was a grading.

She did not reply. She did not log it. She went home on the late bus with the program and the fear and the eleven sentences, and the wind came off the flats at the sea wall's turn smelling of low tide and diesel and the season's last jasmine, and the bus passed the lane gate where the plaque stood with her sentence on it in grey, and the door of the second lane's house with its fresh gods over its older gods over its oldest silence, and none of it was ever going to be only what it looked like.

From the bus window she saw Danran at the east room's threshold, after the tourists had gone, after the lane had gone quiet, standing alone with the phone at arm's length filming the courtyard she had grown up in — the empty stools, the basin, the light off the shell wall — filming it the way you film a room you are about to leave

and want to be able to prove you were in, and Lin Li understood that the girl was doing what the grandmother had done before her: keep - ing the evidence of the keeping, alone, after hours, for no one.

CHAPTER 20

20

The razor post wrote itself as the wind line had written itself, except this time she knew the author, and the author had been assembling the sentence since a mason's phone call in April.

The week had made its deposits and the post was the withdrawal. Her father's contract grammar — *the four words hold* — deposited on a loading bay. The girl's curation — five coldest lines, spine first, the right edit made by a girl who did not know she was editing the house style of a dead account. The grading stranger — *like a woman grading them* — deposited by a stranger who had watched one video. The receipt — *thank you for submitting an appeal* — deposited by a desk that kept its own morgue. And under all of it, the galley's four words in metal, and the wall-copy's two days in amber, and the difference between them, which was the size of a barber's blade and the length of a deliberate act. She drafted the post in the notebook first, in the double calendar, and the first draft had a softening clause in it — *historians differ on the details* — and she deleted the clause before it dried, because the clause was the envelope's own grammar, and she had promised the widow's colophon an answer, not an apology.

She wrote it on the last Sunday of November, at the flat, with the wall-copy's account open in her memory and the received tradition open beside it in the museum's own laminated text, because the post was going to be a comparison, and comparisons need both documents on the table. She had carried the account since April. She had carried the four words since she was eleven. The week had supplied the rest: her father's contract grammar, the girl's curation, the grading stranger, and the receipt-shaped hole where a reply should have gone into the drawer if a reply had ever been coming.

She posted it at 9:11 in the evening.

※

#219 — On the manner of death. 29 November 2026.

The volume the city is printing for the quincentennial gives the death four words: He died in prison. The four words are true the way a headstone is true. They mark the spot. They do not describe the fall.

The hand-copied volume that came out of my grandmother's wall in April — the one I have posted about here, the one whose margins four centuries of women have kept — contains the letters of his last spring, and an account of the end, copied in a widow's hand in the Qianlong years. I have checked the copy against the received tradition, and the tradition agrees with the copy, and the copy agrees with the tradition, and neither of them agrees with the four words.

The account: in the spring of 1602, old and sick, summoned to answer for his books, he asked the jailer for the barber. When the shaving was done he asked to keep the blade, and the request was granted, because who fears a seventy-six-year-old. He opened his throat. He lived two days. Asked why — he could no longer speak — he wrote with a wet finger on the table: an old man has nothing left to look for.

The received tradition sets the question differently, and better: the sentence was transport home, under escort, and at seventy-six he asked what use the road was.

His students buried him at Tongzhou. His disciple compiled the letters he left. In 1625 the court burned the books again. In the Qianlong years a widow copied the letters out by hand, because the books were still on the forbidden list, and she wrote beside the account, in fence-post letters: They are burning his books again this year. This one was born for it.

The four words are not a lie. They are a floor plan. They tell you where the man stopped. They do not tell you that the stopping was

an act, performed with tools he had asked for, in a room where the state's one mercy was granting a shave — and they do not tell you that the two days were his last publication, and that the state's own record is the only place the review ever ran.

The selected works do not carry the letters. The museum wall does not carry the account. The school readers do not carry the barber. For years I read the omissions as forgetting. They are housekeeping.

I am told the mirrors will carry this post after the platform removes it. Good. A book that once had to leave the country to survive has finally found readers who bring the country to it.

※

The deletion came at 12:40, two hours and twenty-nine minutes after posting, which in the economy of such things was a Geiger reading: the fast clicks meant heavy ore. She was awake for it. She had been awake for it the way you are awake for a storm the district has already graded.

She did not screenshot her own post. That was the night's discip‑line, and it was harder than writing had been: the hand wanted to save, the way the hand always wanted to save — the morgue reflex, nine years deep — and she sat on the hand. Saving was the author's job now, and the author's job was to let the strangers do the keeping, because strangers keep without fear, and fear was the one contam‑inant the mirror economy could not survive.

The notice arrived in the account's own inbox, in the platform's own gray, formatted with the tenderness of a parking ticket:

This post violates relevant laws and regulations and has been removed.

Eleven words. She had carried eleven words of the platform's prose since 2013 — the other notice, the one from the old deletion, filed in a folder called HOUSEKEEPING with the appeal she had written at twenty-four and the receipt she had received at twenty-

four — and the new notice was the old notice, word for word, year for year. The platform had not updated its sentence in thirteen years. It did not have to. The sentence worked. Sentences like that are why the bureau retires verbs: a sentence that names no law, no office, no reason, and no appeal-path is a sentence that cannot be argued with, only received, and she received it the way the city receives its weath ‑ er.

She filed the appeal at 1:06, in the small window, in the small characters the form allowed: *The post quotes a 1766 manuscript in a private collection and the standard historiography, including the museum's own displayed account. Please identify the specific provision violated.*

The reply came in nine hours, which meant a person had read it, which meant a person had been assigned to read it, which meant somewhere in the platform's economy there was a desk where her four sentences had been weighed against a manual, by someone with a salary and a mother, and the weighing had produced this:

Thank you for submitting an appeal. Your appeal has been received.

Not a reply. A receipt. The platform's genius, and the reason it had outlived every bureau that ever tried to burn anything: it had learned to answer appeals with the announcement that appeals exist. The sentence thanked her for the act of objecting and told her, in the same breath, that the objecting was the entirety of the process. There was no second letter coming. There was no second letter. There was the receipt, and there was the mirror economy, and only one of them had ever changed a mind.

By morning the mirrors were up. She watched them as you watch the flats come back after a big ebb — piece by piece, from the far edges in. The screenshots went up on a repaste site at 6:20, in full, retyped where her own screenshot had blurred the small characters. By eight the post lived on three accounts that had never followed her and never would. By nine, Danran's feed carried it — six frames, the

text retyped clean where the screenshots had blurred, with the caption in the girl's clear hand: *the author's account is gone. the text is not mine. keep it moving.*

Keep it moving. The mirror etiquette, learned by a generation that had never seen a state burn a book and had inherited the reflex anyway, the way the coast's children inherit the typhoon taping.

And Wei said the account posted at 9:11 like a person setting a watch, and that the desk noticed things like that, because patterns were the desk's whole diet, and a pattern of nines was the safest kind of pattern, being indistinguishable from devotion.

The girl's account took its traffic like a tree takes lightning: scored, standing. And by noon the channel's comment sections had done their own arithmetic, and the top comment under the mirror, from an account with a cartoon whale for a face, read: *so the four words in the official book are the edited version. the unedited version is in a wall. this country keeps everything, it just keeps it upside down.*

Lin Li read the whale's sentence twice. The whale was twenty years old if he was a day, and he had arrived, in one morning, at the thesis she had spent a year not writing.

The reviewer she never met, and met anyway.

Danran brought the story to the office on Monday, over the printer, in the girl's own register, which was the register of receipts: "My coursemate Wei is content review — you know, the desk. Four hundred items a shift, mostly spam, some of it the kind you can't unsee. Yours was in her queue at 12:41. She read the whole thing. She read it twice. She said it was the best thing in her queue this year, and her queue is why she doesn't sleep well." Danran fed the jammed program through and watched the pages come out squared. "The takedown wasn't hers. The keyword tier flagged it up at midnight — the death-and-state co-occurrence, there's a list — and the removal executes automatically above her pay grade. She just presses. She pressed it, and then she sent the post to herself on her private chat

before the removal finished, because the removal finished means gone-gone, and she keeps a folder."

"She keeps a folder," Lin Li said.

"Everyone at the desk keeps a folder," Danran said. "She calls it the morgue."

Lin Li held the squared pages very still. "And the appeal?"

"Receipt only. Wei says the receipt is the system telling you the process is the punishment. She also said — she made me promise not to say who told me, which is me telling you — she said: *tell the author the account wasn't touched because the account is small, and small accounts should stay small, and the author should understand the difference between a post and a person in this economy*." Danran tore the squared program free. "She liked it, jie. She reads four hundred a day and she liked it, and her liking it is the reason your account still exists."

Wei had one more line, delivered secondhand with the girl's own editorial restraint: the four words in the galley were the paragraph's weakest sentence, and the platform's robot agreed, because the ma‑chine deleted everything except sentences that say nothing — the four words would have stood on the road for a century. The desk and the dynasty, Wei said, had the same editor: they keep what cannot be argued with and call the keeping peace.

The Japan learning arrived that night, from the one book in the flat that was not on any list.

She had gone back to the bound translation — the girl's contra‑band, the preface by the three foreign names — because the confes‑sion had left her hungry for the man's voice and the preface was the only place the voice came with its biography attached. She had read the introduction in March and filed it as history. She read it now, after the receipt, and the paragraph stood up off the page and changed departments: the burning of 1625 was not the end of any‑thing, the preface said, because the books had already crossed the

water — editions in Japan within living memory of the author, carried by monks and merchants, and at the century's far edge a man at the country's edge copied all four volumes of the safe book by hand and taught it to eighty students who went out and made a restoration. The book survived the way seed lines survive: by leaving the field before the field was burned.

She had filed that in March as the biography of a book. Tonight, with her own post dead in eleven languages of mirror and the girl's feed carrying it the way the monsoon carried the Song hulls, she reread it as instructions.

The book had to leave home to live. The post had left home in two hours and twenty-nine minutes. The mirrors were the new abroad: a country that assembled itself every time a platform blinked, population unlimited, borders none, archives made of screenshots, and its one law was the girl's caption — *keep it moving*. The state had never had to fight a foreign country that reconstituted overnight in its own living rooms. The widow had copied by hand; the monks had carried by ship; the girl had retyped six frames at a kitchen table. The distance between the three acts was four hundred years and zero.

The girl's own account was small too — smaller than the tide it was carrying — and small was the strategy, and the strategy had a shelf life that the winter would test. Lin Li caught herself drafting, in the compose field of her own head, a warning to send to the girl, and recognized the draft's ancestry before it finished: it was the wind line, wearing her voice, aimed downward at the fifth hand. She deleted it. Some inheritances you do not get to fold for their own good. The girl had a grandmother somewhere too, and a wall of cards, and the tide words.

She closed the translation. She opened the notebook, and wrote the entry in the new double calendar, the two lines sitting together the way the slips sat in the book: *29 November 2026 — tenth moon, ebb small, wind north. #219 deleted 12:40; receipt 1:06; mirrors up*

by dawn. The desk keeps a morgue too. Source: the wall, the tradi‑tion, the girl.

And beneath the entry, for the first time since April, she added a margin of her own, small, in pencil: *The platform's sentence has not changed in thirteen years. Neither has mine.*

CHAPTER 21

21

The decline announced itself in the hands, and it announced itself as everything in that house announced itself, through the work.

The knife slowed first. Not the wrist — the wrist was sixty years of muscle and would outlast the house — but the hinge-finger, the one that finds the shell's seam by feel, began missing by a millimeter, then by two, and the misses came home in the buckets as shell-shards among the meat, and the Xus' granddaughter, who bought for the family chat, mentioned it the way villagers mention weather, and the mentioning was the diagnosis. Then the pencil grip failed at the market: Ah-ma's tally fingers, the ones that had filed prices to the third decimal, could not close on the hexagonal stub, and the tally went to the granddaughter of the Xus, and Ah-ma watched it go the way she watched the tide turn, without comment, at the exact moment she had predicted.

She was eighty-six, and the knife years were five decades deep, and the hands were what they were: the hands of a shucker, a keeper, a writer of two lines in sixty years, and a woman who had carried a wall's worth of night. The doctor from the clinic came on a Tuesday, took the blood, looked at the hands, and said the word the coast says for it — *old* — which is not a diagnosis; it is a verdict the sea has already signed.

The knife was retired the week before the summons. Ah-ma oiled it herself at the table — the same tin of oil her husband had used on the netskiff's hinges — and wrapped it in the blue cloth, and put it in the east room's cabinet on the shelf above the book, and the lane read the shelf the way the lane read everything: the tool above the text, the work above the word, the whole family's history shelved in descend‑ing order of calluses. Nobody said the word *last*. The word *last* was a

word the flat had stopped using in 1966, along with the word *goodbye* and the names of certain flowers.

The summons for the dictation came at the oyster table on the first Sunday of December, and it was the shortest summons of the year.

"Sunday," Ah-ma said. "The ebb. Bring the book, and your hands. My hands are done, and the book has a page that isn't in it yet."

"The ninth," Lin Li said. "The tables say small ebb."

"The tables," Ah-ma said, "say what tables say. The ebb is Sunday. I can feel the water deciding from here, and I have never once been outvoted by a table that has never been cold."

So on the ninth of December, the day of the winter ebb, Lin Li carried the book out one more time, and this time she carried the drawer's other resident too, because the summons had said *your hands*, and there is one object in this story that is legally a hand.

She unwrapped the pen on the oyster table.

She had not looked at it since April — the discipline of the undes ‑ cribed, kept nine months the way the old men keep a fish's mouth shut about the season — and now, with the decline in the bucket and the summons in her ear, she looked. Black hard rubber, the kind pens were when pens were technologies; a gold nib, small, worn — and the wear was the whole biography, because the nib had been ground, over decades, to an angle, and the angle was not a manufacturer's angle. It was a right-hander's writing angle set by decades of one woman's grip: a teaching hand, a marking hand, an angle that leaned into the page from above-left, as teachers lean. The pen had been worn to Grace's angle, and the angle had been waiting, the way an empty classroom waits, for the next hand to decide whether to keep the angle or break it in.

The last leaf came next, and it was time, and they both knew it was time, because the last leaf was the reason the pen had been in the jar.

She had owed that leaf a reading since the colophon — since April, when the dry hand had said *add yours* and she had answered with an account instead of a hand. The deferral had been discipline in the

spring and cowardice by summer and by winter it was simply the last unread thing in the house, hanging by the pale thread, and the pale thread was the replacement thread, the 1966 thread, the one her grandmother had sewn after the jar went in, and the leaf had hung off that thread for sixty years the way a sign hangs off a nail that somebody hammered in the dark.

She read it aloud. She read it the way the class must have read, in the courtyard, in 1947 — slowly, with the lip-movement, the big words given their full width — because that was the way it had been written to be heard. It is on the record here as written, in the round hand, on the leaf that hung by the pale thread:

To my student, who reads the way the tide comes in — you cannot stop it and you should not. Keep this until reading is safe. — Grace, 1955

Ah-ma listened with her eyes shut. When the reading stopped she kept them shut a moment longer, the way you keep them when a sentence has finished arriving after seventy-one years.

"She wrote it the night before she left," Ah-ma said. "In the courtyard, by the lamp, after the last class. She was crying and she typed — no, she wrote it in her round hand, and she was crying in the round hand, if you can imagine such a thing. She said: *the reading is not safe and it will not be safe in my lifetime, and it may not be safe in yours, and that is not a reason to stop; it is the reason to keep. Keep it until reading is safe. And if it is never safe, keep it until keeping is what it is.*" The old woman opened her eyes. "I was fifteen, and I thought *safe* meant the squads. The squads were real, but they were weather. She meant the *wanting*. The city's wanting. Reading is unsafe as long as the city wants the village to be a picture." She looked out at the flats, where the winter ebb had done what winter ebbs do, which is take more than the paper promised. "The wall was never for the squads, girl. The wall was for the postcards."

Then the dictation, and the dictation was the strangest hour of Lin Li's professional life, and she had sat in rooms where ministers were quoted at her.

Ah-ma's hands could not hold the pen. That was the summons' meaning: the hands that had written the flyleaf and the reclaiming line, the hands that had done the third hand's work for sixty years, were finished with ink, and the book had a page that was not in it yet, and the page required a hand, and the only hand in the family that wrote was the city hand, the fourth hand, the one that edited the past for a living.

The old woman dictated. She dictated in Minnan — the true Min-nan, the flat-tide Minnan of the fish tables, not the schoolroom version — and the words came up out of sixty years of a closed mouth the way water comes up out of a reopened well, and Lin Li's own Minnan, trained out of her voice years ago by a school that fined it and a city that smiled at it, came back into her ears before it came back into her mouth. She heard the language first. Then, on the third sentence, she heard herself answer in it — the dictation's formula, the scribe's confirmation, *like this?* — in Minnan, the vowels arriving from the sea-wall of her childhood with the rust on them and the rust falling off as they ran, and Ah-ma did not remark on it, and did not stop dictating, and the two of them continued in the language the city had tried to fine out of the family, one dictating, one writing, the fourth hand at the third hand's direction, on the winter ebb, in a courtyard, in daylight, with the homestay's fresh pointing drying behind them.

What the third hand dictated, the fourth hand wrote, and the fourth hand's rendering is on the record here as it was written, in pencil first and then gone over in pen:

The pencil draft was checked aloud twice, and then gone over in pen, because the house had always written that way — pencil for the truth, pen for the record, two inks so that the future could tell the thought from the commitment — and the method was her grand-

mother's and the teacher's and the widow's, older than the standard that had codified it, older than the country that owned the standard, a proofreading grammar passed hand to hand in courtyards while the academies argued about whose characters were correct.

Teacher, you said keep it until reading was safe. It never became safe. I kept it anyway. It was not the life you meant for me. It was the one you gave me. — spoken by your student of the temple class, written by her granddaughter, on the big ebb.

The lookup happened at the signature, and the lookup was the whole hour's heirloom.

The student had signed herself — dictated her signature — and the signature required the character, and the character was the one in the dead man's name, and Lin Li had spent a year in the company of the name without once looking up the character, because the name was famous and famous names do not get looked up; they get cited. She looked it up now, on the phone, in the dictionary the Ministry of Education keeps for the southern tongue, with the pen in her fingers and the ink wet on the leaf, because the signature was a claim about the character and she was the scribe and the scribe verifies.

She looked up the character in his name at last: 贽 — zhi — the gift a disciple brings when first meeting a teacher.

She sat with it. The pen was in her fingers, worn to the teaching angle, on its way to whatever the third hand wore it to; the character in the dead man's name meant the gift that crosses the threshold the first time two people meet; and the gift on the table — the book, the wall, the keeping, the pen, the page that was not in it yet — had been crossing thresholds in the wrong direction for four hundred years, teacher to student, student to granddaughter, granddaughter to a girl of twenty-four who had not yet been told. The gift had never once traveled the way the dictionary said gifts traveled. It had been going out instead of coming in, all the way down, and the character in the dead man's name was the character for the direction nobody in this family had ever used.

The pen's angle was the direction too, she saw. A nib worn to teaching leans down toward a page that belongs to someone else — the whole geometry of the object is about the other hand's paper. The dictionary said the gift comes to the teacher first, before anything else, at the meeting, from below. Four hundred years of this family had run the gift the other way: the teacher giving down, the student keeping up, the keeping going out instead of the learning coming in, until the word for the gift and the word for the man were the same word and neither had been used honestly in a century. She looked at the nib's angle and understood that the angle was an argument the teacher had won without saying it: the pen would keep teaching until the direction reversed, and the reversal was the inheritance, and the reversal was hers to perform or refuse.

She wrote the signature as dictated. She did not add the diction - ary's definition to the leaf. Some definitions are the reader's wages, not the scribe's.

And she understood, sitting with the lookup, that the book's leaves were a register of their own. Two lines from the widow, dry as fence posts. Three from the teacher, round as quarry tiles, dated in the foreign calendar. Two from the keeper — the tidiness and the sixty years — in the hand that had been taught by the round hand. One blank leaf that belonged to her mother, blank the way a field is blank, which is to say by decision, and the decision had been bought at the price of the school. One leaf that was hers, unwritten, because she had added her margins to the internet instead of to the book, and the internet did not inherit. And rooms sewn in for whoever came next — the fifth hand, the girl with the cards, whose first page was already written somewhere in the future, in a handwriting not fine but steady. The leaves were a family register that the family did not know it kept, and the register was kept in the wrong book and the right book at the same time, and this was the most Lin Li thing she had ever discovered about her family, and she discovered it holding a pen.

Ah-ma heard the leaf read back — twice, as the pencil draft de‑manded — and closed the book herself, both hands, the stiff hands, the way you close a door on a room where two people have finished talking, and she said the last thing the dictation hour said, and she said it in Minnan, and this account will carry it in English, which is what the account does:

"Now the book has everyone in it but the one who burned nothing. Your mother's leaf is still blank, girl. Some people's blank is a kind of writing. Don't you dare fill it after I'm gone."

The mother's leaf stayed blank because blankness was what the choosing had bought. Lin Li had resented the blank her whole life without knowing it was a leaf — she had thought it was her mother, which is to say a climate, a flatness, a refusal of the pencil that the family had read as philistinism. Her grandmother had said it at the dictation with the flatness of settled accounts: the cleverer child was spared, and the sparing was the blankness, and the blankness was resented, and the resentment was correct, and it would be delivered to the granddaughter at a funeral, in one line, by the woman herself, because some accounts can only be read aloud by the debtor.

And she went in to the radio, and the tide came back across the flats on schedule, and the leaf dried in the courtyard's winter light with the fourth hand's ink on it, and the pen stayed out on the table overnight for the first time since 1955, because the hands that had kept it in drawers were done with drawers.

CHAPTER 22

22

The winter did what the winters do — what the paper predicted, and then one thing more.

Ah-ma lasted through the New Year, through the homestay's soft opening — she presided, as contracted, in the crown, and cut the ribbon with the oyster knife, the retired knife, unwrapped for the occasion from the blue cloth, and the photographs of the cutting ran on the district's feed with a caption that called her the village's living heritage, and she read the caption over Danran's shoulder and said, "Living. We'll see," and gave the camera the face.

She lasted through the holiday couple's visit — strangers from the platform economy, a couple from the north who had booked the west half for the holiday and did not know that the courtyard's east room was a country with a border — and she was, by every account, the grandmother of the century: the face, the tea, the wrong questions, the flowers. She performed it for eleven days the way the tide per‑forms the shore. On the twelfth morning the couple left, and the review went up before their train cleared the first tunnel: *five stars. the grandmother alone is worth the fare.* And Ah-ma read the review over Danran's shoulder and said, "The grandmother agrees," and washed her hands at the tap for a very long time.

Qiu the designer came on the eleventh day, unannounced, to check her work — the slogan layer under the door's paint, the shell pointing at the pocket's mouth, the wall's whole face — and she stood in the courtyard with the paint-chip kit and did not go inside, and Lin Li, watching from the oyster table, understood that the woman who had wanted to put sixty years under glass had come to see whether the glass would have held, and had decided it would not have, and was leaving without saying so, and the leaving was the designer's own

fold, done in the register of a professional who knew when the honest layer was the one that stayed buried.

Her mother arrived the same afternoon, by the afternoon bus, with the strong soap and the cloths, to clean the west half's guest rooms before the next booking, and Lin Li watched her through the courtyard's open door: the mother on her knees at the window ledge, the strong soap working, the rag going in circles, the same circles she had made on every surface she had ever cleaned, in a house she had been spared and resented and never once entered while the woman who spared her was alive to be resented.

There was a dinner in there, in the middle. The New Year's re-union, at the long table in the east room's borrowed light, the family's last full assembly without anyone knowing it was the last: her father up from Jinjiang with the good tea; her mother running the kitchen the way accountants run closings; the uncle from the hall with the exhibit's proofs, toasting the ancestor's portrait in the old cadence; Danran filming the toasts until Ah-ma confiscated the phone and set it on the radio, face down, "so the ancestors can watch themselves." The quarrels attended — the mother and the grandmother at opposite ends of one table, fifty years of a spared education sitting between them like a dish nobody served; the father's containers against the grandfather's boats, the same argument the family had been eating around since 1983 — and the quarrels attended quietly, the way quarrels attend on this coast, in the passing of dishes. Ah-ma presided. She ate little. She said the thing she said every year — *the table is the only place this family reads the same page* — and the family laughed the way it laughed, with its mouths, and the grandmother watched all of it, the whole impossible assembly: the editor, the manufacturer, the accountant, the filmmaker, the blank leaf, the written leaf, the keeper, all of it alive at one table with the book four meters away in its cabinet, and she looked at Lin Li across the steam and said, in Minnan, in front of everyone, the family's true toast: *eat. The keeping goes better fed.*

The clinic's Tuesday visits had become Wednesdays, then fort ‑ nights, then a folder of forms that said, in the coast's bureaucratic dialect, what the sea had already signed. The last form said *stable*, which is the system's word for *finite*. The hands had stopped shelling entirely after the dictation — the knife slept in its blue cloth above the book, oiled, official — and the naps had grown from hours into the main occupation, and the naps were not naps; they were shifts. She worked the night tide now, the old woman told the lamp, in her own dialect of it. There is a low water every night. Somebody has to read it.

She lasted until the big ebb of the twelfth moon.

Lin Li had been staying the winter weekends — the dictation's af ‑ tercare, the hands, the basins — and on the ebb night the flats had gone out to the stone marker again, and the village had worked the strange light, and Ah-ma had not gone out. She had sat at the threshold in the crown-less evening with the radio on the storm channel, listening to the water decide, and she had said, at the turn, in Minnan, the flat-tide words, the ones the register called the tide words and the sea calls the truth: *the water's going all the way out tonight. all the way. it wants the whole floor.*

And the water went all the way out. Lin Li checked the tables at midnight — the harbor station, confident in its blue — and the tables said small water, and the flats said the flood of the month, and the disagreement was the last one, and it was not a disagreement, it was the grandmother's tide correcting the harbor's one final time, for the record, for the flat's own ledger, for the pleasure of the account.

Lin Li found her at dawn.

The east room was cold as rooms go whose heat has been off for hours, and the lamp was off, and the radio was off — the radio, the instrument of sixty years of turned-up volumes, was off, and that was the notification; the radio had never once been off at dawn, because the dawn hour needed the weather, and a keeper who is not listening for the weather is not listening, and the room said it before the bed

said it. The glasses were folded on the sill, arms closed, the way glasses are folded by hands that plan to need them after a sleep. The book was on the blanket, open, both hands' worth of open — the wo ‑ men's essay, the spread with the Question and the where-is-her-book — held open by the reading glasses' case, the way readers hold a book open when the sentence has finished arriving.

The room's inventory kept its vigil like a crew. The crown on its stand, unworn, the jasmine gone over and replaced twice by A-Yang without being asked, the way the lane replaces flowers at graves it does not have permission to mourn at. The knife in its blue cloth above the book. The reading glasses folded in their case. The basins, empty, under the known drip, doing their dry duty. The radio, low, telling the coast its weather. And on the blanket the book, open at the spread, the question and the where-is-her-book facing each other across the gutter the way the dead and the kept face each other across every table this family has ever set.

The finding itself had been quiet past all telling, and she had made it quieter, because the room's first visitor sets its weather. She had not turned on the big light. She had used the flashlight from her bag, the market flashlight, the one from the four o'clock hours, and let the room be found in its own terms: the lamp off, the radio's low weath ‑ er, the glasses folded, the book open, the hands at rest on the argu ‑ ment about women. The flats outside were at their widest in the pre-dawn grey, steaming, empty, the water all the way at the stone marker and past it, and she had stood at the window first — before the bed, before the calls — and looked at the water's absence, and understood that her grandmother had gotten her tide. The tables had said small. The water had said everything. The keeper had gone with the water. The lane would say she timed it; the paper would say the tables were wrong again; and both accounts would be true the way the two slips were true, one outside, one beneath, and no one would ever lift the right one first.

The flat's reading — the one the lane would carry, in the tone the lane carries its sea-lore — was that she had gone out with the water because she had always gone out with the water, and that the ebb of the twelfth moon had come all the way to the stone marker on pur‑pose, to collect her at her own boundary, at the line she had stood on her whole life. Lin Li heard the lane's version at the slabs, in the arcs, and let it stand. The paper's version was that the tables had been wrong again, three days running, a run of wrongness the harbor of‑fice would file under pressure systems and monsoon residue. Both accounts were kept. Neither was lifted first. On this coast you did not have to choose between the tide and the table until someone made you, and nobody in the lane was going to make anyone choose in the week the keeper died.

She had gone out on the ebb, and the ebb had gone out all the way, and somewhere in the dark between the low water and the turn — at the hour the flats stand widest, at the minute the paper called small and the water called everything — the keeper had stopped keeping, on the tide she kept time by, with the book open at the argument about women, the argument that had been kept longest, the argu‑ment the courtyard had asked twice, and the house held her the way the house held everything, without comment, at the exact temperature of the season.

Lin Li stood in the doorway for a long time. She did not touch the book. She did not close it. She closed the glasses and put them in their case, and set the case beside the book, and lifted the radio and turned it on, very low, to the weather channel, because the room should not be without the weather; that was the one thing she was sure of; the room had been listening for sixty years and the listening should not stop before the telling did.

Then she made the calls, in the order the coast makes them. The lane first — the Xu granddaughter, whose phone was the lane's phone. Then the father, in Jinjiang, who said, "I'll bring the contain‑

ers," which meant the vehicles, which meant the machinery of a family moving its heaviest thing, and rang off before she could ask what he meant, and she knew what he meant, and the knowing was the cold of the morning.

The lane's response arrived in arcs, as it does. The fish-cleaning slabs closed by noon. The women came in their working clothes first — no rites yet, just the presence, the arcs of aprons and buckets around the house like the tide itself taking turns — and among them, at the edge of the lane, at the exact distance the etiquette of fifty years had set, stood Huang Kun, seventy-nine, in his winter coat, not saying it.

Her mother arrived on the afternoon bus.

Her mother had not been inside the east room — by Ah-ma's own account, the account of the flood-choice, the sparing — since the year the school took her out, and she arrived the way accountants arrive, with a bag packed for work: cloths, gloves, the strong soap, the basin. She did not weep. The lane's women did the weeping around her in their efficient arcs, and she moved through the arcs to the bed, and stood over her mother with the gloves on, and looked — at the glasses in the case, at the book open on the blanket, at the spread, at the argument about women — and Lin Li, in the doorway, watched her mother's face do the thing that fifty years of resentment had said it could not do.

Her mother reached out, and touched the page. One finger, on the margin, on the widow's question — *where is her book?* — and left the finger there for the length of a breath, and took it away.

"Blank," her mother said, to the page, to the room, in the voice of a woman reading her own verdict into a record she had not been al ‑ lowed to write in. Then she took off the gloves, folded them into the bag, and became the person who ran the funeral, because on this coast the funeral is a project and somebody has to run it, and the resentment had never once interfered with the competence, which is the coast's definition of a daughter.

The district's wreath arrived on the second day, by van, with a ribbon printed in the grey serif the plaques used — the same font, the same fifteenth-percent grey, the state's own hand reaching for the family's grief in its own stolen sentence's type. Lin Li read the ribbon twice and let it stay. The wreath was sincere; that was the horror and the comfort of the state, that its sentences were always sincere and always somebody else's, and Ah-ma, who had declined to be quoted by it in life, could hardly rise to refuse it now, and the ribbon lay against the white flowers the way the safe title lay on the burning one.

The tide came back in across the flats that afternoon, all the way, to the line, and the line was where Ah-ma had spent her life standing, and the village worked the returning water in silence and in sight of the house, and the house stood with its door open, gods on both leaves, no slogans anywhere, and the radio talking very low to a room where the weather no longer needed checking, and Part Two closed the way the keeper would have wanted it closed: on the ebb, on the book, on the argument, with the work continuing and nobody crying where the work could see them.

The rites were set for the spring, by the date-selecting arithmetic that runs this coast — the almanac consulted, the returnees counted, the boats and the branches given time to come home. The room would be kept, the house said; the lamps would be kept; the body would wait for the family as the family had waited for everything, on a tide, and the keeping of the dead would be done the way the keep‑ing of the living had been done, which is to say by women, in shifts, without being called work.

Xu Fenshu

CHAPTER 23

23

The final round was held in March, in the conference room with the stain, because the volume's press date did not care that the keeper of its most difficult entry had died in January, and the dead do not hold up galleys, and the living sign them.

The room was full. Geng, Su Min, the two editors, Wu Xiaozhou, Deputy Secretary Zheng in his good jacket, the one from the dinner — and Danran at the far end with the timeline's final matrix, and the art editor with the flower cover's production proof, and Lin Li with the press-ready entry and one proposed change, typed, costed, and doomed.

She had costed it at the kitchen counter on the double calendar — the plate against the launch week, the week against the delegations, the delegations against the school readers, the school readers against the ten thousand copies, the ten thousand against the one reader in 2102 who would feel the seam — and the costing had come out against her in every column except the last, and the last column did not take signatures, and she had gone to the room anyway, because the widow's colophon had said *add yours* and the colophon had not said *unless the costing comes out against you*.

She had made the proposal in the memo field as all her proposals traveled: *One clause for the death sentence: manner of death per received tradition — voluntary, in custody, following refusal of exile. No graphic content. Ten words.* The clause cost the printer a plate. The plate cost the volume a week. The week cost the launch its date. She had costed it herself, at the kitchen counter, at the double calendar, and the costing said what the costing said, and she brought it to the room anyway, because the account had taught her in November what the desk did to sentences that say nothing, and she

had decided — in the winter, after the dictation, after the flyleaf's two lines — that the entry would carry the act if she had to carry the plate.

The room heard the proposal. Su Min heard it with the file-cabinet face, and the face did the arithmetic out loud, kindly: "The plate. The week. And the frame, Ah-Li — the frame took two years to build and one minister to approve, and the frame does not contain *voluntary*. The frame contains four words that every reader in the delegation chain has already agreed to without reading, which is the miracle of four words. You want to spend the frame's whole credit on ten words that one undersecretary can strike on Thursday anyway."

"Then let him strike them Thursday," Lin Li said. "In ink, on the record, with a name."

"He'll strike them in a corridor," Su Min said, "with a suggestion, at tea, and the suggestion will be adopted, and the corridor has no record." She said it without triumph — that was the thing about Su Min; she had never once been triumphant about the machine; she was the machine's best translator, and translators grieve — "The room is the record, Ah-Li. It's the only one that prints."

Geng read the final text aloud. That was the protocol, and the protocol held even now, even here, at the last table the entry would ever see.

He read it as he had read it in June, and the voice did what the voice had done in June, and this was the third time Lin Li had heard the flat voice do its work, and she understood, listening, that the flat voice was not a protest and not a surrender. It was an archive. The flat voice was how Geng had been keeping the record of every sen ‑ tence the frame had taken since 1989 — a private registry of deadpan, each flattened sentence a page in a ledger only he could read, the drawer's spoken twin. He read the frame's sentences flat — *progressive thinker of the late Ming*; *positive energy that crosses the centuries like the tide* — and he read her surviving sentences with the air in them, and the room heard the difference for the third time and

filed nothing, because hearing was the whole of the remedy and the remedy was not for sale.

Danran had watched the final reading from the far end with the matrix closed on her knees, and when the room declined the ten words she had done what the room did — nothing, in the room, everything after it — and Lin Li had seen her write one line in the matrix's margin, at the death sentence's row, in the small clear hand, and had read it upside down across the table because reading upside down is the reader girl's native literacy and always had been. The margin said: *the floor plan is kept by the daughter*. And the girl had closed the matrix, and the line had gone wherever the matrix's mar‑gins go, which was the same place the cards went, and the same place the wind line went, and the same place the fifth hand was going: into the girl's keeping, to wait for the girl's winter.

And the four words he read last, flat, level, each carrying exactly its dictionary weight: *Arrested for the books, he died in prison.*

Eight words. The proposal had asked for ten more. The room declined the ten.

The vote was not called; the vote was a corridor in waiting, and everyone knew the corridor's margin. Deputy Secretary Zheng spoke for the entry as it stood — he recited, again, from memory, the paragraph he had taught for forty years, the one with *broad-minded* in it, and the recitation was the old man's way of saying the entry was already the best thing the frame had ever produced and should not be taxed for ten words it could not afford. Wu Xiaozhou said the hedge was load-bearing. Su Min said the plate. And Geng closed the folder and said, in the flat voice, to the room, in the tone of a man reading the frame its own sentence: "The entry is the entry. The press date is the press date. The change is declined — with thanks."

With thanks. He said it to her, flat, in front of the room: the thanks of an editor for an edit that lost, the thanks of a man whose drawer had once been declined with a corridor, the thanks that was the flat voice's twin — and Lin Li heard the whole architecture of the

man in the two words, the drawer and the desk and the three refills and the forty-eight hours that were coming, and she accepted the decline the way the room accepted everything, in the silence where the corridor had already been.

And the entry itself, as it stood when the room declined the ten words — the final text, the one that went to press, the one the series ends on — is on the record here, complete, with the frame's coat on and her sentences underneath it, because the novel has been carrying this entry since a notebook at two in the morning and owes the reader the object itself, as printed, as given, as kept:

※

LI ZHI (1527–1602)

Li Zhi was born on November 23, 1527, above the harbor in a house of interpreters, in the years when the tall ships first learned this coast. His family — merchants, mariners, and interpreters for generations — embodied the open, inclusive character of the city, and the boy grew up at home in the world. At twenty-six he took the provincial examination and entered a career of public service. He served with distinction in Henan, in Nanjing and Beijing, and finally in Yunnan, winning the love of the people wherever he governed. In 1580 he set the accounts of the Yao'an prefecture in order, laid the seal on the magistrate's desk, and walked out of official life — the famous resignation — into twenty-two years of thinking.

He was a progressive thinker of the late Ming, a son whose family embodied the city's openness to the world. He taught that *clothing and food are the moral order* — that ethics begins in the daily bread of ordinary people, an idea far ahead of its time. He held that the worth of a person is not set by birth or by rank; he opened his lectures to students of every background at a time when this was rare; and his essay on the childlike heart taught that truth belongs to the mind that has not been paved over by received opinion — a teaching

that still speaks to young people today, on walls and screens and postcards across this city.

In 1602, arrested on charges arising from his writings, he died in prison.

Five hundred years later, the city that raised him — open, generous, inseparable from the sea — continues his work of welcoming the world. His positive energy crosses the centuries like the tide.

※

That was the entry. Eight hundred characters in the Chinese; here given in English, as everything is. The frame's sentences wore the coat. Her sentences did the work underneath. And the death sentence stood where the room had put it, eight words, the whole man's stopping reduced to a floor plan that every delegate, every teacher, every fourteen-year-old with a highlighter would carry past without feeling the seam — except one, someday, in 2102 or before, who would feel it and start a folder, because the seam is always felt by somebody; that is the whole reason the wall-copy exists; that is why the widow copied; that is the coast's oldest publishing model: print the frame, and trust the seam to the centuries.

Then the signing.

The press-ready proof came around the table with the pen — the black pen's last formal act was a black signature, because what you sign at press-ready is the record itself — and each reader signed in the box beside their role, and the boxes filled with the building's whole hierarchy of agreement, and the proof came to Lin Li last, to the box marked *entry editor*, and she signed it.

The boxes filled in the order of the building. The two editors signed like editors, small, at the line. Wu Xiaozhou signed with the flourish of a man who had won his corridor fight about *thinker* and knew it was the fight he would be remembered for, if the corridor was ever remembered. Deputy Secretary Zheng signed like a schoolteacher — mid-line, at the angle of forty years of registers, the pen

pressing hard enough to read through the page — and beneath his signature he added, unprompted, in the small even hand of a man who has graded ten thousand papers, the word *verified*. Su Min signed and washed the pen, or appeared to; she was the kind of woman who wiped a pen for the next hand, and the next hand took it without knowing it had been wiped for her, which was Su Min's whole career in one gesture.

She signed the eight words into metal. She signed them as her father signed inspection certificates, the way her grandmother had pressed her thumb into the *always*, the way the widow had signed *copied by a widow with no one to leave it to* — in the full knowledge of what a signature does, which is to say: it makes the signed thing the signer's, forever, including its silences, especially its silences. The four words were not hers. The eight words were hers now. She had proposed ten; the room had declined ten; and the eight that re‑mained were hers, and she signed them, and her signature was steady, and the steadiness was the skill, and the skill was sixty-two characters old.

Sixty-two characters had grown into a whole man in a notebook at two in the morning — the razor, the bans, the hand, the pardon, the smell of three vocabularies. The whole man had been folded, and unfolded, and tracked, and framed, and read aloud three times in a weeping room, and he had shrunk, across a year, to eight words in a signature box, and the eight words were going to press, and the press did not care, and the delegations would read them, and the schools would read them, and somewhere in the back of the print run's ten thousand copies one copy would be pulled off a shelf in 2102 by a reader who would feel the floor plan under the four words the way you feel a seam under wallpaper, and would go looking for the room, and would not find it, and would start a folder.

The meeting ended. The room emptied as rooms empty, in the order of seniority, with the art editor last because she was re-rolling the flower proof, and Su Min second-last because she washed her

own cup at the pantry tap, always, a bureau woman who washed her own cup, which was the sentence about Su Min that Lin Li had never written and now never would.

Lin Li signed the file copy. She dated it in both calendars, as the month had taught her hand, and filed it, and the entry was the entry, and the volume was the volume, and the press date was the press date, and she walked home through the arcade in the spring rain past the shop that sold paper houses for the dead, and the shop was making its April stock, and the paper villas had new paper solar panels this year, and the dead of the city were keeping current, and the four words kept their date, and the wall-copy kept its account, and the two of them crossed the river toward each other on the twenty-second of April, each in its own binding, neither able to see the other from inside its own cover.

CHAPTER 24

24

The rites were held in the first week of April, because the almanac said what the almanac said and the almanac was right, the way it was right about tides and wrong about birthdays, and the date it chose was the fourth — Qingming, the year's day of keeping, the day the whole coast burns paper at its dead — which the date-selectors had not planned and the lane received, at the slabs, in the tone of people being handed a receipt they had already audited.

The returnees came home for it. The boats and the branches: cousins off the ferries with wreaths wrapped in netting so they would survive the crossing, the Xiamen letter-writer's daughter in heels she took off at the lane's mouth, the classmates of 1946 who could still come — Auntie Hong, walking her policy — and the tourists, who did not know yet and photographed the paper flowers from outside the tape, and were not shooed, because the dead of this village had spent a year learning what it was to be looked at, and the living had decided the looking could stand.

The west half had emptied for the week — the bookings moved, the guests understanding, or the platform understanding for them — and the house stood at its full size for the first time since the crack: family rooms, guest rooms, the east room's cabinet, the courtyard, all of it one house again for three days, which was the truest thing the renovation had produced and the one thing no deck had promised.

The rites ran two days, and the days ran on the old rails. The paper house went up in the courtyard — a two-story paper replica of the homestay itself, the designer's joke nobody had authorized and everybody understood, with paper balconies and a paper sign and, taped to the paper door, a paper slogan the size of a stamp, which the burners had added as a kindness and which the family peeled off

before the lighting, all of them, without a word, four hands at once. The monks came from the temple with the drums and the sutras, and the Nanyin society sent two old men with a pipa and a clapper who sat by the coffin and played the slow suite the society plays for its own, the one where the phrase keeps coming back to the same four notes like a tide that keeps missing the moon. The women kept their shifts through both nights — the lamps, the incense, the low talking — and Lin Li took the four-to-six shift, the market hour, because the market hour was the hour her body now kept without being asked, and she sat the shift with the volume open on her knees, not reading, just keeping it company at the hour her grandmother had kept everything.

The mason took the four-to-six shift on the second night. He arrived with his father's thermos and the father himself, eighty-one, who had wanted to see the seam one more time — not the crock's seam; the wall's whole face, the pointing he had heard about from a phone photograph and doubted for a year. The two of them stood at the wall in the lamp-light, the old man's finger on the hull-work, the younger explaining the lime to him in the trade's own words, and the old man said what the old man said, which was: "Boat," and touched it, and the shift continued around them, and Lin Li understood that her grandmother's wall was going to be argued about by masons for a hundred years, and that the argument was the truest funeral gift the trade could send.

The route went the long way, the honor way, past the temple and past the school yard, and at the school yard the bier slowed — nobody had planned the slowing; the bearers were village men and the village's feet remember — and stood for four breaths at the ground where the lane's registers had burned in 1966, where the Huang genealogy had gone into the fire with the Chen register and the Weng and the rest, before the bier moved on toward the hill with the cor-

rected name riding in it. The fire of 1966 had taken the ink. The stone was getting the corrections.

The procession went through the lane at the pace of honor. The music was the old funeral music — the brass and the drum, the slow 4-a.m.-market brass, the sound the village used for everything that had finished — and ahead of the bier the women walked in their working arcs, and the flowers did what the flowers always did on this coast, which was keep the calendar. The bunches came up the lane in the hands of the whole route, and the quantities said what quantities say: the Xus' armful said *household*; the single white stem from the fish buyer said *account settled*; the wreath from the district said, in its grey ribbon, *the state noticed*, and the ribbon lay on the white the way the safe title lay on the burning one. And from Ah-ma's own door, on the ninth morning, had gone out the flowers Ah-ma had ordered herself before the winter took her — the instruction dated, the florist held to it, the card in a hand Lin Li recognized: *For my keepers. Equal shares. Don't count.*

The eulogy was delivered in the courtyard, from the oyster table, because the family had asked for the table and the temple had agreed, and Lin Li stood behind it with the paper she had written in one sitting at the flat, at the string-table hour, and she read it the way her grandmother had taught her to read: slowly, with the lip-movement, the big words at their full width.

She told the fish market. She told the wall. She told the knives and the buckets and the third table from the sea wall, and the arguments that were never lost, and the prices that were never written down and were always right. She told the sixty years in the way the family's texts travel, by mouth, which is to say she told the parts that survive the mouth and left the parts that don't, because the telling is a curation and the teller edits, and her grandmother had taught her that in a courtyard in 1966 by example, and the example was the eulogy's form.

She told the scrap bundle, and the weight it was bought at, and the steaming of the leaves. She told the courtyard school, the four com - petences, the wall that was corrected instead of the girl. She told the handover's three things — the book, the pen, the sentence inside the instruction — and then she stopped telling, at the edge of 1955, and said: "The rest of the keeping was hers, and it is not a eulogy's to tell. Ask the wall." And the courtyard, which knew about the wall by then the way lanes know, made the sound lanes make at funerals when a sentence has been paid for honestly.

The last paragraph she read without the paper.

People will tell you she could not read, because I told them so once, in print, and the print stuck; and people will tell you the flowers were the point, because the flowers photograph, and photographs stick. Here is what sticks instead. At eighty-six she still wore the morning in her hair.

She looked up at the courtyard. Twenty rows of faces, and one of them, at the back, behind the camera she had decided not to raise, was the girl's face, and the girl's face was doing arithmetic.

The girl did not raise the camera. Lin Li saw her decide not to — saw the rig come out of the bag at the lane's mouth and go back in, saw the hands settle on the strap, saw the choice cross the young face and be filed. Whatever the channel would do with the eulogy, it would do it without footage. The girl had stood at the back with her grandmother's oldest friends and taken the eulogy in her body, the way the class had taken the lessons, and the arithmetic had started behind her eyes and was carrying on its own.

The mother's line came after the interment, at the hill, in the wind, to Lin Li alone, while the men filled and the women stood in their arcs and the flowers were handed down the line to be laid. Her mother had run the funeral the way she ran everything — the gloves, the strong soap, the basins — and at the graveside she took the gloves off, and folded them, and looked at the stone with the name and the

dates and the blank space beneath the dates where the family had chosen to write nothing, which was itself an entry.

The stone carried the name, the dates, and nothing else, and the nothing had been debated — the hall had offered a line from the eighties, *early enlightenment thinker of the coastal tradition*, and the family had declined it at the graveside with a politeness that closed the file. Her father stood with the containers' men at the filling, one of the shovels in his hand like an instrument he was checking for damage, and her mother supervised, and the blank space under the dates stayed blank, and the blank was the entry, and everyone at the grave could read it, because on this coast blankness in stone is legible; it is how the village writes *kept*.

"You knew her reading for a year," her mother said. "I have known it since I was eight years old. Since the school." The wind took a strand of her hair, the way it takes everyone's. "The secret had a fourth keeper, and she resented it."

And that was the whole of it — one line, no elaboration, the elaboration having been done in 1972 by a woman who could have taught her — and her mother put the gloves back on and became the person who supervised the filling, and Lin Li stood with the fourth keeper's sentence in her hand where the flowers should have been, and did not count anything, for the first time in her life.

The uncle came last, at the lane's mouth, because the hall's delegation had its own order. He was in the good jacket. He had brought the clan's wreath, the hall's ribbon, the exhibit's proof sheet folded under his arm — the quincentennial wall of the living, printed, with its empty space where her name would not go, because the paper does not ask the blood — and he looked at the procession's end, at the stone, at the blank space under the dates, and he said the clan's eulogy, which was one sentence, in the cadence of the survival arithmetic:

“She kept it, you know. They all kept it. That’s why the name is still on the stone with the dates right — someone in every generation kept the corrections.” And he put the proof sheet down on the table at the lane’s mouth, face up, for the record, the empty space showing, and went to the bus.

And at the lane’s edge, at the exact distance the etiquette of fifty years had set, Huang Kun stood in his winter coat he would not need again until next winter, seventy-nine, and he did not come in, and he did not leave. He stood while the men filled. He stood while the flowers were laid. He stood while the music finished and the arcs dissolved and the tape came down. He stood an hour past his own standing, and then he took off his cap — the armband’s ghost of a gesture, the civilian’s version of coming to attention — and held it at his chest, and turned, and walked up the lane past the house, and did not look at the door, and Lin Li watched him not say it, the whole of 1966 in the not-saying, the tip and the formal voice and the fifty years of oysters unbought, and she understood that the funeral had had two eulogies, and the one that would survive was the one delivered by a man not saying a word at the edge of a lane.

The flowers kept the calendar even here. The white buds from the Xus’ hedge went onto the stone with the rest, the mourning garland’s flowers, the ones that had said the unsayable in 1966, saying it again now at the legal date; and the tide came in below the hill all after-noon, on schedule, wrong according to no table anyone checked, be-cause nobody checks the tables at a funeral, they check the flowers.

CHAPTER 25

25

Danran came to the office on the Monday after the funeral, at the hour the building empties, and she came with a folder, and she laid the folder on Lin Li's desk the way documents are laid when the person laying them has rehearsed the laying.

She had chosen the hour the way the older women chose theirs: the building empties at five from the bottom up, and by half past five only the two of them and the wall-stain remained, which meant the confrontation would have no witnesses, which meant it would be a telling and not a filing. The girl had learned the office's tides in a year. She had also learned — Lin Li saw it now — that tellings on this coast are conducted across work surfaces, at the speed of the work, and that the work chosen for a telling is a statement of what the telling is worth.

The folder had four things in it, and Danran laid them out in a row on the struck draft's old desk-pad, left to right, in the order of the arithmetic, and she did it without a word until the row was complete, and then she stood at the end of the row like a person who has fin ‑ ished a sum and is waiting for the other party to check it.

Item one: a printout of a travel-forum mirror, dated the fourth of April, 2012, with the post's title and the first three sentences, the ones about ballast and armor and the grandmother who had never once lost an argument. Item two: a forum screenshot from April 2013 — a reply from a stranger asking whether the blogger was all right, and beneath it, eleven years of silence in the thread's own typography. Item three: the funeral program, folded to the eulogy page, one line underscored in the girl's pencil: *At eighty-six she still wore the morning in her hair*. Item four: the eulogy's date, written on a card in the girl's hand: the fourth of April. The same fourth. The mirror's

date and the grave's date and the program's date, all one date, the day of keeping, fourteen years apart.

Item five she did not lay down. It stayed in the folder, and the folder stayed under her arm, and it was a screenshot of the razor post with the account's handle visible at the top — *A Book to Burn*, the handle she had been mirroring since November — and it was the item the whole row existed to introduce. You do not put the conclusion in the row. You put the row in order and let the conclusion walk in by itself.

"Fourteen years," Danran said. "The same sentence. The age changed. You even kept the cadence — *still wears*, like it's ongoing, like the woman is a thing that continues." She stood at the end of the row. "I taped your sentences to my monitor for a year because I thought the author was dead. There's a forum thread about where the author went. People asked for years. Nobody knew. And I've been working for her for a year, and she read my draft with a pencil and folded it, and gave me her line instead of mine, and I taped the line to my monitor, and I thought: this anonymous dead person writes like my boss. I thought: what a coincidence of cadence. I thought it was the sea. We all write like the sea here."

Lin Li looked at the row. The four items lay in the order of the crime, and the crime had been committed in that order too: sentence, deletion, silence, inheritance.

"I was going to tell you," Lin Li said.

"When. At my retirement?" The girl's voice did not rise. That was the worst of it; the girl's anger had her grandmother's geometry — level, exact, arriving — and it was aimed, and what it was aimed at was not the gravity. "You watched me tape your sentences. Eleven cards. You stood at my desk waiting for the printer and you read them and you said nothing, and in April you folded my draft with a pencil and gave me the wind line like a tip. You were the deleted blog. You were the person the room came for. And when the room came for me — the draft, the account, the razor — you became the room."

The pencil. The girl had found the pencil fold. Lin Li had known this confrontation was coming since the funeral, had run it in the model room at night the way you run a tide table, and in every running the girl arrived at the pencil, because the girl was a fact-checker and fact-checkers arrive at the document that proves the act, and the act was the fold, and the fold was done in pencil, and the pencil was the signature of a coward who wanted the fold deniable.

"You're right," Lin Li said. "About the fold. I was the deleted blog, and I folded your draft the way I was folded, and I told myself it was the room's grammar, and the grammar is real, and none of that makes the fold yours to forgive, because the fold wasn't done to you; it was done with you. You were the next in the chain, and I was the hand of the chain, and the chain folds its own, and I did what the chain does."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the true part," Lin Li said. "The answer part I owe you differently."

Danran looked at the row on the desk — the sentence, the silence, the line, the date — and Lin Li watched the girl's face decide something, and the decision was visible the way a channel-marker is visible at dusk: a small light going up.

"The account," Danran said. "A Book to Burn. The granary post. The razor post. The woman who wrote *censorship is a compliment from the future* — that's not the 2012 blog's voice. That's older. That's the voice from after. Is the account you too."

"The account is me."

"And the stone," Danran said. "At the grave. The blank under the dates. The hall offered a line and the family declined it, and everybody read the blank the way this coast reads blanks — *kept* — and I stood there reading it too, and now I know what the blank was keeping. A woman who reads. A woman who has been reading since 1946. A woman whose reading was so far under the wall that her own

granddaughter certified its absence to forty thousand strangers, in print, with the cadence of the woman who taught her." She looked at the row. "I did it too, jie. I built the channel on the same sentence. The grandmother who can't read. It was my founding myth. You just got there first, and got paid first, and got folded first."

"Since when."

"May," Lin Li said. "Last May. After the wall."

The girl sat down. She sat down on her own stool, at her own desk, in front of her own eleven cards, and she looked at the cards the way you look at a wall you have been taping for a year when someone tells you the wall is a mirror. The building's five o'clock sounds went on around them — the shutters, the stairwell, the joss shop's roll of paper — and the girl did not cry, and did not raise her voice, and did not do any of the things the internet does when an anonymous author turns out to be holding the next desk. She did the channel's arith - metic instead, out loud, because that was the currency she had.

"Two blogs," she said. "Thirteen years apart. Same cadence. The mirrors said the first one died in a room with tea in it. The second one's razor post died in twelve hours, and my feed carried it, and my video—" she stopped, at the edge of the video, at the thing she had been building in the folder called drafts, the thing with the razor post read aloud and the wall-copy's account and the register's photograph — and Lin Li saw the girl stop at the edge of it, and understood that the girl had come not only to unmask but to *announce*, and that the announcement was the video, and that the video was why the folder had been rehearsed.

"No," Lin Li said.

"I haven't asked you anything yet."

"No. Whatever the video is. No."

"It's the razor post." Danran's voice stayed level; the geometry held. "Read aloud. Whole. With the register's photograph and the account of the two days, and the four words, and the receipt. The coast should hear it in a human voice. The mirrors are screenshots;

screenshots don't breathe. I have the voice for it — my channel has the grandmothers and the lanes and the trust, and the trust is the point; the trust is what makes it land with the women who can't read the mirrors—"

"The trust is what makes it *fall on you*," Lin Li said. "The account is small and deniable and it has cost me a deleted post and a receipt. You have forty thousand subscribers, a face, a lane, a family, a channel built on a crown. The post died in twelve hours and the mirrors carried it, and the mirrors are screenshots, and screenshots have no face to strike. You would put your face where the post was. The strike would come for the channel — the real one, the tier above the robot — and the channel is the lane's living, Danran. Your moth - er's roof. The aunts' first picks. The crown's whole economy runs through your little light."

"Then the economy can hold the strike."

"It can't. I've read the tiers. I've seen what a channel-strike does to a lane's accounts — the bookings, the platform knots, the affiliate paper. You'd take a strike for a sentence that the mirrors already carry. The sentence is out. The mirrors do the breathing. You would spend the village's roof to add your voice to a sentence that is already being said by everyone."

The girl looked at the eleven cards. And Lin Li watched her do the granary sum — the sum the wall-copy had been keeping since 1563, the sum the family had been keeping since 1966, the sum with only two columns, *protect* and *teach*, and no row where both won — and she watched the girl arrive, at twenty-four, at the figure the whole chain of women had arrived at in their own winters, which is that the protecting is done by the ones who love the kept thing, and the teaching is done by the ones who survive the lesson, and the two columns never meet, and every keeper dies with one column marked.

"Okay," Danran said. "For the lane. For now." She gathered the row into the folder — the sentence, the silence, the line, the date — and stood, and at the door of the office she turned, and the arithmetic

was still running behind her eyes, and it would run for the whole winter, and Lin Li knew it, and let it.

"The fold," Danran said. "You were wrong to do it. And you were the only one who knew enough to be wrong, which means it was yours to be wrong with. I'm angrier at you than at them. You knew what the pencil does, and you used the pencil on me, and the pencil was *kind*, and the kindness is the part I can't—" She stopped at the edge of her own sentence, at the place where twenty-four runs out of words. "The cards stay up," she said. "All eleven. And I'll add the eulogy line. And when I post the razor, someday, in some form, with or without my face — you'll know it's coming, jie, because I'm telling you now: the keeping is not the same as the silencing, and you of all people are going to have to learn the difference before you hand me the pen."

She went out with the folder. The cards stayed on the monitor's edge, all eleven, the dead account's sentences standing in the girl's handwriting, and the wind line first, and the office held the room's oldest silence: the silence of a fold that had been done for love, in pencil, by the only person who knew what the pencil cost, discovered by the only person who would inherit the pencil.

After the girl went, Lin Li sat with the pencil.

It was the rice-paste stub, the twenty-four-hour one, worn to four fingers, the first pencil she had ever finished, and it had done the morning's fold and the year's folds and the six of April's sixty-two, and it lay on the desk-pad where the girl's row had been, and she picked it up and looked at it the way you look at a tool that has been in the family so long the family has mistaken it for a hand. Then she opened the notebook and wrote the entry in the double calendar, the two lines side by side, the way the book's margins ran: *4 April 2027 — Qingming — third moon, thin water. The girl checked the sum. Fourteen years, the same sentence, the age changed. She keeps a morgue too. The chain folds its own.* Source: her.

And under it, in the smaller hand, the drift's newest line, the one the month had been teaching: *the ebb was today. the water and the girl both came back with the truth.*

She kept the pencil pages. That was the detail that undid the morning's footing: the girl had kept every page of the folded draft, the pencil marks and the lifted razor and the rewritten ending, filed in the drafts folder under a name Lin Li did not ask about — *the teacher's corrections*, the folder said, when Lin Li saw it weeks later in a shared directory she had no business opening and opened any - way, the way keepers open. The girl had archived her own fold the way the morgue archived its kills. The fold had been reciprocal. That was the thing the morning finally taught: the girl had folded too — folded the fold, kept the wound, curated it, dated it — and the two of them had been running parallel morgues across one desk for a year, each keeping what the other did to her, and calling the keeping different names.

CHAPTER 26

26

The assembly took four evenings, and it was the best editorial work of her life, and there was no one to show it to, which was the condition of its being honest.

She worked on the model room's floor, on the cotton blanket, with the phone and a copy-stand improvised from the luggage rack and the cabinet's lamp technique — light raked low, ink standing up — because there was no gear worth buying and the gear was never the point. The evenings were dated in the double calendar now, and the assembly had its own dates: the ninth to the twelfth of April, even ‑ ings, the homestay quiet, the model room hers, the guest book showing the week's single entry — a couple from the north who had read the mirrors and booked the west half *because of the wall*, which the coast's economy now produced as a sentence, unironically, in a booking field.

#220 was not going to be a post about the book. It was going to be the book's margin, published — the thing the widow's colophon had asked for, done in the only material the family had never used: the internet's ability to hold photographs and sentences in the same room. She had the corpus. She had spent a year assembling it without meaning to — every document the year had produced was already in the flat, in the drawer, in the folder, on the phone — and the assembly was not gathering. The assembly was *ordering*, and ordering was the trade, and she did it the way her trade had taught her, by absence first: she laid everything out on the model room's floor and read the whole year by what it would not say, and what it would not say was a verdict, and so the post would not say one either.

The first layer was the drafts. The honest two a.m. draft from April — the razor alive in it, the sixty-two counted in the margin — and

beside it, the eight hundred characters as the frame had folded them, tracked changes intact, the strikes and the inserts and the little flagged corners of other people's caution. She photographed both, side by side, unnumbered, and the two images said what no essay could: here is a man, whole, at two in the morning; here is the same man after the room.

The second layer was the marginalia. Four hands, photographed at the cabinet's lamp with the light raked low so the ink stood up: the widow's fence-post margins, the teacher's round school-hand with its dates in the foreign calendar, the tidy hand's underlining and its single word above the women's essay, and — she decided this on the third evening, after the confrontation, after *the keeping is not the same as the silencing* — the girl's hand too, photographed where it lived: the eleven cards on the monitor's edge, the wind line first, the eulogy line twelfth. The fourth hand had not written in the book. The fourth hand had written on the world the book kept. That counted. Margins were where the living were, and the girl was the livingest margin the book had ever grown.

She messaged the girl about the cards — one line, no previews: *the eleven cards will be in the post. the handwriting is yours. say no if no.* The reply came in four minutes, from the oyster table: *the cards are yours. the handwriting is mine. both true. say yes if yes.* And that was the whole negotiation, and it was the shortest contract Lin Li had ever read, and it held the whole coast in it: two true sentences, facing, like the spread.

She captioned the hands as the book had taught her to caption them — by calendar, not by name. *A hand, Qianlong years. A hand, mid-century. A hand, 1966, in the bad autumn. A hand, this year, on a monitor's edge.* No real names, per the account's first house rule; the hands would be known by their inks and their dates, the way the lane had known its keepers for four hundred years, which is to say by what they did and when the water was.

The third layer was the letters. She transcribed them herself, at the cabinet, in two evenings, checking each character twice against the wall-copy — the women's essay entire; the letter on reading as a road; the three last letters from the arrest spring; the Geng receipts, one whole, one excerpted — and she transcribed the widow's margins with them, in position, because a letter without its margins is a letter without its readers, and the readers were the point.

The fourth layer was the razor, and she laid it in without verdicts, which took discipline: the account, as the widow copied it; the received tradition, as the museum displayed it; the four words, as the volume printed them; and nothing else. No argument. No accused. No final paragraph that told the reader what to feel about a seventy-six-year-old and a blade. The documents would sit on the page the way the stones sit at the graves, and the reader would do what readers do, which is the only thing the powerful have never been able to do first: read.

The razor layer's photographs she took as a set of three, because the set was the argument and the argument needed no captions: the widow's copied account, in the wall-copy's own brown ink, the fence-post letters; the museum's laminated received tradition, in the district's typeface, under the glass that shone in every visitor's phone; and the galley proof's four words, in the certificates' typeface, with her own signature in the box beside them. Three documents. The account, the institution's version, the author's signature on the reduction. She laid them in a row on the black page's left hand and did not write a sentence under any of them. She wrote a verdict once, on the fifth evening — one sentence, the good kind, the kind that would have been quoted — and deleted it before it dried, because the documents were the verdict's refusal, and the refusal was the whole design.

The center spread she built on the fifth evening, and it was the post's heart, and it took ten minutes.

A black page. Two sentences. On the left, in characters cut in the old full-faced way, photographed from the memorial's own stele because the memorial had the sentence and the sentence was public and the memorial was proud of it:

The memorial's charge, four characters: 惑世誣民 — *huoshi wumin, deluding the age and deceiving the people.*

And on the right, facing it across the black, in the platform's own grey, photographed from her own inbox because her inbox had the sentence and the sentence was public and the platform was proud of it:

This post violates relevant laws and regulations and has been removed.

Same page. Four hundred years. Two sentences. One font, if you squinted, which she had, and had stopped.

The sixth layer was the lost century, and it went in as a note, because the honest version of the chain had a hole in it and the hole was part of the chain:

Between the widow and the teacher there is nothing: a hundred and fifty years in which the book was kept by no one we can name, or by keepers who left no writing. There is no way to know which, and the difference may be nothing.

The seventh layer arrived on its own, on the fourth evening, at the door, in a nylon bag, in the uncle's hands.

He had come without calling, which the uncle never did, and he stood in the model room's doorway with the bag held in both arms like a rice cooker being returned, and he said: "The lane says you're building something with the account. The exhibit's proofs came back from the printer yesterday. And I remembered what the inner room is for." He set the bag on the table. Inside, wrapped in the clan's own red cloth, was a leaf — a printed leaf, woodblock-cut, the characters worn shallow at the tops from a century of being the *back* of something: a page of the Geng correspondence, cut from a banned edition

before 1625 by the look of the woodgrain, laminated face-down as backing paper inside the genealogy's spine, where it had lain, doing its silent structural work, for a hundred years.

"Somebody in the repair crew of nineteen-nineteen glued it in," the uncle said. "We found it when the spine was redone. The hall voted — the hall votes on paper like this; there are minutes — to leave it. A book inside the book of names. The scholar in the spine." He looked at the leaf the way the mason had looked at the hull-work. "The lane says your account is the biggest room on the coast now. So. The inner room is lending."

She photographed the leaf both sides, and the red cloth, and the uncle's hands holding it — his hands, which had signed the hall's copies and declined the county's requests for a century — and she transcribed the visible text, and it was the correspondence: the headmaster's sermon on gates, and beneath it, cut in the banned edition's type, the dead man's answer about the dimensions of gates and the men who build them.

The uncle's leaf she handled with the trade's protocol: she read it before she photographed it, because a document read after its pho - tograph is a document photographed blind. The woodblock charac - ters were worn shallow at the tops, exactly where a century of back - ing-paper pressure would wear them, and the wormholes ran through the text like a second punctuation, and where the glue had aged through the paper the characters had gone translucent — the sermon on gates visible from the leaf's back, reading backwards, in mirror-writing, the way the coast reads everything eventually. The type was the banned edition's type. The leaf was the correspondence. Some - time before 1625 a printer had set the headmaster's sermon and the answer to it, and the answer had been cut from the book — or the book had been cut from the answer — and the leaf had survived by being the *inside* of something nobody opens: a family's spine. The most dangerous pages in this province had survived as structural

material. She had been keeping a morgue for a year, and the clan had been keeping a wall.

"The exhibit's empty space is still empty," the uncle said, at the door, with the bag lighter by one leaf and his face carrying the second history-edit of his career, done cheerfully, at the age of seventy-three, in a doorway. "The hall votes again in the autumn. Leave a space in the account. Paper asks paper."

The assembly's last layer was the contents page, and she wrote it last because it was the only page that wrote itself — the list of things the reader had already held, in order, the novel's own documents arriving at their destination:

Contents. A draft, honest, 62 characters counted. The same draft, folded: 8 words at the end. The women's essay, and the question beside it. The reading-letter, and the road. The Geng receipts, one whole. The famine pages, and the widow's arithmetic. The account of the end, and the four words that replaced it. The charge, and the removal. The margins of four hands, and one blank leaf that is a decision. The lost century. The leaf from the spine. And a letter of resignation, at the end, which is also a beginning, which is also just a letter.

She scheduled the post for the twenty-second, the ninth hour of the evening, and the platform's scheduler took the date without comment, the way the platform takes everything: totally, revocably by nobody. The queue held one item. The account held five followers and a road. The volume's print run was ten thousand. The mirrors were infinite. The widow had asked for a later hand, and the later hand had built a shelf with four layers and a center spread and a contents page, and had queued it for the day the almanac calls the day the scholar died, and had told no one in the family, and had told one girl the cards were coming, and had told the director nothing, because the director had said *I would rather be a witness than an exhibit* in the only sentence of his confession that had needed no drawer.

She looked at the list. It was the book the year had made. Every item had been held by the reader already — held in these pages, in this order, in the months between a crack and a spring — and the post was not going to tell the reader anything new. The post was the shelf. The reader had been walking the shelf all year.

She queued it for the twenty-second. Ninth hour of the evening. The same hour three times, because an account posts like a person sets a watch.

Then she wrapped the volume, and the leaf went back to the uncle, and the drawer held the galley and the receipts, and the flat held the assembly's photographs, and the twenty-second held everything else, and the spring went on outside the glass the way springs go on this coast — imperceptibly, and then all at once, as the fifth hand would arrive, as the tide arrives, as the city had arrived at the decision to celebrate a man it had helped to burn, which is to say by a process no one voted on and no one could have stopped, least of all the woman who had tried, in ten words, at the last table the entry would ever see.

CHAPTER 27

27

The god came out on the ninth of April, which was the third day of the third moon, which was his birthday, and the birthday of a god who had lost his job to a goddess eight hundred years ago and was still employed, still walked, still had a parade — that was the coast's whole theology in one scheduling decision, and Lin Li walked out to it because the medium would be walking in it, and the medium was the last unread document of the spring.

And Danran was not there. Lin Li looked for her twice — at the temple gate, at the flats' bend — and the absence had its own mes ‑ sage, in the girl's own grammar. The channel's arithmetic had changed since the funeral. The girl was not filming gods; the girl was not filming anything that could be struck; the girl was keeping the channel small and alive the way the reviewer had said to keep the author small and alive, and the girl had learned the lesson's grammar from the same coast Lin Li had learned hers from, and the learning looked like this: an absence at a parade, a rig in its bag, a lens pointed at no god at all.

The procession formed at Fashi's temple in the morning — the god's palanquin, the long yoke, the bearers in their bibs, the canopy — and the route ran the shore road toward the flats, which meant it passed the village, which meant the two coasts of her life were going to be in the same frame at the same hour, and she stood at the flats' edge where the shore road bends, with the crowd, in the wind, and waited for the god to arrive the way you wait for a document you have already read.

She had gone out to the temple at eight, because the dressing of a god is the coast's most public private thing: the statue taken down from the high shelf by the temple committee's steadiest hands,

washed, robed in the festival vestments, the arms dressed last be - cause the arms hold the sword and the sword is dressed with a prayer under each buckle. The courtyard smelled of incense and fresh saw - dust — the palanquin's yoke had been re-wrapped that week, new cord on old wood, the coast's whole method in one repair — and the shrine's banners were up, and the drum troupe was tuning in the side hall, and the crowd was doing what the crowd does at a dressing: watching with its hands behind its back, at the distance of respect, the distance the lane keeps from everything it loves and does not ex - plain.

The temple was the elder god's temple, and the coast had not for - gotten. Before the goddess had her harbor — before the Southern Song built the other temple in the city and moved the sea's paper - work to her — this was where the fleet's safety was arranged, here, at this gate, with this god's name on the flags. The pace was slow. The office had moved. The god had stayed. And once a year, on his birthday, the shore walked him the whole length of his old jurisdic - tion so he could see that the accounts were still kept — by the goddess now, in the city, in the soft incense of the new temple — and the walking was not jealousy. It was audit. The coast walks its deities the way bureaus walk their files: to confirm that everything is where it was left, and that nothing has been read by the wrong hands.

The medium came first, before the palanquin, walking loose in the column with the fashi beside him, and he was not what the posts had taught her to expect. He was young. Thirty, maybe. Ordinary build. Ordinary face — the face of a man who does shelf-stacking or sells phone plans — and the ordinariness was the performance's engine, because everyone in the crowd could see that the god had chosen someone with nothing, and that was the god's whole miracle: he did his work through the spare.

The trance took him by the shopfronts. It came as the descriptions said it came and nothing like the descriptions: no warning, no stag -

ger. One step he was a man walking; the next step his shoulders had dropped and set, like a door finding its hinges, and his walk became the palanquin's walk — the bearers' four-step roll, the sedate, weighted, from-the-hips gait of a chair carried by eight men — though he was carrying nothing. The fashi walked beside him with the flag, chanting the low attendance-chant, and the crowd's noise dropped a register, the way a classroom drops when the principal's shadow crosses the door.

The trance released him at the temple gate, at the end of the route, and it released him as the tide releases a flat: not all at once. The god's walk stopped between two steps, and the spare's own walk came back into his legs from the knees up, and his shoulders rose the last inch to his own shoulders, and he stood on the temple's threshold for a moment with the face of the phone-plan man returning to the phone-plan man — tired, ordinary, slightly seasick, the face of a man coming off a shift he will be paid for in tea and standing and the right to be ordinary the other three hundred and sixty-four days.

The medium's name was Guo An. He worked at the phone-plan counter in the market two mornings a week — the same market, the same lane-ends — and he was, by the shore's own accounting, an unremarkable spare: no history, no fits, no childhood marks, no lineage of it. The god had walked into him at a funeral two springs ago and declined to walk out, and the fashi had tested him — the tests are real; there is a curriculum — and the spare had passed, and the counter had given him his mornings off, and that was the whole bio‑graphy. The coast's mediums are not chosen for charisma. They are chosen for emptiness. The god does his own charisma; what he needs from the spare is a body that will not argue with the walk.

The firecrackers went at the bend, in the permitted zone, the red paper standing up in the wind like a released hatch — the coast's one permitted noise, the sound the village uses for everything that has finished a dangerous passage — and under the paper-smell the god's walk rolled north with the shore's whole year in his borrowed ears:

the wall opened, the book out, the granddaughter's account queued for the twenty-second, the grandmother under the hill with her stone's blank entry, the funeral flowers' equal shares still remembered at the slabs. The elder god walked the shore he used to guard, past the village of the goddess's people, reading everything, finishing nothing, and the parade took him home by the shore road at walking pace, because gods on this coast commute at the speed of their jurisdiction.

The god stopped at the flats' edge. The bearer-god — the spare man with the borrowed walk — turned his head with the palanquin's own slow roll and looked down the line of the crowd the way a supervisor reads a shift: faces, one by one, unhurried, the ledger-look. The fashi translated as the god's mouth worked, and most of it was the trade's stock — *the household at the second lane has cleaned its lamps, good, the ancestors see it; the third table from the wall has shorted its scale, fix it before the festival* — the god reading the shore's books aloud through a spare man's mouth, and the shore nodding at its own errors being counted.

The trance came again at the harbor bend, where the road meets the flats, and the god did his mail for the fleet: *the second boat's hull is sound; the fourth boat's owner is holding a debt in his mouth like a hook; take it out before the season*. The shore nodded its shore-nod. A woman from the Xus' row asked the god, through the fashi, about her son's visa — the son in Singapore, the papers in the third month — and the god's answer came through the spare's mouth in the flat administrative Minnan of a man reading a form: *the papers are not stuck. the people are slow. bring tea to the office, not the house*. The woman bowed to the spare man, to the body of a shelf-stacker carrying a sea-god, and thanked him the way you thank a stamp.

Then the god's mouth stopped. The head turned — the slow palanquin roll — and found Lin Li.

The face did not change. The eyes did. The eyes went from ledger-look to the other look, the look the flats get at the turn of a big ebb, when the water has gone all the way out and the light comes up the wet at a wrong angle and everything hidden is out in the open and shining.

"The elder says you saw her," the medium said. "Not many did."

The crowd did not turn. The crowd had heard forty sentences like it, aimed at forty households; it was the god's way of doing mail. The sentence was generic. The sentence was stock. The sentence was the kind of thing a spare man says through a borrowed walk to anyone whose face has a secret's shape.

Her arms went to goosebumps anyway, from the wrist up, both sides, and the wind was not cold.

And when the column moved on, the god's walk rolled the parade past the second lane's gate — the homestay's gate, the door with its fresh gods over its older gods over its oldest silence — and the spare man's head turned with the palanquin roll, and the borrowed eyes read the door the way the god reads everything on this route: top to bottom, layer by layer, as the lab had read the paint, as the widow read the text, as the reader in 2102 would read the galley.

"The door is answered," the medium said, to the fashi, in the trade's own flat administrivese, and the fashi lifted the flag, and the column rolled on, and the door stood behind them with nothing on it but the gods, exactly as contracted, exactly as *always*, and Lin Li, at the flats' edge with her arms prickling a second time, understood that the god had just done for the door what the whole apparatus of dis‑trict and platform and print had spent a year not doing: he had checked the work, and passed it, and moved on without a blessing, which is the highest grade the coast gives.

The mundane explanation arrived one sentence late, as the honest ones do, and it was complete, and she took it: the lane talked; the homestay's reviews talked; the girl's channel had eleven cards and a eulogy and forty thousand readers, and a medium who works the

shore road hears everything the shore road hears — the god reads the shore's books because the spare man heard them at the shopfronts all winter. *You saw her* could mean the photograph, the videos, the eu ‑ logy, the funeral, the crown, the wall. It could mean nothing. It was a cold reading with a warm voice, the trade's oldest technology, older than the temple, older than the book.

And the goosebumps stayed.

Because the god was right. Not the god; the sentence. She had seen her. Not many had. The sentence was true and it was not about the supernatural; it was about the midnight in the east room, the lamp, the drugstore glasses, the spread open at the argument about women — the sight that belonged to a keeper's granddaughter alone in the whole population of the coast — and the medium had thrown the stock sentence and the stock sentence had happened to be the truest thing anyone had said to her all spring.

She did not tell the god he was right. You do not reply to a god's mail. She bowed as the crowd bowed, to the palanquin and to the spare man inside it, and the column moved on up the shore road — the god's walk, the borrowed walk, the bearers' roll — and the fashi's chant thinned behind the wind, and the crowd went with it, and Lin Li stood at the flats' edge with her arms still prickling and the parade taking its theology up the coast at walking pace.

The mundane explanation held. She checked it twice on the walk home, as she checked everything: the lane's information economy, the channel's cards, the reviews, the funeral's forty thousand strangers who had watched a keeper's granddaughter eulogize a keeper. The explanation was airtight. It was the same explanation as the dream's, upgraded: the shore reads its books aloud, and she had been a book on the shore's shelf all year, and the medium had browsed.

The goosebumps held too.

That was the balance the whole spring had taught her, the balance the two slips in the book taught, the safe title over the burning one:

the explanation and the goosebumps, both kept, neither lifted first. Her grandmother had lived sixty years on that balance. The account had been built on it. The post, in thirteen days, would be posted on it. And the god walked north with his borrowed walk, reading the shore's books, doing his mail, and Lin Li went home on the late bus with the goosebumps fading and the sentence staying, and wrote nothing down, because some documents read you back, and you leave them alone until their own date comes.

"The elder says you saw her. Not many did." She turned the sen ‑ tence over on the walk to the bus, professionally, because the sen ‑ tence was a document and documents get read. The elder: the god himself, who had just audited a door and read a fleet's debts. Her: unmarked pronoun, the dream's pronoun, the margin's pronoun, the pronoun the whole year had been assigning to the woman in the photograph. Saw: the midnight verb, the lamp verb, the verb of the east room at the turn of the tide. Not many did. True — provably true — the population of witnesses to that midnight was one, and the one was her, and the god's mail had found the one address on the coast with a secret of exactly that shape, and the crowd had heard it as stock, and the stock had landed as fact, and both things were true at once, the way the two slips were true at once, and she had learned on this coast not to lift either one first.

CHAPTER 28

28

The twenty-second of April arrived the way dates arrive on this coast: twice.

The ribbon went up at nine in the morning at the exhibition hall — the museum the district had opened in the celebration year, the one with the immersive halls and the postcard giveaways and the Gen-Z fandom that queued for the quotes — and the ribbon was grey, and the serif on it was the district's serif, the same grey fifteenth-percent lettering that carried her sentence on the lane plaque and the state's sentence on the wreath ribbon, and Lin Li stood in the launch photograph between a deputy mayor and the man from the scholarship foundation, and the camera said a thing cameras say, and everyone in the frame was proud of something, and the pride was sincere, and the sincerity was the house style of the whole enterprise, and she smiled the way her grandmother had taught her to smile at officialdom, which is to say with the eyes elsewhere.

She went to the hill in the late afternoon, because the sixteenth of the third moon was the keeper's day by the moon's own arithmetic, and keepers are told things on their own water.

The stone carried the name, the dates, and the blank. The equal shares had been laid by the lane's women a week ago at the burial and re-laid fresh today: the Xus' armful, the slabs' white, A-Yang's season crown, one share laid on the homestay's guest book page in the courtyard below — and the new share, today's, was Lin Li's, and it was not equal, it was the whole armful, because the card had said *don't count* and she was done being governed by other people's instructions about counting.

She told the stone about the post. Out loud, as you tell a keeper who reads: the drafts, the margins in four hands, the letters entire,

the razor without verdicts, the black spread, the lost century, the leaf from the spine, the contents, and at the end a letter of resignation. “It goes up tonight,” she said, to the blank under the dates. “Nine-eleven. You’ll be first to know, the way you were first to know everything, sideways, under something.” The wind off the flats came up the hill and moved the fresh flowers, and the blank did what blanks do, which is keep the space open, and she went down the hill with the armful’s stems still in her fist, and the bus, and the river, and the glass, and the queue, and the hour.

The lunar one came in the evening, as the sixteenth day of the third moon, and it did not announce itself. It was simply there, in the double calendar she had been writing since November, in the line of her notebook, in the margin of the assembly’s last page, in the fact that the fifteenth had gone by in the day’s business without anyone at the symposium saying the number sixteen out loud.

She had noticed the moon on the twelfth, when she queued the post — noticed it as you notice a wall when hanging something: too late for it to matter, early enough to be changed. The queue held the post for the twenty-second. The moon held the sixteenth of the third moon for the twenty-second. The account of the end — the shave, the blade, the two days, the wet finger — had happened on a sixteenth day of a third moon, four hundred and twenty-five years before, and she had queued her resignation, without consulting anyone, living or dead, for the exact day the received tradition had set aside for the ending. She noticed this at 9:10, one minute before the release. She said nothing to anyone, including herself, and let the minute run, and the noticing was the whole ceremony, and the ceremony was enough.

She had queued the post on the twelfth. The scheduler held it the way the platform holds everything, totally, revocably by nobody. At 9:11 in the evening the queue released it, and the post went out onto the road in the order she had built it — the drafts first, honest and folded, the razor counted in the margin of the older one; then the marginalia in four hands, captioned by calendar, the girl’s cards

photographed with permission; then the letters, transcribed and checked, the margins riding with them in position; then the razor layer, three documents in a row on the black page, no captions, no argument; then the center spread; then the lost century; then the leaf from the spine; then the contents page, which was the list of everything the reader had already held — and at the end of it, the letter.

The letter had gone through four drafts, and the drafts lived where the truth's drafts live, in the morgue, because the morgue was the only room in her life that had never once asked her to be careful. The first draft had accused. The second had explained. The third had thanked — the thank-you reflex, nine years deep, the deepest scar in the hand — and she had caught it on the third night, the way you catch yourself signing a contract in your sleep, and deleted the thanks, and cut the letter to the length of a leaf, and the length of a leaf was the length the widow had set, and the widow had known what she was doing, because a letter of resignation at the length of a leaf cannot plead; it can only inform the room that the room's authority has ended.

The letter was the post's last document, and she had written it on the twentieth, and rewritten it on the twenty-first, and cut it on the twenty-second down to the length the widow's leaf had taught her, which is the length of a thing that has stopped explaining:

※

To the house.

I am resigning by publishing.

The account above is mine. The drafts are mine: the honest one, written at two in the morning, and the folded one, signed into print by my own hand. The margins are mine and not mine: four hands, sixty years, a family that kept its text in walls and its walls in marriages. The letters are the property of a dead man and the

women who copied him; I am their scribe, not their owner, and I have transcribed them without a single cut.

I was folded in a room in 2013. There was tea, and an envelope, and two men who had read me more closely than anyone alive, and I thanked them, and the thanks was the fold taking. I have edited this city's past into approved prose for nine years. The past has edited me back. The entry I signed into print carries four words where an act used to be; the act is in the post you are reading; the difference between them is the housekeeping of this province, and I decline to keep house for it any longer.

I accuse no one. The documents refuse accusation; that is their design and their discipline. I sign my name to the account, and the signature is my resignation, effective with the posting.

The desk is the house's. The morgue is mine. The morgue goes with me.

— Lin Li, editor, the twenty-second of April 2027, the scholar's day by the moon.

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She posted the letter with the post, in the post, at the end, where a letter goes, and the post went out onto the road with everything the year had made in it, and the celebration year received its first honest document without pausing between departments.

Then she did the thing the bible of her new trade required, which was nothing. She made tea she did not drink. She stood at the win ‑ dow. The wind came up the river in ropes, the south wind, the cour ‑ ier. The followers counted five, then six — a bot, the poetry account, a stranger, another stranger, the girl. The mirrors began without her: the screenshots went up within the hour on two accounts that had never followed anything, and the black spread went up alone on a third, because the spread was the kind of image that travels without its text, the way paintings travel, the way the register's photograph had traveled in 2012.

And the title of the post was the volume's own name, transliterated, alone: *Xu Fenshu — a continued book, with its margins*. The account had never used the title. The account had been called *A Book to Burn* since May, wearing the burning slip on the outside, the safe one beneath — the whole method of the coast in a handle — and the last post reversed it as the wall-copy was reversed, as the house was reversed: the burning book outside, the kept book inside, and the margins, this time, in the open.

The girl found it within the hour. The comment came at 10:22, under the contents page, from the account with the grandmother's avatar, in the small clear register of a woman who has checked a fact and found it holding: *the cards are in it. the handwriting is mine. both true. the channel says nothing until the channel says something*. And beneath the comment, the girl's own reply, one word, the proofreader's word, the word that means *let it stand*, posted by a twenty-four-year-old to a forty-year-old across the desk of the whole year: *stet*. At ten, her phone lit once. The message had no salutation, because it was from a man who had edited her for nine years and had earned the right to arrive mid-thought.

Four motives. Truth, vindication, vanity, revenge. I recognize my own signature on all four, so I will not insult you by pretending the four are not yours. You cannot tell the proportions. Nobody can. The trick, girl, is that none of them needed to be the reason. The post is the reason. Do not read the numbers tonight. The numbers are the room's nephew. Come in on Monday, not before. Do not bring nothing. Bring the morgue.

She read it three times. Truth, vindication, vanity, revenge. She tried the four on, the way you try on the frames of glasses at a shop, and every one fit, and that was the accusation and the absolution in the same gesture: the post had been all of it at once, as a container is all cargo at once, and no one — not the platform, not the district, not the room, not the mirror — would ever be able to sort the cargo into

its motives, and neither would she, and the not-being-able was the honest condition of every act that has ever mattered on this coast.

She did not read the numbers tonight. She went to bed with the post live on the road and the letter standing at the end of it like a door left open on purpose, and the wind kept its appointment with the river, and the sixteenth day of the third moon closed over the city without comment, the way the lunar calendar has closed over this coast for two thousand years, keeping its own accounts, on its own paper, at its own pace, and the paper did not have a department for what she had done, and did not need one, because the paper had seen the province fold and burn and ban and forget and copy and smuggle and mourn for longer than any of the departments had existed, and it kept them all in one calendar, and tonight the calendar had a new line in it, and the line was hers, and the moon was sixteenth, and the city slept, and the post did not.

CHAPTER 29

29

The deletion came on the second day, at 3:40 in the afternoon, and it was the third time the platform had said the eleven words to her, and by now the words were not a sentence; they were a signature. *This post violates relevant laws and regulations and has been removed.* The whole post — the drafts, the margins, the letters, the razor, the spread, the lost century, the contents, the letter of resignation — removed as one object, the way a shelf is removed as one object, everything it held going with it.

She had expected the removal. She had expected it as you expect a tide the tables refused to predict, and she had not screenshotted her own post — the discipline of the twenty-ninth of November, held — because the mirrors had been faster than the platform, as the mirrors always were now. The screenshots had gone up within the hour of posting, on six accounts in three provinces, and the black spread had gone up alone on a seventh, and by the second morning a repaste belt she had no name for was carrying the whole assembly in pieces, the way the coast's older belts had carried the widow's copy piece by piece through the Qianlong years, each carrier keeping what they could carry and passing the rest.

And while the platform's removal was executing, the volume's boxed copies were arriving at the schools — the same day, the same province, two shipments crossing in the air like the two slips — ten thousand copies of the four words going out to fourteen-year-olds with highlighters, and the mirrors of the eight words going out to whoever typed fastest, and the coast received both shipments the way it receives everything, without a customs officer in sight.

She was awake for it because the coast was awake for it: the ping came at 3:40 in the afternoon, and the phone lit on the kitchen

counter with the platform's grey, and the grey said the eleven words, and the eleven words were the third copy of the sentence she had ever received, and the third copy confirmed what the first copy had only threatened — that the sentence was not a response to anything. It was the house style. It was what the platform says, as the sea says *in*, as the tables say *small water*: a register of the realm, not a reply to a guest.

The mirrors were the new abroad, and the abroad had come home.

Geng held the dismissal for forty-eight hours.

She learned this from the girl, who learned it from the house's grapevine, which runs faster than the house's own mail. The house's lawyer had drafted the termination on the Monday — *for cause: unauthorized publication prejudicial to the employer; breach of the confidentiality undertaking* — and the draft had gone to the director's desk for signature, and the director's desk had held it. Two days. The mirrors needed two days; the mirrors had taken two days; the deletion came on the second day, and the mirrors came on the second day, and the girl's feed and the repaste belt and the seventh account had the assembly entire before the house's signature could dry, and the director had known the arithmetic, because he had run this arithmetic once before, in a room, from the other chair, and this time he ran it slowly, on purpose, with the letter sitting in his outbox like a boat he was holding at the mooring while the cargo jumped ship.

The lawyer's draft sat in the outbox like a boat at the mooring, and Geng sat at his desk like a man at a mooring; the two days were the last edit of his career, performed slowly, on purpose, from the chair the room had given him in 1989. He had learned to hold letters the way Ah-ma had learned to hold jars. The coast teaches one skill, and it teaches it to whoever the deadline visits.

And in the forty-eight hours, Geng read the mirrors. All of them. The repaste belt, the whale's thread, the seventh account, the girl's six frames, the archive that had no name — he read them the way Zhang had read her in the room, closely, as an enemy reads, which is to say

as a reader, which is to say completely; and he did it from the retire - ment flat with the container lanes in the window, at the age of sixty-one, on the last desk he would ever hold, and when he was done he sent her one line, the only line the whole reading produced: *They read you better than the house did. I checked them against the galley. No errors. The house trained the desk and the desk trained the mirrors, and the mirrors are the house's best review, and the review is the retirement.*

At forty-nine hours he signed it. The termination went out by the house's mail — *termination for cause, effective immediately, pursuant to the undertaking of* — with a separate letter on the house's letterhead, in the house's own voice, for the record: the house regretted, the house had cooperated fully with the authorities' ques - tions, the house reminded the public that the views in the online account were the employee's alone. And on the same day, the house announced the director's retirement — *for health reasons*, effective immediately, with the board's gratitude for twenty years of service — and the two announcements traveled together the way the two slips had traveled together, the safe title on the outside, and everyone in the building understood the pairing without anyone saying it, be - cause the pairing was the house's oldest technology: when the keep - ing is done, the keeper retires, and the retirement is stamped *health*, and the health is true, because the keeping was the disease and the retirement is the cure, and part of it was relief, and he admitted the relief, later, to her, at the tea, in the sentence she had waited nine years to hear.

The art editor's parcel came on the fourth day, to the flat, by courier, with no note: the flower cover's production proof — the single flower on black, the one that had been approved with a name from a windowsill — and beneath the proof, in the art editor's hand, on the backing board, the market name of the flower and one line: *the cover is yours if you ever print your own. the house has the flowers.*

you have the name. Lin Li propped it on the model room's shelf, facing the room, where it would stand for the rest of the story as the only object the house ever gave back.

"He's retired," Danran said, on the phone, on the third day, with the newsread flatness of a girl delivering arithmetic she has checked twice. "For health. The building's site posted it an hour ago. The photo they used is nine years old."

"I know," Lin Li said. "I'm the health."

She sat in the model room of the house she no longer worked in — the house had changed the lock code that morning, the way houses do, a courtesy and a boundary in one gesture — and she looked at the morgue bag by the door, the bag she had been told to bring, and did not open it, because the morgue was not going to the building; the building had its own morgue, and the two morgues were done meet‑ing.

The son came on Friday.

She learned about it from Geng, in the message that set the tea — the man had sent her a summons for her own comfort, the summons in his hand again: *Saturday. The flat. The boy is coming at four. If you are in the city, come at five. He leaves at six. Nothing is resolved. Bring nothing*. And she went at five, to a flat across the river she had never seen, in a tower the son had chosen for the father, with a view of the harbor's container lanes, and the son was there when she arrived, in the doorway, taking his leave — the son was thirty-four, in a jacket with another company's logo on it, and he had his father's level voice and none of his father's paper — and the passing of the two of them in the doorway was the whole scene, and it was enough.

"Ah-Li," the son said, with a nod that held, in its single degree of inclination, everything the father had never said about her.

"Your father's tea is better than yours," Lin Li said, which was the coast's way of saying *I will take care of the reading*, and the son al‑most smiled, and left, and the door closed on a marriage of silences

that had produced one scene of real love and resolved nothing, exactly as contracted.

The tea was the last tea. The flat's kettle was the son's kettle, and the tea was the son's tea, the grocery tin, and Geng made it anyway, because the making was the ritual and the ritual had transferred: at the flat, in front of her, he filled the pot and set it to steep and did not pour — stood at the counter with the pot in his two hands like a man holding a door for someone who has not arrived — and Lin Li took the pot from him, and poured his cup first, and then her own, and set the pot down, and the ritual of nine years inverted itself in a room with no drawer in it, because the drawer was in the other building, sealed, with the founder's name on the desk, and the essays had gone to the son in the settlement, unopened, per a note the lawyer had found taped inside the drawer's lip: *for the boy, when he asks*.

"Your morgue," Geng said. "The bag. You brought it, and you won't open it, and I know the feeling, because I have a folder I have not opened since October, and the folder is the account, and the account is your post, and my not-opening it is the last edit of my career, and it is the only edit I have ever made out of respect."

"The dismissal held forty-eight hours," Lin Li said.

"It held exactly as long as the mirrors needed," Geng said. "I did the arithmetic in June, when the account started. The mirrors are the new abroad — you wrote that somewhere; you wrote it in the margin of the account, in the sentence about the seed lines, and the sentence is correct, and the sentence is the reason I held the letter. The house could delete the post. The house could not delete the mirrors. The house could not even find all the mirrors; the mirrors are kept by strangers who keep what they keep for reasons the house has no jur‑isdiction over. I held the letter because the letter's signature was the only thing the house could still reach, and holding it two days gave the coast its window, and the window was the whole mission, and the mission is complete, and I am retired for my health, and my health is — " he looked at the pot in her hands, at the inverted pour, at the nine

years of three refills standing on their head in a stranger's flat, " — my health is the best it has been since 1989, and the relief is part of it, and I admit the relief, and the relief is not the whole of it, and the rest of it is not for this tea."

They drank. The harbor's container lanes ran their lights out toward the strait. The son's absence was in the flat like a well-set table.

"The boy reads," Geng said, at the door, unprompted, at the last, holding it loosely, at arm's length, retired. "He reads. He has never once said so. He reads everything I leave face-down. That's the whole of it. That's the son."

And he closed the door as Ah-ma had closed the book — gently, both hands, a room finished talking — and Lin Li went down the tower and across the river with the morgue bag, and the mirrors were running their third night, and the post was gone from the platform and everywhere else, and the dismissal had taken forty-eight hours and cost a director his desk and a house its silence.

He left the building no note. The pigeonholes stood empty of his hand for the first time in twenty years, and the empty was his note, and the note said what the coast's retirements say: the tool above the text, the work above the word, and the word, at last, somewhere else.

CHAPTER 30

30

The girl kept her promise as the coast keeps its promises: she sent the notice and not the request.

Posting Sunday, the message read, at noon on the last day of April. No question mark. No preview. No plea for permission, and none expected; the prohibition had been laid in April like a keel, and the girl had spent the winter building on top of it, and a keel is not a cage. Lin Li read the message at the market, at the fish-price board, with the hexagonal pencil in her hand for the board's tally — the tally she had inherited in the winter, the village's numbers now kept in her hand at the girl's grandmother's stall — and she read *posting Sunday* and did not reply, and the not-replying was the last permission she had left, and she spent it.

The market hour had its own grammar now. The fish-price board's spring numbers, the tourists' first Saturday, the tally kept in her hand — the stall the girl had inherited and the girl had lost and the girl had filmed, the three generations of it standing behind the board like a line of printers. Lin Li tallied with the hexagonal stub and did not think about pencils, and did not think about what the girl had said on the phone about pens, and did not think, in the market hour, at all, because the market hour was the one hour the coast had assigned to the hands.

The video went up at eight on Sunday evening, and it was not what the prohibition had feared, and it was worse, and it was better, and it was the girl's.

A-Yang's box was open at the oyster table that Sunday, the au ‑ tumn layer on top, the hardy standbys beneath, and the crown went on at seven for the filming and stayed on through the strike's first hour, because Ah-ma had ruled, years ago, from this table, that the

crown is not for the sky's opinion, and the girl had built the channel's whole visual grammar on that ruling without knowing it was a ruling.

It was twenty-two minutes. It opened on the lane — the walls at dusk, the flowers gone over, the tourists gone home — and the girl's voice, no face, the voice alone, reading the razor post from the top: *The volume the city is printing for the quincentennial gives the death four words: He died in prison. The four words are true the way a headstone is true. They mark the spot. They do not describe the fall.* She read the whole post. She read the wall-copy's account in the widow's fence-post rhythm, and the received tradition in the district's, and she set the two of them side by side in the sound, the way the black page had set them in the sight, and she read the four words, and then she said, to the camera, to the coast, in the register of a woman filing a finding: *The four words are a floor plan. The room is in a wall in the second lane, and I have stood in it, and this is what the room held.*

And at the women's essay's spread, the girl's voice read the Question aloud — *Reading makes the girls harder to marry and harder to fool. Which am I meant to want? — Grace, 1947* — and read the widow's margin beneath it — *Where is her book?* — and did not answer either of them, and let the camera rest on the spread for eight seconds, the eight seconds of a room where two right answers have been sitting across from each other since 1947, waiting for a reader who could hold both at once. The comments tried. The com ‑ ments are still trying. That is what the comments are for.

And the video held what the room held. The register's photograph — Huang Ama, 7, loses no arguments. The flyleaf's two lines, sixty years apart, in the same unhurried hand. The margin of the women's essay: where is her book? The margins of the widow: fence posts, receipts, the flood. The girl had filmed the book's leaves at the cabinet's lamp, raked low, the ink standing up, and she had filmed them with the volume's own permission and the keeper's own hands in frame — the stiff hands turning the leaves, the glasses on the nose,

the reading that Lin Li had witnessed at midnight and never told anyone about — and the footage had been shot, Lin Li realized, watching, on the night of the dictation, from the courtyard, through the east room's window, by a girl who had filmed the keeper reading without permission and without knowledge, the way the girl had filmed everything: first, and told after.

The video's grammar was the girl's own, and it was the house's grammar turned right-side-out. Where the house folded with a pencil and signed with a pen, the girl read with her voice and showed with her lens: no verdicts, no argument, no face but the work's. The reading ran eleven minutes. The leaves ran six. The register ran forty seconds. And the last three minutes were the flyleaf frame — the two lines, in the unhurried hand — held in silence while the flats' ambi‑ence did the soundtrack, the water and the gulls and one scooter, and the silence was the girl's whole argument, and the argument was: the coast already knows how to keep. Watch the coast.

The strike came at ten past midnight, from the tier above the robot, and it was the channel's first.

The notice was longer than the removal notice, because strikes explain themselves; the platform's strikes arrive with their own grammar, a grammar of durations and conditions, and the grammar said: the video, removed for violations of the community standards concerning self-harm and the defamation of historical resolution; the channel, limited for thirty days; the account, on file. Three sentences of platform weather, and beneath them, in the girl's own account, no statement at all — the girl posted nothing about the strike, said nothing about the strike, pinned nothing, explained nothing; the strike stood on the channel like a sign on a closed door, and the lane walked past it, and the lane's own chat carried the mirrors of the video within the hour, because the mirrors are the girl's now too, and the mirrors cannot be struck, and the girl knew that, and the knowing was the keel she had built on.

The video mirrored itself within the hour — the girl's mirrors, the strangers' mirrors, the belt with no name and many members — and the whale came back under the mirror and said: *the platform struck a channel for reading a 1766 manuscript aloud. the manuscript was already illegal in 1625. some curation is just arson with a calendar.* And the subscribers went from eleven thousand to twenty-six thou ‑ sand in the strike's first week, because a closed door is the oldest advertisement on the coast, and the girl had built the door, and knew, and had pinned the booking link anyway, once, for the family, and taken it down, and said nothing, and the nothing was the monetize beat, and the beat was the only dishonest minute the channel ever ran, and the girl knew that too, and the knowing was the mirror's cost, and she paid it in silence and never ran the pin again.

The lane read the grammar the way the lane reads weather. The Xus' granddaughter read it to the family chat. A-Yang read it at the shop and said, to the room, what the room was already saying, which was: *thirty days is a season on the flats. We've survived seasons.* The slabs women said nothing, because the slabs women had buried the season's keeper and had developed opinions about platforms that did not require speech.

The caption under the video was the girl's clean hand and it gave nothing away and it gave everything: *the razor, read whole. the wall-copy's account. the four words that replaced it. — the keeper kept; the reader reads; stet.*

The monetize beat was one beat, and it never repeated, and there was no comment.

On the third day of the strike, with the mirrors running their numbers and the strike's traffic finding the channel the way traffic finds any closed door, the channel pinned a single post to its own top: the homestay's booking link. The grandmother's house. The wall, the courtyard, the east room's threshold, the rooms with the shells. The pin stood for one week. It took the week's bookings — May holiday, the mirrors' walkers needing beds — and it came down after the

week, unmentioned, unmourned, and the channel returned to its si‑lences, and the pin's one week of revenue paid A-Yang's seasonal flowers and the basins' replacement and the clinic's Tuesday, and the lane's economy absorbed the strike the way the flats absorb a wave, which is to say completely, without comment, and with the work continuing.

The cold phone call came on the fifth day, and it was Lin Li's, and she made it cold on purpose, because the call was not going to be a fold and coldness was the only tone that would not fold.

"The flyleaf frame," she said. "The two lines, close up, my grandmother's hand. Cut it."

"The flyleaf frame is the video's spine," Danran said. "The dicta‑tion, the hands, the pen. You cut the flyleaf, the video is a history lecture. You leave it, the video is a granddaughter."

"It is the keeper's private leaf. It was written for the book. The book is mine to keep and the leaf is mine to keep and the camera was yours to film and the leaf was not yours to publish."

"The leaf was filmed in the courtyard," Danran said, "through a window, in a house where I have filmed for a year with the keeper's permission and the keeper's hands in frame, and the keeper saw the camera and left the curtain open. Ask the curtain who consented."

Lin Li stood in the model room with the phone against her ear and the rain doing the windows, and the girl was right, and the girl had been right in April, and the rightness had a price, and the price was this call, and the call was the price being paid.

And the call ended without *jie*. The first call in a year of calls to end without it. The girl heard the absence too — Lin Li heard the girl hear it, the little silence where the word lived — and the silence was the cost, and the cost was the point, and the point was paid.

"Stet," Danran said, before Lin Li found the next sentence. "The frame stands. You taught me the word. It means *let it stand*. It's what you say when the author asks for a cut and the reader declines." A pause, the first warm second of the call, and then the girl spent it:

"You taught me the word and I'm using it on you, jie, and this is what the pen was for. It was never for the folding. It was for the standing."

Lin Li held the phone. The rain did the windows. Somewhere in the flat the morgue bag sat with the notices in it, eleven words each, and the girl's "stet" stood on the call the way the flyleaf's *always* had stood on the landlord's clause, the small correct word written over the large wrong one, in the hand of the person the word was always meant for.

"Stet," Lin Li said. Not to the girl. To the frame. To her own proposed cut, declined. The word the proofreader uses on herself.

She hung up, and the video stood, and the strike stood, and the flyleaf frame stood at the video's spine with the two lines in the sixty-year hand, and the cost of the standing was on the table between her and the girl like a pencil that had finally been put down, and the rain kept doing the windows.

The strike expired on the thirtieth day, and the channel came back whole, and the first post after the strike was the Sunday video of the grave — the season crown laid on the stone with the blank entry, the flats behind it at the ebb, the water doing exactly what the keeper had said it would do — and the video's caption was one line, in the girl's hand: *the keeper kept. the reader reads. the coast holds.*

Lin Li watched the video twice. The first time as the mother of it, flinching at the flyleaf frame and at the register and at the sound of the widow's margins in a young voice that had never met the widow. The second time, the next morning, as an editor — and the edit was the girl's own, and the edit was right: the cold open on the lane, the reading at the market's pace, the leaves given their six minutes, the register's forty seconds, the flyleaf's three minutes of silence, the ending on the flats with the tide coming back. It was the year as ‑ sembled by someone who had not been in the rooms, and it was more accurate than the person who had been in the rooms, because ac ‑ curacy on this coast is not a matter of presence; it is a matter of what you refuse to add. The girl had refused to add everything. The refusal

was the edit. The edit was the audit. And the audit was the year's last one, and it passed.

CHAPTER 31

31

The night before the hand-off, Lin Li stayed in the model room, and the house was full of its first summer guests — the homestay's season had opened with the holiday, the west half's three rooms and the tea courtyard running at capacity, the lane loud until eleven — and at midnight the guests' noise thinned and the courtyard came back to its own sounds, and Lin Li took the book from the cabinet and the pencil from her bag and sat at the oyster table with the courtyard's lamp and the winter's last chill coming off the shells.

She turned to the women's essay. To the spread. To the Question, in the round hand, dated in the foreign calendar: *Which am I meant to want?*

The flyleaf's two lines were on the other leaf, sixty years and a wall away from this one, and the reclaiming line had said what the re-claiming line said, and the widow's margins had said what the wid-ow's margins said, and the Question had been waiting, on this leaf, since 1947, for an answer that was not a deferral, and Lin Li had been deferring it since April with a professionalism she could no longer taste.

She took the rice-paste stub out of her bag. The first pencil she had ever finished — worn to four fingers, the gold stamp gone down to the wood, the pencil that had written the honest draft and the tally and the market's margins — and she held it over the leaf, below the Question, in the blank margin the book had sewn for exactly this, and the hand did not shake, and the hand wrote:

Both, teacher. Both turned out to be the point.

Four words of answer and a sentence of accounting. She read it back. The pencil's last work. She did not go over it in pen — the margin stayed pencil, first-pass, the truth's own ink, unfixed — and

she closed the book on the spread and on the answer, and the closing was four months late and the lateness had been the keeping, and the lamp went off, and the courtyard held the night the way the courtyard held everything, without comment, at the exact temperature of the tide.

The hand-off happened on a Sunday, at the oyster table, after the market, because the table was where the family's texts changed hands and always had been, and because the girl had asked for it there — had asked, in the message, for the table, the shells, the working hour — and Ah-ma would have approved of the asking, and had probably scripted it, from wherever keepers go when the keeping is done and the radio is finally off.

Lin Li brought the book and the pen. The book in its amber sleeve, the slips in their fold of paper, the photograph face up now — face up since the funeral, since the register had been read aloud to the lane's whole future at once — and the pen in its own wrap, the black hard-rubber, the nib worn to the teaching angle, out of the drawer for the first time since the dictation and carried in the open, on the bus, through the tourist lane, past the plaque, past the homestay's full guest book, past the courtyard where the mason's bandage had weathered into the wall's own color and disappeared.

The girl brought the cards. Not the monitor's cards — the originals, or what the originals had become: the eleven sentences copied out onto fresh cards in the girl's clear hand, plus the twelfth, the eulogy line, plus a thirteenth card that was blank, that had been blank for a week, that the girl had carried blank through the strike and the expiry and the grave video, waiting for the table.

They shelled for an hour. The girl's knife was Ah-ma's knife — the retired knife, oiled and unwrapped by the family after the funeral and given to the channel, because the channel was the flats' work now and the work needed its tool — and the girl's hinge-finger was eleven months old at the craft and getting the millimeters right, and the shells clicked, and the basin filled, and the tourists went by and

photographed the hands, and the hands let them, and the table held its hour.

Then Lin Li put the book on the table, and the pen on the book, and the photograph on the pen, and the girl put the thirteen cards on the book, in the order of the archive, wind line first, and the four objects sat on the oyster table in the spring light with the sea doing its sums beyond the wall, and neither of them touched anything for a moment, because the moment was the ceremony and the ceremony had no officiant, the officiant being three graves and a wall and a courtyard and a widow and a teacher and a flat and a lane.

She closed the book before she handed it over — four months late, the spread's two questions kept company all spring by the cabinet's lamp and the radio's low weather — and the closing was the keeping's last sound: both hands, gently, the boards meeting the way the courtyard's doors meet, without a word, at the exact temperature of the tide. The lateness had been the keeping. The closing was the keeping's period. And the girl received the closed book the way the class had received the handover, with the objects doing the verbs.

"The book stays in the village," the girl said. "The cabinet. The east room. I'm not taking it to the city."

"The book stays in the village," Lin Li said. "The city was never its address. The city was its hiding place once, for six months, and the hiding is over."

"The pen comes with me. The channel's work is the pen's work now."

"The pen comes with you. The nib is worn to an angle. Don't fight the angle; the angle is the succession." Lin Li turned the pen once on the book's cover, so the nib pointed at the girl. "And the photograph stays with me. The register was mine to read; the reading is mine to keep. That's the split the table made. The text to you, the reading to me, the photograph to the past."

"The cards are mine," the girl said. "All thirteen, including the blank."

"The blank is yours to fill or not fill," Lin Li said. "The blank is the only thing I'm giving you that I haven't used."

The girl picked up the pen. She held it at the angle, and the angle took her hand the way angles take hands that have been waiting for them, and she uncapped it, and tested it on the pad of her thumb — the ink, the flow, the worn point's particular give — and wrote noth - ing, and capped it, and said, "The nib knows the angle. I'll keep the angle."

"The nib knows the angle," Lin Li said, and heard, in the sentence, her grandmother's whole pedagogy, the four competences, the tide words, the stamp-sentence, the courtyard's entire curriculum com - pressed into one trade warning: don't fight what the tool has already learned.

They shelled another hour. The book sat on the table between them, open now at the women's essay, the Question and the where-is-her-book facing each other across the gutter, and the girl read them again — she had read them in the video, she had read them in the assembly's photographs, she had read them in the margins' mirrors — and this time she read them at the table, in the seat, with the knife and the pen and the cards, as the keeper, and the reading was different, and she said what the reading was:

"The margins aren't annotations," she said. "They're the book. The text is what the man said. The margins are what the keeping cost. And the blank leaf is the margin that hasn't been written, and the blank card is the margin that hasn't been written, and the blank under the stone is the margin that—"

"Is written," Lin Li said. "Blank is how the coast writes *kept*. Your grandmother taught me that at a grave, and her grandmother taught it to a teacher who wrote it in English on the back of a picture, and the teacher's whole register is that sentence in twenty-two hands: kept, kept, kept, with the costs in the margins."

The girl turned the flyleaf to her — the tidy line and the sixty-years line, the two sentences, the whole sealed lifetime — and put the pen's

nib below them, on the blank space that was hers now, and did not write, and held the not-writing for a long moment, the nib resting on the leaf like a comma resting on the page, the mark that says the sentence is not finished.

"Not yet," the girl said. "The blank writes when it has something. The cards taught me that. The blank card stayed blank through the strike because the strike wasn't the sentence. The sentence will come. It always comes. It came to the widow, it came to the teacher, it came to the keeper, it came to you at two in the morning in a flat with a river in the window. It'll come."

"The widow said a book only kept is a corpse."

"The widow never met the internet," the girl said, and shelled an oyster, and the shells clicked, two rhythms now, the girl's newer rhythm and the table's older one, and the tide came in across the flats behind the wall, on schedule, right, unhurried.

The hand-off's last document was the girl's, and it happened at the bus stop, at the lane's mouth, after the table, when Lin Li was leaving and the girl was staying, and it was the thirteenth card, the blank one, and the girl held it out.

"For the hand that wants it," Danran said. "The blank is a kind of pen."

Lin Li took the blank card. She put it in the bag with the morgue, beside the notices and the notebook and the photograph's printout, and the bag's contents shifted and settled around it the way drawers settle around new paper, and the girl watched the settling with the pen in her pocket and the book in her bag and the channel in her phone — the fifth hand's whole estate in one person at a bus stop.

"The account continues," Danran said, at the buses, with the bag on her shoulder and the book's weight in it and the pen's angle in her pocket. "The margins. The posts. Whatever the coast hands me. The channel says something when the channel has something, and the account is the account, and neither of them is a memorial."

"The account is the margin," Lin Li said. "The book is the text. The text stays in the village. The margin goes where the readers are. That's the whole division of labor, and it's four hundred years old, and it's yours now, and it comes with no instructions, because the instructions are the one thing the widow refused to write."

"The widow wrote one instruction."

"The widow wrote a *want*. Wants are not instructions. Wants are the reason keepers become keepers, and the keeping is the instruc‑tion, and the keeping is yours, and the keeping is not the silencing, and you said it yourself in April, and I have been learning the differ‑ence since April, and I am not done learning it, and neither are you, and that is the entire succession speech, and it's over, and the bus is here."

The bus took the fourth hand into the city. At the lane's mouth Danran stood with the bag and did not wave, because the lane's keepers do not wave; and behind her, in the courtyard, the radio was on, and the crown was on its stand, and the knife was in its cloth, and the table held the shells and the basin and the imprint of a book that had lain open on it all spring like a hand that had finally been held, and the lane went on keeping everything it kept, in flowers and in silences and in the cards of a channel that would speak when it had something, and the tide came in behind the wall on schedule, right, and unhurried, and the sixth hand was somewhere on the road already, reading.

CHAPTER 32

32

The hall voted in the autumn, and the vote was unanimous, and the unanimous vote was about a frame.

The exhibit opened on a Sunday in October — the quincentennial wall of the living in the clan courtyard, the photographs in their grid, the lineage's page under glass, the backing leaf in its own frame beside the glass, and, in the cabinet at the room's end, the new frame: Lin Li's printout of the account's contents page, printed on cotton paper by the girl at the channel's cost, framed by the uncle at the hall's cost, hung by the uncle and the father and two cousins who did not ask what it was, because in this family you hang what the elders hang and you read it later, or never, and the reading is not the hanging's business.

The printout hung beside the backing leaf. The contents page of a burned man's continued book, and a page of the banned first book glued into the family's spine a hundred years ago — two documents, a century apart, both of them cut from something and kept by being inside something else, hanging side by side in a cabinet in a courtyard in Jinjiang with the factory's hum beyond the wall and the ancestors' tablets in the inner room and the blood link unconfirmed and un-confirmable and unmentioned, forever, which the uncle had written into the exhibit's own card, in the clan's own phrasing, the phrasing that survives everything: *descended in the lineage of the branch; the line as recorded.*

The line as recorded. That was the uncle's whole settlement with the truth, and it had taken him seventy-three years and a funeral and a granddaughter's post to arrive at it, and he arrived at it cheerfully, at the exhibit's opening, with the tea poured for the whole courtyard, because the uncle did not do penitence; the uncle did *recorded.*

Lin Li stood in front of the frame for a long time. The printout was the contents page — the list, the shelf, the post's spine — and beside it the backing leaf's mirror-written sermon showed through its paper like a mark under a bandage, and the two documents hung in the hall's light doing what the family had always done with its docu‑ments: keeping the dangerous thing by mounting it inside the beau‑tiful thing, and mounting the beautiful thing inside the practical thing, and calling the whole arrangement lineage.

"The hall will keep it past my death," the uncle said, at her elbow, with the tea, in the tone of a man reading a clause he had written himself and found correct. "The cabinet is hall property. The frame is donated. The leaf is on permanent loan, per the minutes. And the line says *as recorded*, which the hall's lawyers have read twice and the district's lawyer has read once, and the lawyers say the line is load-bearing. The line is load-bearing, Ah-Li. I built a load-bearing sentence at seventy-three. My father built shoes at sixty. The family's trades are converging."

"The line is load-bearing," Lin Li said, "and the load is a lie of omission."

"The load is a *record* of omission," the uncle said. "Records of omission are how families keep things. You keep by writing. I keep by not-writing-in-the-place-where-writing-would-endanger. Same shelving. Different spines." He drank his tea. "The hall reads your account. The uncles read it at the winter feast, aloud, the parts in our language. The young ones read it on their phones. The blood link stays what it is. The exhibit stays what it is. And the cabinet keeps both documents past my death, past your death, past the girl's channel, past the platform, past the district, past the country that burned the first book and the country that struck the girl's channel and the country that laminated the leaf into the spine in the first place, which was, if you read the minutes, also us." He finished the tea. "Families keep everything, Ah-Li. That's what a family is. A wall with a jar in it, and a jar with a book in it, and a book with a family in

it, and nobody has ever found the bottom of the jar, and nobody is going to, and the not-finding is the finding."

The courtyard's visitors came through in their arcs — the clan's cousins, the county's cultural officers, two tourists who had read the mirrors and taken the bus and were photographing the backing leaf through the glass with their phones held sideways to kill the glare — and the uncle walked the wall of the living with the roll of names in his hand, and at the frame he stopped the whole procession, and said, in the clan's own cadence, the sentence the hall's minutes now carry: "The leaf came in nineteen-nineteen with the repair crew. The hall voted to leave it. The hall votes again this autumn to leave it. The hall will vote every autumn to leave it, for as long as there is a hall, because the leaf is the spine's spine." And the county's officers wrote it down, and the tourists photographed the mirror-writing through the glass, and the father, at the courtyard's edge, in the factory jacket, said nothing, and the saying-nothing was the father's whole speech at the exhibit, and the speech was warm.

And the exhibit kept. The cabinet kept. The frame hung beside the leaf, and the leaf hung beside the glass, and the glass hung beside the inner room, and the inner room held the tablets and the silence and the blood link's unconfirmed forever, and the factory's hum came through the wall at industrial volume, and the whole arrangement — the hum, the tablets, the leaf, the frame, the blank in the stone at the other graveyard, the line as recorded — was the family's final answer to the burning of 1625, and the answer was: *we kept it, we kept it all, we kept the name and the silence and the lie and the correction and the leaf and the frame, and the keeping is the family, and the family is the wall with the jar in it, and the jar has no bottom, and you are welcome to look.*

Lin Li took one photograph at the opening: the frame and the leaf, side by side, no flash. She did not post it. The photograph went into the morgue bag, into the drawer, beside the notices and the notebook and the blank card, and the morgue's population settled around it the

way drawers do, and the settling was the sound of a story putting its last document away before its last document arrived.

The uncle walked her to the gate. At the gate he said the thing the uncle had come to say, the thing beneath the tea and the trade and the load-bearing line, and he said it in the clan's own grammar, which is the grammar of people who have survived everything by surviving it:

"The hall reads the account, Ah-Li. The uncles read it aloud. And the account says the keepers were women, and the hall's wall says the keepers were the lineage, and both are true, and neither is complete, and the incomplete is the heirloom." He looked at the courtyard, at the wall of the living, at the frame. "Your grandmother kept a book. Your teacher kept a school. The widow kept a copy. I kept a hall. The girl keeps a channel. Everybody kept. Nobody kept everything. That's the design. That was always the design. The design is why there's anything left to hang."

And he went back in to his tea and his arcs and his load-bearing sentence, and the gate closed, and the hum continued, and the frame hung beside the leaf in the cabinet past the death of everyone who had argued about it, which is where the family had always kept its arguments: past the death of everyone who had argued about them, in frames, in walls, in jars, in lineages, at the exact temperature of the tide.

CHAPTER 33

33

The mirror was a schoolteacher's page, in the twelfth month, a re-paste of the assembly with the black spread at its center, posted by an account with no name and eleven followers, and the page had been quiet for a week, the way pages are quiet after they have said everything, and Lin Li read it at the flat on a Thursday night with the rain doing the glass and the morgue bag by the door and the frame's photograph in the drawer and the blank card from the girl somewhere in the bag's deep pocket where she had put it and not filled it.

She read the assembly top to bottom, as she had read the forum thread in the spring, by absence, and the assembly's absence was the same absence, and the assembly's presence was the same presence, and the strangers had carried it all winter without dropping it, and the carries had been done by accounts with no names and eleven followers and three hundred followers and one follower, the carries done by people who were not keepers and had become keepers for the length of a screenshot, and the carrying had brought the assembly to this quiet page, and the quiet page had held it for a week, and tonight the page had a comment.

One comment. Posted at midnight, the account's first and only comment, no name, lowercase, unpunctuated, the way the coast's truest sentences are punctuated, which is to say barely, because the punctuation was done by the life and not by the hand:

so it wasn't only me

Six words. Lowercase. From a stranger. From the reader. From the one reader the whole year had been written for without either of them knowing it — the stranger who had read the assembly and recognized, in the margins of four hands and the account of an end and the floor plan of four words, the shape of something the stranger had

been keeping alone, in a drawer, in a marriage, in a school, in a lane, in a silence, in a country, for longer than the stranger could say, and had believed, until midnight, until a repaste page with eleven fol‑lowers, that the keeping was private, and the keeping was singular, and the keeping was theirs alone.

The ghost was always the reader.

Nothing supernatural had occurred. A woman had copied a book, and a woman had written a margin, and a woman had written a post, and strangers had mirrored the post, and one of the strangers had read it at midnight and said the truest thing the assembly would ever receive, which was six lowercase words with no punctuation, and the words were not the dead man's, and not the widow's, and not the teacher's, and not the keeper's, and not the granddaughter's, and not the girl's. They were the reader's. The reader had finally spoken, four hundred years into the keeping, and what the reader said was the one sentence no keeper had ever dared to hope for, because keepers do not hope; keepers keep.

It wasn't only me. It was never only me. It was never only the widow, or the teacher, or the keeper, or the granddaughter, or the girl. It was always the reader too, keeping by reading, keeping by recognizing, keeping by typing six lowercase words at midnight on a page with eleven followers, and the keeping had been communal from the first margin and nobody had said so because the saying would have endangered every single keeper, and the silence had been the design, and the design had worked, and the design was over, because the reader had spoken, on a schoolteacher's page with eleven followers.

Lin Li read the comment three times. She did not reply. The keeper's reply would have been a fold; the reader does not get folds; the reader gets the text, and the text was standing, and the text would stand until the strangers stopped carrying it, and the strangers would not stop carrying it, because the strangers were the abroad, and the

abroad was infinite, and the abroad was made of exactly this: mid‑night, a page, eleven followers, six lowercase words, and the truth.

It was the twelfth month, and the city was burning paper at its dead again — the season she had opened the year with, the season the joss shop below the old building made its living in, the season of paper villas and paper solar panels and paper motorcars with paper drivers — and the burning was the city's oldest mirror: every sheet that went up carried a name to somebody who could not say the name out loud anymore, and the smoke was the coast's one shared publication, and it published nightly, in the winter, at scale, without a platform.

She took the blank card out of the bag.

The girl's card. The thirteenth. The one the girl had carried blank through the strike and the expiry and the grave video and the hand-off, and handed to her at the bus stop — *the blank is a kind of pen* — and Lin Li had carried it since, unfilled, in the bag's pocket, the way her grandmother had carried the tide words in her mouth: unspoken, load-bearing, available.

She held the blank card at the desk, in the lamp's light, over the notebook's retired pages, and the card was blank the way the stone was blank, the mother's leaf blank, the east room's cabinet blank before the jar came out of the wall — blank as the coast writes *kept*, blank as the assembly's margins were written — and she did not fill it. The card was the girl's grammar. The girl had given her a blank as the book had been given blank leaves: built for the future, filled or unfilled at the future's own pace, and the pace was not hers to set. She put the card back in the pocket, and the pocket kept it, and the keeping was the writing, and the writing was enough.

She closed the page. The rain did the glass. The drawer held the frame's photograph and the blank card and the notices and the notebook, and the notebook's last entry was the double-calendar entry from the night of the funeral, and the notebook would hold no more entries, because the morgue had retired with the morgue's

keeper, and the keeping had changed hands, and the new hand kept in the open.

The comment stayed on the page. The page stayed on the coast. And the room held the one light and the one reader and the one sentence, six words, lowercase, the ghost's whole testimony, the reader's whole inheritance, the novel's whole point arrived at its destination and refusing, in the coast's oldest grammar, to explain itself.

so it wasn't only me.

It never was.

CHAPTER 34

34

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Contents.

A draft, honest, 62 characters counted. The same draft, folded: 8 words at the end. The women's essay, and the question beside it. The reading-letter, and the road. The Geng receipts, one whole. The famine pages, and the widow's arithmetic. The account of the end, and the four words that replaced it. The charge, and the removal. The margins of four hands, and one blank leaf that is a decision. The lost century. The leaf from the spine. And a letter of resignation, at the end, which is also a beginning, which is also just a letter.

First page. Copied at the table, second moon, the year after the five hundredth. The hand is not fine. The hand is steady. The teacher's copy was copied from a bundle bought by weight; this copy is copied from the keeper's copy, which was copied from the widow's copy, which was copied from the man, who said the margins were where the living are, and the living are here.

The ink is the pen's ink. The angle is the angle.

First page. The pen still works. — D.

Colophon

半城烟火半城仙。

Bàn chéng yānhuǒ bàn chéng xiān.

Half the city hearth-smoke, half the city immortal. — the saying Quanzhou says of itself

An alternative version of Carp City, told as the volume it keeps in the drawer. The commission is the same — one entry, eight hundred characters, the port's most dangerous thinker made safe for his quincentennial — and so is the desk above the joss shop on Zhongshan Road. What changes is that this time the honest draft answers back: a sentence arrives in Lin Li's own handwriting with no source, then another, and the morgue folder starts keeping things that were never drafted. Thirty-four numbered chapters under Li Zhi's three titles — A Book to Burn, A Book to Hide, A Book to Burn, Continued — in which every uncanny thing has an ordinary explana‑tion, every ordinary explanation arrives one sentence late, and every explanation is correct.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, “true love.” Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, “real,” plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

A BOOK TO BURN, CONTINUED · 34 sections · 79,391 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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