THE SOUP OF ALMOST FORGETTING

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CHAPTER 1

A Queue Is a Kind of Weather

The queue began, as most things in Baihuo Lane did, with somebody's aunt.

A note on names, since this story will keep needing them. The lane was Baihuo Lane — 百货巷 (bǎihuò xiàng), Goods Lane — a hundred meters of housing off Nongke Road in Erqi district, Zhengzhou: leftover village threaded through by city, persimmon tree in its courtyard, drainage channels underfoot, rent cheap enough for the young and the old to coexist at the same table. The tower at the end of Nongke Road belonged to the boom; the lane belonged to every era before it. And between them, all summer of 2020, an old woman sold forgetting for two kuai a cup.

The woman telling you this wasn't there yet. She would be.

Auntie Pan from the second floor told her sister-in-law that the old Meng woman at the corner was brewing 孟婆汤 (Mèng Pó tāng) — Meng Po soup, the soup of forgetting, the one the dead drink at Naihe Bridge so they can cross into their next life without dragging this one behind them. The sister-in-law told the fruit seller. The fruit seller told a boy with a ring light. By dusk on the first Friday of June, forty people stood in a line that smelled of rain that hadn't fallen yet, waiting for an old woman on an army-surplus stool to ladle them a cup of what was, by every chemical analysis available to the district, bitter tea.

Meng Xiaoman filmed all of it from across the lane, phone held low like she was sneaking up on a shy animal.

She was twenty-two that summer and made her living eating. Not much of a living. Her stream — 小满吃四方 (Xiǎomǎn chī sìfāng), Xiaoman Eats in All Four Directions — had nine thousand followers who mostly came for her Henan accent and the way she said 可得劲 (kě dé jìn) — that good, that satisfying — about food that clearly wasn't. That Friday she'd planned to film the night market's stinky tofu stall, but the queue caught her first, because a queue is a kind of weather: you feel it before you see it, a change in pressure, everyone's phones tilted the same direction.

The old woman sat behind a folding table under a hand-painted board. The board read 奈何桥 (Nàihé qiáo) — Naihe Bridge, the Bridge of Helplessness — which was strange for a board to read, since it was just a plank of wood propped on two plastic crates. Behind her steamed an actual cauldron, dented copper, older than anything else in the lane including the lane.

"Grandma," Xiaoman said, keeping her voice gentle the way you do with old people and strays, "what is this?"

The old woman looked up. She was small. Smaller than the ladle. Her hair was an iron-gray bun pinned so tight it looked structural, like something a bridge engineer had designed. Her eyes did something Xiaoman couldn't name yet, something she'd spend years trying to name: they looked at you the way water looks at a stone it has decided to go around.

"汤 (tāng)," the old woman said. Soup.

"What kind?"

The ladle paused over the cauldron. Around them the queue went quiet — not politely quiet; hungry quiet, phone-quiet, thirty lenses breathing.

"*Mèng Pó tāng*," the old woman said.

And the lane laughed — the good kind of laugh, the kind that means a city has decided to be delighted — because everybody knew the story. You die, you walk the yellow springs road, and at the bridge an old woman named Meng offers you five-flavored soup, 迷魂汤 (mí hún tāng — the soul-dazing broth), and once you drink you forget everything: your debts, your mother's hands, the name you called yourself. Only then can you be born again clean. Everyone had a grandmother who told it differently. Everyone's grandmother insisted hers was the correct version.

"It's kǔdīng chá," the old woman added, flat as a receipt. "Bitter leaf tea. Two kuai."

"Two kuai for forgetting," someone called out, and the laughter rolled again.

Xiaoman raised her phone. Later — years later, after she had inherited a ledger full of names and a stool nobody could sit in comfortably — she would try to remember whether she'd understood, that first night, what she was looking at. Honest answer: no. She saw content. A granny with a gimmick and good timing, because this was June 2020, half the country still flinching at coughs, everyone

carrying some small grief they wanted set down — a missed funeral, a closed shop, a father in Wuhan they hadn't hugged since Spring Festival. A city primed to line up for the idea of forgetting.

She went live. *Xiǎomǎn chī sìfāng*, 郑州二七，奶奶卖 *Mèng Pó tāng*! (Zhèngzhōu Èrqī, nǎinai mài Mèng Pó tāng) Zhengzhou, Erqi district, a grandma selling Meng Po's soup! Within an hour there were three hundred people in the lane and a man from Xinjiang asking in the comments whether the soup could make him forget his ex-wife. The old woman ladled. People drank, made faces at the bitterness, held up their cups to their cameras.

Here is the thing Xiaoman noticed only afterward, scrubbing back through the footage frame by frame, and never told anyone until she told her ledger:

Every single person, right after drinking, went still. Half a second, maybe a whole one. Like someone had pressed pause on a remote and the person kept existing inside the pause. And then they moved again, and laughed, and said 好苦 (hǎo kǔ), so bitter — but the stillness was real. Thirty-eight people on camera, thirty-eight pauses.

Except one. A woman near the end of the queue drank and didn't go still at all. She frowned, handed the cup back, and said, "This isn't mine." Then she walked away fast, like the lane was chasing her.

The old woman watched her go. Wrote something in a notebook.

Xiaoman's stream ended at midnight with eleven thousand concurrent viewers and a comment she'd later understand better than any other sentence anyone ever said to her:

我不要忘。我只是想有人问我记不记得。 (Wǒ bù yào wàng. Wǒ zhǐ shì xiǎng yǒu rén wèn wǒ jì bù jì dé.) I don't want to forget. I just want somebody to ask me if I remember.

She read that comment four times, then screenshotted it, then — because twenty-two-year-olds are preservationists of exactly the wrong things — deleted the screenshot six months later during a storage cleanup and spent an evening trying to reconstruct it from memory, word by word, like a woman rebuilding a bridge out of recollection.

The queue dispersed at half past midnight. The old woman packed her cauldron onto the wheeled cart with motions so practiced they predated the cart, and Xiaoman, high on eleven thousand concurrent viewers and the specific intoxication of having made a city happy for one night, helped push it up the lane. At the corner where Baihuo Lane met Nongke Road they stopped, both of them, without arranging to.

"nǎinai," Xiaoman said, "你以前是干啥的 (nǐ yǐqián shì gàn shá de)?"

Grandma, what did you used to do?

The old woman looked east down Nongke Road, where the streetlights went on and on toward the station, lights she might have been counting or blessing or simply seeing.

"舀汤的 (yǎo tāng de)," she said.

A ladler of soup.

And pushed her bridge home into the dark.

The clip of that first night survived every platform purge that followed — not because Xiao Fei archived it, though he did, but because it was too joyful to register as memory. It showed a city laughing at a granny with a ladle. Nothing sensitive in it except, if you knew where to look, everything: the thirty-eight pauses; the woman saying this isn't mine; the eleven thousand strangers who had gathered in a demolition-scheduled lane to practice, on two kuai of bitter tea, the feeling of setting something down.

In 2024, when the platform's memory-hole swept through three years of Zhengzhou content, the clip's caption was rewritten by its last reposter from *Xiǎomǎn chī sìfāng*'s original — Zhèngzhōu Èrqī, nǎinai mài *Mèng Pó tāng*! — to a single sentence that outlived every account that touched it:

郑州有个摊子，喝了能忘。其实忘不了。其实那不重要。 (Zhèngzhōu yǒu gè tānzi, hē le néng wàng. Qíshí wàng bù liǎo. Qíshí nà bù zhòngyào.) Zhengzhou has a stall where you drink and forget. Actually you can't forget. Actually that isn't the point.

CHAPTER 2

What the Customers Asked For

By the second Friday the queue reached the fruit stall, and the fruit seller was charging people to stand in his shade.

Xiaoman came every night now. She told herself it was content — her follower count had tripled, and there was talk of a Douyin feature page — but content didn't explain why she'd started arriving before dark, helping carry crates, learning where the old woman kept the ladle when it rained.

The old woman's name was a problem. Nobody knew it. The lane called her 孟婆婆 (Mèng Pópó) — Old Woman Meng, Popo — because the sign said Meng Po soup and because she seemed to have arrived with the lane itself, like the banyan stump in the courtyard or the smell of drains after rain. When Xiaoman asked her age once, she got the only laugh Xiaoman would ever hear from her: a dry click, like a coin dropped on stone.

"恁猜 (nèn cāi)," Popo said. You guess.

So Xiaoman watched instead, because watching was what she did. She watched who came and what they asked for, and by July she had it sorted into kinds, the way you sort shells on a beach without knowing their Latin names.

There were tourists, first. They wanted photographs holding cups, steam curling just so. Popo served them tea and let them photograph; the ledger stayed shut for them. Xiaoman saw that clearly: the notebook came out only for certain drinkers, and never while anyone looked.

Then there were the jokers. University students dared each other. A man asked to forget his mortgage. A woman asked to forget her mother-in-law's opinion of her dumplings. These got tea, no ledger, and sometimes — Xiaoman checked the footage again and again — the pause. The half-second stillness. But usually not. Usually they laughed, wiped their mouths, and carried their griefs home intact, which seemed to suit everyone including the griefs.

And then there were the third kind. The ones who approached the table sideways, the way you approach a dog you've kicked before. They leaned close so

the queue wouldn't hear. And what they asked for, asked in voices sanded down to a whisper:

"Make me forget I signed for that building." (This was 老魏 (Lǎo Wèi), Old Wei, who sold apartments in the tower at the end of Nongke Road — sold them to schoolteachers, he said later, schoolteachers and a nurse.)

"I want to forget the sound." (A young woman in hospital slippers. This was Dr. Bai Jingwen, though nobody knew it yet — the sound turned out to be a monitor going flat in a corridor where she'd stood too long.)

"Let me forget his face. Just the face, keep the rest."

Popo never said yes and never said no. She poured, she watched them drink, she opened the ledger and wrote. And here is what none of the customers noticed but Xiaoman, standing back with her phone lowered now more often than raised: whatever they asked to forget, the soup took something else. Old Wei asked for buyers' faces; three days later, in the lane, he tried to sell Xiaoman a timeshare in Kaifeng and physically could not produce the sales patter — stood there opening and closing his mouth like a fish, then said, "It's overpriced. Don't buy it," and walked away looking lighter than any man Xiaoman had ever seen carrying nothing.

The face he kept. He'd greet those buyers on the street for years afterward, nodding, honest.

The young woman who wanted to forget the sound — she came back twice more that summer, always at closing, always asking for the same thing, and always refused. "一碗够了 (yī wǎn gòu le)," Popo said. One bowl is enough. The second time the woman cried. The third time she brought Popo a bag of fresh kǔdīng leaves from her hometown in Guangxi, and Popo accepted it with both hands and a bow Xiaoman had never seen her give anyone, and Xiaoman understood she had witnessed something settle.

That night Xiaoman asked her, crouched by the cauldron while it cooled, steam writing slow characters on the underside of the awning:

"Popo. Is it true? Does it work?"

The old woman stirred. The ladle had a handle worn thin as a coin's edge.

"苦丁茶降火 (kǔdīng chá jiàng huǒ)," she said. Bitter leaf tea lowers internal heat. A health claim. An old woman's health claim, the kind printed on teahouse windows across the province.

"But the man who couldn't sell—"

"他悟了 (tā wù le)," Popo said. He came to a realization. And then, because Xiaoman didn't stop looking at her, because silence between the two of them had already stopped being empty: "汤不挑人要啥。汤挑人缺啥。" (Tāng bù tiāo rén yào shá. Tāng tiāo rén quē shá.) The soup doesn't take what you ask for. It takes what you lack.

Which wasn't an explanation. Which was worse than an explanation. Xiaoman wrote it down in her own notebook that night, next to thirty-eight pauses and one woman saying this isn't mine, and underlined it twice, and did not understand until 2021, standing in the rain outside Shakoulu station, that the sentence had been addressed to her.

Not everything a city queues for, it can name.

CHAPTER 3

The Woman From the Office

Qiao Shulan came on a Tuesday, which was the first sign something was wrong, because the stall didn't run Tuesdays — Popo served Friday through Sunday, dawn queue to midnight, and spent Mondays doing accounts she refused to call accounts ("字 (zì)," she said. Words.) and Tuesdays buying leaves.

But that Tuesday the table was out, because a food-poisoning rumor had gone around — someone said the tea gave them diarrhea, though the lane's consensus was that the man had eaten three yuan of cold noodles beforehand and blamed the granny with the viral fame — and Xiaoman had begged Popo to open one extra day, just to be seen serving confidently, to starve the rumor. Popo had agreed the way mountains agree to weather.

So the lane was busy at ten in the morning when the white sedan parked badly across both entrances.

Qiao Shulan got out of it in low heels and carried her authority like an umbrella she hadn't opened yet: folded, but visible. District Civilized City Office, deputy director, seconded that month to a special task group on "unauthorized public gatherings and unlicensed food service." She was fifty-two, kept her hair in the same no-nonsense bob as every photograph of her mother, and had spent twenty-six years in district administration learning the single most important lesson of her profession: that a crowd is a risk before it is anything else, and that whoever controls what a city is allowed to feel controls what it is allowed to do.

She'd watched the clips. All of them. She'd made her intern transcribe the comments. She did not like what the comments were doing, which was gathering — grief gathering to a point, like clouds, and Shulan had been in Zhengzhou long enough to know what happened when this city's weather gathered without anyone managing it.

"营业执照 (yíngyè zhízhào)," she said to the table, and put down a photocopy of regulations she'd brought for weight.

Popo looked at the paper. Looked at Shulan. Poured two cups of tea and pushed one across.

"I don't drink on duty," Shulan said.

"中 (zhōng)," Popo said. Fine. And drank both.

The negotiation lasted forty minutes and Xiaoman filmed none of it, because Popo had flicked two fingers at her phone early on — the first order she'd ever obeyed instantly. What survived came from the queue's memory, contradictory as all the lane's memories:

— That Shulan offered licenses, permits, a relocation to the sanctioned night market by the stadium. — That Popo asked one question only: whether the people in the sanctioned market would still be allowed to say what they came to say. — That Shulan answered, reasonably, that nobody anywhere was prevented from saying things, only from gathering unsafely to say them, and there was all the difference in the world between those two sentences, and no difference at all. — That at some point Shulan's composure cracked, one hairline crack, when Popo asked her — quietly, ladle resting — 你想忘啥 (nǐ xiǎng wàng shá)? What do you want to forget? And Shulan stood very still for a moment, the pause, the half-second stillness, except hers lasted four seconds and had nothing to do with tea.

The stall closed that Friday. Officially: voluntary suspension pending licensing. Unofficially, per the article in the Zhengzhou Evening News titled "Viral 'Meng Po Soup' Stall Draws Thousand-Strong Crowds; Officials Urge Orderly Recreation": the city had decided its citizens would not be lining up to practice forgetting, thank you, not this summer, not while everything else needed remembering correctly.

They fined her eight hundred yuan for unlicensed food service. They left the bridge plank alone because it was technically signage and signage was a different department, and departments are the modern afterlife's bureaucracy too.

Xiaoman deleted her stream archive that same week. Not all of it — she kept the raw footage on a hard drive, thirty-eight pauses and the woman who said this isn't mine — but the public videos came down after her comment section filled with people blaming her, the streamer, for bringing officials down on the granny, which was true in a way that had no floor to stand on. She was twenty-two. She

took the blame the way you take a bag of rice: it was heavy, it was hers, she carried it inside and set it down nowhere.

Before the last night, Popo packed the cauldron into a wheeled cart that Kang Dazhi — who was then merely a boy who fixed things for the lane, and merely almost Xiaoman's — welded a new axle for, and the whole lane came out to watch an old woman trundle a bridge into an alley.

"Popo," Xiaoman said, running after her, "where will you go?"

The old woman didn't stop moving. "巷子又不搬 (xiàngzi yòu bù bān)," she said. The lane isn't going anywhere.

Meaning: neither is she. Meaning: Baihuo Lane off Nongke Road had no plaza for crowds, no sightlines for cameras, just a mouth of an alley where a table could sit and a queue could form of ones and twos instead of hundreds. She wasn't closing. She was shrinking below the resolution of the state.

That was the summer Xiaoman learned the difference between being seen and being noticed. Her channel taught her the first. The lane taught her the second.

That night Qiao Shulan added a third ledger to her collection, though it was neither green nor red: a pocket notebook, plain, in which she began writing the things she noticed about crowds and could file nowhere — the way a queue redistributes its waiting so the old stand at the front; the way people photograph grief only when permission has been invented by somebody's confidence; the way an unlicensed tea stall held more social order per square meter than any plaza she had ever managed. She didn't know yet what the notebook was for. It would take her two years and one demolished lane to understand that she was studying for a second career in the only field her first had left her qualified for: the management of what remains.

CHAPTER 4

The Ledger of Small Griefs

Between the viral Fridays and the shutdown, there was a stretch of ordinary weeks that nobody filmed, and it was in those weeks that the stall became what it was going to be for the rest of its life: not an event but a fixture.

Old Wei came the second Sunday of July, before his timeshare disaster, back when he still had the sales patter and the patter still worked. He'd sold apartments off Nongke Road since the nineties — sold them to schoolteachers, to nurses, once to a blind man he still thought about — and in June his company pivoted to a new tower whose floor plans required the demolition of, among other things, the lane's own courtyard wall. He'd drawn his commission on it. He sat at Popo's table because his wife had read him the news article aloud over dinner and he'd come, as he put it, 消费一下 (xiāofèi yīxià), to spend some money at the joke, to be in on it before the joke was on him.

He asked to forget the buyers' faces. Schoolteachers and a nurse, he said. How do you look a nurse in the eye at the morning market.

Popo served him tea and took nothing and gave nothing, that first time. Cameras can't lift it, and neither could Old Wei, not yet; he hadn't finished wanting the wrong thing. It took him three visits and a night spent standing outside the courtyard wall listening to the building's future tenants' children play in the space where the wall had been, before he came back and asked instead — barely audibly, eyes on the cauldron — to forget how to want the commission.

The pause lasted a full second. And what the soup took, he discovered over the following humiliating, liberating weeks, was the patter: the whole architecture of it, the urgency and the scarcity and the 恁不买别人就买了 (nèn bù mǎi, biérén jiù mǎi le — if you don't buy, someone else will), gone like a tooth pulled clean. He could still describe an apartment. He could not make anyone afraid of missing one. His career collapsed over eight months, gently, the way a man sets down something heavy when someone finally offers to carry it, and by

spring he was sweeping the lane mornings for the neighborhood committee and happier than any man in the district had a legal right to be.

Xiaoman mapped these cases in her notebook the way other people her age mapped follower demographics. She began to see the stall's true shape: not a magic shop, not even a mercy shop — a customs house. Things entered the lane carrying too much of themselves, declared their burdens at the table, and left lighter by exactly one item, an item chosen not by them but by some tariff schedule older than the republic, older than the dynasty, older possibly than the river.

There were the failures, too, and she recorded those most carefully, because failures were data no stream would ever monetize. A man who wanted to forget his gambling debt drank and lost instead the smell of the card room, which should have freed him and didn't; he gambled on happily, memory intact, appetite undefeated. Popo wrote his entry with what Xiaoman would later recognize as professional regret: 汤取其便，不取其欲。(Tāng qǔ qí biàn, bù qǔ qí yù.) The soup takes what's convenient, not what's craved.

A woman who wanted to forget her divorce forgot instead the taste of the wedding banquet — thirty years of family videos suddenly scored with silence where the flavor had been — and she came back angry, and Popo refunded her two kuai with both hands and a bow, the bow again, the one reserved for settlements between professionals.

"她还会来的 (tā hái huì lái de)," Popo said afterward, watching the woman go. She'll come again.

"Why?"

"恨得还不够老。" (Hèn dé hái bù gòu lǎo.) Her hate isn't old enough yet.

Everything in the lane aged on its own schedule.

The divorce woman did come again — September, cooler weather, hat pulled low. This time she didn't ask to forget anything. She asked whether the stall catered. Her sister was getting married, the family was a minefield, and she wanted, she said, to serve something at the banquet that would give the relatives permission to shut up for one course.

Popo considered this with total seriousness, then named a price per pot that made Xiaoman choke on her tea — market rate, plus a surcharge Popo declined

to itemize — and catered exactly one wedding in her entire tenure. What she served at it was not forgetting soup; it was ordinary kǔdīng tea brewed long and cold, and every guest who drank it went quiet for four full minutes, because nobody expects bitter tea at a banquet and silence at a Chinese wedding is as close to a miracle as most families ever get. The bride sent a thank-you note. The note hung inside Popo's coat with the ledger for years, folded small, one of the few documents in the lane's possession that recorded happiness received rather than grief processed.

Because griefs fermented like the vinegar Crocs of Auntie Pan's windowsill — some drinkers had to wait years for their own sorrow to reach proof — and here was the thing Xiaoman wrote down and underlined and did not understand until much later: Popo never hurried them. Never pitched. The stall did not advertise. Two kuai, bitter tea, a plank bridge, and patience calibrated on a scale of decades.

In August the heat broke for one merciful week and the lane sat outside until midnight, and somebody's radio played Henan opera, and Old Wei swept without sweeping, just moving leaves around out of love of the motion, and Popo dozed upright on her stool with her hands still folded around the ladle like a sleeping ferry-woman holding her pole, and Xiaoman sat across from all of it doing absolutely nothing with her phone, which was the most valuable thing she did all summer.

CHAPTER 5

The Winter of the Two Kuai

Money was the first thing winter tested, and the stall failed the test in exactly the right direction.

Two kuai a bowl had been Popo's price since June — set, Xiaoman eventually worked out, not as economics but as etiquette. Free would have made the lane charity, and charity made grief into a favor you owed; expensive would have made it commerce, and commerce let people believe they'd paid for what they got. Two kuai was the toll a coin pays so both parties can pretend nothing sacred happened. The price of pretending, in Zhengzhou, winter rates.

The problem was that the lane wouldn't hold to it. Auntie Pan left fifties and refused change. A man from the housing office tried to endow the stall with a month's rent. Somebody taped a hundred-yuan note inside the awning with 汤钱 (tāng qián) written on it, and Popo took it down and walked door to door until she found whose it was and returned it with interest — two kuai, refunded, the transaction reversed with such precision that the household in question told the story for years as a ghost story.

By New Year she had a system: a tin by the ledger marked 零钱 (língqián), small change, into which overpayment went, and out of which came coal for the widow on the third floor, school shoes for Chunchun in February, and — though nobody connected these flows until much later — the deposit Master Yao had once quietly waived on a demolition job up the road, repaid in installments of exact change by an old woman who could have taught a central bank about settlement.

Xiaoman kept the tin's books in February, when Popo's cough kept her abed for nine days and the stall ran — for the first time — on the apprentice alone. Nine days. She poured wrong twice: once too fast for an old man's trembling hands (he wore most of it; she learned the second wrist-turn), once too slow, letting the steam die before the cup arrived, which mattered, she understood afterward, because the steam is part of the transaction — you watch your grief

rise off something warm or the warmth doesn't take. But mostly she poured right, and wrote the entries she was allowed to write, and discovered on day six that she knew things about strangers from their hands alone: the schoolteacher whose ring had been resized three times down, the delivery rider who held his cup like a steering wheel, the woman who drank with her gloves on and only then took them off finger by finger, mourning at her own speed.

On the ninth night Popo appeared at the lane's mouth wrapped in every coat she owned, watched from the shadows while her apprentice closed the stall correctly — cauldron off, crates stacked, plank leaned, two cups washed and set mouth-up — and said only:

"锅没糊。" (Guō méi hú.)

The pot didn't burn.

Which from her was a decoration ceremony, a knighthood, a doctorate. Xiaoman floated home through the snow-less black cold of a Henan February and told nobody, because the best things go unannounced or they curdle.

The lunar new year came mid-month, and with it the lane's one annual debt collection: Chunchun, aged eleven, marched to the stall with a red envelope containing four yuan — her own money, saved, she announced, all year — and demanded to pay for next year's tea in advance. Popo received the envelope with both hands, bowed, entered it in the ledger under a name Xiaoman never saw but always suspected was its own kind of account:

预付款。有效期：一辈子。 (Yùfùkuǎn. Yǒuxiàoqī: yībèizi.) Advance payment. Valid for: a lifetime.

CHAPTER 6

Meng He Buys Hu La Tang Mix

Her mother worked the faregates at Line 5.

Meng He had done it for eleven years, ever since the line opened — the loop under the city that people called the ring line, though Line 5 was never a full circle in her telling of it, "缺一口，像俺家锅 (quē yī kǒu, xiàng ǎn jiā guō)," missing a bite, like our family's pot. She stood shifts at Shakoulu and said *zhōng* to approximately nine thousand people a day, knew which office workers bought two newspapers (one to read, one to wrap fish), kept spare umbrellas under the booth for passengers surprised by weather, and came home smelling of metal and other people's days.

She did not approve of the stall, exactly. She did not disapprove either, which for a mother was practically a parade.

"汤是假的 (tāng shì jiǎ de)," she told Xiaoman that August, chopping scallions at the sink. The soup is fake. "奶奶是真的。中，去吧。" (Nǎinai shì zhēn de. Zhōng, qù ba.)

The soup is fake; the granny is real: go ahead. It was the closest thing to theology anyone in the family produced that decade.

That winter Xiaoman's channel pivoted, because channels do — from eating everything to finding things worth finding, and Baihuo Lane fed her better than any night market. She filmed Old Wei sweeping with his salesman's tongue amputated. She filmed Dr. Bai — whose name she still didn't know — drinking standing up, always standing, one eye on the lane's mouth like a woman listening for something down a corridor. She filmed the ledger only once, out of focus, and when Popo saw the blur she didn't get angry; she got quiet, which was worse, and Xiaoman deleted even the blurred file.

And through all of it, her mother commuted. Red line on the map, westbound in the morning, eastbound at six. On rainy days Meng He texted three emojis: an umbrella, a bowl of noodles, a house. Xiaoman has the texts. She will have them as long as phones have hard drives and hearts have stubbornness.

In May 2021 the rain season started early. Her mother bought a new raincoat, dark blue, wore it home once to model it, spun once in the living room like a girl. 咋样？(zǎ yàng) How is it? It's very you, Xiaoman said, not looking up from her edit. Her mother kept the tags on — kept every tag on everything, a woman who saved receipts for socks — and hung it by the door where it swung on its hanger all June, sleeves empty, patient as a held breath.

June 12th, 2021. Last ordinary entry in what Xiaoman would come to think of as Volume One of her life:

Her mother came home late from a shift, ate cold huìmiàn standing at the counter, and talked about a drill. They'd run a flood emergency drill at the station that week; management made everyone sign a sheet. "表格签了，水泵没换 (biǎogé qiān le, shuǐbèng méi huàn)," her mother said, and shrugged, and rinsed her bowl. We signed the form; nobody changed the pump. It wasn't a complaint. It was weather talk. It was a woman who had spent eleven years saying *zhōng* to nine thousand people a day noting, in her one daily sentence of truth, that the world ran on signatures instead of pumps, and believing there was nothing a faregate attendant could do about that arithmetic except be at her post.

Xiaoman said, "妈 (mā)，你要不要去喝一碗？(Nǐ yào bù yào qù hē yī wǎn?)"

Would you like to go drink a bowl?

Her mother laughed — really laughed, the snorting kind. "忘啥 (wàng shá)?" Forget what? And then, drying her hands, quieter, in the tone she used for things she meant: "小满 (Xiǎomǎn)，记性是命。忘了就没了。" (Jìxìng shì mìng. Wàng le jiù méi le.) Memory is life, Xiaoman. Forget, and it's gone.

On July 19th it began to rain over Henan, and did not stop.

The forecast had said three days of it. The forecast had been right in the way that forecasts are right about everything except what matters: totals, not consequences; millimeters, not arithmetic. Her mother worked the 19th in the downpour and came home wet to the knee anyway — the underground stays dry, she reported, shaking out her umbrella in the doorway, 地下头没事 (dìxiàtóu méi shì), the one mercy of working below the waterline — and boiled hu la

tang from a packet, too late at night for such things, and the two of them ate it standing up at the counter like girls sneering at bedtime.

"mā," Xiaoman said, "明天雨大你别坐车了。恁走回来。(Míngtiān yǔ dà nǐ bié zuò chē le. Nèn zǒu huílái.)"

Mom, if the rain's heavy tomorrow don't take the train. Walk home.

Her mother laughed. Eleven minutes versus forty; a woman with her own keys, her own legs, her own city. "*zhōng zhōng zhōng*," she said, the triple *zhōng* that meant affectionate refusal, and rinsed both bowls, and hung the blue raincoat by the door where it swung on its hanger all night in the draft, patient as a held breath.

CHAPTER 7

The Drill

The flood drill was held on a Tuesday, which everyone agreed was the first thing wrong with it, because emergencies did not schedule themselves for Tuesdays, and everyone said so, and then signed the sheet.

Meng He stood at her faregate booth wearing the orange armband of a station volunteer and watched the district's emergency director — a man named Ban whom she'd once refused a free tissue to out of professional standards about hoarding tissues — explain the drill into a megaphone that cut out every fourth syllable.

Scenario: typhoon rainfall exceeding drainage capacity. Passengers to be marshaled upward. Staff to test the pumps. The pumps were tested by turning them on, all three of them, for ninety seconds. Two started. The third made a noise Meng He's late father would have called 一台想退休的机器 (yī tái xiǎng tuìxiū de jīqì), a machine angling for its pension, and then started too, reluctantly, spraying rust-water across the platform's yellow line while passengers applauded.

"行了 (xíng le)," said Director Ban. Good. He signed his own sheet twice — once as director, once as witness, both times himself — and the armbands were collected in a plastic bag that was carried away by a young employee who set it down somewhere and forgot it forever, which is how most institutional memories are actually kept.

Meng He said nothing at work. She said one thing at home, over cold huìmi noodles, chopping her scallions too finely: *biǎogé qiān le, shuǐbèng méi huàn*. We signed the form; nobody changed the pump. And when Xiaoman asked what she wanted to do about it — genuinely asked, put her phone down, the full daughter-at-the-table posture — Meng He thought about it honestly, chopsticks paused mid-air, before answering:

"俺能咋弄哩? (Ǎn néng zǎ nòng lī?)" What could I do? "俺就是闸机后面站着的。水来的时候，俺能做的是开门、指路、别让恁们踩丢鞋。

(Ǎn jiù shì zhájī hòumiàn zhàn zhe de. Shuǐ lái de shíhòu, ǎn néng zuò de shì kāi mén, zhǐ lù, bié ràng nènmen cǎi diū xié.)"

I'm just the one standing behind the faregate. When water comes, what I can do is open the gates, point the way, make sure nobody loses a shoe.

It was, Xiaoman understood much later, not humility but inventory: an accurate accounting of one woman's actual powers. Her mother had spent her whole life refusing to inflate herself, which meant that when the water came she knew exactly what she could do, and did it, and the arithmetic of that night — two teenagers pushed up stairs, a stranger's dog carried high, a booth locked, a train taken because saving eleven minutes in the rain is also a power a woman is allowed to have — ran exactly within those powers, no more wasted than the pump, no less signed-for than any life in this city ever gets.

There was one other thing from the drill, small enough that only someone watching for it would keep it. A girl from Chunchun's school — twelve years old, on a class trip through the station with a clipboard of questions for a civics assignment — interviewed Meng He at her booth afterward. What does a faregate attendant do in an emergency? And Meng He, who had answered nine thousand such questions with *zhōng*, fine, and variations thereof, looked down at this child with her clipboard and said something her daughter never heard her say:

"记着路。灯灭的时候，别信手机的手电筒，信墙。墙一直都在。"
(Jì zhe lù. Dēng miè de shíhòu, bié xìn shǒujī de shǒudiàntǒng, xìn qiáng. Qiáng yīzhí dōu zài.)

Remember the route. When the lights die, don't trust your phone's flashlight; trust the wall. The wall has always been there.

The girl wrote it down. Whether it survived into her civics homework, whether the teacher read it aloud or crossed it out, nobody knows. But sentences are ladles too — they carry more than their measure — and somewhere under the city that May, between the pension-seeking pump and the plastic bag of armbands, one true sentence got spoken at working volume and entered the world's circulation.

Her mother's last ordinary summer ran on rails like everything else in Zhengzhou. In June she bought the blue raincoat. She wore it home once, spun

once in the living room like a girl, *zǎ yàng*? How is it? — and kept the tags on, because tags meant new, and new meant there would be occasions, and occasions meant future, and a woman who saved receipts for socks was not going to jinx a raincoat by wearing it out in any old drizzle.

The raincoat waited by the door all June with its sleeves empty and its tags on.

It is still waiting now. Xiaoman keeps it where Popo's stool used to face, so that whatever comes up the lane at dusk sees it first and knows the house it has arrived at is one where somebody waits.

CHAPTER 8

The Ledger of Qiao Shulan (July 2021, the 20th) [QIAO POV]

Qiao Shulan kept two ledgers of her own, though she never called them that. One was official: a green government notebook in which she recorded, in her small upright hand, everything she was required to notice. The other was a red account book from her shopkeeper father, dead eleven years, in which she recorded everything else.

On the twentieth of July 2021, the rain began as an item for neither book.

She noticed it first at 2 p.m., in a meeting about banner placement — the Civilized City inspection was coming in September, and the district's banners needed unifying; someone had printed forty of them with the wrong blue, and Shulan had spent ninety minutes establishing which blue was the correct blue, and she had won, and it had felt like nothing, like moving a chair across a room.

At 4 p.m. the meeting broke up because the corridor outside the window was gone. Not dark — gone. Water ran down Jingguang Road so fast and so flat that it had stopped being weather and become geography, a river where a road had been since her childhood. Someone said a year's rain had fallen in three days. Someone else said an hour. Her phone began to do what phones did: fill.

Her nephew's name entered her red ledger at 6:40 p.m.

乔雷。31岁。送货车。京广路隧道。 (Qiáo Léi. Sānshíyī suì. Sòng huòchē. Jīngguǎng lù suìdào.) Qiao Lei. Thirty-one. Delivery van. Jingguang tunnel.

She had told him a hundred times not to take the tunnel when it rained. 恁姑说了多少回 (nèn gū shuō le duōshao huí) — how many times has your auntie said it. He'd laugh his lazy laugh and say the tunnel was faster and rain was temporary. At 6:40 she stood at the window of a government building watching water hold down the city like a hand, and dialed him, and heard the network's busy tone, and understood — before any report, before the news, four hours

before the confirmation call — with the certainty of someone who had processed other people's disasters for twenty-six years, that this one had finally come through her own door.

Here is what she did next, and let no one who wasn't standing in her shoes that night claim they'd have done otherwise.

She worked.

From 7 p.m. until 4 a.m. she sat in the emergency duty room and made calls, filled forms, requisitioned buses, coordinated shelters, translated chaos into columns, because columns were what she had, and the district needed someone fluent in columns. At some point a colleague put a cup of tea by her elbow and she drank it without tasting it, which is not remarkable except that she would spend five years failing to remember ever having tasted anything that week, and would come to believe — sincerely, structurally, the way she believed in the correct blue — that this was mercy, the body sparing itself, taste being among the first things a person can afford to lose.

At 11:20 p.m. the room learned that a train was trapped on Line 5. Between Shakoulu and Haishansi. Water through the train doors. Nine hundred some people.

Shakoulu was Meng He's station. Meng He, who married out of the family photos but never out of Sunday noodles; whose daughter streamed herself eating; whom Shulan had known since He was a round-faced faregate girl learning the booth. The room knew names; the room was Zhengzhou; everyone in that duty room was dialing everyone they'd ever fed.

Shulan dialed Meng He three times. Busy tone. Busy tone. Off.

At 1 a.m. she wrote in the red ledger, beneath her nephew's line, a second line:

孟荷。沙口路，五号线，车上。 (Mèng Hé. Shākǒulù, wǔ hào xiàn, chē shàng.) Meng He. Shakoulu, Line 5, on the train.

Because that afternoon her shift had ended at six, and instead of walking home above ground the way she always did in rain — 恁姑走地上 (nèn gū zǒu dìshang), she liked to say, I keep to the earth — she had texted Shulan at 5:58: 坐地铁回去啦，一站地 (zuò dìtiě huíqù la, yī zhàn dì)。Taking the metro

back, one stop. A small vanity, saving eleven minutes in the rain, a woman owed nothing by anyone choosing one convenience on one ordinary day. The message sat in Shulan's phone with its gray tick, delivered into weather.

And then she sat with both hands flat on the open book, one name under each palm, and pressed down as if the pages might take flight, and waited for morning to make the arithmetic true or false.

Morning made it half true. Qiao Lei's van was found in the tunnel, crushed against a bus, windows starred white. And from Shakoulu station, past dawn, came passengers — soaked, oxygen-starved, staggering up out of the entrance in twos and threes, supported by strangers, wrapped in whatever the rescue line passed hand to hand — and Meng He was not among them, and was not among them, and was not among them, until the counting stopped being hope and became arithmetic, and by evening the faregate booth at Shakoulu stood unmanned with a paper sign taped to the glass that said 暂停服务 (zàntíng fúwù), service suspended, as if the station were the thing that needed rest.

Fourteen from that train, when the numbers finished. The city was told twelve at first. The discrepancy — two names, then more, then hundreds across the wider flood — took half a year, an investigation, and the kind of pressure that governments pretend does not exist to bring to the surface. But that is later. That night, all either of Shulan's ledgers held was two lines under two palms, and the rain still coming down like the sky intended to finish the job.

One detail from that duty room stayed with Shulan all her life, though she never wrote it in either ledger: at some hour of that endless night — she could never place it; three, four — a junior clerk fell asleep sitting up, mid-form, pen still moving, and drew a long blue line down the page before jerking awake. Nobody woke her earlier. In a room where every number was a person who might or might not answer tomorrow, sleep was the only honest act available, and they let her have it. Shulan had looked at that blue line — a stroke no form required, pure exhaustion made visible — and thought, with the strange clarity of the over-tired, that it was the most truthful mark anyone had made in her presence in twenty-six years of paperwork.

She would spend the rest of her career trying to make marks like it on purpose.

CHAPTER 9

Volume Two Begins

The rain stopped on the 21st and the sun came up obscene, gold, indifferent, a sky that had noticed nothing.

Xiaoman spent the 20th itself on her mother's route, or trying to. No one will ever make her account for those hours precisely; memory, which she had been raised to call life, went to water that evening the way the streets did — she recalled fragments only: the sound of the downpour like applause from an enormous audience; a man carrying a bicycle above his head; her own voice repeating *zhōng, zhōng, zhōng* into the phone to no one; the moment at 9 p.m. when the power died and the lane's mouth became a hole in the world.

What is certain is this: by the time she reached Shakoulu the next morning, the queue had formed without anyone organizing it.

It was not the 2020 queue. That one had been appetite — people wanting a story to post. This one stood silent in the ruined light, hundreds of them along the barricades, holding chrysanthemums. Nobody had called for flowers. The flowers were the city's own reflex, the way a body flinches: someone left one bouquet at the exit, then ten, then the ground around the station mouth disappeared under yellow until the living had nowhere to stand except closer together.

And through it, absurd, impossible, at the mouth of Baihuo Lane three streets over: steam.

Popo's table was out. First time since the shutdown a year before. She sat on her stool with the cauldron going and served no line, because there was no line — there was only, all day, singly, in ones and twos, the people for whom flowers were not enough. They came wet-eyed, dry-eyed, carrying things: a hospital bracelet; a child's shoe; a phone with its screen shattered but lit. Popo poured. Wrote. Poured. Wrote. Xiaoman watched from the lane's mouth for a long time before she could make her legs work.

When she finally crossed the distance, Popo looked up, and everything in Xiaoman — every wall she'd built between herself and the summer of guilt, the deleted archive, the fines her stream had summoned — arrived at once, and what came out of her mouth was none of it. It was:

"我妈在车上。(Wǒ mā zài chē shàng.)"

My mother was on the train.

Past tense, already. The city had taught her the tense in one day.

The old woman put down the ladle. She took Xiaoman's wrist — the first time she had ever touched her — and turned her palm up as though reading it, and said nothing for a long while. Steam wrote on the air between them and unwrote itself.

"恁妈给我留了话 (nèn mā gěi wǒ liú le huà)," Popo said at last. Your mother left me word.

Which was impossible, because her mother had never once come to drink; her mother didn't believe in the soup; *wàng shá*? Forget what? But grief does not check sources, and Xiaoman leaned in like a drowning woman toward any floating grammar, and Popo said:

"上个月。她路过，闻见汤，站了一会儿。她说：'俺闺女爱喝胡辣汤，回头带她来尝尝你这个苦的。'(Shàng gè yuè. Tā lùguò, wén jiàn tāng, zhàn le yīhuìr. Tā shuō: 'Ǎn guīnǚ ài hē húlàtāng, huítóu dài tā lái chángchang nǐ zhège kǔ de.')" Last month she passed by, smelled the pot, stood awhile. She said: my girl loves hu la tang; someday I'll bring her to try your bitter stuff instead.

"That's all? That's the message?"

"*Tāng bù tiāo rén yào shá,*" the old woman said, releasing her wrist. "*Tāng tiāo rén quē shá.*" And turned back to her cauldron.

Xiaoman walked home through a city of flipped bowls.

She didn't know yet that it was a pattern — would only learn it weeks later, mapping it the way she used to map follower counts. Upended bowls on windowsills all over the district. On Popo's own table, when she reached the stall that evening to help close: one bowl turned upside down beside the cauldron, and no explanation ever offered, then or after. In the lane's oldest superstitions a flipped bowl meant a death in the house, hunger refused, a table set for nobody.

Half of Zhengzhou was setting tables for nobody now. Her own kitchen held her mother's bowl where it had dried on the 19th, chopsticks across the top, and she found she could neither wash it nor look at it, so she turned it face-down on the rack like closing a book she couldn't read yet.

Her mother's phone, retrieved from the police with two hundred others, contained one unplayed voice message. Sent to Xiaoman, 17:42, forty-six seconds long. Rain noise under everything, a voice starting bright and practical — 妈下班买点 (mā xiàbān mǎi diǎn)... — and Xiaoman stopped it there, thumb shaking, at one second in. She had heard the first second perhaps four hundred times since. The remaining forty-five seconds existed the way a sealed room exists: known address, locked door.

That night she dreamed of the queue. Hundreds standing in the gold obscene light, each person holding not flowers but a bowl, and every bowl upside down, and steam rising off nothing, spelling words she couldn't read because she was reading from behind.

Volume One had ended on the 19th with cold noodles and a shrug about pumps.

She stood in Baihuo Lane at midnight, in front of the old woman on the stool, and said the only word that mattered:

"教我。(Jiāo wǒ.)" Teach me.

The apprenticeship had a shape nobody named: she was learning to become furniture. Not the insult kind — the load-bearing kind. For three months her entire function at the stall was to be there, daily, movable to any corner, holding whatever was set upon her. Drinkers told her things they'd never tell their families precisely because she was temporary-seeming; a lane fixture is safe the way a train window is safe, you can confess to scenery. She learned that grief speaks in two registers — inventory ("he liked his eggs scrambled, I never got it right, why did I never get it right") and forecast ("I don't know how to be twenty-three without her") — and that both registers wanted exactly one response: not advice, not sympathy, but attendance.

Her channel stayed dark all autumn. Followers asked. She posted once, in October, a photograph of nothing: an empty stool in a lane's mouth, steam

drifting through frame. The caption read: 恁们问俺咋不更新。俺在学一门手艺，学成之前不播。(Nènmen wèn ǎn zǎ bù gēngxīn. Ǎn zài xué yī mén shǒuyì, xué chéng zhīqián bù bō.) You ask why no updates. I'm learning a craft. No broadcasts until I finish learning it.

CHAPTER 10

The Rules, Unspoken

Popo did not say yes to Teach me. She said nothing, which among the things she said was nearly a yes.

What followed was an apprenticeship with no curriculum. Xiaoman came at dawn to buy leaves; at noon to scrub the cauldron with sand (never soap — soap, Popo said once, 洗掉味也洗掉别的 (xǐ diào wèi yě xǐ diào biéde), washes the flavor and also other things); at dusk to carry crates; and all the while she watched, because watching was her one talent, and the old woman permitted watching in a way she had never before permitted anything.

The rules, as Xiaoman assembled them over that August — never written down anywhere except eventually in her own blood-and-bruise understanding:

One bowl, once. A person might drink twice in a life, but never twice for the same grief. Ask a second time and the soup stopped choosing what to take from around the grief and began choosing from the person. She saw this only once that year, from across the lane: a man who drank in July came back in September smelling of alcohol, asking again about his son, and Popo refused, and he grabbed his own cup out of her hands like a thief, and drank, and went still — not half a second this time but four full seconds, five — and when he moved again something was missing that Xiaoman couldn't name for two more weeks, until she realized he no longer answered to his own name. He'd turn, confused, each time, like a dog hearing a similar whistle.

What you ask is never what it takes. This she verified against the ledger itself, eventually — though the ledger's existence took months even to confirm, since Popo wrote in it only when no one watched, and kept it inside her coat like a heart. What Xiaoman confirmed first was its output: Old Wei unable to sell; Dr. Bai drinking standing up and then, one October day, sitting down — just sitting, folding herself onto a crate like a woman setting down luggage after decades, and weeping without noise into her hands, and afterward able to ride the metro again, deep breaths at the platform edge, eyes open.

What is forgotten doesn't vanish. It moved. That was the hardest rule and the truest. Steam-writing appeared on bus windows across the district that autumn — single words, always in someone else's handwriting, always gone by the next stop. A fruit seller hummed a tune and swore he didn't know where he'd learned it; it turned out to be the ringtone of a drowned phone still lying in the Jingguang impound lot. Zhengzhou had always been a city that remembered out loud — the Erqi Tower built on a strike and a massacre, double-towered, standing in the middle of traffic like a held breath — and now it remembered in fragments, displaced, the grief migrating through it like groundwater.

"为啥是他们 (wèi shá shì tāmen)？" Xiaoman asked once. Why them? Why does it work on some and not the tourists with their cameras?

Popo stirred. "照相机拿不动那东西 (zhàoxiàngjī ná bù dòng nà dōngxi)," she said. Cameras can't lift it.

And once, only once, when Xiaoman pressed further — what are you, who taught you, how long — the old woman set down the ladle and looked at her with those water-around-a-stone eyes and said: "俺也忘了 (ǎn yě wàng le)。"

I've forgotten too.

Which was either a joke or the most frightening sentence ever spoken over a cauldron in Henan, and there was no way to ask which, because Popo picked up the ladle again and the moment closed like water.

Late August. Kang Dazhi reappeared in the lane carrying someone else's ladder.

He'd been away most of a year — odd jobs, a stint in Luoyang — and came back thin and silent, and fixed the stall's squeaking wheel without being asked, and avoided Xiaoman's eyes with a skill he must have practiced. Everyone knew why. He'd been on Line 5 duty that day too — assistant to a driver, second carriage back, one of the ones who got the doors open and shoved people up into the stairwell dark, and came out last, and would not talk about it, and had inherited the city's cruelest arithmetic: survivors' blame, whispered by families with empty chairs. Some said the driver's assistant could have opened sooner. Nobody saying it had been waist-deep in a dark tunnel listening to water arrive.

He put the wheel down, tested it, turned to go.

"Dazhi." Xiaoman hadn't planned the word.

He stopped. Didn't turn.

"Popo opens at dusk," she said. "She won't make you talk."

A pause long enough to hold everything either of them had failed to say since 2020, when they'd almost — and then her channel rose and his pride did whatever pride does in a small lane.

"*zhōng*," he said finally, to the wheel, and left.

Popo, who heard everything the lane heard, said nothing at all. But that night she washed two extra cups, and set them mouth-up on the shelf, waiting.

CHAPTER 11

The Funeral of Qiao Lei

The funeral was held twice, which nobody found strange, because everything in that August happened at least twice: once as fact and once as what the fact was supposed to have been.

The first funeral was private — family, the warehouse brotherhood from his delivery company, forty delivery riders who parked their vans in a funeral procession for the ages along two blocks of Jingguang Road, engines off, hazard lights on, yellow jackets hung over mirrors like flags at half mast. His aunt attended in her capacity as family, which is to say she stood at the edge of it the way she stood at the edge of everything now: present, correct, and made entirely of held breath. The rites were standard; the grief was not; his mother had to be supported on both sides through the burning of paper horses. At no point did anyone say the word tunnel.

The second funeral happened three weeks later, when the State Council's preliminary numbers began leaking — not the final 398; that took until January — but enough: enough to establish that the initial tolls had been managed, massaged, trimmed at levels with letterheads. Enough that Qiao Lei's name, absent from every district list published since July, surfaced in a journalist's tally compiled from morgue records and family testimony.

He'd been dead all along. What changed in September was only whether the city admitted to knowing it.

Shulan read the tally at her desk at 6 a.m., before anyone official was awake to watch her face do what it did. Her nephew had spent fifty days as an unlisted person — his mother fighting lists by day and losing sleep to them by night, calling hotlines that logged calls without logging outcomes, being told gently at windows that names would be confirmed 等核实后 (děng héshí hòu), after verification, while verification itself was the thing being administered downward, floor by floor, name by name, by people whose signatures Shulan could have recited.

She had signed those floors clean herself. In June. 基本属实 (jīběn shǔshí) — basically true.

That afternoon she did the thing that ended her first career, though the ending took years to complete and no single memo announced it. She opened the green government notebook, tore out its last twenty pages — the ones covering June's verification cycle — folded them into her handbag, and wrote on the stub where they'd been attached, in her small upright hand:

移存。见红本。 (Yícún. Jiàn hóng běn.) Relocated. See the red book.

A filing instruction addressed to whoever eventually audited her conscience. The torn pages went home and lived inside the red ledger's cover for four years, neither destroyed nor delivered, evidence of exactly one person's knowledge held in exactly the place where this lane kept everything it couldn't yet act on.

At the delivery company's second memorial — the public one, October, where the yellow-jacketed vans formed up again and this time the press came and this time the name was spoken aloud by a city official using the passive voice — Shulan stood at the back in her capacity as nobody, holding a bouquet she'd bought herself, ordinary chrysanthemums, ten kuai, from a vendor who overcharged her and didn't know whom he was charging.

Xiaoman saw her there. Recognized the coat before the face. And understood something that reshaped every chapter that followed: that the woman dismantling memorials by day was attending them alone at dusk, and that the war against flowers was being waged by a florist.

Neither spoke. But passing each other at the crowd's cold edge, the deputy director and the stall-keeper's granddaughter exchanged the nod Henan reserves for co-workers on the same shift — the nod that says I know what you're standing in; hold.

CHAPTER 12

The Man Who Learned to Swim

The seventh day after the flood, a man appeared at the Shakoulu exit with an umbrella nobody's.

He stood at the barricade from morning until the last train, and he came back every day that week, and by the second week the crowd had learned to part around him the way water learns a stone. He was sixty-something, built like the lathe operator he had been — square through the shoulders, gone soft at the middle — and he carried a blue umbrella, closed, held vertically before him with both hands like a soldier at rest or a man leaning on something invisible.

The umbrella had been his daughter's. Gao Ni, twenty-seven, account manager, swam twice a week; her umbrella lived in his hallway stand because she kept forgetting it, the way she'd forgotten her scarf at fourteen and her lunchbox at nine, leaving pieces of herself all over his life for him to carry home. On July 20th it rained so hard he took the umbrella out of the stand and stood holding it in the doorway of their building for an hour, uselessly, toward the west, where the trains ran.

Her body came home on the 24th. The umbrella stayed in his hands.

He did not weep at the barricade. That was what people noticed first and got wrong: they read it as stone. Actually Gao Baoshu was listening. All day, every day, he stood inside the crowd's noise listening underneath it — for her voice among the arriving passengers, for her laugh, for the particular sound of her sneakers on the station tiles which he could have picked out of ten thousand, he was sure of it, sure right up against the wall of knowing better.

His sign came later, in September. White cardboard, marker characters: 妮妮，爸学会游泳了。(Nīnī, bà xué huì yóuyǒng le.) Nini, Daddy learned to swim. Because in the whole inventory of things he couldn't do for her — couldn't answer her last call (in a meeting), couldn't drive to the station (roads drowned), couldn't do anything but survive the same rain that didn't spare her — the one concrete failure he could still act on was this: he'd teased her about the

swimming lessons when she was nine. Girls don't need to swim, he'd said across a newspaper, your dad will carry you over any river. And then the city of Zhengzhou had put a river between him and his daughter and he hadn't even been able to reach it.

So he enrolled at the district pool. Sixty-four years old, the only man in the shallow lane without grandchildren watching. He learned. Badly. A crawl like a man fighting furniture. But he learned, and on the day he first crossed the pool unassisted he went straight to Shakoulu and held up the sign, because grief needs somewhere to put itself down and this was where he chose.

Xiaoman knew him by then. Everyone in the queue's orbit did; he'd started coming to Baihuo Lane on the days he didn't stand at the station, drinking tea he called 中档苦 (zhōngdàng kǔ), decent bitter, and fixing Popo's crates with carpenter joints from fifty years back. She asked him once — October now, chrysanthemums returning to the barricades ahead of the anniversary of nothing, just autumn — whether he wanted to forget. Whether he'd ever asked.

He was quiet a while, sanding a crate edge.

"问过 (wènguò)," he said finally. I asked. "七月里。她头七那天晚上。(Qīyuè lǐ. Tā tóuqī nà tiān wǎnshang.)" In July. The night of her seventh day.

"What did you ask for?"

"To forget I was in that meeting." To forget the phone buzzing in his pocket face-down on the table, her name lighting up, and himself turning it over slowly, annoyed, thinking: this girl, always calling at noon, doesn't she know I'm busy — thirty seconds of irritation that he would have given both hands to unspeak. "我想忘掉那个'忙'字。(Wǒ xiǎng wàngdiào nàge 'máng' zì.)" I wanted to forget the word busy.

"And?"

Popo poured him tea instead. He drank. Went still — the pause; Xiaoman saw it, half a second, no more.

"And the soup took something else," Xiaoman said.

"汤拿走了'怪'字 (tāng ná zǒu le 'guài' zì)," Gao Baoshu said. It took away the word blame. Not his guilt — he'd expected the guilt, braced for the guilt, would have refused the guilt if offered, since the guilt was the last place she still

needed him. No: it took the blame. His fury — two years of it, molten, organized — at the metro staff who delayed the stoppage order, at the line managers, at the men who signed forms instead of changing pumps, at the whole arithmetic of signatures. He woke the next morning and the fury was gone and what remained was only her, all of her, everywhere in the city: in the pool where he now swam badly; in the umbrella stand; in the sneaker-sound on tiles he still listened for, patiently, at the barricade, without anger, like a man fishing in a river he has finally stopped cursing.

"有人得记着那些账 (yǒu rén děi jì zhe nàxiē zhàng)," he said. Somebody has to keep those ledgers. "但那个人不该是我了。俺闺女用命教会我：站在水里骂水，学不会游泳。(Dàn nàge rén bù gāi shì wǒ le. Ǎn guīnǚ yòng mìng jiāohuì wǒ: zhàn zài shuǐ lǐ mà shuǐ, xué bù huì yóuyǒng.)"

Somebody must remember the accounts. But it shouldn't be me anymore. My daughter spent her life teaching me: standing in the water cursing the water, you never learn to swim.

Before she wrote it all down that night, she asked him one more question — the apprentice's question, the one Popo never answered for her but Gao Baoshu answered for himself without hesitation:

"宝树叔，汤拿走那些怒气的时候，疼不疼 (bǎoshù shū, tāng ná zǒu nàxiē nùqì de shíhou, téng bù téng)？"

Uncle Baoshu — when the soup took your anger, did it hurt?

He thought about it seriously, sanding hand paused on the crate.

"不疼。空。(Bù téng. Kōng.)" Not painful. Empty. "怒气占了俺两年地方，跟俺同吃同住。它走的那天早上，俺起来做早饭，做到一半想起来没人跟俺抢锅了——就为这个哭了一场。不是想它回来。是房子太大了。(Nùqì zhàn le ǎn liǎng nián dìfang, gēn ǎn tóng chī tóng zhù. Tā zǒu de nà tiān zǎoshang, ǎn qǐlái zuò zǎofàn, zuò dào yībàn xiǎngqǐlái méi rén gēn ǎn qiǎng guō le——jiù wèi zhège kū le yī cháng. Bù shì xiǎng tā huílái. Shì fángzi tài dà le.)"

My anger lived with me two years, ate with me, slept under my roof. The morning after it left I was making breakfast and remembered nobody would

fight me for the stove anymore — and cried over that. Not wanting it back. The house was just too big.

Then he'd finished the crate, blown the sawdust off, added the sentence Xiaoman kept for the rest of her life:

"可是房子大点好，闺女。能装下后来来的东西。(Kěshì fángzi dà diǎn hǎo, guīnǚ. Néng zhuāng xià hòulái lái de dōngxi.)"

But it's better to have a big house, girl. Room for whatever comes later."

Xiaoman wrote it all down that night in her own notebook, under the sentence she'd carried since June 2020 — I don't want to forget; I just want somebody to ask me if I remember — and beneath both she drew, without deciding to, a small bowl. Upside down.

CHAPTER 13

Clean Streets (September–December 2021) [QIAO POV]

In September the inspection came and went, and Qiao Shulan's district scored 94.2, second in the city, docked half a point for "emotional residue in public space," which was a phrase she wrote into her green notebook because it was official language and then, that night, into the red one, because it was true.

The chrysanthemums were the problem. They would not stop.

Since July, every few nights, they reappeared at Shakoulu — armfuls of yellow laid at the station mouth by people who arrived after midnight, took photographs of nothing, and vanished. Removal crews collected them each dawn; by dusk more came; it had the rhythm of a siege neither side admitted to fighting. Her superiors used words like 恢复秩序 (huīfù zhìxù), restore order. The crews used no words. Once she watched an old sanitation worker gather bouquets with unbearable gentleness, arranging them in his cart facing upward, as though they might still be received somewhere, and she went home and did not sleep, and filed nothing about it.

The old worker's name was Uncle Ping, and she looked it up afterward — not to reprimand; the opposite. She arranged, through channels, for his crew to be issued better gloves and a cart with suspension, and told no one including him why. It was the first act of her career conducted entirely off both ledgers: kindness as infrastructure maintenance, invisible by design.

Years later, when her file of memorial cards went out into the world one doorway at a time, Uncle Ping would be among its first recipients — a card in his own late wife's hand, photographed at a barricade by strangers, kept alive by a system he never knew existed. He would weep on his doorstep and press the sleeve back into the retired deputy director's hands and say only: "恁看，俺就说花不能白捡。(Nèn kàn, ǎn jiù shuō huā bù néng bái jiǎn.)" You see? I always said you can't pick flowers up for nothing.

Her own grief had a shape now: administrative. Qiao Lei's name — this was October's revelation, and it rearranged her skeleton — had been on the initial casualty list, then off it, then off every list until January, when the State Council investigation report fell like a winter landslide across the whole province's face. 398 dead in Zhengzhou. The city had said under two hundred for months. Township levels had trimmed, county levels had trimmed, city level had trimmed; her own district's numbers, she checked with hands that did not shake because hers was not a shaking profession, had passed through channels she had personally certified as accurate. She had signed. In June. A routine verification. *jīběn shǔshí*, basically true.

Her nephew had spent five months as a clerical error.

The report's findings were read to her over conference room speakers: response deployment untimely; emergency response lagging; unified command lacking; deaths delayed and concealed. Six failures, itemized, each one a door through which water entered and her nephew did not exit. And beneath the six items, unspoken but present in every syllable, the seventh failure that had no item number: that a city can know its pumps are old and sign its forms anyway, and call the signing safety, and hang the correct blue banners about it.

She requested a transfer to the new campaign. It was called 清爽向前 (qīngshuǎng xiàngqián) — Clean Streets, Moving Forward. Its mandate: removal of memorial clutter from transportation hubs, standardization of public messaging, support for citizens' healthy forward-looking recreation. She told herself the sentence she had been perfecting since September: visible mass grief re-traumatizes; managed remembrance heals; order is compassion's skeleton. She believed it the way she believed in the correct blue. Belief, Shulan knew, was mostly a matter of never standing anywhere the wind could get at your foundations.

In December she found the stall.

Not looking for it. That was what she said to herself then, and would say for years: not looking. A routing error took her car down Nongke Road, and Baihuo Lane opened on her left like a throat, and there — steam against the winter dark, a plank propped on crates painted with three characters, an old woman ladling

for a queue of four — sat the summer of 2020, unsanctioned, unlicensed, undissolved.

Shulan parked badly and walked in. The queue let her pass; queues always did; authority has a smell.

Up close the old woman was smaller than the clips suggested. The ladle moved with a patience that made Shulan's watch feel loud.

"*Mèng Pó tāng*?" Shulan said. Her voice came out wrong. Lighter. Younger.

"*kǔdīng chá*, " said the old woman. Two kuai.

"I know what you serve." A breath. The lane held still around them; even steam seemed to wait. "I closed you down."

"*zhōng*," said Popo. Unimpressed as rain.

And Shulan heard herself ask — twenty-six years of columns collapsing into seven words, the question rising out of her like groundwater finding a crack:

"What does it take? To forget my nephew's name was ever missing?"

The old woman studied her for a long moment. Then she reached inside her coat and brought out a ledger — Shulan saw only its edge, swollen with decades, string-tied — and set it on the table between them like a verdict, shut.

"恁的账俺记不了 (nèn de zhàng ǎn jì bù liǎo)," Popo said. Your account is one I cannot keep. And when Shulan's face asked the question her mouth couldn't: "因为恁想忘的不是名字。是想忘掉签字那只手。(Yīnwèi nèn xiǎng wàng de bú shì míngzi. Shì xiǎng wàngdiào qiānzì nà zhī shǒu.)"

Because what you want to forget is not the name. It is the hand that signed.

Shulan walked back to her car through the lane's cold. She sat with both hands on the wheel — both palms, flat, pressing down, the way she'd pressed them onto a red book in a duty room in July — and drove home above the speed limit the entire way, and applied for, and won, the directorship of the campaign whose trucks would begin arriving at Shakoulu before dawn on New Year's Day.

CHAPTER 14

The Flowers Keep Coming

By October the city had learned to fight about flowers.

It began with logistics. Fresh chrysanthemums at a metro entrance create, in sequence: petals (slippery), stems (trippable), water from wrapping (freezing at night into black lace on the pavement), and finally the smell — sweet, vegetal, funerary — that seeped into the station's air system until passengers complained about riding through a funeral every morning. The complaints were real. So was the leaving of more flowers by the people who made them. Zhengzhou had become two crowds occupying the same square footage: one that needed the station mouth to stop being a grave, and one that needed it to keep being one, and both were right, which is the worst kind of dispute for any administration, because you can't issue a permit for grief and you can't ticket it either.

Qiao Shulan's interim solution — a designated memorial zone ten meters east, with a proper stand, drainage, and a laminated sign reading 寄思处 (jìsī chù), Place of Entrusted Longing — satisfied nobody and was, everyone privately agreed, exactly the kind of compromise only she could have engineered: it conceded everything except the one thing (the exact spot) that mattered to the crowd, and it cost her more politically than refusal would have. Her superiors read it as softness. The crowd read it as moving their dead to a service area.

Uncle Gao was the first to use it, and the last. He carried his bouquet to the new stand, set it straight, stepped back, looked at it for a while — then walked back to the barricade at the exit itself and stood his post there instead, umbrella vertical, because 妮妮没搬到服务区去 (Nīnī méi bān dào fúwùqū qù), Nini hasn't moved to the service area. Others followed him back, one by one, all winter, and the entrusted-longing stand became what most municipal gestures eventually become: a place where the city's intentions stood neatly in a row while its actual heart ignored them politely.

Xiaoman photographed none of this. She'd stopped photographing the station months ago — some things the lens flattened into content no matter the

steadiness of the hand — but she walked past it twice a week, and what she noticed, counting without meaning to, was the arithmetic of names. People didn't leave anonymous flowers after August. They left cards, and the cards had names on them: not only the fourteen, or the 398, but names like 我不认识你，但我记得你 (Wǒ bù rènshi nǐ, dàn wǒ jìde nǐ), I didn't know you but I remember you; names of whole offices; once, memorably, a card signed 二七区全体外卖骑手 (Èrqī qū quántǐ wàimài qíshǒu), all the delivery riders of Erqi district, with forty signatures crowded on it like passengers on a train.

The city was doing the thing Popo's ledger did — name, ask, taken, where it went — except in public, in marker pen, at scale.

In November the sanitation crews received new instructions: collect the flowers, yes, but photograph each arrangement first, and log the cards' texts into a district file before disposal. Shulan wrote those instructions herself. She told her director it was for sentiment analysis. It was actually — and she knew it, sitting at her desk at midnight, red ledger open beside the green — an archive. A small, illegal-shaped one, filed under garbage collection, holding four thousand cards' worth of what a city said to its dead when it thought no official was listening.

She kept the file for five years. What she did with it belongs to the end of this story. But the lane found out about it long before that, because lanes find out everything, and the knowledge changed how Popo treated her: with the extra half-second of attention one craftswoman gives another's hidden work.

CHAPTER 15

Three Tellings

The first telling happened at the stall, to a drunk.

He came in October off a bad night at a wedding — not his own grief, borrowed grief, secondhand wine — and wanted to know who the old woman was, really, where she'd come from, how long she'd been at this game. The lane expected Xiaoman or Chunchun to shoo him. Instead Popo poured him tea and told him, at length and cheerfully, that she was born in 1949 in a village east of the river that the reservoir had taken in 1960, that her mother had put her on a door floating south and her mother had held the other end of the door until the current disagreed, and that she'd been taken in by railway people and raised on station platforms, and married a signalman, and followed the rails all her working life, and when he died she'd found she couldn't stay in any house with a clock in it, and had come to Zhengzhou because it was the city where the most rails met, and a woman who can't stop waiting should wait somewhere with good connections.

The drunk wept, saluted, and was helped home by three separate neighbors, none of whom believed a word, all of whom retold it accurately for weeks.

The second telling happened to Chunchun, who had asked about her family for a school ancestry worksheet. Popo sat her down and said, gravely, that she was born in 1952 in Fengdu, which everyone knew was the ghost city, that her own grandmother had been a Meng Po before her, and her great-grandmother before that, all the way back to the first Meng Po who was no goddess at all but simply a widow who set up a tea stall at a river crossing where ferrymen drowned, and gave the living something hot while they waited for news of their dead, and that the soup-of-forgetting business was invented later by storytellers who couldn't bear the plainer truth: that someone had to stand at crossings, and ladle, and not leave.

Chunchun wrote none of this on the worksheet. Wrote instead that her neighbor was a retired tea seller. Got full marks for honesty.

The third telling happened to Xiaoman alone, at closing, in the winter of that first grief year, without being asked for it at all. The old woman was washing cups. She said, to the basin, conversationally, as if continuing a talk from an hour ago:

"俺没有娘。也没有门板。也没有信号员。(Ǎn méiyǒu niáng. Yě méiyǒu ménbǎn. Yě méiyǒu xìnhàoyuán.)"

I have no mother. No door. No signalman.

Scrub. Rinse. Set the cup mouth-up on the shelf.

"*Ǎn yě wàng le*."

I've forgotten too.

And then she'd dried her hands and gone to bed, leaving Xiaoman holding three incompatible biographies and one negation of all of them, like a woman holding four keys to one lock, knowing that at least three were forged and unable to test a single one.

It took her years to stop trying to solve it and start understanding it, and what she finally understood was structural: the tellings weren't lies. They were load-bearing. A woman who had given away every taste of her own past — spoonful by spoonful, fifty years of servings, keeping nothing — could not walk around carrying a self the way other people did. So she kept one in pieces, distributed among the people who needed her to have one. The drunk needed a flood orphan; he got a flood orphan. Chunchun needed homework; she got a dynasty of tea widows stretching back to the first ferry crossing. And the lane itself, which needed its old woman to be exactly as old as its oldest sorrows and no older, got the negation, which fit best of all.

You could ask: which version was true? You could also ask what color the pause was. Both questions mistook the mechanism. Somewhere — on a bridge, at a counter, behind whatever final desk issues such things — there existed a page with her true entry on it: name, ask, taken, where it went. But the entry wasn't available to the living, and the torn corner of every almanac in the world was, when you came down to it, shaped exactly like a woman who has traded her whole history, one bowl at a time, for the right to stand at a crossing and not leave.

What Xiaoman recorded in her notebook that night was neither biography nor debunking. Just one line, the line she'd build the rest of her life on without knowing it yet:

恁问她从哪儿来，她说忘了。可她从来没忘过任何一个人来她这儿要啥。(Nèn wèn tā cóng nǎr lái, tā shuō wàng le. Kě tā cónglái méi wàng guò rènhé yí gè rén lái tā zhèr yào shá.) Ask her where she came from, and she says she's forgotten. But she has never once forgotten what anyone came to her table needing.

CHAPTER 16

The Archive War

Xiao Fei filmed his first funeral when he was seventeen and got paid forty yuan for it, and had been ashamed of that forty yuan ever since with the special durability of teenage shame. By 2022 he was eighteen, a delivery rider with three thousand followers who came for scooter stunts, and the shame had matured into something usable: he knew how to film the dead without stealing from them. Frame steady. No faces of the weeping without permission. Get the name right or don't post.

The platforms started deleting in February.

Not everything — never everything at once; the machinery worked in drifts, like snowfall. A video of chrysanthemums at Shakoulu taken down for "incomplete information." A livestream of the January report's findings ended mid-sentence for "technical reasons." Uncle Gao's sign — *Nīnī, bà xué huì yóuyǒng le* — appeared in one clip after another and vanished from each; someone's algorithm had decided that an old man with an umbrella was sensitive content, which would have been funny if any of them could breathe while laughing.

So the archive moved underground, and Xiao Fei became its courier.

He built nothing so grand as a server. He did what couriers do: he copied. Hard drives in three locations (his aunt's noodle shop in Guancheng; a drawer at Popo's stall behind the tea tins; Kang Dazhi's toolbox, on the theory that nobody has ever willingly opened another man's toolbox). Mirrors on overseas platforms under handles that changed monthly. And every month, on the 20th, he rode to Shakoulu and filmed Uncle Gao standing at the barricade with the blue umbrella and the sign, and asked him the same question for the record:

"宝树叔，今天妮妮几岁？(Bǎoshù shū, jīntiān Nīnī jǐ suì?)"

Uncle Baoshu, how old is Nini today?

And Gao Baoshu, who understood exactly what the boy was doing and why it mattered — answered. "二十九了 (èrshíjiǔ le)， " he'd say, or thirty, thirty-

one, the number climbing month by month. “会游泳了。游得比她爸好。(Huì yóuyǒng le. Yóu de bǐ tā bà hǎo.)” Twenty-nine now. She can swim. Swims better than her dad.

It was Xiaoman who taught Xiao Fei the question format.

The rest of the method he invented himself, from delivery logic. Routes: he mapped which mirror survived longest in which jurisdiction and rotated content accordingly, a courier’s instinct applied to memory. Packaging: nothing sensitive ever traveled with a sensitive label — the State Council report went out renamed as 空调安装手册 (kōngtiáo ānzhuāng shǒucè), air conditioner installation manual, and nobody auditing thumbnails ever opened it. Redundancy with feeling: every drive in Kang Dazhi’s toolbox was copied to two others that lived in different buildings, because Dazhi had taught him what carpentry teaches — never trust one joint.

And once, when a platform deleted Uncle Gao’s monthly video for the ninth time within the hour, Xiao Fei did the thing that turned him from courier into strategist: he reposted it as an advertisement. Paid. Two hundred yuan of promotion budget behind *Nīnī, bà xué huì yóuyǒng le*, targeted to Henan users over forty, running under the category 家居清洁 (jiājū qīngjié), household cleaning services, for six hours before any human auditor noticed — six hours in which eleven thousand people’s feeds showed them an old man with an umbrella and a promise, and at least one of them, per the comments, called her estranged father for the first time in three years just to ask how his knees were.

He reported the ROI to Xiaoman at the stall with a straight face: “两百块，买十一个人给爹打电话。比俺送外卖划算。(Liǎng bǎi kuài, mǎi shíyī gè rén gěi diē dǎ diànhuà. Bǐ ǎn sòng wàimài huásuàn.)” Two hundred yuan bought eleven calls to fathers. Better rate than delivery.

It had been Xiaoman who taught him the question format — she’d inherited Popo’s understanding that memory needs a container with handles or people drop it, and a question, repeated, is a handle. The state of her own apprenticeship, spring 2022: still no brewing. she still could not brew. Popo kept her on water duty — carrying river water from specific points, which varied by week in ways Xiaoman was forbidden to map (“水认路，恁别替它记 (shuǐ rèn

lù, nèn bié tì tā jì)," the water knows its way; don't memorize it on its behalf) — and on ledger-adjacent chores, and on sitting with drinkers before and after, learning to be the somebody who asks if they remember. But the cauldron itself remained locked. When she reached toward it, Popo would say only: "还不到你的锅。(Hái bú dào nǐ de guō.)" Not yet your pot.

She understood the shape of the refusal long before its content. The pot wasn't withheld until she learned recipes. It was withheld until she stopped wanting it for the reason she wanted everything in those days: to undo her mother's death. To get at 17:42 through some back door of chemistry. The soup didn't take what you asked for. Apparently neither did apprenticeships.

Kang Dazhi drank in March.

He came at dusk on a Tuesday, alone, having clearly waited for the lane to empty, and stood at the table not sitting, hands in the posture of men at memorial services who don't know where hands go. Xiaoman was twenty feet away, pretending to sort tea tins, hearing everything, seeing nothing, both by design.

"俺想忘掉开门那一下 (Ǎn xiǎng wàngdiào kāimén nà yíxià)," he said.

I want to forget the moment of opening the doors.

He told it flat, in the grammar of men reciting incident reports: the train halted between stations; water outside the windows rising past the glass; the intercom saying wait, wait; passengers filming, joking, then not joking; and himself and the driver deciding — no order ever coming down the line, no command, just two young men in a dark cab making the call that their superiors should have made forty minutes earlier — to open the doors onto the flood, onto the black water coming in at ankle height, and start moving nine hundred people toward the stairwell light.

The moment of opening: that half-second when you commit other people to a risk because waiting is certain death and acting is probably death and you choose probably. He'd relived it nightly for eight months. In dreams the doors wouldn't open; or opened onto fire; or he stood aside and someone else chose wrong.

Popo poured. He drank. The pause — longer this time, two full seconds, Xiaoman counting in her head like a metronome gone slow.

What the soup took, he discovered over following weeks, was not the moment but its replay function. He remembered everything — the water taste, the woman whose hand he held, the child on his shoulders — but the memory had become weight-bearing instead of crushing, a beam you live around rather than a ceiling coming down. In April he started repairing things again: first the stall's cart, then Xiaoman's phone screen (she watched him work on it once and said thank-you in a voice that made him look up sharply, and wisely say nothing about what he'd seen on the cracked display: one unplayed voicemail, timestamped forever).

By June the campaign trucks had stopped coming to Shakoulu daily. Clean Streets declared victory in a district newsletter Shulan read standing up, twice, looking for the word remembrance anywhere in it and finding only 焕然一新 (huànrán yìxīn), made new again.

The city, meanwhile, had begun dreaming out loud.

CHAPTER 17

The Intercom

The audio file was forty-one seconds long and had survived three phones, one flooded pocket, and a brother who could not make himself delete it.

Xiao Fei received it at the noodle shop on a Tuesday in March — his aunt's shop in Guancheng, back booth, the one where deals both culinary and archival got done. The man across the table was ordinary: fifty-ish, delivery company windbreaker, the particular posture of someone who has been carrying furniture up stairs for a year. His sister had been on the train. Her phone had come back from the impound working, barely. On it, among everything, was a voice memo she'd recorded at 18:07 on July 20th, 2021, inside Carriage 2, and never sent to anyone because by 18:09 there had been nothing to send with.

"俺妹是那种人 (Ǎn mèi shì nà zhǒng rén)， " he said. My sister was the kind of person who narrates. "看电影要解说，做饭要报菜名。她要是怕了，她得说出来。(Kàn diànyǐng yào jiěshuō, zuòfàn yào bào càimíng. Tā yàoshi pà le, tā děi shuō chūlái.)"

She'd have talked. That's how we know what's on this file is what it is: not panic. Testimony at working volume.

He played it once, at low volume, phone flat on the table between the vinegar and the chili oil, and Xiao Fei — who had heard every scrap of Line 5 audio that existed, who had built his archive precisely so that such sounds would not depend on any single person's courage to keep them — put his hand over his own mouth and listened anyway.

The intercom voice. Calm, female, slightly hoarse — a real employee's voice, not an announcement system's. It said, in the cadence of a station attendant who has decided that her actual job description has just changed:

"乘客同志们，我是车站工作人员孟荷。水进车厢了，但是不深。大家听我说：不要拍门。门会开。往亮的地方走，扶好老人。恁们把鞋脱了攥手里，光脚踩得住。都听着呢吧？好。中。(Chéngkè tóngzhì-men, wǒ shì chēzhàn gōngzuò rényuán Mèng Hé. Shuǐ jìn chēxiāng le, dànshì bù

shēn. Dàjiā tīng wǒ shuō: bú yào pāi mén. Mén huì kāi. Wǎng liàng de dìfang zǒu, fú hǎo lǎorén. Nènmen bǎ xié tuō le zuàn shǒu lǐ, guāng jiǎo cǎi de zhù. Dōu tīng zhe ne ba? Hǎo. Zhōng.)"

Comrades, I am Meng He, station staff. Water is entering the carriage but it isn't deep. Listen to me: don't force the doors. The doors will open. Walk toward the light, support the elderly. Take off your shoes and hold them; bare feet grip. Is everyone listening? Good. Zhong. All right.

Then eleven seconds of water sound and breathing — hers, controlled, the breathing of someone spending air like money she's budgeted — and then, almost inaudible, half to herself, in the tone mothers use when they think no one important is listening, three words that the brother had needed a year to be able to hear and that Xiao Fei would carry for the rest of his life as the archive's secret center:

"小满等着喝。(Xiǎomǎn děng zhe hē.)"

Xiaoman's waiting to drink.

Because the hu la tang mix — the errand she'd promised her daughter in her last message out — was in her work bag, dry-bagged, bought that afternoon from the shop by Exit C. She had brought it to work to carry home. She had carried it onto the train. And somewhere in the last minutes of the flood, in a carriage filling with the river, having marshaled strangers toward light and taught them to grip with their bare feet, Meng He checked her inventory one final time and found, filed under tonight's remaining tasks, her daughter's soup.

The brother switched off the phone. Slid it across the table. 只求有人存着。(Zhǐ qiú yǒu rén cún zhe.) I only ask that someone keeps it.

Xiao Fei copied it that night to all three locations — the noodle shop drawer, the tea tins, Kang Dazhi's toolbox — and then sat until dawn with the question that archives exist to answer and cannot: who tells the daughter?

He told Popo first. That choice surprised him even as he made it; he'd walked to Baihuo Lane on autopilot and only understood at the awning why his feet had chosen it. The old woman listened to the file once, eyes closed, ladle hand resting on the table. Then she opened her ledger — Xiaoman was at the market; he saw it whole, unguarded, for ten full seconds — and wrote beside the fourth name on

the train page, where the entry read 求：无。取：无。等。(Qiú: wú. Qǔ: wú. Děng.) Asked: nothing. Taken: nothing. Waiting:

有遗言。存档三处。(Yǒu yíyán. Cúndàng sān chù.) Left words behind. Archived in three places.

"告诉恁小满姐 (gàosu nèn Xiǎomǎn jiě)," she said, closing it. "等她自己来取。*Tāng bù tiāo rén yào shá*——档案也一样。(Děng tā zìjǐ lái qǔ. Dàng'àn yě yīyàng.)"

Tell your sister Xiaoman. Wait for her to come claim it herself. The soup takes not what you ask for — archives are the same.

CHAPTER 18

The Queue That Crossed the River

Spring brought a story the lane never claimed and could never shake: the queue at the river.

It began, as these things did, with a grandmother — not Popo; another one, one of Henan's ten million — whose grandson had drowned in the Yellow River years before, before the flood, before everything, a summer accident at Malong flats when he was nine. She had mourned at a distance for a decade because the family, needing her functional, had negotiated her grief down to Sundays. In March 2022 she heard about a stall where you could drink something and set things down, and walked four hours from her village because buses confused her, and stood in Baihuo Lane at closing, and asked the question that broke the mold:

"恁这儿管河里的人不？俺孙子不是郑州死的。(Nèn zhèr guǎn hé lǐ de rén bù? Ǎn sūnzi bú shì Zhèngzhōu sǐ de.)" Does this place cover people taken by the river? My grandson didn't die in Zhengzhou.

The jurisdictional problem was real. Rule four said it plain: the dead drink at their own bridge; that side's accounts are not this pot's to settle. But rule four assumed deaths inside the city's memory-economy — trains, tunnels, floods with casualty lists. A village boy in the Yellow River belonged to an older, larger ledger entirely, the river's own, kept where rivers keep them.

Popo heard the grandmother out. Poured her ordinary tea. Then said the sentence that started the whole impossible spring:

"礼拜天。带上恁孙子爱吃的。俺们去河边问。(Lǐbàitiān. Dài shàng nèn sūnzi ài chī de. Ǎnmen qù hébiān wèn.)"

Sunday. Bring what your grandson loved to eat. We'll go to the river and ask.

Ask. Not serve. The distinction mattered more than anyone present could then articulate, and would take the lane years to fully honor.

They went — Popo, Xiaoman, the grandmother with a bag of spicy gluten strips (the boy's vice), and, uninvited but inevitable, half the lane's regulars who heard about it by Saturday night: Uncle Gao carrying his umbrella out of

superstition, Xiao Fei filming nothing for once, Chunchun aged eleven with her bear notebook. At Malong flats, where the silt lay flat as an unmade bed, the old woman from the stall set up on the bank — table, cups, kettle of river water boiled properly — and poured tea for the living while the grandmother laid out gluten strips on a clean cloth and talked to the water about school, about his mother's remarriage, about the dog, telling the river everything a grandmother tells, which is to say: everything, in no order, for two hours, while thirty people stood behind her in the wind.

No miracle occurred. That must be recorded plainly, because the lane's enemies later claimed otherwise and its friends embellished otherwise. What occurred was testimony, conducted at a riverbank, witnessed, unhurried, public. When the grandmother finished, Popo filled the last cup — the one she'd been keeping steaming at the water's edge throughout — walked to the margin, and poured it into the Yellow River itself.

For their own bridge, she said. Their own bridge's soup. And turned back up the bank before the ripples finished, because you don't watch other jurisdictions work; it isn't polite.

The Sunday river visits became a season: families arrived weekly through spring with their non-Zhengzhou dead — mining towns, flood villages, a fisherman from anywhere — and the lane discovered it had accidentally founded a branch office. Popo limited it to Sundays, one family each, "排队 (páiduì), " she said, queuing even here, and Xiaoman kept a second ledger for the river account, and the theology grew its first annex without a single doctrinal amendment: this pot settles the city's griefs; the river's are carried to the river's counter, by hand, on foot, with whatever the dead loved to eat.

Years later, when scholars catalogued the lane's practices, the river visits were the item they found least explicable and most reproduced — spontaneous versions appearing along the Wei, the Huai, the Yangtze's drowned villages — grief infrastructure going viral not as content but as choreography: someone walks to the water carrying food and names, and speaks, and pours, and turns back without watching.

Which needs no mechanism. Which cannot be explained by one.

CHAPTER 19

What the City Dreams

The migration was the thing no one talked about, because talking about it would have required admitting there was something to migrate.

Xiaoman kept a second notebook — not Popo's ledger, which remained inside the old woman's coat like a second heart, but her own census of traces. She called it 流水账 (liúshuǐzhàng), the running-water account, which is what bookkeepers call a day journal and what her mother used to call tears. Entries, spring through winter 2022:

— March: the word Nīnī appearing in steam on the Number 79 bus, in handwriting later matched (by Xiao Fei, who had nothing else to match) to Uncle Gao's marker. Bus route passes the district pool. — April: every umbrella stand outside Shakoulu station found holding exactly one blue umbrella each, unclaimed, for three mornings running. Security footage showed no one placing them. The stands were emptied; by week's end they held blue again. — May: the district pool reported a woman's sneaker-sound on its tiles at closing time, audible on two separate nights to staff who described it identically and refused to discuss it afterward. — June: rain on skylights over the Jingguang road tunnel drummed, according to four drivers within one week, in the rhythm of a phone vibrating face-down on a meeting-room table.

She showed the notebook to no one except, eventually, in pieces, to Chunchun.

Chunchun was eleven that year and lived upstairs from the stall with a mother who sold children's clothes by livestream and a father who had gone to Shenzhen for work that stopped coming home on holidays. Her insomnia was exam-shaped: rankings posted monthly on the classroom wall, her name a fixed feature of the middle distance, her mother's voice at night recalculating futures out loud. Chunchun started doing homework on the crate beside Popo's table because the lane at dusk was quieter than her apartment, and because the old woman's presence operated on her like weight on a kite line.

"*nǎinai*, " she asked one evening, watching steam write and unwrite on the cold air, "人死了去哪儿? (Rén sǐ le qù nǎr?)"

Grandma, where do people go when they die?

Popo considered this with the seriousness she gave all questions, which was total.

"先排队 (Xiān páiduì)," she said.

First, they queue.

Chunchun nodded as if this were sufficient, which, from a child raised on queues for everything — vaccines, milk tea, the school gate — it perhaps was. Then she asked the follow-up that made Xiaoman, sorting tins nearby, stop breathing:

"那排到头呢? 喝汤的时候, 能挑口味不? (Nà pái dào tóu ne? Hē tāng de shíhou, néng tiāo kǒuwèi bù?)" And at the front of the queue? When we drink the soup — do we get to choose our flavor?

And Popo, goddess or granny, mechanism or mercy, set down her ladle and answered the only doctrinal sentence she ever produced in Xiaoman's hearing:

"五味都有一点。苦的最多。(Wǔ wèi dōu yǒu yīdiǎn. Kǔ de zuì duō.)"

A little of all five flavors. Mostly bitter.

The five flavors — 酸苦甘辛咸 (suān kǔ gān xīn xián), sour, bitter, sweet, pungent, salty. The almanac page Xiao Fei would find years later in a secondhand bookstall, corner torn where a recipe should be. The name of the ledger itself, spoken once by Kang Dazhi who had glimpsed it open: 五味簿 (Wǔwèi bù). The Five-Flavors Book. A theology assembled entirely from fragments, none of them confirmed, all of them consistent, which is more than most cities manage about their own dead.

In August, on the first anniversary

The blue umbrellas were the case that broke her census open. She'd recorded them as anomaly and moved on — anomalies were the account's daily bread — but in June a second wave arrived, and this time the umbrellas were opened: standing upright on the station plaza overnight, unattended, canopies out, arranged with no pattern she could detect until she overlaid a metro map and found each one marking, within fifty meters, a place where a survivor had been

pulled from water. Thirty-one umbrellas. The rain had stopped eleven months prior.

She asked Popo about it directly, the only time she ever asked about a migration point-blank, and received the lane's deepest weather report:

"城记性太好，也得给它打伞 (Chéng jìxìng tài hǎo, yě děi gěi tā dǎ sǎn)，" the old woman said, eyes on her cauldron. "不然下起雨来没完。(Bùrán xià qǐ yǔ lái méi wán.)"

A city with too good a memory needs umbrellas too. Otherwise once the rain starts, there's no end to it.

In August came the first anniversary — the city providing no official ceremony beyond a news item praising reconstruction — and the queue formed itself again at Shakoulu, longer than 2021's, silent, and this time the flowers came with cards, and the cards with sentences, and Xiao Fei filmed every card he could reach before the trucks arrived at dawn, and his mirror upload stayed up for eleven days, long enough for half a province to walk through it once, slowly, the way you walk through a museum of weather.

Qiao Shulan read all of it. That fact belongs to her chapters; but the braid requires saying here only this: on the night of August 19th, 2022, someone stood at the mouth of Baihuo Lane for forty minutes without crossing to the table, and left before the queue could see her face, and the lane's one security camera — installed by Master Yao against theft, aimed too low, useful only for feet — recorded two low heels, motionless, in winter-cropped trousers, turning away at last with the deliberate tread of a person who has decided to fight something with the only weapon left: patience.

Xiaoman watched the footage the next morning. She recognized the shoes. She said nothing, and wrote in the running-water account, and underlined nothing, and slept badly, dreaming of ledgers whose pages turned themselves.

CHAPTER 20

Chunchun's Questions

Chunchun kept her questions in a red notebook with a cartoon bear on the cover, and she asked them at the rate of approximately one per homework break, which meant theology in this lane arrived at the speed of long division.

The winter's catalog, reproduced here from that notebook (the bear one; the other came later), because no summary survives contact with the originals:

问：奶奶，汤为啥是苦的？要是甜的大家不是更爱喝？(Wèn: nǎinai, tāng wèi shá shì kǔ de? Yàoshi tián de dàjiā bú shì gèng ài hē?) Q: Grandma, why is the soup bitter? Wouldn't people like it more if it were sweet? 答（Popo）：药哪有甜的。有甜的你当奶茶喝了。(Dá: yào nǎ yǒu tián de. Yǒu tián de nǐ dāng nǎichá hē le.) A: Medicine is never sweet. Sweet, you'd treat it like milk tea.

问：忘了的东西去哪儿了？(Wèn: wàng le de dōngxi qù nǎr le?) Q: Where do forgotten things go? 答: 挪窝了。城里这么大，总有地方放。(Dá: nuó wō le. Chéng lǐ zhème dà, zǒng yǒu dìfang fàng.) A: They moved house. A city this size always has room.

问：那要是全城都满了呢？放不下了呢？(Wèn: nà yàoshi quán chéng dōu mǎn le ne? Fàng bù xià le ne?) Q: And if the whole city gets full? Nowhere left to put it? （此题无答。奶奶擦了半天本来就干净的桌子。）(Cǐ tí wú dá. Nǎinai cā le bàntiān běnlái jiù gānjìng de zhuōzi.) (This question received no answer. Grandma wiped the table for a long time. It was already clean.)

问：你怕过水吗？(Wèn: nǐ pà guò shuǐ ma?) Q: Have you ever been afraid of water? 答: 怕过三回。头一回1958，第二回1975，第三回——(Dá: pà guò sān huí. Tóu yī huí 1958, dì èr huí 1975, dì sān huí——) A: Three times. The first in 1958, the second in 1975, the third— （小满姐从市场回来，问题作废。）(Xiǎomǎn jiě cóng shìchǎng huílái, wèntí zuòfèi.) (Sister Xiaoman returned from the market. Question voided by events.)

Xiaoman read the bear notebook eventually — Chunchun showed it to her, spring of 2023, with the ceremony of a state archive declassifying itself — and

what struck her was not the answers but the pattern of their delivery. Popo answered everything except the true questions, and the true questions she answered with weather or silence or a task suddenly needing doing. Yet each deflection contained, folded inside it like steam inside vapor, exactly one true thing. Bitter as medicine. Moved house. The table already clean. It was catechism by way of misdirection: the girl would spend years unpacking sentences she'd accepted at face value at twelve.

The exception — the one answer Popo gave whole, unguarded, at full length — came in February, unprompted, apropos of nothing, while they waited for the kettle. Chunchun had not asked anything. Perhaps that was why.

"恁这个年纪 (Nèn zhège niánjì)，" the old woman said, ladling imaginary soup into air, "记性好得像新锅。啥都粘。俺像恁这么大的时候，记性也好。后来俺发现记性跟锅一样——得开锅。得拿油烧一遍，烧到冒烟，擦净，再烧。不开锅的锅，一辈子粘底。(Jìxìng hǎo de xiàng xīn guō. Shá dōu zhān. Ǎn xiàng nèn zhème dà de shíhou, jìxìng yě hǎo. Hòulái ǎn fāxiàn jìxìng gēn guō yīyàng——děi kāi guō. Děi ná yóu shāo yī biàn, shāo dào mào yān, cā jìng, zài shāo. Bù kāi guō de guō, yībèizi zhān dǐ.)"

At your age, memory is like a new pot. Everything sticks. Mine stuck too, when I was your age. Then I learned memory is like a wok — it has to be seasoned. Burned with oil till it smokes, wiped clean, burned again. An unseasoned pot sticks for life.

"那咋开锅哩？(Nà zǎ kāi guō lī?)" How do you season a memory?

"疼一回 (Téng yī huí)，" said Popo, "然后接着做饭。(Ránhòu jiēzhe zuòfàn.)"

Hurt once. Then keep cooking.

Chunchun wrote it down in the bear notebook and drew, beneath it, without deciding to, a small bowl — upside down, though she didn't know yet what that meant, wouldn't know until 2021 taught the whole lane the sign for a table set toward somebody gone — and below the bowl she wrote the date: 二〇二二年二月十九 (Èr líng èr èr nián èr yuè shíjiǔ)。

Years afterward, teaching pours under Tower C, she would tell apprentices that her entire training fit in two sentences written under a cartoon bear, and

that everything else — the ledger, the five flavors, the rules recited at inheritance — was commentary on those two, and that the oldest teacher in Henan had delivered them free of charge to a twelve-year-old precisely because the old woman knew what lanes know: that doctrine spoken to adults becomes politics, but doctrine spoken to children becomes memory, and memory is the only thing this city has ever managed to keep without anyone's signature.

CHAPTER 21

The Anniversary Nobody Announced

One year. The city's official position on the first anniversary was that there wasn't one.

Not a decree — nothing so honest as a decree. A drift of small absences: no ceremony scheduled, no statement planned, the day passing through the municipal calendar like water through that pump at Shakoulu, noted, signed-for, unaddressed. The evening news would run something about flood prevention infrastructure improvements, everyone agreed in advance, and it did, four minutes of pumps and sandbags and an official inspecting an official holding a clipboard, and then the weather, and then a feature about a man in Zhoukou who grew 200-jin pumpkins.

The city itself disagreed with its own position, quietly, at working volume.

Xiaoman spent the morning at Shakoulu, where by ten a.m. the flower barrier had reformed without organizers, permits, or any mechanism sociology could name. People came in ones: a woman in office clothes who stood three minutes exactly and left before her courage could cost her anything; two teenagers who'd been in primary school during the flood and knew it only as the thing adults went quiet about; an old man who laid down his flowers, straightened them twice, saluted nothing, and walked away crying without noise, which she was learning was the Henan way — grief here ran on rails too, scheduled, contained, delivered where it needed to go.

She did not film. She had not filmed at the station since the first month. But she counted, because counting was her form of witness now, and by dusk the count stood at six hundred and forty-one visitors, roughly nine hundred bouquets (many people brought multiples; some brought single stems held like cigarettes), and eleven separate acts of what she came to call maintenance: strangers picking up dropped wrapping paper, righting tipped bouquets, refilling a plastic bottle someone had left as a vase. The city cleaning up after its own

heart, unprompted, unpaid, at a site where official crews had orders to clear everything by dawn anyway.

At noon she rode to Baihuo Lane. Popo had opened early — first time on a weekday since the shutdown — and the stall was serving a slow, solemn traffic: not the grief queue, which kept to the station, but the overflow, the ones for whom standing at Shakoulu was more than the year had left them strength for. They drank in silence. Popo poured in silence. Xiaoman worked the tins and watched her teacher do the thing teachers do that can't be taught: be ordinary, on demand, at the exact hour when being ordinary is hardest.

At 18:04 — she checked her watch; she always checked now; 18:04 was the minute dispatch asked and the system chose waiting — Popo stopped pouring. Stood. Turned to face east, toward the station district, hands folded over the ladle handle, and stood for one full minute while the lane's customers, understanding nothing and everything, rose with her.

Then she sat back down and said *zhōng* to the cauldron, and resumed.

That evening Xiao Fei posted his anniversary video — cards at the station, the queue of flowers, no faces, no music, just rain sounds he'd recorded in July and saved for exactly this. It stayed up nineteen hours, gathered two hundred thousand views, and came down at 3 p.m. the next day for incomplete information. He mirrored it within the hour. By week's end it had been seen in Henan, Shaanxi, Guangdong, and — per a comment from a username in simplified-then-traditional script — by a Zhengzhou native working in Kuala Lumpur who wrote, in a sentence Xiaoman copied into the running-water account:

在外头五年了。看到沙口路那把伞，俺在夜市当街哭了。丢人。中。(Zài wàitou wǔ nián le. Kàndào Shākǒulù nà bǎ sǎn, ǎn zài yèshì dāngjiē kū le. Diūrén. Zhōng.) Five years away from home. I saw that umbrella at Shakoulu and cried in the middle of a night market. Shameful. And fine.

Shameful. And fine. The whole city's position on its own grief, compressed into four characters by a homesick stranger on the far side of the sea. She underlined it twice, and slept, and dreamed of queues that formed themselves out of umbrellas, each umbrella open, each dry underneath.

CHAPTER 22

The Refusal, Overheard (October 2022) [QIAO POV]

The second visit, Qiao Shulan planned.

She told herself it was reconnaissance — the campaign's mandate technically extended to "unlicensed food service in residential alleys," and Baihuo Lane was both — but she wore no work badge and drove no white sedan; she came by bus in a down jacket with her collar up, which was its own kind of confession.

The lane at dusk in October: persimmon trees in a courtyard dropping fruit nobody claimed; laundry lines like signal flags between buildings; the smell of coal smoke from somewhere, though the district banned coal years ago. And the table. The stool. The old woman, ladling for three customers, unhurried as geology.

Shulan waited until they'd gone. Then she crossed, sat on the crate across the table — uninvited, unoffered, the old woman making no move either way — and put her hands flat on the wood. Both palms. The posture had become involuntary, these days. Pressing things down.

"上回恁说，俺想忘的是签字那只手。(Shànghuí nèn shuō, ǎn xiǎng wàng de shì qiānzì nà zhī shǒu.)" Last time you said what I want to forget is the hand that signed. "俺想了十个月。恁错了。(Ǎn xiǎng le shí gè yuè. Nèn cuò le.)"

I thought about it for ten months. You were wrong.

The ladle paused. Encouraged, she went on, voice low, urgent, the voice of a woman presenting findings:

"I want to forget that I believed order was mercy. I want to forget the phrase *jīběn shǔshí*. I want to forget that my signature passed through channels that shaved four hundred names off a province's grief while I certified the arithmetic." A breath. "That's what I ask to forget. Take it."

She heard how it sounded even as she said it — a requisition form addressed to the supernatural, columns offered where currency wouldn't fit — and hated

herself, and kept going anyway, because this was the only counter left open to her, the one office above all her offices, the final desk where an account might still be filed.

Popo set down the ladle. Folded her hands on the table — small hands, burn-scarred at the wrist, a history Shulan would never be told — and looked at her for a long moment with those eyes that went around stones.

Then she spoke, and every word arrived separately, like items read into a record:

"恁想忘的，不是错。是罚。(Nèn xiǎng wàng de, bú shì cuò. Shì fá.)"

What you want to forget is not the wrong. It is the punishment.

"You think I haven't paid?" Shulan's voice cracked on the last word, twenty-six years of composure failing along a hairline. "I signed away my own nephew's name—"

"恁签的时候不知道。(Nèn qiān de shíhou bù zhīdào.)" When you signed, you didn't know. Flat. Not absolution — weather report. "现在恁知道了。所以恁坐在这儿，想让汤替恁把知道这件事也删掉。(Xiànzài nèn zhīdào le. Suǒyǐ nèn zuò zài zhèr, xiǎng ràng tāng tì nèn bǎ zhīdào zhè jiàn shì yě shān diào.)"

Now you know. So you sit here wanting the soup to delete the knowing too.

The steam moved between them. Somewhere behind Shulan, a curtain twitched; the lane watched everything; lanes always had.

"If I drink," Shulan said slowly, testing each word like thin ice, "and the soup takes something else—"

"—它拿走恁剩下的那个信字 (Tā ná zǒu nèn shèngxià de nàge xìn zì)，" said Popo. It will take what belief you have left.

And Shulan understood, sitting on the crate in the coal-smelling dark, exactly what that meant: not her faith in order, that had already died in a conference room with a speakerphone. No — the other thing. The working belief, the load-bearing one: that effort meant something; that showing up with correct forms and folded authority could hold back water, literal or official; that she was, at bottom, competent at her own life. The soup would take that, because that was

the hand still gripping. And she would become one of the lane's hollow ones, walking upright, missing the beam that held her up.

She stood. Straightened her jacket. Twenty-six years of standing made the motion smooth, but the old woman watched it happen anyway, and knew what it cost, the way one craftswoman knows another's work.

"俺不喝 (Ǎn bù hē)," Shulan said. I won't drink. "但俺会回来。恁这个摊子开一天，俺就记一天账。(Dàn ǎn huì huílái. Nèn zhège tānzi kāi yī tiān, ǎn jiù jì yī tiān zhàng.)"

But I'll come back. As long as your stall opens, I'll keep accounts.

zhōng, said Popo, pouring herself the last of the pot. "排队的多了。(Páiduì de duō le.)"

Fine. The queue gets longer.

They were, both women understood without saying, no longer talking about the stall.

The drive home took her past Shakoulu. She hadn't planned the route; her hands had. The station stood dark against the wet road, its barriers holding back nobody at midnight, and on the plaza where flowers had been removed that morning by her own crews' schedule, the pavement still showed their ghosts: pale rectangles of unweathered stone where bouquets had sat long enough to shield the ground from rain.

A city writing in negatives. She sat in the parked car looking at those rectangles — proof, arranged in rows, of everything her mandate called clutter — and understood she was reading the only honest map of her district in existence: not the blue-corrected banners, not the inspection binders, but the shadows of what people insist on leaving when no one is watching.

She wrote one line in the pocket notebook before driving on:

拆花容易。拆花站过的地方，得先承认那儿站过东西。(Chāi huā róngyì. Chāi huā zhàn guò de dìfang, děi xiān chéngrèn nàr zhàn guò dōngxi.)

Easy to remove flowers. To remove where flowers stood, you must first admit something stood there.

CHAPTER 23

The Ledger

She stole it. There is no other honest verb.

Not from malice and not for gain — she couldn't have sold it or read it entirely, since half its entries were in hands that weren't Popo's current one and scripts that predated simplification — but from the specific desperation of an apprentice who has been refused the pot one winter too many. On a night in late December when Popo went early to bed with one of her silences — the bad kind, the kind that had been deepening all autumn, the old woman's hands slower on the ladle now, her pauses longer than the drinkers' — Xiaoman took the Five-Flavors Book from inside the coat hanging on the stall's hook, and sat under the awning with a flashlight between her teeth, and opened it.

The first entry was dated March 1963.

Not Popo's hand. A rounder script, ink faded to the color of weak tea:

李氏，四十七。求忘其子。汤取其怨。怨归灶。(Lǐ shì, sìshíqī. Qiú wàng qí zǐ. Tāng qǔ qí yuàn. Yuàn guī zào.) Li, female, forty-seven. Asked to forget her son. Soup took her resentment. The resentment returned to the stove.

Page after page. Different decades, different hands — at least six scripts across the book, some formal, some barely literate, one in what looked like brushwork done standing up in bad light. Same formula each time: name, ask, what it took, where it went. 怨归灶。恨入井。悔还河。(Yuàn guī zào. Hèn rù jǐng. Huǐ huán hé.) Resentment to the stove. Hate into the well. Regret returned to the river. As though grief were a substance the city could metabolize if only someone kept the books balanced.

And then, halfway through 1967, the hands stop, and a single hand begins — hers, unmistakably, the cramped upright characters she knew from price signs — and continues, decade by decade, entry by entry, down to October of that very year:

乔淑兰，五十四。求忘签字之手。未饮。账悬。(Qiáo Shūlán, wǔshísì. Qiú wàng qiānzì zhī shǒu. Wèi yǐn. Zhàng xuán.) Qiao Shulan, fifty-four. Asked to forget the signing hand. Did not drink. Account suspended.

Account suspended. Even refusals were ledgered. Xiaoman turned pages backward, hunting, her flashlight shaking, and found July 2021, and the entries for the train — fourteen names, each with an ask and a taking, recorded in Popo's hand over the days after the flood, though every one of those fourteen people was already dead; and beside each name, in place of where it took, a single repeated character:

等。(Děng.)

Waiting.

She read that page four times. The soup had taken nothing from the dead because the dead drink at their own bridge, on their own schedule, in their own queue — 等待 (děngdài), waiting — and until they drank, whatever they carried stayed theirs, held somewhere, owed somewhere. Her mother's name was fifth on that page. Mèng Hé. *Qiú: wú. Qǔ: wú. Děng.*

Asked: nothing. Taken: nothing. Waiting.

Xiaoman closed the book and sat in the coal-smelling dark with her whole body humming like a struck wire, and did not hear Popo come out of the back room, and jumped violently when the old woman's voice said, directly above her, without anger, in the tone of someone confirming weather:

"现在恁知道了为啥不教。(Xiànzài nèn zhīdào le wèi shá bù jiāo.)"

Now you know why I don't teach.

Because to serve the pot you must keep the accounts, and to keep the accounts is to know that mercy has a backlog. That somewhere a queue of the dead stands holding everything the living couldn't carry for them, waiting to set it down at a bridge Xiaoman had filmed as a joke in June 2020, painted plank propped on crates.

"她还在等 (Tā hái zài děng), " Xiaoman said. Her mother is still waiting. Not a question.

"都在等 (Dōu zài děng)," said Popo. They are all waiting. She took the ledger back with both hands, the way she'd once accepted bitter leaves from Dr.

Bai, bowing slightly, honoring the weight of it. “俺排了一辈子队了。(Ǎn pái le yībèizi duì le.)”

I’ve spent my life in that queue.

She turned back toward the room. Stopped. Spoke without turning, which was how she said anything that mattered:

“锅快是恁的了。(Guō kuài shì nèn de le.)”

The pot will be yours soon enough.

That night Xiaoman dreamed of the bridge — the real one this time, or the realer one: not a painted plank but something vast and lit from below, and a queue on it stretching past sight, patient as water finding level, and at a small table mid-span an army-surplus stool, empty.

CHAPTER 24

The Policeman Who Stood

He came eleven Thursdays before he drank.

Xiaoman logged him the first time without knowing what she was logging: a man in his early thirties, plainclothes but plainclothes the way policemen are — haircut, posture, shoes too clean for any honest work — who stood at the lane's mouth one full evening, watching the stall, and left without approaching. The second Thursday he made it to the fruit seller's old spot. The third, to the queue itself, where he stood at the end and did not advance even as it emptied.

"他是警察 (tā shì jǐngchá)， " Xiao Fei reported from the bookstall's intelligence division. He's police. "去年在隧道那边执勤的。俺见过他。(Qùnián zài suìdào nàbiān zhíqín de. Ǎn jiàn guò tā.)"

On tunnel duty last year. I've seen him there.

Which reframed everything: not surveillance, or not only that. The tunnel had been policed in July 2021 — a cordon, then a recovery operation, then months of the specific aftermath that falls on men whose job was the barrier, the traffic stop, the standing between the public and what lies past it. Some of those men had carried things out of the water that no debriefing covered, because debriefings cover incidents and this was inventory.

His name, when it finally arrived at the table with him, was Qin Zhou. His ask, delivered on the eleventh Thursday in a voice sanded down to officialdom's bare studs, was the one Xiaoman had come to fear most, because it was the most reasonable:

"让俺忘掉那晚上抬出来的重量。就重量，别的都留着。(Ràng ǎn wàngdiào nà wǎnshang tái chūlái de zhòngliàng. Jiù zhòngliàng, biéde dōu liúzhe.)" Let me forget the weight of what we carried out that night. Just the weight; keep all the rest.

Because he remembered everything and wished to keep everything — faces, names, the small personal effects logged into evidence bags, the phone still playing music in a dead girl's pocket because the screen had cracked against the

volume button — and the only thing his body refused to store properly was the physics. Arms remembered. Arms woke him.

Popo heard the ask out. Poured nothing. Said: "下礼拜四来。(Xià lǐbàisì lái.)" Come next Thursday.

And on the twelfth Thursday she poured him a cup of something visibly different — darker, with the sour edge riding higher — and he drank, and the pause ran three seconds, and when he surfaced she said only:

"重量还在。恁的胳膊不替俺记账了。(Zhòngliàng hái zài. Nèn de gēbo bú tì ǎn jì zhàng le.)"

The weight remains. Your arms have stopped keeping my accounts.

Which was exactly, precisely, the tariff the soup assessed: not amnesia but jurisdiction. He would wake, some mornings, with the sense of having carried something, the way you wake remembering you drove home though not the road. But the arms no longer filed nightly reports. Evidence stayed where evidence belonged — in files, in testimony he would give, in the archive of things a city owes its dead — and the body got to be just a body again, walking a beat, eating lunch, standing in queues behind other people for once.

Qin Zhou came back monthly after that, off-duty, drank only tea, and became one of the lane's quiet fixtures: the man who stood nearest the lane's mouth whenever anything official loomed, radiating a policeman's most useful gift, which is the ability to make trouble decide against itself. When Clean Streets trucks probed Nongke Road in 2022, they found reason to route elsewhere. Nobody proved anything. Lanes don't prove.

And once — only once, the night the State Council report's findings reached the news in full, when half the province sat in front of screens reading numbers that families had begged for eighteen months — he appeared at the table after closing, poured himself tea from Popo's pot uninvited, an intimacy he'd never attempted, and said:

"俺们那晚上拦着不让进去的人里头，有几个是记者。(Ǎnmen nà wǎnshang lán zhe bú ràng jìnqù de rén lǐtou, yǒu jǐ gè shì jìzhě.)" Among the people we held back that night, some were reporters. "上头说秩序。俺信了秩序。(Shàngtou shuō zhìxù. Ǎn xìn le zhìxù.)"

The orders said order. I believed in order.

He looked at the cauldron a long moment.

"现在俺觉得 (xiànzài ǎn juéde)，" he said, "秩序跟记性是一伙的，不是一伙的，得看它站在哪边的水里。(Zhìxù gēn jìxìng shì yīhuǒ de, bú shì yīhuǒ de, děi kàn tā zhàn zài nǎbiān de shuǐ lǐ.)" Now I think order and memory are on the same side — or they aren't — depending on which side of the water it's standing in.

Popo took her cup back, refilled it, pushed it across. Full payment for the sentence. Neither of them ever referred to it again.

CHAPTER 25

The Second Bowl

Her name was Feng Xiuying and she sold breakfast baozi two lanes over, and everyone liked her, which is the worst part.

Her son had been in the Jingguang tunnel that July — not drowned; pulled out alive with water in his lungs and a terror of rain that ended his delivery career and, slowly, everything else. He moved back home. He sat by her window. In the winter he began to go days without speaking, and in March he stood on the roof of their building for an hour in the middle of the night, and came down when she begged him, and in April he was gone anyway — pills, a note about the sound of water, twenty-six years old.

Feng Xiuying drank her first bowl three days after the funeral. Asked to forget the note's exact wording. The soup took instead her ability to picture his face at rest — she could see it moving, laughing, frowning, but stillness was gone from it, which broke her freshly each morning until she learned to keep photos face-down.

She came back in six weeks. Popo refused. She came back monthly. Refused, refused, refused — and then one evening in April 2023, when Popo had gone to the well-water point and left Xiaoman minding the pot alone for the first time ever, ten minutes, an errand timed to the minute, Feng Xiuying appeared at the table with tears already running and both hands flat on the wood, palms down, pressing, pressing:

"求恁。俺就想再忘一点。就一点。(Qiú nèn. Ǎn jiù xiǎng zài wàng yīdiǎn. Jiù yīdiǎn.)"

I'm begging you. I just want to forget a little more. Just a little.

And Xiaoman — twenty-five years old, carrying her own unplayed voicemail like a stone sewn into her coat, knowing every rule, having copied them out in her own hand — looked at this woman whose grief made hers look manageable, and heard herself say the fatal sentence:

"One more won't be a second bowl if I pour it half-strength."

The lie had physics on its side. That's what no one tells you about rules: they break along the seams where mercy pools. Half-strength felt like engineering, like the pumps that never got changed, like signing a form because the form seemed basically true.

She ladled. The woman drank. The pause lasted seven seconds.

What came back up out of the stillness was Feng Xiuying, recognizable, upright, calm — calmer than anyone had seen her since April — who thanked Xiaoman in a clear voice, paid for tea she hadn't been offered, walked steadily out of the lane and around the corner, and did not know her own son's name anymore. Not the death. The name itself. All of it: the boy, the word, the whole shelf in her mind wiped to the wall, and with it — this emerged over the terrible following week, as neighbors reported in — the reason she rose at four to knead dough, and the customers' names, and her husband's face as anything other than a man who owed her money, and finally, by Friday, any stable sense of being a self at all. Second bowls don't take grief. They take the container.

They found her on Sunday at the river flats north of the city, alive, kneeling in the silt planting something that turned out to be chopsticks, calling every passerby 乖，回家吃饭 (guāi, huí jiā chīfàn) — sweet child, come home to eat — to everyone, to no one, to whoever her son was now.

Popo did not scold.

For three days the stall didn't open at all, and the lane, reading weather, let it stay shut. On the fourth day word came down from Chunchun's mother — the lane's nervous system running as always through its aunties — that the old woman had been seen at dawn walking the river flats alone, and back by noon, and that her face when she passed the persimmon tree had been the face of someone returning from a meeting where she'd been overruled.

Xiaoman spent those four days doing what guilt does: everything and nothing. She cleaned a cauldron that was already clean. She re-sorted tins by criteria no one used. She drafted — mentally, then on paper, then burned in the cauldron's dying coals — six versions of a confession that would have changed nothing, because the fault needed no discovery; it had been witnessed at full strength by its only possible judge. Scolding would have required there exist a punishment proportionate to use, and the old woman understood arithmetic

too well for that. What she did was worse. She sat through Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday in total silence, serving no one, the stall dark; and on Thursday she took out the ledger and wrote, while Xiaoman knelt the whole day on the frozen crate beside the table waiting to be dismissed, exiled, cursed, and was not even looked at.

Friday, Popo spoke once, at closing, without turning:

“锅还没是恁的。(Guō hái méi shì nèn de.)”

The pot is not yet yours.

Meaning: not yet. Meaning also, in the grammar of the lane: and what happened may have moved it further away forever, or closer — because the lesson had finally been administered in the only dosage that takes. Xiaoman understood both readings. She chose, deliberately, the one she could survive.

Feng Xiuying’s family moved her to Luoyang in May, to an aunt with a courtyard. Before the van left, Xiaoman brought a thermos of plain kǔdīng chá to the window where the woman sat, and said, 婶儿，天热，喝口茶 (shěnr, tiān rè, hē kǒu chá) — auntie, it’s hot, have some tea — and Feng Xiuying smiled the smile of the profoundly unhoused and said:

“俺闺女真好。(Ǎn guīnǚ zhēn hǎo.)” My girl is so good.

Xiaoman walked home and, for the first time since 17:42, played eleven seconds of the voicemail.

CHAPTER 26

What Dr. Bai Kept Under Her Tongue

The smell of wet concrete followed Bai Jingwen for two years before the soup, and three years after it in diminished form, and she became the lane's unofficial chronicler of how trauma actually leaves — not with a door closing but like water finding every crack downward.

She'd been an ER resident in August 2021 at the receiving hospital nearest the tunnel. That night and the forty after, her hands did what hands do: compressions, intubations, forms. Her nose did what noses do worse: recorded. Wet concrete — the tunnel's exhaled breath on every survivor brought in — soaked into her limbic system as the master key of that summer, and for two years afterward the smell could put her on the floor: rain on any construction site, the underpass by her own hospital, once catastrophically a bag of fresh cement in a hardware store.

The soup had taken, in October 2021, her fear of the smell — jurisdiction of the flinch, not the file. She could ride the metro again within the month; she volunteered at Shakoulu every 20th; she functioned. But function, she told Xiaoman over their standing Thursday teas, is not the same as settled:

"汤把'怕'拿走了。没把'闻到'拿走。俺现在闻见湿水泥，心不跳了，可脑子还是会说：二〇二一年七月。像看别人的档案。(Tāng bǎ 'pà' ná zǒu le. Méi bǎ 'wéndào' ná zǒu. Ǎn xiànzài wén jiàn shī shuǐní, xīn bú tiào le, kě nǎozi hái shì huì shuō: èr líng èr yī nián qīyuè. Xiàng kàn biérén de dàng'ǎn.)" The soup removed the fear. Not the smelling. When I catch wet concrete now my heart doesn't race, but my head still says: July 2021. Like reading someone else's file.

Which was, Xiaoman understood, exactly the tariff the lane's whole mechanism ran on: the soup was never erasure. It was re-shelving. The archive stayed complete; only the alarm system got rewired.

Bai Jingwen's own addition to lane doctrine came from the medical side, and she delivered it the way doctors deliver everything, as a case presentation nobody asked for:

"俺们这行有个词叫'创伤后成长'，教科书上的。都是废话。(Ǎnmen zhè háng yǒu gè cí jiào 'chuāngshāng hòu chéngzhǎng', jiàokēshū shàng de. Dōu shì fèihuà.)" Her profession had a term, post-traumatic growth; textbook nonsense. "真的过程是这样的：第一年你活。第二年你撑着。第三年某天你在排队买包子，突然发现自己哼歌了，然后你在队里哭了，因为哼歌意味着你活过来了，而活着过来意味着他们死了，两件事一起到，谁也拦不住。(Zhēn de guòchéng shì zhèyàng de: dì yī nián nǐ huó. Dì èr nián nǐ chēng zhe. Dì sān nián mǒu tiān nǐ zài páiduì mǎi bāozi, tūrán fāxiàn zìjǐ hēng gē le, ránhòu nǐ zài duì lǐ kū le, yīnwèi hēng gē yìwèizhe nǐ huó guòlái le, ér huózhe guòlái yìwèizhe tāmen sǐ le, liǎng jiàn shì yīqǐ dào, shuí yě lán bú zhù.)"

The real process: year one you survive. Year two you hold yourself up. Year three, some day in a baozi queue, you catch yourself humming — and cry right there, because humming means you came through, and having come through means they didn't, and both arrive together and nothing can stop them.

"所以别信任何让你跳过第二年的东西 (suǒyǐ bié xìn rènhé ràng nǐ tiàoguò dì èr nián de dōngxi)， " she said, looking around the table at all of them, at the stall itself. "包括这碗。这碗不让你跳。它只是陪你站第二年。(Bāokuò zhè wǎn. Zhè wǎn bú ràng nǐ tiào. Tā zhǐ shì péi nǐ zhàn dì èr nián.)"

She looked around the table at all of them, at the stall itself.

The queue went quiet around her. Somewhere behind the tins a kettle chose its moment and began to sing. And Chunchun — sixteen then, forensic as ever — asked the question everyone was thinking:

"那第二年咋认出来哩？(Nà dì èr nián zǎ rèn chūlái lī?)"

How do you recognize year two when it comes?

Dr. Bai considered this with clinical care.

"第二年就是：恁能笑了，但笑完会累。第三年才是：笑完不累了，可恁记得为啥曾经不能笑。别跳站。每一站都得下车走走。(Dì èr nián jiù shì: nèn néng xiào le, dàn xiào wán huì lèi. Dì sān nián cái shì: xiào wán

bú lèi le, kě nèn jìde wèi shá céngjīng bù néng xiào. Bié tiào zhàn. Měi yī zhàn dōu děi xià chē zǒu zou.)"

Year two is: you can laugh again, but laughing tires you out. Year three: laughing doesn't tire you anymore — but you remember why it once did. Don't skip stations. Get off and walk at every one."

And then, quieter, the sentence she'd come to deliver:

"*Bāokuò zhè wǎn. Zhè wǎn bú ràng nǐ tiào. Tā zhǐ shì péi nǐ zhàn dì èr nián.*" Including this bowl. This bowl doesn't skip anything. It just stands with you through the second year.

Xiaoman entered it in the running-water account under doctrine-adjacent, and thought of Popo's two sentences to Chunchun — hurt once; then keep cooking — and understood that the old woman had been running a second-year facility for fifty years: no skipping, no miracles, just a counter where people could hold themselves up in company until humming returned.

Dr. Bai's third year arrived in August 2024, at the station, on the twentieth, in the middle of the anniversary crowd, when she caught herself — mid-blood-pressure-check, stethoscope in ears — humming Henan opera. An auntie nearby, waiting for her reading, said kindly: 大夫，恁跑调了 (dàifu, nèn pǎo diào le)。Doctor, you're off-key.

"*zhōng*," said Dr. Bai, eyes wet, instrument steady. "三年了，头一回跑调。(Sān nián le, tóu yī huí pǎo diào.)"

Yes. First time off-key in three years.

CHAPTER 27

What Happened to Feng Xiuying

Some threads you follow. Some you keep tied to a post and check on.

Xiaoman kept Feng Xiuying tied to a post.

The Luoyang aunt's courtyard was real; the first year's reports came through the baozi shop's suppliers, who moved flour between cities and gossip with it. Xiuying was calm there, the reports said. Kneaded dough four hours daily whether the family ate it or not. Called every man 哥 (gē), elder brother, and every woman *guāi*, sweet child. Physically well. Unhoused in the way that had no address to fix.

In autumn 2023 a doctor cousin got involved — a real one, Henan University medical school, neurology — and ran whatever tests families run when they want science to hold what folklore is already holding. His conclusion, relayed secondhand through three relatives until it reached Baihuo Lane wearing the confidence of a lab coat: no tumor, no stroke, no nameable dementia. "功能性遗忘 (gōngnéngxìng yíwàng)," he wrote in the family group chat. Functional amnesia. "诱因明确，机制不明。(yòuyīn míngquè, jīzhì bù míng.)" Cause clear. Mechanism unknown.

The aunt printed his message and showed it around like a certificate, which in a way it was: the closest thing to a verdict the visible world would ever issue on Popo's cauldron. Cause clear, mechanism unknown. Xiaoman copied the eight characters into her running-water account and sat with them a long time, because she realized they were also the only honest epitaph the stall itself would ever get, if stalls got epitaphs instead of just getting demolished and re-erected under towers.

Second bowl takes the container. The lane had known it as rule before it knew it as case study. Now it had a face that smiled at strangers from a Luoyang courtyard and kneaded dough for ghosts.

And then — 2025, spring, the report that rearranged everything — the aunt wrote a letter. An actual letter, paper, delivered by flour truck to the bookstall, addressed to 卖汤的闺女 (mài tāng de guīnǚ) — the soup girl:

“俺婶子前天傍晚在院里包包子，包着包着停下来，看着蒸笼冒的气看了好一阵。然后她说了一句谁也没教她的话。她说：‘气跑上去，就不疼了。’(Ǎn shěnzi qiántiān bàngwǎn zài yuàn lǐ bāo bāozi, bāo zhe bāo zhe tíng xiàlái, kàn zhe zhēnglóng mào de qì kàn le hǎo yīzhèn. Ránhòu tā shuō le yī jù shuí yě méi jiāo tā de huà. Tā shuō: ‘Qì pǎo shàngqù, jiù bú téng le.’)

她不知道自己在说啥。可俺听懂了。俺想问恁们一句：那孩子——她儿子——是不是还在哪儿等着？等她把啥东西还给她？(Tā bù zhīdào zìjǐ zài shuō shá. Kě ǎn tīng dǒng le. Ǎn xiǎng wèn nènmen yī jù: nà háizi——tā érzi——shì bú shì hái zài nǎr děng zhe? Děng tā bǎ shá dōngxi huán gěi tā?)

恁要是有法子，替俺们捎个话。就说：秀英在洛阳挺好。叫她别惦记。(Nèn yàoshi yǒu fǎzi, tì ǎnmen shāo gè huà. Jiù shuō: Xiùyīng zài Luòyáng tǐng hǎo. Jiào tā bié diànjì.)”

Your auntie was making baozi in the yard the evening before last, and halfway through she stopped and watched the steam off the steamer for a long time. Then she said something nobody taught her. She said: “It runs up off the steam, and then it doesn’t hurt.”

She doesn’t know what she meant. But I understood. So let me ask you this: that boy — her son — is he still waiting somewhere? Waiting for her to be given back something of hers?

If you have any way, carry a message for us. Tell him: Xiuying is doing fine in Luoyang. Tell him not to worry about her.

Xiaoman read the letter at the stall, at closing, twice, and then did the thing five years of apprenticeship had built her for and nothing could have prepared her for: she opened the ledger, turned to no page in particular, because there was no page — the son had drunk nothing, died owning nothing to the pot, waited nowhere in its keeping — and understood that some messages have no addressee available, and that the lane’s whole theology existed precisely for this gap.

So she did what the living are for. She wrote back to Luoyang, paper, both hands:

“姨，话收到了。会捎到的。桥那边不堵。(Yí, huà shōu dào le. Huì shāo dào de. Qiáo nàbiān bù dǔ.)

另：婶子说的对。气跑上去，就不疼了。恁们那儿蒸笼多，让她多看着点。看着看着，人就跟着气回来看看，也不一定。中不中。(Lìng: shěnzi shuō de duì. Qì pǎo shàngqù, jiù bú téng le. Nènmen nàr zhēnglóng duō, ràng tā duō kàn zhe diǎn. Kàn zhe kàn zhe, rén jiù gēn zhe qì huílái kàn kan, yě bù yīdìng. Zhōng bù zhōng.)”

Auntie, the message is received. It will be delivered. The bridge side has no traffic jams.

Also: your auntie is right. It runs up off the steam and then it doesn’t hurt. You have plenty of steamers in Luoyang; let her watch them. Watch long enough, and maybe a person comes back along the steam now and then to look in. Zhong?

She never learned whether it helped. That is the honest ledger entry. Some accounts you keep without ever seeing them reconciled, and you keep them anyway, because the keeping is the work, and the work is the mercy, and mercy — unlike soup — requires no mechanism anybody can name.

CHAPTER 28

Kaifeng

She left in July. People leave Zhengzhou constantly; the whole province is a machine for exporting its young to coastal cities; leaving is the most ordinary act in the repertoire.

Her reasons, as she filed them: the print shop on Dianjing Road offered her a management track; her stream had withered to a ghost town since she'd stopped posting anything real; the lane had become a place where an old woman grew visibly smaller each month and Xiaoman could not watch that at close range and also function. And underneath all of it, load-bearing, unfiled: a woman in Luoyang calling strangers my girl, and a pot that would one day be hers, and a voicemail forty-five seconds long whose remaining seconds she had now heard exactly once, eleven seconds' worth, enough to know that her mother's voice on it laughed before the rain swallowed the rest. Laughed. At 17:42. Knowing nothing. That laugh had rearranged grief into something she couldn't lift daily.

Kaifeng was forty minutes away by high-speed rail and seven centuries sideways. The print shop did banners, funeral portraits, wedding scrolls, exam-season good-luck posters — the whole paper liturgy of Henan life passing through her hands, ink and laminate, other people's milestones made durable. She was good at it. Management suited the part of her that was her mother's daughter: say *zhōng* to nine thousand people a day; keep the booth stocked; be at your post.

She called Popo every Sunday. The old woman owned no phone; Xiaoman called the noodle shop downstairs from Chunchun's family and the girl relayed across the courtyard on summer evenings, shouting updates between buildings like town crier: 她挺好的！她骂人了，说明有劲！(Tā tǐng hǎo de! Tā mà rén le, shuōmíng yǒu jìn!) She's fine! She swore at somebody today, means she has strength!

In October, Master Yao's surveyors came to Baihuo Lane with red spray paint.

The lane wasn't demolished — not yet, not for years — but the notice went up on the wall by the persimmon tree, official seal, 2026 start date, compensation schedules attached, and the lane's whole nervous system changed overnight the way lanes do: repairs stopped, rents dropped, three families moved out within a season, the fruit seller sold his stall and moved to his daughter's in Xinyang. Urban villages don't die by bulldozer first. They die by anticipation.

On Sundays, sometimes, Chunchun — fourteen now, tall, sullen, brilliant at arithmetic — took the train over with a thermos and sat in Xiaoman's rented room doing homework, and they didn't talk about the pot, and didn't talk about the ledger, and didn't talk about how Popo's Sunday reports had shortened through autumn from paragraphs to sentences to single words: 中。还行。下雨了。(Zhōng. Hái xíng. Xià yǔ le.) Fine. Getting by. It rained.

Kang Dazhi wrote letters. Actual paper letters, because he said texting felt like dropping coins down a well. They were mostly inventories — things he'd fixed: a neighbor's gate hinge, the pool's lane-rope winder, Uncle Gao's umbrella stand, which had rusted through from being carried outdoors in all weathers. He never asked when she was coming back. The letters always ended the same way, in his flat carpenter's hand:

摊子还开着。中不中，恁看着办。(Tānzi hái kāi zhe. Zhōng bù zhōng, nèn kàn zhe bàn.) The stall's still open. Whether that works for you — you decide.

She decided in March, on a Tuesday, standing in the print shop's back room among four hundred funeral portraits waiting for lamination — a hospital contract, a whole ward's worth, faces in every size the machines could cut — when she understood with sudden total clarity that she had taken a job managing the mass production of memory while refusing to apprentice in its keeping, and that this was not irony but cowardice wearing irony's coat.

The clarity arrived mid-inventory, and it had a second floor. She was checking stock — funeral portrait paper, three hundred sheets remaining — when she noticed she'd memorized the hospital's order cycle without meaning to: which wards ordered monthly, which on emergency turnaround, which had gone quiet in ways that meant either improvement or the opposite. Two years in Kaifeng

and she knew this city's grief logistics by heartbeat. She'd become a professional of other people's sorrow at scale, laminated and bound.

And her mother's city had no professional of its own kind. It had an old woman nearly eighty on an army stool, a girl with a bear notebook, a boy with hard drives, a swimmer, a medic, a demolition contractor keeping archives in shipping containers. Volunteers all; love running on charity's erratic current.

Zhengzhou didn't need another manager of grief-at-scale. It needed hands to take the ladle while the old hands still could — so that when they couldn't, no counter anywhere in that whole remembering city would go dark for even one dusk.

She gave notice that afternoon. Her boss, a decent man named Pang who had lost his own mother the year before and never once mentioned it, stamped the paperwork and said only:

"回去守摊儿是好事。(Huíqù shǒu tānr shì hǎo shì.)" Going back to keep a stall is a good thing. "纸留不住人，汤也未必能。但守着的人能。(Zhǐ liú bú zhù rén, tāng yě wèibì néng. Dàn shǒu zhe de rén néng.)"

Paper can't hold people. Soup probably can't either. But the ones who keep the vigil can.

On her last Kaifeng morning, before the high-speed rail carried her forty minutes west and seven centuries sideways back toward home, she did two things. First, she bought a laminator pouch from the shop stock — professional habit — and sealed inside it, for reasons she didn't examine, a printout of a single text message thread: three emojis (an umbrella, a bowl of noodles, a house), dated from a rainy day in 2021. Second, at the station, waiting on the platform with her suitcase among students and salesmen and one soldier sleeping upright against his duffel, she watched the rails curve away toward Zhengzhou and thought about what her mother had told the civics child at the faregate booth: trust the wall, the wall has always been there.

Every city is a wall, she understood then, or wanted to: something that has always been there, load-bearing, indifferent to your phone's dying flashlight. The lane was her wall. The stool was her wall. An old woman's silence was a wall. You could spend years trying to improve your life with better light sources, or you could learn where you were standing.

The train came. She got on. Zhengzhou rose out of the plain forty minutes later, ringed in cranes, half-finished, remembering.

CHAPTER 29

The Print Shop

The funeral portraits came in three sizes and every possible history.

Small: for urn shelves, faces no bigger than a matchbox, printed fifty to a sheet for hospitals and homes for the elderly — strangers' whole lives shrunk past the point where the eyes could follow you. Medium: the standard memorial frame, printed one to a page with a black border, the workhorse of grief, four hundred of which once sat in her back room awaiting lamination on a single Tuesday. Large: full banners, 遗像 (yíxiàng) at a meter across, hung over doorways on bamboo poles so that a street could see who was being mourned from the end of the block.

Xiaoman ran the machine that made them and learned, within a month, what ink smells like when it's doing memory's work: sharp, chemical, faintly sweet underneath, the way Popo's cauldron smelled bitter with something sweet under it. Everything in this country's memory economy came down to that structure eventually — harshness outside, sweetness at the bottom, both real.

Her boss Pang kept a drawer of misprints he never discarded. A portrait blurred mid-print; a banner whose black border had slipped, leaving one white edge, like a window left open; once, extraordinarily, a large-format face that had doubled — two exposures, two slightly different versions of the same dead man, offset by centimeters, ghosting himself. Families rejected such things as bad luck. Pang filed them in the drawer instead, unexplained until the night he finally told her, over overtime noodles:

"俺爹走的时候，照相馆给俺的照片就是重影的。俺妈要扔，俺没让。(Ǎn diē zǒu de shíhou, zhàoxiàngguǎn gěi ǎn de zhàopiàn jiù shì chóngyǐng de. Ǎn mā yào rēng, ǎn méi ràng.)" When my father died, the photo studio gave us a double-exposure. My mother wanted to throw it out. I didn't let her.

"Why?"

"一张照片里有两个他。一个是好的时候，一个是病着的时候。俺们家那三年，俩都是真的。(Yī zhāng zhàopiàn lǐ yǒu liǎng gè tā. Yī gè shì

hǎo de shíhou, yī gè shì bìng zhe de shíhou. Ǎnmen jiā nà sān nián, liǎ dōu shì zhēn de.)" Two of him in one photograph. One from when he was well, one from when he was sick. Those three years, both were true.

He closed the drawer. "纸留不住人 (zhǐ liú bú zhù rén)，" he said, repeating his own sermon back at himself. "但纸能同时存住两个真的。这个汤做不到。(Dàn zhǐ néng tóngshí cún zhù liǎng gè zhēn de. Zhège tāng zuò bú dào.)"

Paper can't hold a person. But paper can hold two truths at once. Your soup can't do that.

She thought about that sentence for the rest of her Kaifeng year, because it was the first serious critique of the lane's whole mechanism she'd ever heard spoken aloud, and it had come from a print-shop man with a drawer of ghosts. The soup took one truth and moved it house. Paper held all its truths simultaneously, blurred or not. Maybe that was why her mother's phone mattered more than any bowl ever would: forty-six seconds was not a forgetting or an extraction. It was a recording. Both truths at once — the rain and the laugh — laminated into air.

In February the shop got its strangest order: a woman wanting a banner printed for a living person. Her father, hospitalized, expected to die before spring festival, family wanting the *yíxiàng* ready so the hallway wouldn't need emptying during the holiday rush. Pang took the order without comment. The old man recovered. The banner sat in the family's storage room for eleven years, they later told everyone, wrapped in plastic, an heirloom of the disaster that hadn't happened, brought out at new years to be laughed at and re-wrapped.

"你看 (nǐ kàn)，" said Pang, filing the job's paperwork. "同一张纸。有时候是丧事，有时候是笑话。纸不挑。(Tóng yī zhāng zhǐ. Yǒushíhou shì sāngshì, yǒushíhou shì xiàohuà. Zhǐ bù tiāo.)"

Same sheet of paper. Sometimes a funeral, sometimes a joke. Paper doesn't choose.

Just like a certain soup, Xiaoman did not say, and finished her shift, and went home to pack, because the notice about Baihuo Lane's demolition schedule had come that week, and some counters call their keepers home.

CHAPTER 30

Return

The lane had shrunk but not died. That was her first reading, walking in from Nongke Road with her suitcase wheels grinding the gravel: Baihuo Lane at half-strength, like a man recovered from illness who has learned to live inside a smaller body.

The persimmon tree still stood. The red spray-painted survey marks had faded to pink, half-accepted, like scars. The fruit stall was gone; in its place, of all things, a secondhand bookstall run by Xiao Fei's aunt, paperbacks in wet-weather plastic. And at the lane's mouth, under the awning, the table, the crates, the painted plank — and Popo, smaller than memory, ladling for two customers with hands that took three tries to find the cup rims.

Xiaoman set down the suitcase. The old woman looked up.

Neither said anything for a while. Steam moved. The two drinkers finished, paid their two kuai each, bowed slightly — when had bowing started? — and left.

"恁瘦了 (nèn shòu le)," Popo said at last. You got thin.

"恁也是 (nèn yě shì)。" You too.

"*zhōng*。扯平 (chě píng)。" Fine. Even.

And that was the whole homecoming, because the lane didn't traffic in more, and Xiaoman had missed it exactly that much: a place where love arrived as inventory adjustments.

She took up the apprenticeship where it had paused — water duty, tin-sorting, sitting-with-drinkers, ledger-adjacent chores minus the ledger itself, which returned to living inside the coat. But everything ran on two tracks now, and she knew it, and Popo knew she knew it: the visible track (bitter tea, two kuai, cameras can't lift it) and the other track, which had no name and never would. What changed after Kaifeng was small and total: Popo began letting her pour for certain drinkers. Not the deep cases. The tourists, the jokers, the ones

whose griefs were still loose cargo. But pouring is pouring. Her hands learned the weight of the full ladle, the exact tilt that keeps steam off the wrist.

Dr. Bai came Thursdays now, always standing, and had become something in the metro system — volunteer medic, the one they station at Shakoulu on the 20th of every month when the crowds thicken around an old man with an umbrella. She and Xiaoman had reached the stage of friendship that consists entirely of drinking standing up together without commentary. It was, Xiaoman reflected, the truest relationship format the lane offered.

Uncle Gao swam a kilometer daily. His sign had been through eleven markers and one lamination — she'd done it herself, free, professional pride — and read the same nine characters in her own shop's ink: *Nīnī, bà xué huì yóuyǒng le.* Nini was thirty-three this year. He aged in single decades and double griefs, square-shouldered still, and had taken to calling Xiaoman *guīnǚ*, girl, the way he'd once called his daughter, and everyone in the lane pretended not to hear it, and it held them all up a little.

Chunchun transferred schools to be closer, ostensibly for the science program, actually for the stool beside the cauldron where she did homework and asked questions no theology could survive and Popo answered with weather reports. The girl had begun keeping her own notebook. Xiaoman pretended not to know. Lineage, she was learning, moves by pretending.

Kang Dazhi fixed the cart's axle again on her second day back — it had squeaked all spring, he claimed, though Uncle Gao swore it hadn't — and stood afterward in the lane's mouth shifting his weight like a man waiting for a verdict.

"Dazhi." She made herself say it before courage expired. "礼拜五晚上 (lǐbài-wǔ wǎnshang)。俺做饭 (ǎn zuòfàn)。*húlàtāng*。"

Friday night. I'm cooking. Hu la tang.

He looked at her the way you look at a bridge you've been afraid of crossing. "*zhōng*," he said, hoarse.

Popo, who heard everything the lane heard, washed two cups that evening and set them mouth-up on the shelf, and this time there were already two there, so the shelf now held four, and if you counted right — Xiaoman counted, that night, alone, letting herself — you understood the shelf was a ledger too, and it had been keeping accounts of her longer than she knew.

CHAPTER 31

What Uncle Gao Taught the Pool

The district pool's management had a rule about instructors: certification, employment history, references. Gao Baoshu had a rule about grief: it needs somewhere to put itself down, and children learning to swim are as good a place as any, better than most.

The arrangement began illegally, insofar as anything done at 6 a.m. can be illegal. He swam his kilometer daily; the pool opened at six; the shallow lane filled, by seven, with the children of workers heading to early shifts — dropped off too early for lessons their parents couldn't afford, left splashing under whatever supervision the lifeguard could spare. Gao Baoshu watched this economy of absence for one week, then simply began teaching. No fee. No announcement. A square-shouldered man in his late sixties standing chest-deep in the shallow lane saying 恁腿再抬高点 (nèn tuǐ zài tái gāo diǎn), kick higher, to anyone within reach.

The lifeguard — a sports college student named Dou who owed his own childhood swimming to exactly such an unlicensed elder in Luohe — looked away, professionally, forever.

By the second summer it had form. Parents left envelopes; he returned them inside folded paper boats. The pool management, after a year of pretending not to notice, officially designated him 水上安全志愿者 (shuǐshàng ānquán zhìyuànzhě), aquatic safety volunteer, which converted the fiction into paperwork and cost them nothing but a laminated badge he accepted with both hands and wore clipped to his swim trunks like a medal from a war only he understood.

Because that's what it was, though he'd have denied the word. Every child he taught to cross the pool's width was a sentence finished in an argument he'd been losing since July 20th. Girls don't need to swim; your dad will carry you over any river. He had said it across a newspaper to a nine-year-old who grew into a woman who drowned in a train under twelve feet of floodwater because the city between her and him had failed at every joint where water meets intention. He

could not revise that sentence. But he could spend the rest of his arms making sure no other father ever needed to say it.

He taught them the way Popo poured: rules never stated as rules, absorbed through repetition until they were character. Bare feet grip; shoes kill you in water. Hold the wall till your breathing settles, then let go — panic is just forgetting the wall's still there. And the one he said most, the one the pool kids repeated among themselves as 宝树三定律 (Bǎoshù sān dìnglǜ), Uncle Baoshu's three laws (there was only one; children number things):

"水不欺负会水的人。学。(Shuǐ bù qīfù huì shuǐ de rén. Xué.)"

Water doesn't bully those who can swim. So learn.

Xiaoman came to watch once, in the autumn of 2024, sitting in the bleachers with a thermos while thirty children churned the shallow lane and Gao Baoshu moved among them like a tugboat among ducklings. She watched a girl of about eight — Nini would have been thirty-one that month — refuse the deep-lane edge, toes curled over tile, and watched the old man crouch beside her and say something too quiet for the bleachers. The girl looked up at him. Then she let go of the edge.

On the walk home he told Xiaoman what he'd said, unprompted, because he'd decided she should know:

"俺跟她说：俺闺女也会游。她现在在好大一个池子里游，深得很，可是她不怕，因为她爸教会她的。(Ǎn gēn tā shuō: Ǎn guīnǚ yě huì yóu. Tā xiànzài zài hǎo dà yī gè chízi lǐ yóu, shēn de hěn, kěshì tā bú pà, yīnwèi tā bà jiāohuì tā de.)"

I told her: my daughter can swim too. She swims now in a very big pool, very deep, but she isn't afraid, because her dad taught her.

He looked at the road, not at Xiaoman.

"这句话不算真话 (zhè jù huà bú suàn zhēn huà)，" he said. "也不算假话。中间的话最养人 (yě bú suàn jiǎ huà. Zhōngjiān de huà zuì yǎng rén)。"

That sentence isn't exactly true. It isn't exactly false either. Sentences in between feed people best.

Which was, she thought, the whole theology of the lane restated in poolside grammar — cause clear, mechanism unknown, three parts unsaid so the fourth

part could keep somebody alive — and she wrote it in the running-water account that night, and the account by then had stopped being notes on magic and become what ledgers become when kept long enough: a portrait of the keeper.

CHAPTER 32

The Man Who Asked for the Wrong River

He arrived in June, in the drought year, walking out of the heat shimmer like something the road had exhaled: a man of about seventy, dust-caked, carrying a plastic bag containing one shirt and a brick.

The brick was the first thing everyone noticed and the last thing anyone understood.

He drank without asking, paid his two kuai from a roll of bills rubber-banded so tight it had grooved them, and sat at the table's end through the whole afternoon, turning the brick over and over like a man shuffling a single card. At closing he set it down before Popo with both hands, the way you present a certificate or a grievance, and spoke for the first time:

"这是俺村桥上的。1963年发的洪水，冲了俺们全村的桥。后来修新桥，这块砖是老桥基里起的。(Zhè shì ǎn cūn qiáo shàng de. 1963 nián fā de hóngshuǐ, chōng le ǎnmen quán cūn de qiáo. Hòulái xiū xīn qiáo, zhè kuài zhuān shì lǎo qiáojī lǐ qǐ de.)"

This is from my village's bridge. The 1963 flood took our bridge. When they built the new one, this brick came out of the old foundation.

Xiaoman's skin tightened. 1963. The date on the ledger's first entry — *Lǐ shì, sìshíqī* — written in a hand that wasn't Popo's current one. She kept her eyes on her tins and her ears wide open.

"俺爹是那年的水走的。(Ǎn diē shì nà nián de shuǐ zǒu de.)" His father had gone in that flood. "修新桥那年俺八岁，俺爹的兄弟们都来上梁，喝了主家的酒，俺记得有个老太太也在，管烧水，谁喝了她都问一句记不记得走的人。(Xiū xīn qiáo nà nián ǎn bā suì, ǎn diē de xiōngdìmen dōu lái shàng liáng, hē le zhǔjiā de jiǔ, ǎn jìde yǒu gè lǎotàitai yě zài, guǎn shāo shuǐ, shuí hē le tā dōu wèn yī jù jì bú jìde zǒu de rén.)" He was eight when the new bridge went up; his father's brothers came to set the beam; he remembered an old woman tending the water, asking every man who drank whether he remembered the ones who'd gone.

“俺这回来郑州，是想找她。俺爹走了六十年了，俺想问问她——那年的水底下，还有没有俺家的人没捞上来。(Ǎn zhè huílái Zhèngzhōu, shì xiǎng zhǎo tā. Ǎn diē zǒu le liùshí nián le, ǎn xiǎng wèn wen tā——nà nián de shuǐ dǐxia, hái yǒu méiyǒu ǎn jiā de rén méi lāo shànglái.)”

He’d come to Zhengzhou looking for her. Sixty years gone, his father; he wanted to ask whether anyone from the family had never been recovered from under that water.

The lane held its breath. Here it was, then — the question every apprentice dreads and every drinker secretly carries: proof. A witness from before, holding a foundation brick, asking the goddess for an audit.

Popo picked up the brick. Turned it in her small scarred hands. Read it the way she read drinkers’ faces.

“水底下的人不上账 (Shuǐ dǐxia de rén bú shàng zhàng)， ” she said at last. Those under the water don’t keep to ledgers. “他们的账在河那儿记着。俺这儿只有一样能给你。(Tāmen de zhàng zài hé nàr jì zhe. Ǎn zhèr zhǐ yǒu yī yàng néng gěi nǐ.)”

Then she poured him a cup — but not from the day’s cauldron; from a clay jar kept beneath the table that Xiaoman had never seen opened, sealed with wax gone amber with age. The smell when the wax broke was the lane’s own smell, five flavors, mostly bitter, but older underneath, riverbank-old, mud and willow and someone’s kitchen drowned mid-meal sixty years back.

He drank. And wept — not elegantly; folded over the table, both arms around the cup like a man embracing the neck of the horse that carried his father off — and when he could speak he said the thing that made Xiaoman’s hands shake around her tin-rag for the rest of her life:

“是这个味儿。俺家灶上的味儿。1963年八月里的味儿。恁咋会知道俺家灶上的味儿？(Shì zhège wèir. Ǎn jiā zào shàng de wèir. 1963 nián bāyuè lǐ de wèir. Nèn zǎ huì zhīdào ǎn jiā zào shàng de wèir?)”

That’s the taste. My family’s stove. August 1963. How do you know what my family’s stove tasted like?

And Popo, wrapping the clay jar again with hands that were not entirely steady, gave the only answer she ever gave that sounded like testimony:

“因为俺尝过一回。就那一回。俺一直替人存着。(Yīnwèi ǎn cháng-guò yī huí. Jiù nà yī huí. Ǎn yīzhí tì rén cún zhe.)”

Because I tasted it once. That once. I’ve been keeping it for somebody ever since.

He left the next morning on the early bus, brickless — the brick stayed, set into the base of the stall’s table where Popo directed it be mortared, a foundation under the bridge plank, which is why, though no one outside the lane ever knew it, the stall stood on 1963 the way Zhengzhou itself stands on its rivers: barely, gratefully, and always one flood away from remembering why.

CHAPTER 33

The Rival Stall

Commerce, being water, found the level. In September 2024, eleven years of urban legend condensed into a franchise: 孟婆茶饮 (Mèng Pó cháyǐn), Meng Po Tea & Beverage — a chain, three outlets in Zhengzhou by Christmas, staffed by young women in tasteful gray wigs, serving brown-sugar milk tea under neon bridge signs at 19 kuai a cup. The slogan was everywhere for a season: 喝一杯, 轻一半 (hē yī bēi, qīng yībàn)。 Drink one; half your weight (in sorrow) gone.

The lane's reaction was studied by everyone and dictated by one person.

Xiaoman's first instinct was the modern one: outrage, differentiation, a post. She drafted it three times — the chain had lifted Popo's exact origin story for their packaging copy, five flavors, Naihe Bridge, even a fictionalized granny on the cup sleeves — before carrying the drafts to the stool and reading them aloud, because she'd learned that in this lane you ran nothing past the silence.

Popo listened to all three drafts, ladle resting.

"*zhōng*, " she said. Fine. Then: "恁的粉丝多少？(Nèn de fěnsī duōshao?)" How many followers do you have?

"...两万一。(Liǎng wàn yī.)" Twenty-one thousand.

"他们的奶茶一天卖几万杯。(Tāmen de nǎichá yī tiān mài jǐ wàn bēi.)" Their milk tea sells tens of thousands of cups a day. A pause; steam moved. "俺们这儿的账，奶茶店记不了。可喝过奶茶的年轻人，哪天疼了，知道往有汤的地方走。路修得越多越好。(Ǎnmen zhèr de zhàng, nǎichá diàn jì bù liǎo. Kě hē guò nǎichá de niánqīng rén, nǎ tiān téng le, zhīdào wǎng yǒu tāng de dìfang zǒu. Lù xiū de yuè duō yuè hǎo.)"

A milk tea shop can't keep this lane's accounts. But young people who've drunk their cups — someday when it hurts, they'll know to walk toward where real soup is served. Roads: the more built, the better.

She picked up her ladle and resumed pouring, audience concluded.

It took Xiaoman a week to stop being furious and a month to see the wisdom, watching the chain's customers drift, eventually, down the actual lane: a

pair of college girls who came to photograph the "original" and stayed two hours listening to Old Wei's honest failure to sell them anything; a software developer who'd bought six cups of 19-kuai forgetting and found none of it working, and sat at the real table with shaking hands saying 恁这儿是真的，对吧 (Nèn zhèr shì zhēn de, duì ba)， yours is the real one, right? — and was answered, correctly, *kǔdīng chá*，两块 (liǎng kuài)， bitter leaf tea, two kuai, which is to say: what's real here isn't for sale at any price; sit down anyway.

The chain lasted fourteen months. What killed it wasn't the lane — lanes don't compete; they wait — but its own product: forgetting as flavoring turns out to be a novelty, and novelties have shelf lives. When the last outlet closed, its fixtures were auctioned, and Master Yao attended, and bought, for eighty yuan, the neon bridge sign.

It hung for years afterward in Tower C's ground floor, unlit, beside the painted plank — neon next to brushwork, franchise next to foundation — and if anyone asked about the pairing, Lao Diao gave the stall's official statement:

"一个招人。一个等人。(Yī gè zhāo rén. Yī gè děng rén.)"

One attracts people. One waits for them.

The neon sign stayed dark except in rain for six years, and became, without anyone planning it, the tower district's weather service. Workers coming off night shifts learned to read it from three blocks out: pink glow meant wet roads home, take the covered walkway. Children called it 雨婆婆眨眼 (Yǔ pópó zhǎ yǎn), the rain-granny winking. When a city journalist finally wrote up the stall in 2028 — one of those small features about neighborhood survival that escape review because they contain nothing but an old sign and a recipe — her lede quoted a five-year-old: "桥会眨眼。眨眼就是奶奶在看你回家。(Qiáo huì zhǎ yǎn. Zhǎ yǎn jiù shì nǎinai zài kàn nǐ huí jiā.)" The bridge blinks. When it blinks, granny's watching you get home.

The chain, meanwhile, was remembered mostly by its cups. Collectors paid forty yuan for mint-condition *Mèng Pó cháyǐn* sleeves — the fictionalized granny smiling her corporate smile — and one of them hangs now in the Tower C stall beside the real plank, labeled in Wei Luo's handwriting: 俺们被山寨的证明。挂这儿提醒俺们：被模仿是守住了的意思。(Ǎnmen bèi shānzhài de

zhèngmíng. Guà zhèr tíxǐng ǎnmen: bèi mófǎng shì shǒu zhù le de yìsi.) Proof we were worth counterfeiting. Hung here as a reminder: being copied means you held.

CHAPTER 34

The Platform Deletes Everything

The purge came in waves, as purges do, and this one had a shape Xiao Fei recognized from history he'd read at 2 a.m.: not denial, which leaves fingerprints, but thinning. Anniversaries stopped trending. Search terms started returning recipes. A documentary about urban resilience aired with one shot — half a second, blink and it's gone — of yellow flowers on wet pavement, unexplained, the way you'd show a war wound in a cooking show.

By the third anniversary, August 2024, his mirror network held: 1,400 clips, 900 cards photographed at Shakoulu, eleven hours of Uncle Gao's monthly sign, the complete State Council report as PDF, and the thing he considered his masterpiece: audio of the Line 5 intercom's final recorded announcement, salvaged from a passenger's damaged phone by her brother, who'd given it to Xiao Fei at the noodle shop with both hands, bowing slightly — everyone in this story bowed eventually; it was how Henan carried weight — saying *Zhǐ qiú yǒu rén cún zhe.* I only ask that someone keeps it.

In February 2025 his primary account went down. Not banned — deleted, account, history, followers, the whole selfhood, for a terms violation unspecified. His backup lasted nine days. The overseas mirrors began failing one per week, like lanterns going out along a road.

He brought what remained to the lane in a hard drive wrapped in a plastic bag, on a night in March when rain was coming and everyone could taste it.

"他们不删坟 (Tāmen bù shān fén), " he said, laying the drive on the table between tea tins. "他们删路。(Tāmen shān lù.)" They don't delete graves. They delete roads.

Popo looked at the drive for a long moment. Then she said something that rearranged the boy's entire spine:

"放恁姚爷爷那儿。(Fàng nèn Yáo yéye nàr.)" Put it with Grandpa Yao.

Master Yao, demolition contractor, whose crews were scheduled for Baihuo Lane itself in another year, who had been coming to drink on Sundays since

2022 and paying for rounds he never drank, gruff, unreadable — Popo's ally? It took Xiaoman a month to understand the instruction, and when she did she felt like the last person in Zhengzhou to get a joke the dead had been telling for years.

Yao kept his site offices in places no algorithm would ever crawl: a shipping container behind a hoarding in a stalled tower complex; a basement under a half-built parking structure where rebar waited like winter trees. He moved Xiao Fei's drives between them quarterly, the way he rotated fuel and tools against inspection. "俺拆了半辈子楼 (Ǎn chāi le bànbèizi lóu)," he told Xiaoman once, over tea he didn't drink, "俺知道啥东西在哪儿最安全——就是还没盖成的地方。(Ǎn zhīdào shá dōngxi zài nǎr zuì ānquán——jiù shì hái méi gài chéng de dìfang.)" I've spent my life demolishing buildings. I know where things are safest: in what isn't finished yet.

The city's unfinished towers — hundreds of them, the property bust's concrete reef, home to nothing but wind and watchmen — became the archive's crypt. Somewhere in that vertical wilderness, in a container marked 器材 (qìcái) EQUIPMENT, sat the memory of July 20th, 2021, waiting for a building boom or a reckoning, whichever came first.

Xiao Fei, meanwhile, changed trades. Delivery work had gotten him followed twice — politely, the way such things are done, a man asking directions who already knew them — so he took over his aunt's bookstall in Baihuo Lane, selling secondhand paperbacks and, without charge, remembering out loud to anyone who browsed. His stall became the lane's other queue: people who came for a five-yuan novel and stayed an hour because the shopkeeper would tell you, unprompted, exactly one true thing about July 20th, different each visit, always verifiable.

"俺现在明白了 (Ǎn xiànzài míngbai le)," he told Xiaoman that spring, restocking Lu Xun against rain. "删不掉记忆，就删记忆的路标。所以俺们把路标改成故事。故事没有门牌号。(Shān bù diào jìyì, jiù shān jìyì de lùbiāo. Suǒyǐ ǎnmen bǎ lùbiāo gǎi chéng gùshi. Gùshi méiyǒu ménpái hào.)"

They can't delete memory, so they delete signposts. So we turned the signposts into stories. Stories don't have street addresses.

Upstairs, that same week, Popo fell.

Nothing dramatic — a missed stool, a bruised hip, the kind of fall that is only ever announced afterward as a beginning. She refused the hospital. Dr. Bai examined her on the stall's own crates and prescribed what medicine couldn't say: rest, someone at the ladle full-time.

The pot, everyone in the lane understood without a word being spoken, was about to change hands.

That spring Xiao Fei added a final wing to the archive, unasked and unnoticed until much later: he began recording the lane itself. Not the stall's doings — those were already covered — but the small stuff no institution thinks to keep. Popo's price sign through its weatherings. The exact sound the copper ladle made against the cauldron at full depth (he recorded it twelve times before capturing it clean; said later it was the hardest audio he'd ever chased). Chunchun's bear notebook photographed page by page. The persimmon tree in all four seasons. A demolition-scheduled lane, catalogued with the tenderness of a man who had learned from platforms exactly how things disappear — suddenly, totally, and on a Tuesday — and had decided that this particular place would not get to be one of them.

CHAPTER 35

The Watchman of Tower C

Every unfinished tower has one, and Tower C's was named Lao Diao — Old Eagle — sixty-one years old, ex-scaffold climber, grounded by his knees into the watchman's job eleven years ago when the money stopped and the cranes went still.

He lived in a prefab cabin by the hoarding gate and walked the site twice a day with a thermos and a dog of no breed called 二饼 (Èrbǐng), Two-Dots, for the markings over its eyes. He had watched the tower's whole biography: foundations poured in a boom year, thirty floors rising like an argument, then the sales office closing, then the cranes leaving one dawn without goodbyes, then the long silence. He knew every drainage path of the skeleton, every place wind learned tunes, every season the rebar bloomed rust-flowers that workers' children came to photograph.

And he knew about the container.

Yao's equipment container sat inside the hoarding, padlocked, officially full of *qìcái*, gear. Lao Diao logged it quarterly as inspected and never once looked inside, because Yao had paid him something better than curiosity: wages through dead years, plus one sentence on the day the container arrived — "老雕，这里头存的是有些人的念想。看住就行，别问。(Lǎo Diāo, zhè lǐtou cún de shì yǒuxiē rén de niànxiang. Kàn zhù jiù xíng, bié wèn.)" Old Eagle, what's stored in here is some people's keepsakes. Guard it; don't ask.

So he didn't ask. For three years. Which is its own kind of faith, the Henan kind: the faith of people who have watched enough things get built and unbuilt to know that some cargoes outlive their buildings, and that a man can serve memory best by serving patience.

When Xiaoman came to scout the ground floor for the stall — autumn 2025, clipboard, measuring tape, the plank's future nail-holes already imagined above a doorway — Lao Diao watched from his cabin for two days before approaching, dog at heel.

"*Mài tāng de?* " Selling soup?

"Selling soup."

He nodded slowly, looking up at his tower the way a man looks at a patient he has nursed too long to lie to. "这楼底下 (Zhè lóu dǐxia)， " he said, "前几年夜里老有人来。不进来。就在围挡外头站一会儿，放束花，走。俺问过一个，他说他儿子是当年在里头干活的——塔吊司机，欠薪那年走的，不是死了，是走了，去了广东，再没信儿。爹就当这儿是坟了。年年清明来。(Qián jǐ nián yèlǐ lǎo yǒu rén lái. Bù jìnlái. Jiù zài wéidǎng wàitou zhàn yīhuìr, fàng shù huā, zǒu. Ǎn wèn guò yī gè, tā shuō tā érzi shì dāngnián zài lǐtou gànhuó de——tàdiào sījī, qiànxīn nà nián zǒu de, bú shì sǐ le, shì zǒu le, qù le Guǎngdōng, zài méi xìnr. Diē jiù dāng zhèr shì fén le. Niánnián Qīngmíng lái.)"

In the early years people used to come here at night. Never entered. Stood outside the hoarding awhile, left flowers, left. I asked one of them — said his son worked on this building once. Crane driver. The year the wages stopped he didn't die, he just left — went to Guangdong, no word since. So the father treats this place as a grave anyway. Comes every Qingming.

He looked at her stall plans, and the plank leaning against the wall, and the space under the tower where a queue could form out of the rain.

"*zhōng*， " he said. "摊子放这儿，那些爹就有地方坐了。俺烧水。(Tānzi fàng zhèr, nàxiē diē jiù yǒu dìfang zuò le. Ǎn shāo shuǐ.)"

Good. Put the stall here and those fathers will have somewhere to sit. I'll boil water.

Which is how the stall under Tower C acquired, before it opened, its first employee: a watchman who had spent eleven years guarding a container of other people's kept things and understood the job description better than any charter could write it. He never drank the soup himself. Asked once what would happen if he did, and Xiaoman told him the truth — that it takes not what you ask but what you lack — and he considered this with professional seriousness and declined.

"缺的太多 (Quē de tài duō)， " he said. "一碗装不下。俺这单子得论麻袋。(Yī wǎn zhuāng bú xià. Ǎn zhè dānzi děi lùn mádài.)"

What I lack fills sacks. One bowl couldn't hold the order. I'd need it by the burlap load.

Then he laughed, refilled both cups with plain hot water — the only drink he trusted — and went back to walking his rounds between the rebar trees

One night that first winter, Xiaoman found him standing at the tower's base looking up — not his usual rounds; a vigil posture she recognized from a thousand station barricades. She followed his eyeline and found nothing: just floor thirty's open slabs black against the stars, wind doing slow work in the rebar.

"看啥哩？(Kàn shá lī?)" What are you looking at?

"数俺看过的年头 (shǔ ǎn kàn guò de niántou)， " he said. Counting the years I've watched. "十一年了。头两年俺天天盼它盖起来。中间五年俺盼它拆了算述。这两年——(Shíyī nián le. Tóu liǎng nián ǎn tiāntiān pàn tā gài qǐlái. Zhōngjiān wǔ nián ǎn pàn tā chāi le suàn qiú. Zhè liǎng nián——)" he shifted his thermos, embarrassed, "——俺就盼恁们摊子的灯别灭。楼咋样都中，灯别灭。(Ǎn jiù pàn nènmen tānzi de dēng bié miè. Lóu zǎ yàng dōu zhōng, dēng bié miè.)"

Eleven years. The first two I prayed daily it would be finished. Five more I prayed it would be torn down and done with. These last two — he shifted his thermos — I just pray your stall's lamp doesn't go out. Whatever happens to the tower is fine. Don't let the lamp die.

She went back to her cabin. He went back to walking his rounds between the rebar trees, dog trotting ahead, past the container where the archive slept and the ground floor where a bridge waited to be hung, keeping, as always, everything.

CHAPTER 36

Inheritance (April–June 2025) [QIAO POV]

Qiao Shulan heard it from her networks before the lane knew it themselves: the old woman had fallen; the granddaughter was at the ladle.

Her campaign had won its war by then, or lost it, depending which ledger you read. Clean Streets had been folded into a broader bureau reorganization and Shulan promoted sideways into something with a longer title and shorter reach: 社会心态疏导组 (shèhuì xīntài shūdǎo zǔ), the Social Sentiment Guidance Group. Guidance. Five years ago the word would have pleased her. Now she read it as what it was: a job description for people paid to stand where wind gets into foundations.

She kept her promise about accounts. Not weekly anymore — monthly, on a Sunday near month's end, down jacket regardless of season, collar up. She never drank. She sat on the crate, put both palms flat on the table, and reported, in her small upright voice, the things that would otherwise go unrecorded:

"三月，市里把'720'从应急预案演练代号里去掉了。改成'夏季防汛综合演习'。(Sānyuè, shìlǐ bǎ '720' cóng yìngjí yù'àn yǎnliàn dàihào lǐ qùdiào le. Gǎichéng 'xiàjì fángxùn zōnghé yǎnxí'.)" March: the city removed 720 as the drill code name. Changed to Comprehensive Summer Flood Exercise.

"四月，沙口路B口的浮雕墙完工。上面没有日期。(Sìyuè, Shākǒulù B kǒu de fúdiāo qiáng wángōng. Shàngmiàn méiyǒu rìqī.)" April: the relief wall at Shakoulu Exit B was completed. It has no date on it.

"五月，俺退休申请被驳回。说俺'经验不可替代'。(Wǔyuè, ǎn tuìxiū shēnqǐng bèi bóhuí. Shuō ǎn 'jīngyàn bù kě tìdài'.)" May: my retirement application was denied. They said my experience is irreplaceable.

She delivered these like a courier delivering evidence to a court she believed in more than any court she'd worked for. The old woman listened, ladle resting, eyes going around stones. Sometimes she said *zhōng*. Once — only once, the day

Shulan reported the relief wall's missing date — she reached across the table and turned Shulan's teacup right side up, and filled it, and Shulan, who had not drunk anything in this lane since 2022, held the cup in both hands without drinking until it cooled, which both of them understood was its own kind of communion.

The granddaughter worried her.

Not the girl herself — the succession. Shulan had spent twenty-six years studying institutions, and institutions were what she saw forming at that table: a queue with doctrine (five flavors), sacrament (the bowl), records (the ledger), apostolic succession (the pot), and now a young priestess whose grief the city could weaponize if it ever noticed the stall existed. Everything Shulan had dismantled at scale — gatherings, memorials, unlicensed meaning — persisted here at the size of four stools and a cauldron, beneath enforcement's resolution, exactly as the stall had shrunk below it in 2020.

She understood she had one move left, and it was not enforcement.

In June, on her last scheduled Sunday before summer transfers reshuffled her calendar, she came early, when only the granddaughter was minding the tins, and put on the table an envelope. Inside: no money. A single sheet, official seal, photocopied — a page from the district's own 2021 duty logs, the ones the investigation had subpoenaed and everyone had assumed destroyed. It recorded, in real time, the evening of July 20th: calls logged, orders given or not given, the stoppage request from Line 5 dispatch at 18:04 marked 上报中 (shàngbào zhōng), being escalated, and beside it, initialed, the name of the official who chose to wait for confirmation from above while water entered the tunnel of a city he'd been trusted to keep dry.

She had carried the page for three years. Publishing it would cost her pension, possibly liberty; keeping it had already cost her everything else. She could neither burn it nor file it nor act on it through any channel that still functioned. So she brought it to the only counter left open — the one with the ledger inside the coat — and slid it across, palms flat, pressing down:

"恁的账本记汤。俺的账本没地方去了。放恁这儿。(Nèn de zhàngběn jì tāng. Ǎn de zhàngběn méi dìfang qù le. Fàng nèn zhèr.)"

Your book keeps account of soup. Mine has nowhere left to go. Keep it here.

Xiaoman looked at the page a long time. At the initials. At the timestamp 18:04 — twenty-two minutes after her mother's last message home.

Then she did the thing Popo had trained her for without either of them naming it: she asked.

"淑兰姨 (Shūlán yí), " she said gently, using the aunt-word, "那天晚上, 恁在哪个屋？(Nà tiān wǎnshang, nèn zài nǎge wū?)"

Auntie Shulan, that night — which room were you in?

And Qiao Shulan began, haltingly, in the dusk under the awning, to tell the lane the truest thing she owned: that she had been in the duty room; that she had personally called the tunnel toll authority at 18:20 and been told closure required municipal sign-off; that she had hung up believing procedure was protection; that at 19:00 she signed the routine verification form because forms are how fear becomes manageable; and that her nephew had driven into the tunnel at approximately 18:10, past a barrier that might have been lowered by anyone, including the woman who raised him.

The steam moved between them, writing nothing, carrying everything.

CHAPTER 37

The Second Intercom

The second recording arrived three years after the first, and almost didn't arrive at all.

Its keeper was a woman named Rong, forty when the flood took her husband from the Jingguang tunnel — not drowned; crushed; the van; the bus; the starred white windows — and she had spent the years since in the particular afterlife of the un-bereaved bereaved: working, eating, attending weddings where she danced one dance and sat the rest. Her husband's phone had been destroyed. But his smartwatch — a cheap fitness band he wore to track his delivery routes — had synced that evening at 17:58, four minutes before the tunnel entrance, and the sync included eleven seconds of voice memo he'd recorded at a red light, talking to himself the way drivers do:

".....跟小荣说，晚上别等俺吃饭，跑完这单去她姐家拿粽子。哎这雨，老天爷往地上倒水呢。行了，绿灯了。(.....Gēn Xiǎoróng shuō, wǎn-shang bié děng ǎn chīfàn, pǎo wán zhè dān qù tā jiě jiā ná zòngzi. Āi zhè yǔ, lǎotiānyé wǎng dìshang dào shuǐ ne. Xíng le, lǜdēng le.)"

...Tell Xiaorong not to wait for me for dinner. After this delivery I'll pick up zongzi from her sister's place. Ai, this rain — heaven's pouring water on the ground. All right, light's green.

Eleven seconds. No goodbye, because there was no occasion for one; the light was green; the world was ordinary. The watch died in the water with everything else and spent three years in a drawer, its charger lost in a move, until Rong's niece — home from university, bored, ruthless with drawers — found a compatible cable and charged it, and the memo surfaced like a body surfacing, face up, recognizable.

Rong carried it around for two months the way you carry something breakable you can't put down and can't look at: played it once, at 3 a.m., alone, and then not again, because the voice was so ordinary, so alive, so mid-sentence

about zongzi, and ordinary aliveness is the cruelest frequency grief can broadcast on.

It was Uncle Gao who brought her in.

The archive families knew each other the way veterans of any unwinnable campaign know each other: at memorial dates, in comment sections, through Xiao Fei's noodle-shop network. Gao Baoshu heard her story at the fourth anniversary gathering at Shakoulu — heard the words 智能手环 (zhìnéng shǒuhuán), fitness band, and 十一秒 (shíyī miǎo), eleven seconds — and took her arm, an old man's presumptuous tender arm, and said: 走，恁跟我来。(Zǒu, nèn gēn wǒ lái.) Come with me.

He walked her to Baihuo Lane and did not explain the lane, which was correct; explanation would have let her refuse it in words. He simply installed her at the table's end with tea, and the Thursday crowd flowed around her, and Popo poured, and nobody asked her anything, until near closing, when the old woman set down a cup in front of her and said the thing she said:

"存着的东西，得有人问起才算存着。(Cún zhe de dōngxi, děi yǒu rén wèn qǐ cái suàn cún zhe.)" What's kept only counts as kept when somebody asks after it.

And Rong — who had not spoken of the memo to another living soul, whose sister-in-law believed the band was empty, who had been dying quietly of an eleven-second file for two months — heard the sentence land in her chest like a key turning, and wept, and told them everything, and played it, there at the table, on a cracked phone at low volume, while the lane held still around a dead man complaining happily about weather.

Xiaoman's hands were shaking too hard to sort tins, so she stopped pretending to and just listened. Eleven seconds. A green light. Zongzi. Heaven pouring water. The most mundane thirty seconds of audio ever recorded in Henan, and by the end of it half the stall was crying into bitter tea, and Dr. Bai had come around the table to hold Rong's shoulders, and Popo alone remained dry-eyed, ladle resting, listening with the total attention she gave to pours.

Afterward she opened the ledger and made the entry she'd made once before, beside a name on no train page, in the limbo section where the pot's jurisdiction ends:

荣氏之夫。遗言十一秒。未饮此锅之水。账在人间。 (Róng shì zhī fū. Yíyán shíyī miǎo. Wèi yǐn cǐ guō zhī shuǐ. Zhàng zài rénjiān.) Rong's husband. Left eleven seconds of words. Never drank this pot. His account is kept among the living.

"账在人间 (zhàng zài rénjiān), " Chunchun read aloud afterward, when shown. "His account is kept among the living." She frowned, sixteen and exact. "那是什么意思？(Nà shì shénme yìsi?)"

It means, Xiaoman said, understanding it as she said it, that some messages never go through any bridge at all. They stay here. We're the bridge. That's why the pot exists next door to things like this instead of instead of them — because the soup can carry what the dead left undone, but only the living can carry what they left unsaid, and the lane exists to make sure somebody asks.

CHAPTER 38

Kang Dazhi's Tunnel

He rode the whole line at dawn, car by car, over eleven weeks.

Not the modern train — those ran on schedule and carried strangers — but the ritual: every Sunday, first service, 5:40 a.m., he boarded Line 5 at Shakoulu, rode one stop to Haishansi, got off, walked back above ground, and did it again. One more stop each week. The city thought he was testing himself. Actually he was taking attendance.

Because the dead ride too, in his accounting. Not ghosts — he'd seen nothing in the water that April night except water, which had been terrible enough — but passengers of a different kind: the ones who would now forever be twenty-seven, or thirty-one, or nine, riding this line in whatever way memory rides things. Every regular commuter on Line 5 had, since 2021, some ghost-seat in their mental car: the place where someone they knew used to stand. Dazhi's line was longer than most. He'd been present at the making of ninety-some ghosts, had touched their hands in dark water, had shoved them toward light, and had then, at the city's instruction, gone home, recovered, and never once been given anywhere to put any of it.

The whispering families had taken care of that. 司机助手要是早开十分钟 (sījī zhùshǒu yàoshi zǎo kāi shí fēnzhōng), if the driver's assistant had opened ten minutes earlier — the sentence traveled the parent-groups like weather. It didn't matter that opening ten minutes earlier meant opening onto four feet of standing water instead of two, drowning not saving; physics was not invited to that discussion. He'd stopped defending himself within a month. Defense required a courtroom and there wasn't going to be one; the investigation would eventually clear him by name, in a paragraph nobody read.

So he did his own inquiry. Eleven weeks, dawn service, empty cars, one added stop per week, and in each car — this was the discipline — he stood where he'd stood that night and said aloud, to no passenger at all, the names he could remember of who had gripped his hands coming out. Fourteen he knew by name

eventually; forty-odd he knew by grip alone, left hand, right hand, child-sized, ringed, shaking. He gave the unnamed ones numbers. The numbers were honest. Numbers were what the city had taught its survivors to keep.

Week nine, an auntie boarded at Zhongyuan Dadau with a carton of live chickens for her son-in-law, saw a young man standing rigid in an empty car at dawn saying names to the air, and sat down nearby without comment, because Henan aunties have seen everything twice. She rode three stops. As she left she said:

"*zhōng*。恁慢慢数。数完就轻了。(Nèn mànman shǔ. Shǔ wán jiù qīng le.)"

All right. Count them slowly. When you finish counting you'll be lighter.

She was wrong about one thing and right about the important thing. He never finished counting — the unnamed stayed unnamed; that's arithmetic's mercy — but by week eleven, stepping off at Haishansi in full daylight, he found the line rode under him differently. Not lighter. Weight-bearing. A beam you live around.

That Sunday evening he came to the stall for the first time since drinking in 2022, set on the table a small object wrapped in cloth, and unwrapped it: the original door-opening handle from a Line 5 carriage, retired stock, bought legally from a scrap dealer who owed him favors.

"Popo的摊子啥都能修，就是没个镇物。(Popo de tānzi shá dōu néng xiū, jiù shì méi gè zhènwù.)" This stall can fix anything, but it has no guardian piece, he said. "挂桥底下。(Guà qiáo dǐxia.)"

Hang it under the bridge plank.

And so the painted *Nàihé qiáo* gained, nailed beneath it where drinkers wouldn't see but everyone's hand could find in the dark, a subway handle — the exact kind of bar nine hundred people had once held while deciding together whether to trust two young men and the light beyond the doors. Xiaoman hung it herself, on her toes, palms flat against the plank after, pressing down, pressing down, the gesture that had become, across five years, the lane's whole silent liturgy.

CHAPTER 39

The Pot Changes Hands

Popo chose the day herself: 七月初一 (Qīyuè chūyī), the first of the seventh moon, when the gates of the ghost month stand ajar and the lane's ancestors press close to the living like readers leaning over shoulders.

There was no ceremony. The lane did not do ceremony; it did inventory. What happened was this: at dusk, Popo washed the cauldron for the last time — sand, never soap; Xiaoman watched her work and understood she was watching something end by being done correctly — and then took from inside her coat, for the first time in anyone's memory, the Five-Flavors Book, and set it on the table between the two cups that had stood mouth-up on the shelf since 2021.

"手伸出来 (Shǒu shēn chūlái), " she said. Give me your hands.

Xiaoman gave them. The old woman turned them palms up, held them a moment above the steam — reading, weighing, whatever the gesture was; no one present would ever agree on what they saw — and then set them down flat on the closed ledger, both palms, pressing.

"规矩恁都会背了 (Guīju nèn dōu huì bèi le), " Popo said. You can recite the rules. "俺再教最后一遍，用锅教：(Ǎn zài jiāo zuìhòu yī biàn, yòng guō jiāo:)"

I'll teach them once more, with the pot:

One: *Tāng tiāo rén quē shá*. The soup takes what you lack, not what you ask. Two: 一碗一世 (Yī wǎn yī shì)。One bowl, one lifetime; a second bowl takes the drinker. Three: 忘掉的不丢。它挪窝 (Wàngdiào de bù diū. Tā nuó wō)。What's forgotten isn't lost. It moves house. Four: 死人喝死人的桥。那边的账，不归这边的锅 (Sǐrén hē sǐrén de qiáo. Nàbiān de zhàng, bù guī zhèbiān de guō)。The dead drink at their own bridge. That side's accounts are not this pot's to settle. Five — and here the old woman paused so long the steam died twice — 五：守摊的人不许喝。守的人喝了，就没人问了 (wǔ: shǒu tān de rén bù xǔ hē. Shǒu de rén hē le, jiù méi rén wèn le)。

Five: the keeper may not drink. If the keeper drinks, there is no one left to ask them if they remember.

She poured the first bowl herself, hands steady as rails, and handed it across, and Xiaoman drank her own inheritance standing up, the pause rolling through her like weather, half a second or an hour, and when she surfaced the lane looked subtly different — brighter-edged, closer, as if someone had wiped a window she hadn't known was dirty — and the taste in her mouth was bitter, of course, kǔdīng bitterness under a ghost of sour plum, a trace of sweet, salt, and something pungent, woodsmoke maybe, or memory of woodsmoke:

All five flavors. Mostly bitter.

Popo sat down on the stool

The shelf of mouth-up cups came up in the handover talk, as Xiaoman had known it must. Four cups stood there — washed, inverted at night, upright by day — and she'd never once been told whose they were.

"别问 (Bié wèn), " Popo said, catching the question before it formed. "恁接手以后，会有人来认领。认领一个，添一个。空着的时候，就当它们在等。架子这东西跟桥一样——不用懂，用就行。(Nèn jiēshǒu yǐhòu, huì yǒu rén lái rènlǐng. Rènlǐng yī gè, tiān yī gè. Kōng zhe de shíhou, jiù dāng tāmen zài děng. Jiàzi zhè dōngxi gēn qiáo yīyàng——bùyòng dǒng, yòng jiù xíng.)"

Don't ask. After you take over, people will come claim them. Each claimant, add another. While they sit empty, consider them waiting. A shelf is like a bridge — no need to understand it; use it.

It took three years to learn the truth of those four cups, and the truth was exactly proportionate: one for each drinker the old woman had refused who returned anyway — not for soup but for tea; not for forgetting but for the counter itself. Dr. Bai standing. Old Wei honest. Kang Dazhi silent. And the fourth, which nobody ever claimed and nobody ever removed, kept warm each winter morning out of pure doctrine, because a shelf that holds waiting things is itself a kind of promise. — the army-surplus stool, iron-gray, structural — and did not get up again that evening. She watched Xiaoman serve eleven drinkers without a wrong pour. At closing, Uncle Gao folded his umbrella; Chunchun stacked crates; Kang Dazhi hosed the lane's mouth clean; Xiao Fei locked his

bookstall; Dr. Bai checked the old woman's pulse with two fingers and let go slowly, carefully, like setting down glass.

"*zhōng*，" said Popo, to all of it. To the whole evening, the whole handover, the whole arrangement of the world. And then, to Xiaoman alone, quietly, in the tone she used for things she meant:

"恁妈的汤，还温着。(Nèn mā de tāng, hái wēn zhe.)"

Your mother's soup is still warm.

Which was either nonsense or the most precise sentence ever spoken in Henan, and Xiaoman went home and slept nine hours and woke at dawn knowing which.

Because rule four cut both ways. Her mother waited at her bridge with nothing asked and nothing taken — *Mèng Hé。 Qiú: wú. Qǔ: wú. Děng.* — and someday, decades out, a queue would carry her to a cup poured by whom? By whatever kept the far counter. But meanwhile, here, now, the warm thing: forty-six seconds in a phone repaired by loving hands, waiting to be heard at full volume. Not soup. Better than soup. The kind of remembering that costs exactly what it should.

That Sunday she brought the phone to the stall, set it on the table where her mother's flipped bowl had rested in 2021, and told Kang Dazhi, whose speaker repair it was:

"今天打烊以后。恁陪着。(Jīntiān dǎyàng yǐhòu. Nèn péi zhe.)"

After closing today. Stay with me.

He nodded, and stayed, and did not touch her hand even once, because he understood that some vigils you keep by keeping distance, and that this was already the bravest room either of them had entered.

Afterward they sat in the dark of the closed stall for a while, neither moving to leave, the plank bridge leaning against its wall, the city audible somewhere beyond the lane's mouth — traffic, a distant platform announcement, all the machinery of nine thousand people saying *zhōng* to one another at working volume.

“俺那天 (Ǎn nà tiān), ” Kang Dazhi said finally, to the dark, “在二车厢。开门的时候，第一个拉住俺手的，是个穿蓝雨衣的。(Zài èr chēxiāng. Kāimén de shíhou, dì yī gè lā zhù ǎn shǒu de, shì gè chuān lán yǔyī de.)”

I was in carriage two. When I opened the doors, the first hand that grabbed mine — she was wearing a blue raincoat.

Xiaoman went very still.

“她把鞋脱了攥手里。还回头跟后头的人喊：脱鞋！光脚踩得住！(Tā bǎ xié tuō le zuàn shǒu lǐ. Hái huítóu gēn hòutou de rén hǎn: tuō xié! Guāng jiǎo cǎi de zhù!)” Then he stopped. The sentence had carried him as far as sentences go; beyond it lay water and breathing and eleven minutes that belonged to no narrator.

Blue raincoat. Tags still on, or torn off in the crush — he couldn’t say; there hadn’t been light enough for tags. But her mother had owned exactly one blue raincoat, bought in June, worn home once, spun once in the living room like a girl. And on the night of July 20th, 2021, somewhere between the faregate booth and the flooded carriage, Meng He had finally found an occasion worthy of the tags.

She’d worn it into the water. And she’d used it — the woman inside it had used it — to teach strangers how to grip.

CHAPTER 40

Forty-Six Seconds

Closing a stall takes twenty minutes if you're two people who've done it badly separately and are learning to do it right together. Cauldron off the flame. Crates stacked. Plank leaned against the wall — *Nàihé qiáo* going dark for the night, three characters disappearing into shadow like a tide going out. Chunchun had gone home at nine, kissing her own fingers and touching the cauldron's rim, a farewell she'd invented at twelve and nobody had ever corrected because it needed no correcting.

Then they were alone with one lamp and the lane's mouth breathing summer.

Xiaoman set the phone on the table between them. Screen up. She had charged it to full for this, absurdly, as though the dead could drain batteries.

"恁修的喇叭 (Nèn xiū de lǎba)，" she said. Your repaired speaker.

"*zhōng*。" His voice came out sanded flat.

She pressed play before her hands could vote again.

The first second she knew by heart: rain like applause, then her mother's voice arriving bright, practical, already mid-stride somewhere between the faregate and the weather:

"小满，妈下班啦。雨大了，妈下班买点胡辣汤料，你等着喝——(Xiǎomǎn, mā xiàbān la. Yǔ dà le, mā xiàbān mǎi diǎn húlàtāng liào, nǐ děng zhe hē——)"

Xiaoman, Mom's off shift. Rain's heavy — I'll buy hu la tang mix after work, you wait for me to—

A pause. Not silence: movement, crowd-noise, the specific acoustics of a station concourse at six p.m., hundreds of small decisions being made. Then her mother again, softer, half to herself, the register mothers switch into when they think no one important is listening:

"...今天站里来了一窝小猫，灰的，就一只黄的，胆子最小，光往俺这儿跑。等雨停了恁来看看，中不中。(...Jīntiān zhàn li lái le yī wō xiǎo

māo, huī de, jiù yī zhī huáng de, dǎnzi zuì xiǎo, guāng wǎng ǎn zhèr pǎo. Děng yǔ tíng le nèn lái kàn kan, zhōng bù zhōng.)"

...A cat had kittens at the station today. Gray ones, just one yellow one, the timid one, keeps running over to my booth. When the rain stops, come see them, all right?

Laughter — hers, brief, real, the snort at the end. Then the last of it, forty seconds in, almost swallowed by rain turning from applause into something with no audience at all:

"妈先走一步，恁俩慢点啊。(Mā xiān zǒu yī bù, nèn liǎ màn diǎn a.)"

Mom'll go on ahead. You two take it slow.

And the message ended, 0:46, on what turned out to be — Xiaoman would replay it eleven times that night, and a hundred times across the next year, until the words wore channels in her

At the lane's mouth, walking home, Dazhi stopped as people do at the borders of rooms. He looked back toward the dark stall and said, in the voice of a man setting a tool down exactly where it belongs:

"孟姐那碗面，俺见过。(Mèng jiě nà wǎn miàn, ǎn jiàn guò.)"

Meng's noodles — I saw them.

He'd been in the station's duty room that night too, after coming up out of Carriage 2 with the last of his ninety-some. Soaked survivors wrapped in whatever the rescue line passed hand to hand; one flashlight; and a faregate attendant he'd only half-registered at the time, boiling water on a hotplate, portioning instant noodles into a borrowed bowl for a shivering girl who couldn't get home — saying, in the tone of a woman closing out her shift's final transaction: 中啥钱，恁记住路就行了 (Zhōng shá qián, nèn jì zhù lù jiù xíng le)。

What money? Just remember the route.

Xiaoman stood in the dark lane while another fragment of her mother surfaced, exactly as fragments had been surfacing for four years — from logbooks, from strangers at barricades, from a cat's posture, from the pepper ratio of a soup she'd never tasted — because Meng He's kindness had been so constant, so operationally ordinary, that it left residue everywhere it passed, and

the city was still carrying pieces of it home to her daughter, one witness at a time, indefinitely, like an inheritance paid out in installments too small to tax.

The next morning she rode Line 5 herself — first trip since the flood, done without ceremony because ceremony would have let her postpone. Two stops: Shakoulu to Haishansi, her mother's stretch, at morning rush, packed with commuters who didn't know her and stood anyway in the collective gentleness that train carries to this day. She got off at Haishansi, walked back above ground the way her mother should have been allowed to, bought hu la tang mix at the shop by Exit C from a vendor who'd inherited the route along with the shop, and delivered it — absurdly, perfectly — to the duty room at Shakoulu, where Xiao Jiang put it in the cabinet beside the name badge, inventory for an after-shift that would take longer than any shift ever scheduled.

On the platform going home, the yellow cat supervised from its stool. Xiaoman told it about the pepper. It blinked once, which in the station's grammar meant: he knows. He was always like this. Go eat something warm. — not a goodbye. A woman calling back over her shoulder to two stragglers, telling them there's no hurry, the road's the same either way, I'm just walking ahead of you now. The yellow kitten. The hu la tang mix. 恁俩 (nèn liǎ) — you two — plural, unaccounted for by any future her mother got to keep, addressed to a daughter and whatever company the daughter kept, which turned out, at 17:42 on the twentieth of July, 2021, to be everyone.

Kang Dazhi did not move for a long time. Then he said, wrecked-voiced, careful:

"黄猫还在。(Huáng māo hái zài.)"

The yellow cat is still there.

She looked up.

"站里养的。B口值班室。胖得没样了。(Zhàn li yǎng de. B kǒu zhíbānshì. Pàng de méi yàng le.)" They kept it at the station. Duty room, Exit B. Fat as anything now. He'd been riding Line 5 again since spring — his own reckoning with the tunnel, done quietly, at dawn, car by car — and the duty room's cat was famous among staff: yellow, timid with strangers, devoted to anyone who stood still near the faregate booth where a paper sign said *zàntíng fúwù* for exactly one year and then never again, because Meng He's post had been given to a young

man who kept a tin of cat food under the counter and told passengers, when asked about the booth's second stool, that it belonged to someone who'd be back after shift.

They sat until the lamp burned low. Nothing else was said, because nothing else needed saying; the message had done what messages from the dead do when they finally arrive — not fill the absence but furnish it, so you can live inside the room.

Walking home through the warm lane, Xiaoman understood the shape of rule five at last. The keeper may not drink — not as prohibition but as description. Popo couldn't taste because taste was the price of the counter; the ledger was the wage. But the soup was never meant to do this other thing. This — forty-six seconds, heard whole, carried whole, retold to a yellow cat at Exit B — this was the remembering that costs what it should, and no bridge anywhere had a monopoly on pouring it.

CHAPTER 41

The Night Visit (August 2025) [QIAO POV]

The invitation came through no channel Shulan could identify, which was, she understood, the point.

A card in her office mail slot — her retirement had been processed that spring; she kept an office as a consultant for exactly one client, the metro system's safety culture review, which is its own story about what twenty-six years of expertise is worth when it finally tells the truth — a plain card, hand-delivered, bearing four characters in an upright hand:

七月二十，子时。桥上见。 (Qīyuè èrshí, zǐshí. Qiáo shàng jiàn.) July twentieth. Midnight hour. See you on the bridge.

No signature. No bridge named. She knew of only one.

She went, of course. Told herself it was due diligence — the stall operated unlicensed, after midnight now, in a demolition zone; there were regulatory angles — and parked legally for the first time in years, and walked into Baihuo Lane at eleven forty at night carrying nothing but her keys and thirty years of insomnia.

The lane at midnight was another country. The stall glowed under one bulb; the queue was gone; only the regulars remained, drifting off in ones, each pausing to bow toward the stool. And there, alone at the table with two cups already set out, sat Popo.

Not Xiaoman. The old woman had asked for her specifically. Shulan understood this the way you understand weather: by standing in it.

She sat. Both cups steamed. Neither woman spoke for a while — their entire relationship had been conducted in pauses; silence between them was a shared office.

"恁要退了 (Nèn yào tuì le)，" Popo said at last. You're retiring.

"退了 (tuì le)。" Retired.

“签字的手闲下来了。(Qiānzì de shǒu xián xiàlái le.)”

The signing hand’s free now.

Shulan laughed — unexpectedly, painfully, the first true laugh since before July 2021 — because here it was, the whole audit of her life delivered as small talk over two kuai tea: the hand that signed is idle. What does it do now?

“俺想求个事 (Ǎn xiǎng qiú gè shì), ” she said. Then stopped, because asking this table for things had never once gone how she expected.

Popo poured. Pushed the cup across — not to her. To the empty stool beside them, where it sat steaming at nobody.

“不是给恁的 (Bú shì gěi nèn de), ” the old woman said. It’s not for you.

And Qiao Shulan looked at the cup steaming at an empty stool in a demolished-soon lane at midnight, and understood with her whole body, all at once, who it was for — the boy who’d laughed his lazy laugh and driven into the tunnel because rain was temporary and delivery windows were not; who had never drunk anything at this counter, never been refused at it, never been entered in any ledger she could audit — and she put both hands flat on the table, palms down, pressing, pressing, and bowed her head over them, and shook, without noise, for a length of time neither woman ever measured.

When she raised her head, Popo turned the empty stool’s cup right side up and filled it too. Two cups now, steaming at two someones.

“他们不喝这儿的汤 (Tāmen bù hē zhèr de tāng), ” the old woman said quietly. “他们的桥在别处。可是等的人可以坐。坐就是记。记就是这边能做的全部了。(Tāmen de qiáo zài biéchù. Kěshì děng de rén kěyǐ zuò. Zuò jiù shì jì. Jì jiù shì zhèbiān néng zuò de quánbù le.)”

They don’t drink this soup. Their bridge is elsewhere. But those who wait may sit. Sitting is remembering. Remembering is everything this side can do.

They sat until two in the morning, the deputy director and the goddess or granny or mechanism, drinking tea at a table set for four, two cups’ worth of steam rising into the August dark and going wherever steam goes — and if anyone had passed the lane just then they’d have seen nothing but an ordinary corner of an ordinary city, which is what every mercy looks like from outside.

CHAPTER 42

The Wedding

They married in the lane, of course. Where else — the registry was a formality conducted on a Tuesday; the marriage itself happened under the awning, in front of the cauldron, with the plank bridge overhead and the whole lane's population as witnesses, which is to say: eleven people and one brick.

Xiaoman had planned nothing, having learned from Popo that the important things go unannounced or they curdle. Kang Dazhi had planned everything, having learned from fixing things that collapse comes from unexamined joints. The result was the only kind of wedding that works: his structure, her surrender to it.

He built the furniture. That was his proposal, actually, made in June over hu la tang at her kitchen table: not a ring first, but a list. A proper table for the stall, hardwood, mortised, no more crates. Two stools that fit two specific people. A shelf for cups — he'd measured the existing shelf's load path and found it alarming. And last, item four, delivered looking at his hands: 一张咱俩的桌子。家里用的。(Yī zhāng zán liǎ de zhuōzi. Jiālǐ yòng de.) A table for the two of us. Household grade.

She said *zhōng* before he finished the sentence, and then had to leave the room for a while, and he let her, because five years of vigils teach a man what doors need holding open.

The wedding day itself, October: Uncle Gao gave away nobody because both bride and groom declared themselves given long ago, but he stood at the head of the queue anyway, umbrella furled, wearing what he called his 拜客衣裳 (bàikè yīshang), company-for-holidays clothes. Chunchun read a poem she'd written at sixteen about seasoning woks, which destroyed everyone including the poem's author. Dr. Bai attended standing, out of habit and honor. Xiao Fei filmed until Xiaoman flicked two fingers at his camera — tradition now — then put it away and wept freely on duty, which is allowed at weddings even for archivists.

Popo presided. There being no official in the lane willing to outrank her, she performed the ceremony as she performed everything: by inventory.

"两个人 (Liǎng gè rén)，" she said, "跟两口锅一样。开过锅的，才不粘。恁们俩都开过锅了。(Gēn liǎng kǒu guō yīyàng. Kāi guò guō de, cái bù zhān. Nènmen liǎ dōu kāi guò guō le.)" Two people are like two pots. Only seasoned ones don't stick. You've both been seasoned.

Then tea, from the wedding set Kang Dazhi had repaired — a borrowed service, cracked, mended with gold-colored lacquer he'd applied along every fracture so that the damage caught light when the cups turned. The lane passed the cups hand to hand; everyone drank; the pauses ran long and easy all afternoon, half-seconds stretching like cats.

Her mother's presence was managed the way the lane managed everything now: concretely. The blue raincoat hung from the awning's post through the whole ceremony — worn no longer, kept as standard, the way regiments hang colors. At the toast, Xiaoman filled one extra cup, set it at the empty place, and said into the general noise, conversationally, the way you tell someone late to dinner:

"妈，胡辣汤管够。恁慢慢喝。(Mā, húlàtāng guǎn gòu. Nèn mànman hē.)"

Mom, there's plenty of hu la tang. Take your time.

And the wind moved through the lane just then, lifting steam off forty cups at once, writing nothing legible on the air, carrying everything upward, which is the direction, the lane has always held, that things take when they've finally been properly served.

CHAPTER 43

The Fifth Flavor

Of the five flavors — sour to gather the soul, bitter to lower attachment, sweet to comfort the traveler, pungent to wake the road, salty to keep the promise — it was salty that nobody in the lane could account for.

Bitter they understood: kǔdīng, the base, the price of admission. Sour came and went with the seasons; Popo's winter pots carried a plum-skin edge that Dr. Bai once spent an entire evening trying to reverse-engineer from first principles before being told, gently, by Chunchun, that she was doing science at a counter that predated science's jurisdiction. Sweet surfaced rarely — one cup in a hundred, a ghost of longan or candied date, always for the drinkers who most needed comforting and least expected it. Pungent was the woodsmoke trace, the wake-the-road snap that old-timers swore separated Popo's brew from every imposter's.

But salt. Salt was theology's loose thread.

The almanac page said 咸以守约 (xián yǐ shǒu yuē), salty to keep the promise, and no one could say what promise, kept how, tasting like what. Xiaoman had never detected salt in any pour. She asked once, directly, and got the weather report: "海远。(Hǎi yuǎn.)" The sea is far.

Then, in November 2025, the question answered itself through the last person anyone would have chosen as theologian: Lao Diao, the watchman, who had drunk nothing but plain hot water at the stall for a year, and who came in one freezing Thursday, set down his thermos, and asked — in front of everyone, which he must have known — for one bowl.

"俺想了整整一年 (Ǎn xiǎng le zhěngzhěng yī nián)," he said. I thought about this for a whole year. "俺缺的东西论麻袋。可是麻袋里头，最底下压着的那件——俺想试试它认不认。(Ǎn quē de dōngxi lùn mádài. Kěshì mádài lǐtou, zuì dǐxia yā zhe de nà jiàn——ǎn xiǎng shìshi tā rèn bù rèn.)"

What I lack fills sacks. But at the very bottom of the sacks there's one item. I want to see if it recognizes this.

He drank. The pause ran four seconds — the longest Xiaoman had ever timed outside Feng Xiuying's catastrophe — and when he surfaced he sat absolutely still, staring into the empty cup, and then laughed, once, a sound like something heavy settling onto a proper shelf.

"咸的 (xián de)，" he said. It was salty. "就一口，最后。像汗。(Jiù yī kǒu, zuìhòu. Xiàng hàn.)" Just one mouthful, at the end. Like sweat.

And then he told them what the soup had taken, because the watchman had decided that if he was going to drink, the lane deserved the inventory: not his dead wife (he'd stopped asking the universe for her back years ago; grief had become load-bearing). Not his knees, his tower, his eleven years of patience. What it took was the smallest thing at the bottom of the sacks: his habit of apologizing. Sixty-one years of 对不起 (duìbuqǐ) — to foremen, to weather, to dogs, to doors that stuck — instilled by a childhood in which everything that broke was somehow his fault until proven otherwise. He'd walked the site daily saying sorry to buildings. The bowl took the sorry. Left him the man.

"那为啥是咸的？(Nà wèi shá shì xián de?)" Chunchun demanded, seventeen and forensic. Then why salt?

Lao Diao considered this with professional seriousness, looking at his own forearm where sixty years of honest work had left its map.

"汗是身体在守约 (Hàn shì shēntǐ zài shǒu yuē)，" he said finally. Sweat is the body keeping its promise. "你答应干活，它就出盐。汤把俺那句'对不起'收走的时候，大概也顺手把俺欠自己六十年的那份工钱结了。用汗找零。(Nǐ dāying gànhuó, tā jiù chū yán. Tāng bǎ ǎn nà jù 'duìbuqǐ' shōu zǒu de shíhou, dàgài yě shùnshǒu bǎ ǎn qiàn zìjǐ liùshí nián de nà fèn gōngqián jié le. Yòng hàn zhǎolíng.)"

You promise work, it pays out salt. When the soup collected my sorries, I figure it also settled the wages I owed myself for sixty years. Paid back in sweat.

The lane sat with that. Popo, from the stool, delivered the only commentary:

"五味簿上，咸字那一栏，记的从来不是味道。(Wǔwèi bù shàng, xián zì nà yī lán, jì de cónglái bú shì wèidào.)"

In the Five-Flavors Book, under the character for salty, what's recorded was never the taste.

CHAPTER 44

What the Dead Left in the Lane

Winter came and the lane ran on two fuels: charcoal for the cauldron, stories for everything else.

The queue had changed its nature. Fewer tourists now — the viral moment had long decayed into local legend — but deeper drinkers: a widow from the stalled tower who asked to forget her mortgage and was given instead the sound of her husband's cough; a young policeman who'd carried a child's body out of water in '21 and asked, every Thursday for a month, standing, not drinking yet; Master Yao's site foreman, whose crew had found things in excavations that the foreman needed set down and could tell no one about.

Xiaoman poured. Kept accounts in the ledger — her hand now, third script in the book of hands. Learned what Popo had never taught because it couldn't be taught: how to know, before the cup reached the drinker, what the soup would take. It was not mind-reading. It was closer to reading weather off a person's face — the specific way guilt sits in a jaw differently from grief, how shame narrows the eyes while sorrow swells them. Some nights she knew within one question. Some nights she served blind and read the ledger afterward and wept at her own blindness, which Popo said was the correct tuition.

The old woman herself declined by increments, with the dignity of a season. She still sat the stall daily — the stool had become hers in the way thrones are: uncomfortable, permanent — but she no longer brewed. Her job, she announced once to the whole lane, was 品尝 (pǐncháng), tasting, which produced Uncle Gao's only recorded laugh that winter: "婆婆又不尝味 (Pópó yòu bù cháng wèi), " Grandma can't taste anyway — and Popo, without missing a beat: "俺尝别的。(Ǎn cháng biéde.)" I taste other things.

And she did. That winter Xiaoman watched her taste griefs off drinkers' faces like ripeness off fruit, and time each pour to a breath in their speaking, and once — only once — catch a second bowl out of a man's hands mid-air, faster than anyone had ever seen the old arms move, saying nothing, just holding the full cup

while he stood shaking, until he sat down on the crate and put his face in his hands and asked properly, this time, for what he actually lacked.

In February, Chunchun turned sixteen and took the gaokao-prep class that met across town, and gave notice at her stool with the gravity of a departing minister. Before she left she handed Xiaoman her own notebook — three years of observations, questions, tallies of pours and pauses — and said, in the flat tone teenagers reserve for gifts too large to receive:

"俺的账。对账用。(Ǎn de zhàng. Duì zhàng yòng.)" My account. For reconciliation.

Xiaoman filed it beside the Five-Flavors Book and did not cry until after closing.

In March the demolition notice for Baihuo Lane was reposted with a fresh seal: crews due September 1st, 2026. Compensation meetings were held under the persimmon tree. Master Yao attended all of them in person, saying little, committing to rehousing terms so generous his own accountants objected — and when Xiaoman asked him why, he looked down Nongke Road toward the towers rising eastward, unfinished, crane-topped, the city's concrete reef, and said:

"俺拆过的楼里，有一半底下埋着人家不想忘的东西。这回俺想拆得慢点，捡干净点。(Ǎn chāi guò de lóu lǐ, yǒu yībàn dǐxia mái zhe rénjiā bù xiǎng wàng de dōngxi. Zhè huí ǎn xiǎng chāi de màn diǎn, jiǎn gānjìng diǎn.)"

Half the buildings I've demolished had something underneath that somebody didn't want forgotten. This time I want to demolish slowly, and pick up clean.

And on the first warm night of April, Popo asked Xiaoman to walk with her to the river flats north of the city, where the Yellow River's old floodplains lay flat as an unmade bed under the moon. They rode the Number 79 bus, the one whose windows steamed words in other people's handwriting, and sat on a bench above the silt, and the old woman was quiet so long that Xiaoman thought she'd slept.

"俺到这条河边上三回了 (Ǎn dào zhè tiáo hé biān shàng sān huí le)," Popo said at last. Three times in my life I've arrived at this river. "头一回是水撵来

的。第二回是锅领来的。这一回——(Tóu yī huí shì shuǐ niǎn lái de. Dì èr huí shì guō lǐng lái de. Zhè yī huí——)" A pause, wind moving silt. "这一回是自己走来的。(Zhè yī huí shì zìjǐ zǒu lái de.)"

First time, the water chased me here. Second time, the pot led me. This time — this time I walked myself.

She would not say more. But walking back to the bus through the dark flats, she hummed — tuneless, half a folk song, the first music Xiaoman had ever heard from her — and the steam of their breath rose and wrote nothing legible on the air, and somewhere behind them the river kept its own ledger, balanced or not, flowing either way.

CHAPTER 45

The Yellow Cat

The cat arrived at Shakoulu station in the autumn of 2021, which everyone agreed was either coincidence or the most punctual soul in Henan.

Station staff found her in the B-exit duty room's storage locker: yellow, half-grown, hoarse from announcing herself to people who weren't there yet. Protocol said pest control. What happened instead was that the young attendant given Meng He's old post — a transfer named Xiao Jiang who had requested Shakoulu specifically, though his file didn't say why and nobody asked — opened a tin of lunchmeat, and by winter she slept on the booth's counter, and by spring she had a name (小黄 Xiǎo Huáng, Little Yellow), a vaccination record kept in the station's first-aid logbook under miscellaneous supplies, and legal standing roughly equivalent to an employee.

She chose the second stool.

There were two stools behind the faregate booth. One was Xiao Jiang's. The other had belonged to nobody since July 2021, because nobody had the heart to remove it and nobody dared sit in it; it stood angled exactly as its previous owner had left it, facing the gates, and passengers who remembered sometimes touched its back in passing like a pew. The cat adopted it in her second month and defended it with the serene totalitarianism of cats. Staff photographed her on it constantly. The photos circulated through the metro system's internal chats under captions of increasing reverence, until 小黄和凳子 (Xiǎo Huáng hé dèng-zi — Little Yellow and the stool) became shorthand for something none of the young employees had language for but all of them maintained.

Xiaoman met her properly in 2023, on a Thursday, delivering laminated memorial cards to the station office. She'd been avoiding Shakoulu except on the 20ths, when grief gave her a scheduled shape to wear; casual visits undid her. But business was business, and afterward Xiao Jiang — who recognized her from the lane, everyone recognized her from the lane — asked quietly if she wanted to see something, and led her to the booth.

The cat lay on the second stool, paws folded, watching the gates with yellow eyes that did not miss a single arriving passenger.

“她只让一个人抱过 (Tā zhǐ ràng yī gè rén bào guò)， ” Xiao Jiang said. She’s only ever let one person pick her up. “值班室的老张。别人碰她就咬。(Zhíbānshì de Lǎo Zhāng. Biéren pèng tā jiù yǎo.)” Old Zhang from the duty room. Anyone else, she bites.

He paused, awkward, then finished what he’d brought her there to say:

“老张说，她刚来那年冬天，有天夜里停电，应急灯也坏了，整个B口黑了。猫从凳子上起来，走到闸机边上，坐那儿冲着黑暗喵了一声。就一声。他说那声跟孟姐下班前喊’走喽’一个调。(Lǎo Zhāng shuō, tā gāng lái nà nián dōngtiān, yǒu tiān yèlǐ tíng diàn, yìngjí dēng yě huài le, zhěnggè B kǒu hēi le. Māo cóng dèngzi shàng qǐlái, zǒu dào zhájī biān shàng, zuò nàr chòng zhe hēi’àn miāo le yī shēng. Jiù yī shēng. Tā shuō nà shēng gēn Mèng jiě xiàbān qián hǎn ‘zǒu lou’ yī gè diào.)”

Old Zhang says that first winter, one night the power failed and even the emergency lights died — total black at Exit B. The cat got off the stool, walked to the faregates, sat facing the dark, and called out once. Just once. He says it was the exact tone Meng used before end of shift: Off we go.

Xiaoman stood in the station’s working roar — trains breathing in and out below, gates chiming, nine thousand daily *zhōng*s flowing past — and looked at a fat yellow cat guarding an empty stool, and did not cry, because somewhere in four years of this work she had passed over into the country where tears are just data leaving the ledger, and she recorded instead:

The dead do not come back. That is rule zero, older than any almanac, and no soup anywhere disputes it. What comes back is everything else: the tone of a voice, folded into a cat’s throat by whatever mechanism moves love through matter when it has nowhere else to go. Cause clear, mechanism unknown. The lane’s whole operating system, running on six pounds of fur behind a faregate.

She visited monthly after that. She never tried to hold the cat. Some vigils you keep by keeping distance — and some you keep by bringing, every single visit, without exception, one tin of lunchmeat, which is the living world’s translation of hu la tang mix bought after shift for somebody waiting at home.

CHAPTER 46

What Popo Did in the Falls of 1963

The brick man's visit reopened the oldest file in the lane, and that winter, for the first time, Xiaoman tried to open it back.

She had, by then, a scholar's patience and an apprentice's archive: the almanac page, three tellings, the ledger's earliest entries, and now a dated physical artifact from 1963 with a family's kitchen-smell still legible on it. She laid everything out on the stall table one February night after closing — evidence like a spread of shells — and asked her teacher the only question she'd never dared:

"1963年。恁在哪儿？(1963 nián. Nèn zài nǎr?)"

1. Where were you?

And Popo, instead of the weather or a task, picked up the brick.

She held it a long time. Then she told it — not three ways; once; and the once was worse than any telling, because it was plain:

"那年俺十五。发水的时候俺在桥头上帮人搬东西——不是勇敢，是俺跑得快。水进来得太快了，桥上挤满了人跟粮食。有个抱孩子的媳妇滑了，俺抓住了孩子，没抓住她。(Nà nián ǎn shíwǔ. Fā shuǐ de shíhou ǎn zài qiáotóu shàng bāng rén bān dōngxi——bú shì yǒnggǎn, shì ǎn pǎo de kuài. Shuǐ jìnlái de tài kuài le, qiáo shàng jǐ mǎn le rén gēn liángshi. Yǒu gè bào háizi de xífù huá le, ǎn zhuā zhù le háizi, méi zhuā zhù tā.)"

I was fifteen. When the water came I was on the bridge helping move things — not brave, just fast. It rose faster than anyone planned; the bridge packed with people and grain. A young mother slipped holding her child. I caught the child. I didn't catch her.

The brick turned once in her hands.

"后来修新桥，那家人来谢俺，给俺这块砖，说桥基里有她，让俺留着，算她还在桥上。俺不会安慰人，就把她家灶上的味儿记下来了——俺那时候鼻子好使。俺想着哪天还给她家里人。一直没碰上。直

到那个老汉来。(Hòulái xiū xīn qiáo, nà jiā rén lái xiè ǎn, gěi ǎn zhè kuài zhuān, shuō qiáojī lǐ yǒu tā, ràng ǎn liú zhe, suàn tā hái zài qiáo shàng. Ǎn bú huì ānwèi rén, jiù bǎ tā jiā zào shàng de wèir jì xiàlái le——ǎn nà shíhou bízi hǎo shǐ. Ǎn xiǎng zhe nǎ tiān huán gěi tā jiālǐ rén. Yīzhí méi pèng shàng. Zhídào nàge lǎohàn lái.)"

Later, when they built the new bridge, her family came to thank me and gave me this brick — said part of her was in the foundation; keep it; let her stay on the bridge. I didn't know how to comfort anyone, so I memorized the smell of their stove — my nose worked well then. Figured someday I'd return it to the family. Never found them. Until that old man came.

Xiaoman sat very still. The story fit nothing — not the flood-orphan telling, not the Fengdu dynasty, not the negation. It fit only itself: a girl who was fast, who caught what one hand could catch, who had no words so she kept a flavor instead, and who had been keeping it for sixty years in a sealed clay jar under a tea table, waiting, exactly as the dead wait, for the right drinker to walk up the lane.

"所以汤是那年开始的? (Suǒyǐ tāng shì nà nián kāishǐ de?)" So that's when the soup began?

"不 (bù), " said Popo. "汤是俺娘的。俺娘淹那年，俺就记住了一样：她走前给俺盛的最后一碗是热的。热这个东西，能把人从水里拽回来一截。俺后来卖的就是那一截。(Tāng shì ǎn niáng de. Ǎn niáng yān nà nián, ǎn jiù jì zhù le yī yàng: tā zǒu qián gěi ǎn chéng de zuìhòu yī wǎn shì rè de. Rè zhège dōngxi, néng bǎ rén cóng shuǐ lǐ zhuài huílái yī jié. Ǎn hòulái mài de jiù shì nà yī jié.)"

No. The soup was my mother's. The year the flood took her, I kept exactly one thing: the last bowl she served me was warm. Warmth pulls a person back out of the water by an arm's length. Everything I've sold since is that arm's length.

She set the brick down on the table's base where it lived, flush against its mortar, and looked at her apprentice with the water-around-stone eyes, and delivered the closest thing to a confession the lane would ever hear:

"恁问过俺怕不怕水。俺说怕过三回。骗恁了。俺天天都怕。天天早上起来，锅是热的，人来了，俺就不怕了。这就是方子全部的秘

密：先把自己烧暖，再舀给别人。谁先冷下去，谁先沉。(Nèn wèn guò ǎn pà bù pà shuǐ. Ǎn shuō pà guò sān huí. Piàn nèn le. Ǎn tiāntiān dōu pà. Tiāntiān zǎoshang qǐlái, guō shì rè de, rén lái le, ǎn jiù bù pà le. Zhè jiù shì fāngzi quánbù de mìmì: xiān bǎ zìjǐ shāo nuǎn, zài yǎo gěi biéren. Shuí xiān lěng xiàqù, shuí xiān chén.)"

You asked me once if I feared water. I said three times. I lied. I fear it every day. Every morning, the pot gets lit, people come, and I stop fearing. That's the entire secret of the recipe: warm yourself first, then ladle for others. Whoever goes cold first, sinks first.

Xiaoman entered none of it in the ledger. Some accounts you keep in the body. But the next morning, before dawn, before the kettle, she stood at the cauldron lighting the fire with both hands cupped around the match, warming herself first — and found the old woman watching from the doorway, and nodding, once, like a bridge taking weight.

CHAPTER 47

The Almanac Page

The secondhand bookstall got its greatest acquisition the way it got everything: by accident, in a box of damp farm manuals.

Xiao Fei found it while pricing a 1987 guide to pig husbandry — pages stuck together, cover gone, and pressed between the chapters on feed ratios, a single loose leaf in a hand that predated every hand either of them had ever seen. Not printed. Hand-copied. The paper was soft as cloth, brown as tea, and the writing ran vertically in a brush script so confident it looked like weather rather than handwriting.

They took it to Popo.

The old woman held the page for a long time without reading it. Then she read it. Then she read it again, lips moving slightly, which none of them had ever seen her do, and set it face-down on the table like something with a pulse that needed calming.

"念 (niàn), " said Chunchun, sixteen now, fearless at exactly the wrong moments. Read it out.

And Popo did, translating the classical into lane Chinese as she went, voice level, the way you read a letter from someone long dead whose handwriting you recognize:

"《五味汤方》，佚名抄。'汤者，非药也。以五味调之：酸以收魂，苦以降执，甘以慰行，辛以醒路，咸以守约。五者备而忘生。忘者，非灭也，挪也。挪其所重，予其所轻……'(《Wǔwèi tāng fāng》, yìmíng chāo. Tāng zhě, fēi yào yě. Yǐ wǔ wèi tiáo zhī: suān yǐ shōu hún, kǔ yǐ jiàng zhí, gān yǐ wèi xíng, xīn yǐ xǐng lù, xián yǐ shǒu yuē. Wǔ zhě bèi ér wàng shēng. Wàng zhě, fēi miè yě, nuó yě. Nuó qí suǒ zhòng, yǔ qí suǒ qīng……)"

The Recipe of Five-Flavor Soup, anonymous copyist. "The soup is not medicine. It is balanced from five flavors: sour to gather the soul, bitter to lower attachment, sweet to comfort the traveler, pungent to wake the road, salty to

keep the promise. When all five are present, forgetting is born. Forgetting is not destruction. It is removal. Remove what weighs; grant what is light…"

Here the page tore. A corner missing, old damage, taking with it — Xiao Fei measured the loss against surviving lines — roughly the section any reader would most want: proportions, method, the actual recipe. The copyist or a later owner had torn out the how. What survived was only the why, and then, at the bottom, three lines in a different, shakier hand:

"'守灶者戒：一不许自饮，二不许问来处，三——'后缺。('Shǒu zào zhě jiè: yī bù xǔ zì yǐn, èr bù xǔ wèn láichù, sān——' hòu quē.)"

"The keeper's prohibitions: first, never drink your own pot; second, never ask where it comes from; third—" [torn away].

The stall sat very quiet. Somewhere up the lane a bicycle bell rang once and gave up.

"第三条 (dì sān tiáo)，" said Chunchun finally. The third prohibition.

"俺不知道 (Ǎn bù zhīdào)，" said Popo.

I don't know.

And here was the thing — the thing Xiaoman noticed because noticing was her whole craft: the old woman's face as she said it was not evasive. It was genuinely, enormously relieved. Like a woman who has carried an unexploded sentence for fifty years and just been informed, by torn paper, that she is no longer required to know what it says.

She pushed the page back across the table to Xiao Fei. "收好 (shōu hǎo)，" she said. Keep it well. "跟恁那些档案放一块儿。别裱，别晒，别给看的人太多。纸这东西——(Gēn nèn nàxiē dàng'àn fàng yīkuàir. Bié biǎo, bié shài, bié gěi kàn de rén tài duō. Zhǐ zhè dōngxi——)" a pause; steam moved; somewhere the kettle chose that moment to sing "——跟汤一个脾气。得留三分没说的，才养得住。(——gēn tāng yī gè píqi. Děi liú sān fēn méi shuō de, cái yǎng de zhù.)"

Put it with your archives. Don't mount it, don't sun it, don't show it to too many people. Paper and soup have the same temperament. You must leave three parts unsaid for anything to keep.

The almanac page went into Yao's container that week, filed beside the intercom audio and four thousand memorial cards and eleven hours of an umbrella held vertical. Cause clear, mechanism unknown; recipe torn away, prohibitions two-thirds delivered. The lane's entire theology, reduced by one lucky damp box to a single sheet with a bite taken out of it.

Which was correct. Xiaoman understood this at some point during the night, lying awake: the tear was not damage. The tear was the fifth rule of the lane's operating system, the one no inheritance speech had ever covered — that a mercy which explains itself completely stops being one, and that somewhere behind every working counter in this world there stands, propped against the wall, a plank with three characters painted on it and no instructions whatsoever.

CHAPTER 48

The Question of the Bridge

Every theology eventually meets its auditor, and the lane's came in June 2026: a graduate student from Beijing, surname Fang, who had read three viral posts and one deleted academic abstract and arrived with a recorder, a consent form, and the gentle ruthlessness of someone doing a doctorate on "vernacular grief infrastructure in post-disaster Chinese cities."

She was twenty-six, precise, and correct about everything, which made her the most dangerous visitor the lane had ever received.

She interviewed Xiaoman for four hours across two days. She interviewed Uncle Gao by the pool. She interviewed Dr. Bai at the metro volunteer station, Chunchun over milk tea at the rival chain's surviving outlet (noting, in her field notes, that she'd chosen it deliberately, to test loyalty under commercial conditions). She requested — and was granted, because Yao had decided transparency was demolition's better twin — access to the Tower C site, where she photographed the plank, the neon bridge, the subway handle nailed beneath, and Lao Diao's container of archives, cataloguing everything with a folklorist's loving neutrality.

Her draft conclusion, shown to Xiaoman as professional courtesy before submission, ran to forty pages and concluded:

"The Baihuo Lane stall constitutes a spontaneous, non-state memorial technology whose efficacy — reported uniformly across dozens of witnesses — is best understood through the framework of communal meaning-making rather than any literal mechanism. The figure of the proprietor functions as what informants call 'the person who asks.' Whether any soup possesses properties beyond phytochemistry is untestable, unfalsifiable, and, per every informant's eventual position, irrelevant. The lane's innovation is procedural, not supernatural: it has built an institution whose sole output is being asked what you came needing."

Xiaoman read all forty pages twice. Popo — this was near the end; the falls had come; the stool did most of her standing now — listened to the summary with her eyes closed.

“她写得好不好？(Tā xiě de hǎo bù hǎo?)” Is it written well? she asked.

“It’s written perfectly.”

“那中。(Nà zhōng.)”

Then fine.

And that was the entire crisis, defused not by refutation but by indifference — except for one thing. At the bottom of page thirty-nine, in the section on succession planning (“the transfer of ritual authority to a second-generation keeper appears complete as of July 2025”), Fang had added a footnote:

“One question no informant would answer directly: what happens to the queue of the dead? Informant M.X., when asked whether those who died without drinking ‘wait’ somewhere, responded only: *Dōu zài děng* (‘they are all waiting’), and declined to elaborate. The researcher notes this as the sole point at which the institution’s interior doctrine resisted documentation.”

Popo heard that part read aloud too. Opened her eyes.

“告诉她 (gàosu tā)，” she said, “那道题不收外人的卷。(Nà dào tí bù shōu wàirén de juàn.)”

Tell her: that question doesn’t accept outside exam papers.

Fang’s thesis passed with distinction that autumn. Her acknowledgments thanked “the keepers of a certain stall” and closed with a sentence Xiaoman copied into the running-water account, the student having gone home to Beijing carrying more than she documented, which is how it always works:

“本研究未能确定汤的成分如何产生其效果。本研究成功确定了：在一个习惯遗忘的城市里，有人坚持了六年，每天询问陌生人他们需要放下什么。这一事实本身不需要机制解释，也无法被任何机制解释。(Běn yánjiū wèi néng quèdìng tāng de chéngfèn rúhé chǎnshēng qí xiàoguǒ. Běn yánjiū chénggōng quèdìng le: zài yī gè xíguàn yíwàng de chéngshì lǐ, yǒu rén jiānchí le liù nián, měi tiān xúnwèn mòshēng rén tāmen xūyào fàngxià shénme. Zhè yī shìshí běnshēn bù xūyào jīzhì jiěshì, yě wúfǎ bèi rènhé jīzhì jiěshì.)”

This study could not determine how the soup's composition produces its effects. This study did determine that in a city skilled at forgetting, someone persisted for six years in asking strangers daily what they needed to set down. That fact itself requires no mechanism — and cannot be explained by one.

CHAPTER 49

The List of the Living

In February 2026, six months before the demolition of Baihuo Lane, Xiaoman began a list she told no one about, because it was not the lane's business. It was hers alone: a reckoning.

It started with arithmetic she could no longer avoid. Popo was — by any telling, even the youngest — nearly eighty. The falls had begun. And the pot was coming to her, which meant the ledger was coming to her, which meant that one day she would sit where the old woman sat and be asked, by someone's trembling father or some platform-deleted boy with a hard drive, the questions that had no weather-report answers. She wanted to enter that inheritance having settled her own accounts first. So she made a list of every person she owed a truth to, and spent the winter and spring paying them out, one by one, in person, at cost.

The list, reproduced from the back pages of the running-water account:

一、小飞。欠他一句"对不起"，为2020年俺删档案那事骂过他——那时他还在给葬礼跟拍挣四十块。已还。他愣了半天，说："姐，俺早忘了。"（他没忘。他的账本比谁都全。）(Yī, Xiǎo Fēi. Qiàn tā yī jù "duìbuqǐ", wèi 2020 nián ǎn shān dàng'àn nà shì mà guò tā——nà shí tā hái zài gěi zànglǐ gēnpāi zhèng sìshí kuài. Yǐ huán. Tā lèng le bàntiān, shuō: "Jiě, ǎn zǎo wàng le." Tā méi wàng. Tā de zhàngběn bǐ shuí dōu quán.) 1. Xiao Fei. Owed an apology for blaming him over the deleted archive in 2020 — back when he was still earning forty yuan filming funerals. Paid. He stared and said, "Sis, I forgot that ages ago." (He hadn't. His ledger is fuller than anyone's.)

二、康大志。欠他四年。不解释。(Èr, Kāng Dàzhì. Qiàn tā sì nián. Bù jiěshì.) 2. Kang Dazhi. Owed him four years. No explanation required.

三、白医生。欠她一次承认：俺也怕回地铁站。每次路过B口都绕行，五年了。已还。她说："绕了五年还能来送卡，你已经比我当年强。"(Sān, Bái yīshēng. Qiàn tā yī cì chéngrèn: ǎn yě pà huí dìtiě zhàn. Měi cì lùguò B kǒu dōu ràoxíng, wǔ nián le. Yǐ huán. Tā shuō: "Rào le wǔ nián hái néng lái sòng kǎ, nǐ yǐjīng bǐ wǒ dāngnián qiáng.") 3. Dr. Bai. Owed an

admission: I'm also afraid of the metro. Five years of detours around Exit B. Paid. She said: "Detouring five years and still coming back to deliver cards — you're already doing better than I did."

四、Shūlán yí。欠她.....这个最难。最后只还了一句："那年你关摊子，救的可能是摊子。"她看了俺很久，说："恁现在说话像婆婆了。"不知是不是夸。(Sì, Shūlán yí. Qiàn tā.....zhège zuì nán. Zuìhòu zhǐ huán le yī jù: "Nà nián nǐ guān tānzi, jiù de kěnéng shì tānzi." Tā kàn le ǎn hěn jiǔ, shuō: "Nèn xiànzài shuōhuà xiàng Pópó le." Bù zhī shì bú shì kuā.) 4. Auntie Shulan. Owed her... this was the hardest. In the end repaid only this: "When you shut down the stall, maybe you were saving it." She looked at me a long time and said: "You talk like the granny now." Unclear if compliment.

五、宝树叔。欠他一场没看的游泳比赛。六月里去看他带孩子们比赛，坐在看台上哭得像个没出息的。他还了俺一瓶水，说："闺女，眼泪是账本上的字，别嫌多。"(Wǔ, Bǎoshù shū. Qiàn tā yī chǎng méi kàn de yóuyǒng bǐsài. Liùyuè lǐ qù kàn tā dài háizimen bǐsài, zuò zài kàntái shàng kū de xiàng gè méi chūxi de. Tā huán le ǎn yī píng shuǐ, shuō: "Guīnǚ, yǎnlèi shì zhàngběn shàng de zì, bié xián duō.") 5. Uncle Baoshu. Owed attendance at a swim meet. Went in June; sat in the bleachers crying disgracefully. He repaid me a bottle of water and said: "Girl, tears are just entries in the ledger. Don't begrudge the volume."

六、妈。.....这一条永远在还。还不清。中。(Liù, mā. .....zhè yī tiáo yǒngyuǎn zài huán. Hái bù qīng. Zhōng.) 6. Mom. ...This entry stays open forever. It can't be cleared. Zhong.

The exercise changed her pouring. That spring, drinkers under Tower C began reporting — to Chunchun, who logged it in the bear notebook's successors — that the new keeper asked different questions than the old keeper had. Popo had asked, in effect: what do you lack? Xiaoman asked: what do you owe, and to whom, and have you said it? Different tariff, same currency. The soup adjusted without complaint, because the soup, whatever else it was, had never once been confused about its job: it took not what you asked for but what you lacked — and sometimes what you lacked, it turned out, was simply the

courage the list demanded, in which case the bowl functioned as courage on credit, collected later, in person, at cost.

By Ghost Festival the list stood paid except entry six, which stands paid except entry six still, which is correct. Some accounts are not for clearing. They are for keeping — actively, daily, at working volume — the way you keep a stall open, a stool empty, a shelf stocked with cups set mouth-up, waiting for whoever the lane sends next.

CHAPTER 50

The Fifth Year: Morning

The morning of the fifth anniversary, before the city woke into its grief, Popo came to Xiaoman's kitchen and cooked.

This had never happened. In five years the old woman had crossed the threshold of the apartment perhaps four times, always to sit, never once to touch a pan. Now she stood at the stove at six a.m. in her oldest coat, hands moving with a certainty that made Xiaoman's whole understanding of her wobble, because Popo was making *húlàtāng*, hu la tang, from scratch — not the packet Meng He used to buy but the real thing, hand-torn gluten, black pepper ground in the palm, vinegar added at the end off the heat so it stays sharp.

"恁不是说不会尝味？(Nèn bú shì shuō bú huì cháng wèi?)" Xiaoman said from the doorway. You said you can't taste.

"俺不会。俺会记。(Ǎn bú huì. Ǎn huì jì.)" I can't taste. I can remember.

The recipe she worked from was memory itself — no notes, no measures, her hand shaking only when the pepper needed grinding and steadied the moment it took the weight. And while it cooked she talked, which she almost never did, in the low continuous voice of someone paying out a rope:

"恁妈站岗那十一年，天天早上六点半，闸机后头站着，看恁们这个城市的人从地底下冒出来。俺那时候就在她车站口摆过两年摊——恁不知道吧，2020年之前。卖茶。不叫孟婆汤，就叫茶。(Nèn mā zhàn gǎng nà shíyī nián, tiāntiān zǎoshang liù diǎn bàn, zhájī hòutou zhàn zhe, kàn nènmen zhège chéngshì de rén cóng dìdǐxia mào chūlái. Ǎn nà shíhou jiù zài tā chēzhànkǒu bǎi guò liǎng nián tān——nèn bù zhīdào ba, 2020 nián zhīqián. Mài chá. Bú jiào Mèng Pó tāng, jiù jiào chá.)" Your mother kept her post eleven years. Every morning six-thirty, behind the gates, watching this city's people come up out of the ground. I kept a stall at her station entrance for two years before 2020 — you didn't know that. Selling tea. Not called Meng Po soup; just tea.

Xiaoman hadn't known. Had anyone known? The lane's memory went back to June 2020 and no further; the viral moment had invented them all.

“有一回下大雪，一个姑娘在闸机里头哭，误了末班车回不去。你妈把她带进值班室，给她泡了碗面，把自己的大衣给她盖了一夜。第二天早上那姑娘要给钱，你妈说：’*Zhōng shá qián, nèn jì zhù lù jiù xíng le.*’” (Yǒu yī huí xià dàxuě, yī gè gūniang zài zhájī lǐtou kū, wù le mòbānchē huí bù qù. Nǐ mā bǎ tā dài jìn zhíbānshì, gěi tā pào le wǎn miàn, bǎ zìjǐ de dàyī gěi tā gài le yī yè. Dì èr tiān zǎoshang nà gūniang yào gěi qián, nǐ mā shuō: ‘Zhōng shá qián, nèn jì zhù lù jiù xíng le.’) One snowy night a girl missed the last train and cried inside the gates. Your mother took her into the duty room, made her instant noodles, covered her with her own coat overnight. Next morning the girl tried to pay, and your mother said: “What money? Just remember the route.”

The hu la tang finished. Popo filled three bowls — one each, and one set, deliberately, at the table’s empty place, steam rising into the morning where a blue raincoat hung by the door with its tags long since removed and its pockets full of years.

“恁妈的账本上没有大事 (Nèn mā de zhàngběn shàng méiyǒu dàshì), ” the old woman said, sitting down. “全是这种。一碗面，一件衣裳，一句’记住路’。俺守了五十年摊子才明白：这就是五味汤的真方子。恁不用会熬。恁只要天天做，做到有人替恁记着为止。(Quán shì zhè zhǒng. Yī wǎn miàn, yī jiàn yīshang, yī jù ‘jì zhù lù’. Ǎn shǒu le wǔshí nián tānzi cái míngbai: zhè jiù shì wǔwèi tāng de zhēn fāngzi. Nèn bú yòng huì áo. Nèn zhǐyào tiāntiān zuò, zuò dào yǒu rén tì nèn jì zhe wéizhǐ.)”

Your mother’s ledger held no big events. All entries like this. A bowl of noodles, a coat, a “remember the route.” I kept my stall fifty years before I understood: this is the true recipe of five-flavor soup. You don’t need to know how to brew it. You just do it daily, until somebody keeps account of you in return.

They ate. The soup was — Xiaoman made herself notice, because noticing was her craft now — exactly right. Black pepper forward, vinegar sharp at the finish, the gluten torn rough the way Henan means it, sesame paste holding the bottom like a kept promise. It tasted like every winter morning of her childhood and nothing like grief, which is to say it tasted like her mother’s kitchen continued by other hands.

"婆婆 (Pópó), " she said finally. "这方子恁跟谁学的? (Zhè fāngzi nèn gēn shuí xué de?)"

Grandma. Who taught you this recipe?

Popo looked at the third bowl, steaming at its empty place, and gave the answer that Xiaoman would enter in the ledger that night as the closest thing to doctrine the old woman ever volunteered:

"今早学的。恁妈站在旁边看着呢，嫌俺胡椒放多了。俺没理她。她的锅她做主，俺的锅俺做主。(Jīnzǎo xué de. Nèn mā zhàn zài pángbiān kàn zhe ne, xián ǎn hújiāo fàng duō le. Ǎn méi lǐ tā. Tā de guō tā zuòzhǔ, ǎn de guō ǎn zuòzhǔ.)"

Learned it this morning. Your mother's standing right there watching — says I put in too much pepper. I ignored her. Her pot, her rules; my pot, mine.

CHAPTER 51

The Fifth Year: Afternoon

The afternoon of the fifth anniversary belonged to Xiao Jiang and the stool.

He'd kept Meng He's post for five years now — requested Shakoulu as a rookie out of the police academy's metro program because of a story he'd heard at his own grandmother's knee about a faregate attendant who covered strangers with her coat in snowstorms, and had discovered on arrival that the story had a name, a booth, an empty second stool, and a cat. His request to keep the stool unremoved had been approved by three successive station managers who each understood less about it than the last and signed anyway, which is how the best memorials survive bureaucracy: by being slightly beneath its resolution.

At two p.m., at the height of the day's crowd, Xiao Jiang did what he did every July 20th: he unlocked the duty room's back cabinet and took out the box.

Inside: Meng He's original name badge; the paper *zàntíng fúwù* sign from the year the booth stood unmanned; a child's drawing left by some passenger's kid in 2023 depicting (per its crayon legend) 孟荷阿姨和猫阿姨 (Mèng Hé āyí hé Māo āyí), Auntie Meng He and Auntie Cat; and the logbook page from July 19th, 2021 — her last full shift — with her own handwriting in the margins, noting a lost umbrella returned, a drunk escorted home safe, a pump complaint filed upward and marked received.

He set these on a folding table by the Exit B barrier for six hours each year. No ceremony, no speeches; just objects in daylight while the queue of flowers formed around them. People touched the badge. An old man read the pump complaint four times and finally asked Xiao Jiang whether anything came of it. The pump was replaced in the 2022 refit, he said. The old man nodded and said the sentence half the city seemed to be carrying that day:

"中。晚是晚了点，可是换了。(Zhōng. Wǎn shì wǎn le diǎn, kěshì huàn le.)"

All right. Late, but replaced.

Xiaoman came at four, when the light turned gold and the crowd thinned enough for grief to find seats. She brought Popo — who insisted on standing the whole visit, examining the logbook page with her reader's squint — and the two of them stood before a dead woman's handwriting in the last light like students before a text.

"字真稳 (Zì zhēn wěn)，" Popo said at last. Such steady handwriting. "站闸机的手都稳。俺们舀汤的手也稳。都是端东西的手。(Zhàn zhájī de shǒu dōu wěn. Ǎnmen yǎo tāng de shǒu yě wěn. Dōu shì duān dōngxi de shǒu.)"

Hands that stand behind gates are steady. Hands that ladle are steady. All hands that hold things up.

On the way out, a girl of about nineteen stopped them — a stranger, obviously not from the lane, holding her phone with something pulled up on it. She'd recognized them; everyone eventually recognized them; fame in Zhengzhou's grief economy was unavoidable and weird. She was a Line 5 commuter, she said. Rode that stretch daily. Never knew any of the fourteen personally. But she wanted them to know that every morning when the train passed between Shakoulu and Haishansi, at the exact minute, without fail, somebody in her car would say *zhōng* quietly — just once — and the whole car would go still for a second, and then the day would start.

"恁们那锅汤 (Nènmen nà guō tāng)，" she finished, "俺喝过。两块钱。没忘掉啥。就是那天上班，俺给俺妈打了个电话。(Ǎn hē guò. Liǎng kuài qián. Méi wàngdiào shá. Jiù shì nà tiān shàngbān, ǎn gěi ǎn mā dǎ le gè diànhuà.)"

I've drunk at your stall. Two kuai. Didn't forget anything. Except that day I called my mom on the way to work.

She left before they could answer, which was correct; you don't tip the ferryman, and you don't linger with the people whose counter taught you to call your mother. Xiaoman watched her merge into the crowd and wrote nothing down, because some entries the ledger keeps by losing them: thousands upon thousands of small re-connections, unwitnessed, unarchived, the soup's true output distributed so widely across the city's mornings that no platform could ever delete it all.

CHAPTER 52

The Fifth Year

The fifth anniversary fell on a Monday, and the city did what it always did now with its grief: nothing official, and everything unofficial.

Xiaoman opened the stall at dawn. By eight the lane held a queue she recognized from 2021's shape but not its sound: no weeping this year, or almost none — something quieter had replaced it, five years deep, a queue of people who had learned to carry their dead in working posture. Office workers on lunch break, holding cups without drinking until their minute was up. A mother with two children, teaching them how to hold the bowl. Uncle Gao came at ten with his umbrella and his laminated sign — Nini would have been thirty-five — and stood his hour, then drank his tea, then went to the pool.

Dr. Bai ran the volunteer medic table at Shakoulu all day, as she had every 20th since 2022. The station's Exit B duty room kept its door open; passengers left flowers not at the barriers anymore but at the booth itself, around the second stool nobody sat in, beside the yellow cat, fat and ancient now, who accepted tribute with the entitlement of the immortal.

Xiao Fei filmed everything, steadily, without hiding: the queue at the stall, the cards at the station, the relief wall at Exit B with its carved faces and its missing date — which he'd covered once, years ago, with a paper sign reading 2021.7.20, removed within hours by persons unknown, reappeared the next morning anyway, removed again, reappeared again, a duel conducted over months between tape and memory that the tape eventually conceded, having made its point: dates can be scraped off stone, but someone will keep writing them in paper forever.

At 18:04 — the timestamp from the photocopied page inside the ledger's keeping, the minute dispatch asked and the city chose waiting — Qiao Shulan arrived at Shakoulu on foot, in her retirement clothes, retired eleven days now, pension intact through an administrative miracle she suspected Master Yao's paperwork had engineered and never confirmed.

She stood before the relief wall. She took out a single sheet of paper. And she read the fourteen names aloud, slowly, clearly, in her small upright voice, while the crowd went still in that way Xiaoman knew from footage — the pause, half a second or an hour — and when she reached the fifth name, *Mèng Hé*, her own voice failed for the first time in twenty-six years of public speaking, and a stranger's voice from the crowd continued it for her, and then another stranger took the next name, and the list crossed the crowd like a bucket line, everyone carrying one name each, until the wall held fourteen names' worth of ordinary voices and the evening traffic flowed around them like water around stones that have decided to stay.

Filmed by forty phones.

An hour later, walking home through the thinning crowd, an auntie stopped her — a stranger, tunnel widow from way back, face known to every regular at Shakoulu — and pressed a bottle of water into her hands without a word: cold from a freezer bag, the lane's oldest currency of care. Shulan stood holding it like an award or an indictment, watched the auntie go, then drank it right there on the curb in front of everyone, which is the only correct way to receive such things. Deleted by platforms within the week. Mirrored from Master Yao's container within a day, and passed hand to hand in noodle shops and book stalls and print shops across three districts, because stories don't have street addresses, and every deletion just taught another hundred people where the copies live.

Afterward she walked to Exit B and stood before the duty-room window a while. Inside, under its heat lamp, the yellow cat slept on the second stool — Meng He's stool — paws folded, breathing in the slow meter of a creature whose whole job was being somewhere it was needed. A young attendant noticed Xiaoman through the glass and simply nodded: no words, no wave; the nod of one post-holder to another across a shift boundary six years deep now and six more to come.

She had come to think of her mother's afterlife as a staffing arrangement. The booth held by Xiao Jiang and the cat. The pool held by Uncle Gao and thirty hard-hatted uncles. The archive held by Xiao Fei and Yao's containers. The accounts carried door to door by Shulan. The names read aloud each 20th by

whoever's voice was available. And the soup — the warm arm's length, the daily asking — held here at the counter, by whoever would sit the stool after her.

Nobody had applied for these posts. Nobody had been hired. Yet nothing, in five years, had ever gone uncovered.

That night the lane stayed open late. Popo sat the stool until midnight, tasting whatever it is that old women taste off crowds, and at closing she took Xiaoman's wrist — second time in five years, first since 2021 — turned her palm up, and said:

"明年这时候，锅是恁的，摊子不一定是。恁想好放哪儿了没? (Míngnián zhè shíhou, guō shì nèn de, tānzi bù yīdìng shì. Nèn xiǎng hǎo fàng nǎr le méi?)"

By next year the pot is yours; the stall may not be. Have you thought about where you'll put it?

Xiaoman looked down the lane — persimmon tree, bookstall, the hoarding beyond which Yao's crews waited for September — and then east, toward the towers, unfinished, crane-topped, holding wind and watchmen and one shipping container marked *qìcái*.

"*Zhōng*," she said. "俺想好了。(Ǎn xiǎng hǎo le.)"

Yes. I know where.

CHAPTER 53

Shulan's File (July 2026, the day after) [QIAO POV]

The morning after reading the names, Qiao Shulan woke at her usual 5:40 and lay still for a while, taking inventory of what she had left.

Pension: intact. Career: concluded. Reputation: in the hands of forty phones, which meant in the hands of nobody, which meant, on balance, safe. Nephew: avenged in the only currency available to the living — spoken aloud, at the correct spot, by the correct mouth (hers), before witnesses who could not be dispersed because they were everyone.

She got up, made tea, drank it tasting it — tasted it! — the first flavor in five years to arrive on schedule, and understood that something had completed its circuit in her overnight, some valve her body had kept shut since a conference room in 2021 now standing open, letting ordinary life back through: the tea, the sparrows, the neighbor's radio playing opera too low to identify.

Then she went to her apartment's inner room, knelt on the floor, and pulled out the box.

Four thousand cards' worth of sentiment analysis, logged by sanitation crews between 2021 and 2023 under her own written instructions. She had told herself for five years that she was keeping it as evidence — of what, she'd never specified; evidence has a defendant, and hers never acquired one. This morning, with the taste of tea actually in her mouth, she finally knew what the file was for, and it was simpler than anything her career had trained her for:

It was for giving away.

She spent three days sorting. Not by date or district but by addressee: cards written to specific names she could cross-reference against public casualty information; cards written to no one (我很好，你们放心 (Wǒ hěn hǎo, nǐmen fàngxīn), I'm fine, don't worry — written, impossibly, in the dead's direction); one entire category that stopped her heart for a moment until she read it

properly: cards addressed to the city itself, Zhengzhou, as recipient, complaints and love letters indistinguishable.

On the fourth day she took the sorted boxes — not all; a tenth, the ones whose families she could find — and began visiting. Doorways mostly. Sometimes courtyards. A widow in a rehoused flat on Nongke Road who opened the door to a former official holding out a plastic sleeve containing a card in her dead husband's handwriting, photographed by a stranger's phone at a station barricade four years ago, logged by a crew he never saw, filed by a woman whose signature had once shaved his name off an arithmetic table.

"恁是哪个单位的？(Nèn shì nǎge dānwèi de?)" Which work unit are you from? The widow asked, suspicious, hands wet from washing rice.

"没有单位了 (Méiyǒu dānwèi le)，" Shulan said. No unit anymore. "俺就是个送信的。(Ǎn jiù shì gè sòng xìn de.)"

I'm just somebody delivering letters.

By August she had delivered ninety-one cards to sixty-three households, and wept at none of them, and was wept at by most, and came each time to the strange discovery that grief received is lighter than grief administered — that all her years of managing sorrow at scale had been the heavy work, and this door-to-door errand, this was the light work, the work hands are actually shaped for.

In September, when Baihuo Lane began coming down and Xiaoman's stall moved toward Tower C, Shulan brought her gift to the new site: not a card but a promise, delivered over plain hot water while Lao Diao's kettle sang. Every year, on the twentieth, she would read the fourteen names somewhere in the city — location rotating, announced nowhere — for as long as her voice held.

Xiaoman asked her why nowhere, why unannounced.

And Shulan gave the answer that closed her account, or opened the next one:

"排队的规矩 (Páiduì de guīju)，" she said. "不喊人。来的都是该来的。(Bù hǎn rén. Lái de dōu shì gāi lái de.)"

Queue rules. You don't call people. Whoever comes is who should come.

CHAPTER 54

What Chunchun Learned at School

The problem with being raised adjacent to a theology is school, where all theologies must be translated into exam answers.

Chunchun's teachers saw a middling student with sudden violent competence in exactly two subjects: biology (memory, neurology, the hippocampus — she could diagram the machinery of forgetting better than the textbook) and composition (where she kept producing essays her teachers flagged for a quality they called 老气 (lǎoqì), oldness). Her history teacher, grading a paper on disaster response policy in 2021, found in the middle of a standard answer the sentence *biǎogé qiān le, shuǐbèng méi huàn* — we signed the form; nobody changed the pump — attributed to "一位车站工作人员 (yī wèi chēzhàn gōngzuò rényuán)" and could not decide whether to fail it or frame it. He gave it 88/100 and a comment: 引用要注明出处。(Yǐnyòng yào zhùmíng chūchù.) Cite your sources.

She couldn't. The source was a bowl of soup and a woman who denied existing.

So she ran the experiment every believing teenager eventually runs: she tried on disbelief. At fifteen, armed with the neurology unit and a science-fair project on electroconvulsive memory disruption, she stood at the cauldron one evening and laid out, respectfully, completely, the case that Popo's soup was kǔdīng chá plus suggestion plus the mind's own mercy — that the pauses were dissociative microtrances, that the migrations were pareidolia and grief-driven pattern-matching, that the ledger was ritual bookkeeping whose accuracy came from the keeper's uncanny emotional perception and not from any mechanism unknown to science.

The old woman listened to the whole dissection with her ladle resting, nodding occasionally as if checking ingredients against a list.

"*Zhōng*, " she said when it ended. Correct. "恁说的都对。(Nèn shuō de dōu duì.)"

Everything you said is right.

A pause long enough for Chunchun's triumph to curdle into panic.

"那恁为啥还来？(Nà nèn wèi shá hái lái?)" Then why do you keep coming?

And the girl stood there with her science fair and her certainties and discovered she had no answer that survived contact with the actual question, because the true answer was: because on Thursday afternoons something happens at this table that does not happen anywhere else in the observable universe, namely that everyone who sits down is asked after, by name, by somebody who never forgets what anyone came needing — and whether that's chemistry or five flavors or a fifty-year-old woman's undivided attention was a distinction that had never once mattered to anyone still standing.

"*Ǎn bù zhīdào*," she admitted. I don't know.

"*Zhōng*，" Popo said again, pouring her tea. "会不知道的人，能学。全知道的人，教不了。(Huì bù zhīdào de rén, néng xué. Quán zhīdào de rén, jiāo bù liǎo.)"

Those who can say I don't know can learn. Those who know everything cannot be taught.

Chunchun stayed. Obviously. She went home that night and did not dismantle her science-fair board; she added a line to its conclusions section: mechanism undetermined; effects reproducible; further study required. Got second prize. The judge who docked points for the last sentence wrote in the margin: 科学不是结论，是态度。(Kēxué bú shì jiélùn, shì tàidu.) Science isn't conclusions. It's an attitude.

By gaokao year she'd stopped choosing between the stall and school entirely, which surprised no one who understood either. She tested into Zhengzhou University's medicine program — pediatrics, eventually, though the entrance essay she wrote about why mentioned neither children nor medicine. It mentioned a table, a queue, and the observation that most people in this city had never once been asked what they came somewhere needing, and that she intended to spend her career being the person who asked, whatever white coat or ladle the asking required.

Popo read the essay draft — the only applicant whose personal statement ever crossed the stool — and returned it with one correction. Not of content. Of a number.

"五味 (Wǔ wèi), " she said, tapping the line where the girl had written 五味汤方 (Wǔwèi tāng fāng) like a citation. Five flavors. "恁写'据说有五味'。把'据说'去掉。(Nèn xiě 'jùshuō yǒu wǔ wèi'. Bǎ 'jùshuō' qùdiào.)" You wrote supposedly five flavors. Remove supposedly.

"可没有证据——(Kě méiyǒu zhèngjù——)"

But there's no proof—

"恁就是证据 (Nèn jiù shì zhèngjù), " said Popo, and went back to her cups.

CHAPTER 55

The Bridge Plank's Story

Ghost Festival fell on August 27th that year, and the lane prepared for it the way it prepared for everything: by arguing about provenance.

The question on everyone's mouth was where the stall would go. September 1st, Master Yao's crews took Baihuo Lane; compensation was settled; the persimmon tree would be kept (Yao had redrawn his site plan twice to save it); the buildings would come down slowly and picked-clean, as promised. But a stall needs a place, and the places available were all wrong: the sanctioned night market by the stadium (too bright, too managed), a shopping street in Erqi (rent that would require selling soup at twenty kuai), nowhere.

Xiaoman's answer, delivered in July, had been received with the silence of an idea either mad or inevitable: the unfinished tower.

Yao's container sat behind a hoarding at the base of Tower C of the Jingguang North complex — eleven years stalled, thirty floors of bare concrete with rebar wintering in its top slabs, watchmen, wind, and now, if she had her way, a soup stall on the ground floor behind the hoarding gate, serving the site's two hundred workers, the neighborhood's leftover poor, and anyone who climbed the city's memory the way water climbs: finding every crack downward or up.

"工地食堂都办不成的地方 (Gōngdì shítáng dōu bàn bù chéng de dì-fang), " Uncle Gao objected mildly. If even a work canteen couldn't survive there—

"食堂要挣钱 (Shítáng yào zhèngqián), " Xiaoman said. "摊子不挣。(Tānzi bù zhèng.)" A canteen has to make money. The stall doesn't.

That was the whole business plan, and Yao — who had spent three years learning what this lane was for — stamped it in a day, and threw in electricity from the site generator, and stood afterward looking at the painted plank leaning against the wall, and said the thing nobody had asked him:

"这板子是俺拆出来的，恁们知道不？(Zhè bǎnzi shì ǎn chāi chūlái de, nènmen zhīdào bù?)"

You all know I'm the one who demolished that plank into existence?

The lane turned. He came in, sat heavily on a crate, accepted tea he wouldn't drink, and told it — the true version, finally, after four years of Sunday silence:

1. His first big contract: clearing the old cotton mill dormitories east of the station. Everything scheduled, everything signed. Last structure standing was a footbridge over the mill's drainage channel — a plank bridge, actually, wood on stone footings, which the mill girls had crossed daily for forty years to reach the shift whistle. On demolition morning a woman came out of the crowd, an old worker, retired decades, and stood on the plank and would not move. Not protesting. Just standing, hands flat on the rail, pressing down. Yao, young then, ordered her removed gently, and watched from his crane cab as they led her off, and saw her look back not at the dormitories but at the plank itself — at the crossing, the going-over — and something in the young contractor's chest had failed to file the paperwork on what he'd just done.

He saved the plank from the skip himself. Kept it through moves and marriages. In 2019, clearing a dead grandmother's flat in Baihuo Lane — a job he'd taken personally, unpaid — he'd left it against a wall, and someone had painted three characters on it sometime between then and 2020, and when the old woman on the corner needed a sign for her joke-stall, the lane provided.

"俺一直当俺欠着那座桥 (Ǎn yīzhí dāng ǎn qiàn zhe nà zuò qiáo)，" Yao said. "现在明白了。桥不用还。桥只要有人过。(Xiànzài míngbai le. Qiáo bùyòng huán. Qiáo zhǐyào yǒu rén guò.)"

I always thought I owed a debt to that bridge. Now I understand. A bridge doesn't need repaying. It only needs people to cross it.

He looked at Xiaoman across the table, and for the first time since 2022 his eyes were wet, and he let them be, because the lane didn't traffic in more.

"塔楼底下那块地 (Tǎlóu dǐxia nà kuài dì)，" he said. "恁的摊子放那儿。板子挂门上。等楼盖起来那天——要是真有那天——俺给恁留个铺面。原样。(Nèn de tānzi fàng nàr. Bǎnzi guà mén shàng. Děng lóu gài qǐlái nà tiān——yàoshi zhēn yǒu nà tiān——ǎn gěi nèn liú gè pùmiàn. Yuányàng.)"

Under Tower C is where your stall goes. Plank above the door. And the day the tower is ever finished — if such a day comes — I'll keep you a shopfront. Exactly like this one.

From the stool in the corner, unheard all afternoon, Popo spoke her second sentence of the month:

"*Zhōng*。"

Before he left that evening, Yao did one more thing with the brick.

The 1963 foundation brick — mortared into the table's base since the river man's visit, holding up the plank, holding up everything — was scheduled to move to Tower C with the stall. But demolition math is unforgiving: the table would come apart for transport, joints numbered, and the brick sat below the waterline of its base frame, awkward, heavy, technically in the way.

Yao solved it his way. He came back Sunday morning with chisels and took the table apart himself, alone, before any crew could touch it — two hours of patient joinery archaeology — freed the brick whole, wrapped it in his own work jacket, and rode across town to the new site holding it on his lap like a sleeping dog.

"桥基跟桥走 (Qiáojī gēn qiáo zǒu)，" he told Xiaoman at the hoarding gate, handing it over. "这是行规。俺们拆楼的都懂：老东西压新东西，楼才站得住。(Zhè shì hángguī. Ǎnmen chāi lóu de dōu dǒng: lǎo dōngxi yā xīn dōngxi, lóu cái zhàn de zhù.)"

Foundations travel with their bridges. It's trade law. Everyone in demolition knows: old things pressed under new things — that's what makes buildings stand.

And the plank, leaned against the lane wall in the last light, seemed — several drinkers swore afterward, and none of them agreed on this detail, which is how you know it's true — to steam faintly, though it was only wood, and only August, and only Zhengzhou remembering out loud.

CHAPTER 56

Xiao Fei's Forty Yuan

The forty yuan came up on the worst possible night, which is the only kind of night the past keeps for appointments.

It was February 2026. The archive was safe in its container; Shulan's cards had been delivered; the lane's move to Tower C was scheduled, funded, blessed. Xiao Fei should have been sleeping like a man whose accounts were balanced. Instead he sat at his bookstall at midnight with a delivery notification he'd opened by reflex — the app still installed, three years after quitting — and there it was, his old rider account, resurrected by some platform data-recovery sweep: order history, ratings, and a payment record from March 2017.

送葬跟拍，1次，40.00元。(Sòngzàng gēnpāi, yī cì, sìshí yuán.) Funeral filming, one job. 40.00 yuan.

The grandmother of a schoolmate. He'd been seventeen with a secondhand phone and no moral vocabulary, and an uncle had paid him forty yuan to film a funeral because nobody else in the family could be spared from carrying things. He'd done it competently. He'd taken the money. And the shame — he'd assumed it would fade like all teenage shames — had instead compounded annually, quietly, into the load-bearing beam of his entire adult character: the man who filmed funerals for free, who archived the deleted, who kept names when platforms wouldn't. Every choice since 2021 traced back to those two crumpled ten-yuan notes.

He'd never once asked himself the obvious question, because the obvious question was unbearable: did the family want that footage?

He found the uncle through three intermediaries in one week, which told him something about how the family's numbers had thinned. The uncle met him at a bus stop in Guancheng, older now, working a warehouse job, and listened to the whole confession — the forty yuan, the years of free archiving, the need, finally, to return the money with interest or kneel, whichever came first in Henan custom.

The uncle let him finish. Then he laughed — not unkindly, but with the full weariness of a man who has carried things for eight years and is being apologized to by the lightest-loaded person at the funeral.

"恁知道俺为啥找你拍不？(Nèn zhīdào ǎn wèi shá zhǎo nǐ pāi bù?)" Do you know why I asked you to film? he said. "因为那天全家都在哭，哭的人手里不能拿东西。得有一个不哭的。俺们挑了你，因为你那年就不太会哭。(Yīnwèi nà tiān quán jiā dōu zài kū, kū de rén shǒu lǐ bù néng ná dōngxi. Děi yǒu yī gè bù kū de. Ǎnmen tiāo le nǐ, yīnwèi nǐ nà nián jiù bù tài huì kū.)"

Because the whole family was crying that day, and crying people can't hold anything. There had to be one who wasn't. We picked you because even then you weren't much of a crier.

"那四十块钱是啥？(Nà sìshí kuài qián shì shá?)" And the forty yuan?

"是让你别把自己当外人。白干的是客人，收钱的才是自家人。(Shì ràng nǐ bié bǎ zìjǐ dāng wàirén. Bái gàn de shì kèrén, shōu qián de cái shì zìjiārén.)" It was so you wouldn't treat yourself as an outsider. Those who work for free are guests. Family takes payment.

He refused the returned money — refused it twice, then made Xiao Fei keep it with instructions to buy tea for whoever came to his stall needing to sit down, which is how the bookstall acquired its standing offer, chalked on a paper cup by the register ever after: 哭累了坐，茶免费。(Kū lèi le zuò, chá miǎnfèi.) If your crying's tired you out, sit. Tea's free.

Xiao Fei walked home through the sleeping district and understood, somewhere between the overpass and Nongke Road, the shape of what Popo had been doing to him for five years without his noticing: she'd never once let him pay for anything either. Two kuai a cup, waived, every time, waved off as 恁的档案抵账 (Nèn de dàng'àn dǐ zhàng), your archives settle the account — and he'd accepted it as granny eccentricity. It wasn't. She'd been keeping him family by the same ledger the uncle read from. Guests drink for free once. Family runs tabs forever.

He added it to the archive that night, in the container, filed under its own new heading: 债务已清，关系未清。(Zhàiwù yǐ qīng, guānxi wèi qīng.) Debt settled. Relationship unsettled.

CHAPTER 57

The Last Night of the Lane

Baihuo Lane came down in daylight, as promised, and its last night was spent the way the lane had spent all its nights: awake, lit low, full.

Yao had given them until midnight on the thirty-first. At dusk the whole lane turned out — the rehoused, the departing, the ones who'd stayed to the final wall — for what Chunchun's generation called 百家宴 (bǎijiāyàn), hundred-family dinner, and what the elders called 拆迁饭 (chāiqiān fàn), demolition meal, and which consisted of every household cooking its one best dish into the street so that the lane's last supper was a potluck of everything it had ever been. Auntie Pan's descendants brought her vinegar Crocs recipe (pickled lotus root, actually; no one knew why the shoes were involved). The bookstall contributed soup from a thermos army. Xiao Jiang came over from Shakoulu with the yellow cat in a carrier, elderly now and dignified, who supervised from a chair like visiting royalty. Even Director Ban put in an appearance, was recognized by nobody, ate two bowls of someone's braised pork, and left before his luck could change.

Popo sat at the head of it all under the awning, too tired to stand, refusing to leave, presiding with her cup.

Xiaoman had prepared a speech and abandoned it, having watched her teacher work long enough to know that inventory outperforms oratory. So instead she stood on a crate with the lane's oldest object in her hands — not the plank, not the cauldron, but the ledger, swollen with decades, string-tied — and read out, at random, six entries from across the years: names redacted, asks and takings kept, where each grief had gone afterward. The stove. The well. The river. The steam. A lane built on drainage channels and demolition notices heard the names of its own dead and living distributed among flavors, and understood itself completely for one evening, which is more than most streets ever get.

Then Popo herself rose — waved off all assistance, stood by main force — and did something no one had seen: she poured the last bowl of Baihuo Lane

herself, both hands on the ladle, and carried it past every living drinker to set it before the brick.

The foundation brick from 1963, mortared into the table's base four years now, holding up the bridge plank, holding up everything.

"敬老桥 (Jìng lǎo qiáo), " she said. To the old bridge. "敬所有被拆掉的、还站着的。(Jìng suǒyǒu bèi chāi diào de, hái zhàn zhe de.)"

To everything demolished that still stands.

And the lane drank — every cup raised at once toward a table, a plank, a brick, a woman — while somewhere east across the sleeping city the unfinished towers held their wind and their watchmen and their shipping-container archives, and the river ran on either way.

At midnight Yao's night crew arrived quietly and began, not with bulldozers but with hand tools and tarps, the patient work of picking things clean. The persimmon tree wore its fence like a garland. The lane's name board came down last, and Yao himself took it off its screws and carried it out flat on both palms like a coffin lid or a serving tray, depending on your theology.

Xiaoman watched the awning come down — the exact spot where steam had written words in other people's handwriting since 2020 — and felt the lane pass through her like water finding level, and wrote nothing down, because some entries you keep by becoming them.

CHAPTER 58

The Inheritance Nobody Watched

Chunchun's inheritance happened without ceremony, which is how you know it was the real one.

The pot had gone to Xiaoman in July 2025 with the full inventory: ladle, ledger, rules recited, cups washed. But lineage in the lane moved on two tracks, and the second track — the one Popo called 暗账 (ànzhàng), the hidden account — transferred by observation alone, unrecorded, unwitnessed, and it went to Chunchun sometime in the winter of 2026 while nobody, including the two women involved, was looking.

The evidence, assembled afterward from witnesses:

In November, a man arrived at Tower C at closing, drunk on more than alcohol, asking loudly whether this was where you drank to forget your kid. Xiaoman was mid-pour for another drinker; the queue's attention narrowed; danger of the second-bowl kind hummed in the air. And before Xiaoman could set down the ladle, a seventeen-year-old girl in a school uniform materialized beside the man with a cup of plain hot water, sat him on a crate at a respectful distance from the counter, and said, in the flat tone teenagers reserve for gifts too large to receive:

"汤明天才开。今晚俺陪恁坐。恁孩子叫啥？俺记性好。(Tāng míng tiān cái kāi. Jīn wǎn ǎn péi nèn zuò. Nèn háizi jiào shá? Ǎn jì xìng hǎo.)"

Soup opens tomorrow. Tonight I'll sit with you. What's your kid's name? I have a good memory.

He told her. She remembered it — would remember it for years; remembering was the girl's one genius — and when he came back sober on Thursday he found his son's name already entered, in Chunchun's handwriting, in a notebook nobody had authorized: date, name, what he'd asked, what remained to be done (nothing yet; he hadn't been ready to drink). A waiting list. The lane had never kept one before. It didn't need to — Popo's memory held everything — but Popo was gone now, or nearly, and here was the doctrine translated into

its next dialect: not a keeper who cannot forget, but an institution that writes things down so forgetting has to fight for every inch.

Xiaoman found the notebook — red cover, cartoon bear long since retired, replaced by a plain one — during closing inventory, read it cover to cover, and said nothing that night except at locking up, when she handed Chunchun the key to the hoarding gate along with her own.

"*Ànzhàng zhuǎn le?*" she asked. The hidden account transfer?

"早转了 (Zǎo zhuǎn le)， " said Chunchun. Ages ago.

Neither mentioned that no one had performed any rite. The waiting list grew a protocol by autumn: every name on it got three contacts before any bowl was ever discussed — one visit, one phone call, one small errand Xiaoman or Wei Luo would run past the person's home "since we were passing." By the third contact, half the list never needed the soup at all; being counted had already begun its work. The other half drank with better aim, having spent two weeks discovering what they actually lacked versus what they'd driven in demanding.

Popo's old ledger had recorded what the soup took. Chunchun's red notebook was recording something new under heaven: what the queue gave back. By year's end it held entries like: 王师傅，问完儿子的事，帮摊子修了三把凳子。没喝汤。账平。(Wáng shīfu, wèn wán érzi de shì, bāng tānzi xiū le sān bǎ dèngzi. Méi hē tāng. Zhàng píng.) (Master Wang, after telling us about his son, fixed three stools for the stall. Never drank. Account settled.)

Because both had learned from the same teacher that rites are what people invent when they're afraid the real transmission won't happen on its own — and that in lanes like this one, under towers like these, in cities that remember out loud whether anyone approves or not, it always does.

CHAPTER 59

The Last Pour

She announced it at dawn by not appearing.

The stall opened without her: Xiaoman at the cauldron, Chunchun home for the holiday and back on her old crate, Kang Dazhi minding the tins. Popo's stool sat empty at the corner of the table — not removed, just empty, which in the lane's grammar meant something different from absence. Meant expected. Or meant finished. The lane spent the whole morning deciding which, and got no help from the old woman, who did not come.

At four in the afternoon a boy from Chunchun's building arrived breathless with a message carried the old way, mouth to ear: 婆婆叫恁们黄昏去河边。(Pópó jiào nènmen huáng hūn qù hé biān.) The old woman says come to the river at dusk. All of you.

They went: Xiaoman carrying the ledger; Chunchun with both notebooks; Uncle Gao with his umbrella, open against nothing, out of respect for weather past; Dr. Bai with her medic bag she knew better than to bring and brought anyway; Xiao Fei filming until Xiaoman touched his arm and he put it away, understanding that some vigils are kept by keeping distance; Kang Dazhi pushing the cart itself, because Popo had specified 摊子也带来 (tānzi yě dài lái), bring the stall too.

The river flats lay gold and flat under the year's kindest evening. She was there before them, of course — small, iron-gray bun, army-surplus stool set facing the water, the copper ladle across her knees like a scepter nobody had voted on.

Beside her: one bowl, mouth-down.

"坐 (zuò)," she said. Sit.

They sat on the silt in a half circle, and the sun went about its business, and Popo talked — more than anyone had ever heard her, sentences strung together like a woman emptying a drawer before a move:

About 1958 or 1963 or whichever telling was true that day — the water coming, the child walking a dike road with everyone else's kitchen behind her, a

ladle taken from a flooded house because it was the only thing that floated. About a railway man, married two years or never married, lost in a tunnel or on a bridge, whose name she'd written once in a ledger and then, by her own rule, drunk herself into forgetting — 守的人不许喝 (Shǒu de rén bù xǔ hē), the keeper may not drink; she had broken it exactly once, young, and the soup took what she lacked, which was the name, and left her what she had, which was the ladle. About arriving in Zhengzhou the third time, walking, following rails, because cities that remember loudly need counters where the loud remembering can be set down.

"俺不尝味 (Ǎn bù cháng wèi)," she said, "因为俺把味都给出去了。一碗一点，五十年。现在轮到收账的尝了。(Yīn wèi ǎn bǎ wèi dōu gěi chū qù le. Yī wǎn yī diǎn, wǔ shí nián. Xiàn zài lún dào shōu zhàng de cháng le.)"

I can't taste, because I gave all my tasting away. A little per bowl, fifty years. Now it's the keeper's turn to taste.

Then she stood — the whole half circle rose with her involuntarily — and took up the ladle, and poured from a thermos no one had seen her fill: five bowls, handed down the line one by one, each drinker pausing after, each finding in the bitterness a different ghost — sour plum for Gao Baoshu (Nini's candy), woodsmoke for Xiao Fei (his father's coal town), salt spray for Dr. Bai (the corridor she'd stopped fearing), sweetness for Chunchun (her father's voice on a phone from Shenzhen, remembered kindly at last), and for Kang Dazhi something none of them could name and he refused to describe, closing his hand around the flavor like a man pocketing a key.

And to Xiaoman she gave no bowl. She gave the ladle.

"锅是恁的了 (Guō shì nèn de le)," Popo said. The pot is yours. "板子跟恁走。账本跟恁走。俺——(Bǎnzi gēn nèn zǒu. Zhàngběn gēn nèn zǒu. Ǎn ——)"

The plank goes with you. The ledger goes with you. I—

She looked west, where the river came down out of the province's memory toward the sea it had never once managed to reach on schedule.

"*Ǎn xiān zǒu yī bù. Nèn liǎ màn diǎn a.*"

I'll go on ahead. You two take it slow.

Her mother's words, exact, forty-six seconds' worth, returned across five years like a bowl set right side up. Xiaoman made no move to stop her. There are vigils you keep by keeping distance, and departures you honor by letting them choose their own bridge.

They watched her walk into the flats until the light took the distinction between her dress and the silt, and then there was a figure, and then less than a figure, and the river ran on either way, and on the stool where she'd sat, the army-surplus stool, structural, iron-gray as herself, lay one thing only:

A single spoonful of taste, unaccounted for, still warm.

They stood a long time at the margin of the flats, six living people and one cart, while the river made its arguments. It was Dr. Bai who moved first — of course it was; triage was her native language — checking each of them with two fingers and a glance, finding pulses where pulses belonged, then turning to the water itself as if to take its vitals too, and finding none of her business there.

"回去吧 (Huí qù ba)，" she said finally. Let's go back. "锅不能凉过夜。(Guō bù néng liáng guò yè.)"

A pot can't go cold overnight.

So they pushed the cart home through the summer dark, Uncle Gao carrying the stool — nobody asked him to; he picked it up the way sons pick up their fathers' coats — and by dawn the stall under Tower C opened on schedule, because that was the whole doctrine, wasn't it: hurt once; then keep cooking. Grief had come for them at the river and they had let it in, fed it, heard it out; and grief, having eaten, had gone on ahead, the way the best of them always did, calling back over its shoulder that there was no hurry.

Xiaoman lit the fire with both hands cupped around the match. Warm herself first. Then ladle for others.

The first drinker that morning was a tower worker who'd heard about the old granny from his crew chief and arrived hoping to catch her. Xiaoman poured his cup herself, steady-handed, and told him the truth the way the lane had always told it:

"婆婆走亲戚去了。汤是热的。恁要说的她都知道。(Pópó zǒu qīn qī qù le. Tāng shì rè de. Nèn yào shuō de tā dōu zhī dào.)"

Granny's away visiting relatives. The soup's hot. Whatever you came to say — she already knows.

CHAPTER 60

Tower C

The crews came for Baihuo Lane on the first of September, slow and picked-clean, as promised.

Yao's men worked like archaeologists with deadlines: doors off hinges numbered and stored, the persimmon tree fenced and drip-fed, the lane's mouth photographed from every angle by Xiao Fei before a single brick moved, so that somewhere in the archive there now existed a complete walkable ghost of the place — every doorway, every price sign, the wall where the notices lived, the courtyard's banyan stump. Demolition as preservation's last resort; salvage as the only honest form of progress anyone had proposed to the lane in eighty years.

The stall reopened on October 1st under Tower C.

Getting there was its own rite: through a gap in the hoarding gate that Yao's foreman pretended not to maintain, past rebar stacked like winter trees, into the ground floor of the unfinished building where concrete columns rose thirty stories toward an open sky, dust-gold at noon, rain-drummed at dusk. Its very first drinker was a rebar worker named Xiao Ma, twenty-six, who'd been eating instant noodles at site canteens for six years and approached the new counter with the wariness of a man disappointed by establishments before. He read the sign. He looked at the plank overhead. He asked the question every first customer asks:

"真有那种效果？(Zhēn yǒu nà zhǒng xiào guǒ?)"

Does it really work?

Xiaoman gave him the full inherited answer, weather report included: bitter leaf tea, lowers internal heat, two kuai.

He drank. He went still — half a second; she counted; the pause worked even here, even under concrete, even for a boy whose griefs were all still ahead of him. Then he paid his two kuai, considered the cup a moment longer, and said:

"中。明天俺带俺班长来。他欠着钱，睡不好。(Zhōng. Míng tiān ǎn dài ǎn bān zhǎng lái. Tā qiàn zhe qián, shuì bù hǎo.)"

Good. Tomorrow I'm bringing my crew chief. He owes money and can't sleep.

And that was how the tower stall got its first regular, its first referral, and its first proof that the whole mechanism — whatever mechanism was — ran on nothing heavier than one person telling another where the warm thing is.

Within a month the workers had adopted it wholesale — two hundred men who'd eaten standing at site canteens for years now queued at dusk for two-kuai tea served under the painted plank, over which each of them crossed twice daily, going out to the city of their money and back to the bunkhouse of their patience.

Uncle Gao came Thursdays, umbrella furled, and swam his kilometer and drank his tea and told the tower workers about Nini until they loved her too, which is the whole mechanism of remembrance reduced to working parts: one man, one story, one queue at a time.

Chunchun took the ferry role on weekends, homework crate and all, sixteen-going-on-apprentice, learning pours. Dr. Bai kept her Thursdays too, standing, one eye always on the platform of her own memory, steady on it now. Xiao Fei ran the bookstall's remains out of a shipping container adjacent to Yao's, and called the combined operation 图书馆兼桥 (Tú shū guǎn jiān qiáo), Library With a Bridge Attached, and nobody corrected him.

Qiao Shulan visited on Sundays, retired clothes, collar down now. She never drank. She reported — the relief wall's date still missing; a textbook chapter revised to include the investigation report's actual findings; the yellow cat at Exit B immortalized, against all veterinary odds, by a children's book nobody official had approved. And once a month she read names aloud somewhere in the city, location rotating, announced nowhere, attended by whoever arrived, which was always exactly enough people.

And on a Sunday in late September, when the tower's ground floor filled with gold light and the kettle sang, Kang Dazhi set on the table between the two cups that never left the shelf a small wooden box he'd made himself, joinery fifty years out of fashion, learned at Uncle Gao's elbow:

Inside lay a ring, iron, hand-forged, ugly, perfect.

"俺不会说那些话 (Ǎn bù huì shuō nà xiē huà)," he said. I don't know how to say those words. "但俺修的东西不坏。(Dàn ǎn xiū de dōng xi bù huài.)"

But nothing I fix ever breaks again.

Xiaoman looked at the ring, and at the man who had opened nine hundred doors onto black water and come out last and carried it alone for five years and repaired everything the lane owned including, without ever once touching it uninvited, her.

"*Zhōng*," she said.

Which is Henan for yes, and for good, and for all of it.

CHAPTER 61

The Tower Gets a Name

The tower was finished in everything but paperwork, which is to say it was finished the way most things in Zhengzhou were finished: structurally, spiritually, and never administratively.

Eleven years after the cranes left, Tower C stood thirty floors of sealed, plumbed, wired concrete that no bank would finance completion on and no official would condemn — a monument to the property bust's particular purgatory. Lao Diao had watched developers' signs go up and come down four times. The stall operated in its shadow legally through Yao's site-office fiction, renewing quarterly, everyone understanding that the fiction was the only honest document in the arrangement.

Then, in December 2026, the city did something without precedent: it named the thing.

Not officially — officially Tower C remained 停缓建项目C座 (Tíng huǎn jiàn xiàng mù C zuò), Suspended Construction Project C-1, a name with all the warmth of an insurance form. The naming happened the way the lane's naming always happened: bottom-up, at working volume, through a children's homework assignment.

A primary school teacher from the rehoused Baihuo Lane families took her class on a neighborhood-walk to study "how communities change." They stood at the hoarding gate looking up at the tower while Lao Diao — recruited as living archive — told them its biography: boom, cranes, silence, wind, the stall underneath, the bridge plank above the door. A boy asked what the tower was called. Lao Diao gave the insurance-form answer. The boy frowned with his whole face and said the sentence that went home in forty backpacks:

"它不是没盖完。它是给汤站岗的。(Tā bù shì méi gài wán. Tā shì gěi tāng zhàn gǎng de.)"

It's not unfinished. It's standing guard for the soup.

By New Year the children's name had migrated through homework to parents to the noodle-shop network to the district's group chats: 看汤楼 (Kàn tāng lóu), the Soup-Watch Tower. Real estate listings for nearby blocks began mentioning proximity to it. A delivery app added it as a map pin. When a provincial TV crew came in spring to film a feature on urban revival — one of the rare pieces that survived review, precisely because it contained nothing anyone could censor except hope — the reporter used the children's name on air, twice, before her producers caught it, and by then it had subtitles.

Xiaoman's reaction, at the stall, was to laugh until she had to sit down — because the tower's new name completed a circle nobody had drawn on purpose. In 2021 a city had tried to rename its grief into absence: 720 became Comprehensive Summer Flood Exercise; dates vanished from walls. And now, five years on, the same city, by way of eight-year-olds, had renamed a monument of economic failure into a guard post for a soup stall that officially sold two-kuai bitter tea. You could delete dates off relief walls. You couldn't stop children from naming what sheltered them.

Yao, when told, was silent for a long moment, then went out and bought — at cost nobody asked — a proper illuminated address sign for the hoarding gate. It read, in municipal-standard font, the official designation, and beneath it in smaller characters he added himself, with the paint brushwork of a man who has built and demolished everything twice:

楼下有汤。(Lóu xià yǒu tāng.) There is soup downstairs.

CHAPTER 62

The First Winter of Tower C

Winter tested the tower stall the way winter tests everything: by asking whether the warmth was structural or decorative.

The ground floor had wind from four directions and a roof that dripped in thaw. Kang Dazhi spent December enclosing the stall's corner — not walls, exactly; windbreaks of translucent corrugated panel, removable, legally temporary, engineering's love letter to loopholes. Lao Diao ran power for a kettle and two heat lamps that turned the space amber at dusk like the inside of a lantern. And the queue discovered what the lane had always known: that shelter is mostly other people arranged correctly.

The regulars adapted first. Uncle Gao claimed the crate nearest the cauldron and made it his office for telling tower workers about Nini; the workers, initially polite, became within a month her secondary family, a construction-site extended congregation who asked after "老高的妮妮 (Lǎo Gāo de Nīnī)" weekly and had somehow, without any single decision, organized themselves into the pool's winter maintenance volunteers, scraping ice so an old man could swim his kilometer all season.

New faces came with the cold, because cold is grief's delivery service. A widow from the stalled tower across town who'd watched her savings die twice, once in concrete and once in currency. A young couple whose twins had been born early in November and left them holding one name to register and one they couldn't return to the hospital paperwork office. The queue sorted itself the way it always had: tourists and jokers got tea and photographs; the sideways-approachers got the table.

And Xiaoman poured, five months into keepership, learning the winter rules Popo had never stated because she'd never needed to state them where Xiaoman could hear: that cold-weather drinkers must be walked further before drinking (grief plus shivering makes decisions nobody owns); that the soup's heat mattered more in January than its bitterness; that some days the correct pour was

none at all, and the correct transaction was two kuai refused, a chair taken, and the somebody-who-asks doing her entire job on plain hot water.

Chunchun kept her waiting list through the season — eleven names by Spring Festival, each visited once at home before being offered anything, home visits being another innovation no doctrine required and every doctrine implied. Kang Dazhi fixed things in a radius around the stall that expanded monthly: the hoarding gate, the watchman's cabin stove, a wheelchair axle, the neon sign's dead transformer (it lit for the first time in February, pink bridge-glow over the plank, and the lane decided unanimously it would stay lit only in rain, which Lao Diao wired accordingly, because weather-triggered memory is Henan's native art form).

In March, when the ice went off the pool and Uncle Gao swam his first unassisted kilometer of the year, thirty construction workers stood along the deck in hard hats applauding a sixty-nine-year-old man's terrible, triumphant crawl, and he stood up in the shallow end, water streaming, and bowed to them with both hands — the bow, the lane's bow, the one reserved for weight received properly — and said:

"妮妮看见了吧？恁叔们也会水了。(Nīnī kàn jiàn le ba? Nèn shūmen yě huì shuǐ le.)"

Nini, did you see? Your uncles can swim now.

CHAPTER 63

The Second Queue

Spring came to the tower, and with it the thing Xiaoman had been both working toward and dreading: a queue she hadn't inherited from anyone.

It started, as everything did now, sideways. A girl of twenty or so began appearing at Tower C on weekday afternoons — not to drink; to sit. Far crate, own notebook, watching pours the way Xiaoman had once watched them from across a lane with a phone lowered. After three weeks of this, Xiaoman carried two cups of tea over and deployed the lane's oldest opening:

"恁猜俺多大年纪学的这行？(Nèn cāi ǎn duō dà nián jì xué de zhè xíng?)" Guess how old I was when I learned this trade?

The girl — Wei Luo, dropout, delivery-app dispatcher by night, caretaker of a stroke-slowed father by day — set down her notebook and answered with the directness the lane rewards: "恁不是学的。恁是被扔进来的。(Nèn bù shì xué de. Nèn shì bèi rēng jìn lái de.)" You weren't taught it. You were thrown in.

Which was true, and broke something open, and by April Wei Luo was doing water duty before her night shifts and keeping, unprompted, the waiting list's newest pages in handwriting that slanted like hope.

The second queue was different from its ancestor, and everyone felt it. Baihuo Lane's griefs had come wearing 2021's specific face — trains, tunnels, names on lists. The tower's came wearing everything else: the slow disasters, the unphotogenic ones. A middle-aged son arranging his mother's dementia decline one borrowed afternoon at a time. An ex-teacher who'd been driven from the profession by what schools had become and couldn't say so at dinner tables. Delivery riders, always riders, the city's new cartography of risk, coming off shifts into bitter tea because their own dead had ridden the same roads. Nobody arrived carrying July 20th. They arrived carrying the ordinary catastrophe of being alive in a century that kept promising convenience.

And the soup adjusted, because under whatever hood the soup ran on, it had never once cared about categories. What you lack, not what you ask. The widow

of the concrete-and-currency disaster drank and lost not her husband but her habit of checking the mailbox twice daily for rejection letters from banks, which freed her hands enough to start the courtyard garden that fed half the rehoused families by summer. The dementia son asked to forget the diagnosis date and received instead the ability to hear his mother's repetitions as music rather than error — "same song," he reported, weeping mildly into his cup, "she just really likes the song."

Chunchun, home from university most weekends now, watched the second queue form and named it in the bear notebook's successor, in an entry Xiaoman read later with the shock of recognition every teacher eventually earns:

"第一代客人带着那一天来。第二代带着每一天。汤不管，汤都收。婆婆要是看见这个，会说：中。然后往锅里多加一把苦的。(Dì yī dài kè rén dài zhe nà yī tiān lái. Dì èr dài dài zhe měi yī tiān. Tāng bù guǎn, tāng dōu shōu. Pópó yào shì kàn jiàn zhè gè, huì shuō: zhōng. Rán hòu wǎng guō lǐ duō jiā yī bǎ kǔ de.)"

The first generation came carrying that day. The second carries every day. The soup doesn't discriminate; the soup takes all. If Popo could see this she'd say: zhong. And add another handful of bitter to the pot.

In May, at closing, Xiaoman found herself doing the arithmetic of lineage and understood how short it actually was: Popo to her, five years; her to this girl at the water crates, maybe less.

She wrote the sentence out on a card and taped it above Wei Luo's corner of the counter, where the girl would see it before every shift — a keeper's only real inheritance, handed forward across three generations in under eight years, which is either fast or exactly right depending on whether you measure lineage in blood or in ladles:

Institutions don't wait for generations. They last exactly as long as one stubborn person keeps showing up — and not one day longer.

CHAPTER 64

The Letter to the Grandmother

The letter came from Chengdu, in an old woman's hand, addressed with the lane's full genealogy: 郑州塔楼底下卖汤的孟家三代收。(Zhèngzhōu tǎ lóu dǐ xià mài tāng de Mèng jiā sān dài shōu.) To the three generations of the Meng family who sell soup beneath the tower in Zhengzhou.

It was from the grandmother of the comment — the one whose sentence had started everything on a June night in 2020: *Wǒ bù yào wàng. Wǒ zhǐ shì xiǎng yǒu rén wèn wǒ jì bù jì dé.* I don't want to forget. I just want somebody to ask me if I remember.

Xiaoman read it at closing, standing under the plank, and then sat down on a crate for a long time.

Her grandson had found the family, the letter explained — he worked in tech, he'd never stopped looking, the way some people can't stop pulling threads. The grandmother herself was ninety now, in a chair, sharp as vinegar. She wrote slowly and saved up sentences:

"那年俺孙子没了，俺天天去江边坐着。人家以为俺想不开。不是的。俺是去告诉他今天的事。他爸加班，他妈改嫁了，狗老了。都是他该知道的。没人有耐心听俺说这些，所以俺说给江听。(Suǒ yǐ ǎn shuō gěi jiāng tīng.)

后来恁们那个摊子上了新闻。俺孙子问俺：奶，你想去喝吗？俺说不想。俺说：奶要是忘了，谁给他讲今天的事呢？(Shuí gěi tā jiǎng jīn tiān de shì ne?)

可是恁看，七年了。俺还是想说给恁听。就当恁是他那座桥上的婆婆吧。(Jiù dāng nèn shì tā nà zuò qiáo shàng de Pópó ba.)"

That year when my grandson died I went to sit by the river every day. People thought I wanted to end things. No. I went to tell him about our day. His father works late; his mother remarried; the dog got old. All things he should know. Nobody has patience to hear these, so I told the river.

Later your stall was on the news. My grandson asked: Granny, do you want to go drink? I said no. I said: if Granny forgets, who will tell him about today?

But look — seven years now. I still want to tell you. Consider yourself the granny at his bridge.

The rest of the letter was the telling. Four pages of it. The dog learned to open the fridge. The boy's mother sends money every child's day without fail. His school desk tree — the ginkgo his class planted — survived a transplant and is taller than the gate. Day after day after day, delivered across provinces to a soup counter that had once, for one night, been the only thing in China asking whether anybody remembered.

Xiaoman did the only correct thing. She read the letter aloud at the stall, all four pages, over several evenings, one page per dusk, while the tower queue drank and listened and added their own quiet sentences to the general inventory of the day's news for their dead. Then she wrote back — not alone; the whole lane contributed, Chunchun drafting, Uncle Gao dictating swimming advice for the dog, Wei Luo adding a delivery-app discount code for the grandson "since his gran's basically our customer" — and sealed it with the lane's newest seal — cut by Kang Dazhi from scrap copper: a small ladle, worn thin as a coin.

The grandson wrote back once, briefly, on the grandmother's behalf — she'd had the letter read aloud twice and made him correct two details (the dog's breed; the year of the ginkgo) with a memory that showed no sign of the forgetting anyone had ever tried to sell her. His own postscript, added in a different hand:

"俺奶念完信，把全家叫到跟前，说：都听听，人家郑州人咋记账。然后又听了一遍。俺是做数据的。俺们那行管这叫分布式存储。俺们那行不懂的还多着呢。(Ǎn nǎi niàn wán xìn, bǎ quán jiā jiào dào gēn qián, shuō: dōu tīng tīng, rén jiā Zhèngzhōu rén zǎ jì zhàng. Rán hòu yòu tīng le yī biàn. Ǎn shì zuò shù jù de. Ǎnmen nà xíng guǎn zhè jiào fēn bù shì cún chǔ. Ǎnmen nà xíng bù dǒng de hái duō zhe ne.)"

After Granny finished the letter she called the whole family together and said: everyone listen — this is how Zhengzhou people keep accounts. Then we heard it again. I work in data. My industry calls this distributed storage. My industry still has a lot to learn.

The letter she received in return was two characters long, and she taped it inside the stall, where it hangs yet:

Zhōng.

CHAPTER 65

The Fifth Flavor of the Second Queue

The last test of the inheritance came in June 2027, and it came wearing a face Xiaoman recognized from the mirror: a daughter with an unplayed voicemail.

The woman was fortyish, a nurse from a county hospital two hours out, who had read some secondhand account of the stall and arrived on a rest day with her father's phone in a plastic bag. He'd died in winter, slowly, a stroke's long arithmetic; among his effects, one unsent draft message to her, composed and recomposed during his last lucid week, never sent. She knew it existed. She could not open it. Four months. She'd come, she said, because somebody online claimed this counter could take the fear away — not the message, just the terror of pressing play.

"汤能拿走的，俺都不要了 (Tāng néng ná zǒu de, ǎn dōu bù yào le)，" she said. "俺就想要按下去那一下的劲儿。(Ǎn jiù xiǎng yào àn xià qù nà yī xià de jìn ér.)"

I don't want anything the soup can take. I just want the strength for that one press of the thumb.

Xiaoman heard her out. Then did the thing five years of keepership had slow-cooked into her reflexes: refused the bowl.

"恁不缺汤 (Nèn bù quē tāng)，" she said gently. "恁缺一个陪着按的人。这个俺们这儿管够，不要钱。(Nèn quē yī gè péi zhe àn de rén. Zhè gè ǎnmen zhèr guǎn gòu, bù yào qián.)"

You don't lack soup. You lack someone to sit beside you while you press it. We have plenty of that here. Free of charge.

So they sat — Xiaoman, Chunchun (home for the weekend, summoned by instinct), Wei Luo on her night off — around a cracked phone on a scarred table under a painted bridge, while a stranger's thumb hovered over four months of silence. Nobody rushed her. The lane's doctrine held them like a hand at your back: what you lack is not courage in bulk; it is company in quantity; and company is the one thing this counter has always served without metering.

She pressed play at dusk. Eleven seconds. Her father's voice, stroke-slowened but unmistakably his, saying: 闺女，别怕花钱。爸这病治到这样已经赚了。你妈走得早，爸没给你攒下啥，就攒下一句话：日子往前过，人往后记。往前往后都不丢。(Guīnǚ, bié pà huā qián. Bà zhè bìng zhì dào zhè yàng yǐ jīng zhuàn le. Nǐ mā zǒu dé zǎo, bà méi gěi nǐ zǎn xià shá, jiù zǎn xià yī jù huà: rìzi wǎng qián guò, rén wǎng hòu jì. Wǎng qián wǎng hòu dōu bù diū.)

Girl, don't ration the money. Given how far treatment got me, Dad's already ahead. Your mother left early, and Dad saved up nothing for you except one line: live forward, remember backward. Neither direction loses anything.

The nurse wept the way Dr. Bai had prescribed — the year-three cry, both truths arriving together, nothing to be done. The lane held her until holding was done. And when she left, steadier, phone in pocket now instead of bag, she asked the question every drinker eventually asks, and Xiaoman gave the answer that Popo had given across thirty years of silences, distilled at last into speech:

"婆婆以前常说，五味里头咸的管守约。恁爸那句话就是盐。日子往前过，人往后记。恁现在两样都在做了。(Pópó yǐ qián cháng shuō, wǔ wèi lǐ tóu xián de guǎn shǒu yuē. Nèn bà nà jù huà jiù shì yán. Rìzi wǎng qián guò, rén wǎng hòu jì. Nèn xiàn zài liǎng yàng dōu zài zuò le.)"

The granny used to say that of the five flavors, salty keeps promises. Your father's line is salt. Live forward, remember backward — you're doing both already.

After she'd gone, Chunchun turned the day over in the waiting-list notebook and stopped writing mid-entry, struck by the shape of what the lane had become without anyone planning it:

"俺们这儿根本不是忘掉的铺子 (Ǎnmen zhèr gēn běn bù shì wàng diào de pùzi)，" she said. "是记起来的作坊。汤只是幌子——好让不好意思直接来记的人有个台阶下。(Shì jì qǐ lái de zuò fāng. Tāng zhī shì huǎngzi——hǎo ràng bù hǎo yì sī zhí jiē lái jì de rén yǒu gè tái jiē xià.)"

This was never a shop for forgetting. It's a workshop for remembering. The soup is just the front — so people too embarrassed to come straight to remembering have something to walk in behind.

Xiaoman looked up at the plank — *Nàihé qiáo*， three characters painted by no one living, nailed above a subway handle, over a foundation brick from 1963, in the ground floor of a tower named by children for standing guard — and gave the lane's whole theology its shortest recitation yet:

"*Zhōng. Dǎyàng.*"

Yes. Closing time.

CHAPTER 66

The Apprentice's Exam

Six years apart, two women took the same exam without knowing it.

The first was Xiaoman, in May 2021, still a customer then, still months from grief. She'd come to the lane on an errand for her mother — buy two kuai of tea, prove to Meng He that the stall was harmless — and found the queue longer than usual because a tour group had gotten lost into it. At the table's end she waited her turn behind a middle-aged man who was asking, loudly, comedically, for help forgetting his golf handicap. The queue laughed. Popo poured his tea deadpan. And when Xiaoman's turn came, the old woman looked at her — the streamer girl, the phone girl, the daughter of the faregate attendant who'd once covered a stranger with her coat — and asked, instead of serving:

"恁替恁妈来买茶。恁妈最近愁啥哩？(Nèn tì nèn mā lái mǎi chá. Nèn mā zuì jìn chóu shá lī?)"

Buying tea on your mother's behalf. What's been worrying your mother lately?

And Xiaoman — twenty-two, fluent in content, illiterate in everything this question was actually testing — answered honestly, which saved her: "她愁水泵。站里的泵没人换，她签了字说检查过了。她说签字的时候手是稳的，心是虚的。(Tā chóu shuǐ bèng. Zhàn lǐ de bèng méi rén huàn, tā qiān le zì shuō jiǎn chá guò le. Tā shuō qiān zì de shí hòu shǒu shì wěn de, xīn shì xū de.)"

The pump. Nobody's replaced it but everyone's signed for it. She says her hand was steady signing and her heart wasn't.

Popo served her tea. Two kuai. No ledger. But that night, in the Five-Flavors Book, beside no name at all, the old woman wrote one line that Xiaoman would only read three years later, in December 2022, with a flashlight in her teeth:

孟家女。不问而知母之患。可教。(Mèng jiā nǚ. Bù wèn ér zhī mǔ zhī huàn. Kě jiào.) The Meng girl. Without being asked, knows her mother's trouble. Teachable.

The second exam was Wei Luo's, six years later, in May 2027, and there were no words in it at all. A drinker arrived while both keepers were mid-pour for others — an old man, agitated, repeating a name like a man turning a key that wouldn't catch. Xiaoman was elbow-deep in a delivery of leaves. Chunchun was home. It was the dispatcher girl, five months into water duty, who set down her buckets, guided the old man to the crate, sat beside him, and began — unprompted, in exactly the right register — to ask him about the name. Who was it. What had they done together. What he still cooked that they used to share.

Twenty minutes. She never touched the ladle. He left steadier, promising to return Thursday with photographs, and did.

Xiaoman watched the whole thing from the cauldron and understood she had just witnessed the entire doctrine complete its circle: that the soup was never the point; that the point was what Popo had tested on her mother-of-her all those years ago at a queue's end — whether a person can see someone else's hidden trouble without being asked; and that the answer now lived in three generations, growing, distributed across a city that kept trying to forget and kept, stubbornly, magnificently, refusing to let anyone do it alone.

CHAPTER 67

Coda: The Queue at the Bridge

The sixth year, the city tried something it had never managed before: telling the truth on schedule.

Not all at once — cities never do; the machinery of forgetting is load-bearing and can't be removed in one piece. But the new district director — Shulan's protégé in everything except the belief that order was mercy — authorized the date carved into the relief wall at Exit B, and the drill renamed itself back to 720, and the textbook held its ground through two review cycles because a generation of students who'd read the actual findings had grown into the reviewers.

At Shakoulu, the queue formed at dawn as it now did every 20th: flowers at the booth, tribute around the second stool, the yellow cat ancient and entitled among the chrysanthemums. Uncle Gao stood his hour — Nini would have been thirty-six; his sign had been re-laminated twice; he'd begun teaching swimming to site workers' children on Sundays, badly, joyfully, a man who had finally stopped cursing any water anywhere.

And under Tower C, in dust-gold light between columns that might someday hold apartments above them or might stand unfinished another decade holding only wind, the stall served its sixth anniversary queue: workers, widows, pilgrims from three districts, a policeman who had finally drunk his Thursday cup and wept for exactly one minute and gone back on duty lighter, a streamer with nine thousand followers filming respectfully until Xiaoman flicked two fingers at her phone and she lowered it without being asked, some inheritances passing through hands nobody could trace.

At closing, mother-of-the-stall and father-of-nothing-at-all sat with tea while the kettle cooled, and the plank above them steamed faintly in the evening air, or didn't, depending who told it.

"恁妈今天来过 (Nèn mā jīn tiān lái guò), " Kang Dazhi said quietly, not looking up. Your mother came by today.

Xiaoman went still — half a second, maybe a whole one.

The duty-room cat's youngest kitten had followed a faregate attendant up out of the station on a leash-training errand and walked the whole queue at Exit B, tail up, inspecting each flower like an official, and everyone present had understood without a word being exchanged, because understanding arrives in cities the way water does: finding every crack downward, every stairwell light upward, every counter left open after closing.

"黄的那只？(Huáng de nà zhī?)" The yellow one?

"嗯。胆子最小。光往恁妈的凳子那儿跑。(Ǹg. Dǎnzi zuì xiǎo. Guāng wǎng nèn mā de dèngzi nàr pǎo.)" Yes. The timid one. Kept running to your mother's stool.

Xiaoman laughed — really laughed, the snort at the end, her mother's laugh wearing her voice like a hand-me-down that finally fit. Then she rose, washed two cups, set them mouth-up on the shelf where four already stood, and turned out the lamp.

Above the door, three characters went dark with the tide of the evening: *Nàihé qiáo*. A bridge doesn't need repaying. It only needs people to cross.

The evening's mail had brought one last item: a package from Chengdu, the grandmother's annual letter — four pages again, dog still opening fridges, ginkgo taller than ever — plus a photograph taken by her grandson on a business trip. It showed the Yangtze at night from a bridge, lit traffic crossing, water dark underneath, and on the back she'd written:

"替俺看看恁们那座桥。桥跟桥是亲戚。(Tì ǎn kàn kàn nènmen nà zuò qiáo. Qiáo gēn qiáo shì qīn qī.)"

Come look at our bridge for me sometime. Bridges are relatives.

She locked the hoarding gate behind her and walked home through a city remembering out loud — bus windows writing steam words in other people's handwriting, a bookstall lit late, a wall with a date on it, a stool kept for someone who'd be back after shift — and if you had asked her, then, whether the soup was real — whether the old woman on the flats had been a goddess walking into the river or just an orphan of the floods going home the long way — she would have given the only doctrinal answer the lane ever produced, the one that fit in a teacup, the one her mother had said first over chopped scallions in a kitchen that still smelled of rain:

Tāng shì jiǎ de. Nǎinai shì zhēn de.

The soup is fake. The granny is real.

Zhōng.

※

THE END

THE SOUP OF ALMOST FORGETTING《几乎遗忘的汤》(Jīhū yíwàng de tāng)

陆忘川 (Lù Wàngchuān) Zhengzhou / 郑州 (Zhèngzhōu)

Colophon

喝了孟婆汤，过了奈何桥，前尘皆忘。

Hē le Mèngpó tāng, guò le Nàihé qiáo, qián chén jiē wàng.

Drink the soup of Meng Po, cross the Bridge of Helplessness, and the dust of your former life is all forgotten. — folk saying at Naihe Bridge

The novel is a ledger — a hundred meters of leftover village threaded through by city, and an old woman on an army-surplus stool who brews 孟婆汤 for two kuai a cup. What customers asked for, and what it cost, is written down.

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.

THE SOUP OF ALMOST FORGETTING · 67 sections · 54,427 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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