Beaten by Pocket Change

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CHAPTER 1

Waking

This body is not mine.

I came to in it on a Tuesday in March, in a rented room the size of a coffin with a fan on the ceiling and a smell of old cigarettes and 辣椒 (*làjiāo* — chili, fried into the paint by every tenant before me). There was a phone on the pillow that lit up when I touched it, and the light hurt, and I let it ring. It rang for a long time. It is still, technically, ringing, somewhere inside me.

The body woke hungry before it woke me. That was the first surprise of the century: hunger is not a thought, it is a landlord. It does not knock. It takes the stomach and turns it over like a man searching a drawer for money he lent you. I lay in the coffin-sized room and the body wanted breakfast with a purely physical urgency, no history in it at all — congee, eggs, the chili-and-sesame steam of the noodle stall on the corner — and I lay there understanding that I had never once needed anything. Haunting is a job with no requirements. The body required everything, constantly, and did not care who had been watching whom. I ate, that first morning, at a stall under the expressway: 重庆小面 (*Chóngqìng xiǎomiàn* — the city's own noodles, plain, scalding, a dish the city claims runs back to the Táng). The city eats, I have read since, something like thirteen million bowls of them a day. I was one bowl of thirteen million, and the bowl did not care, and by nine that night the body demanded sleep with the same urgency and went under like a dropped stone. Needing, always needing. The body is a debt collector with a rounds schedule of its own.

The body is fifty years old, more or less. The ID card says 王岁 (*Wáng Suì* — Wang Year), born 1974, in a mountain county I have never heard of, which is saying something, because I am four thousand years old and I have heard of every mountain county in the empire. It says 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*). Not 祟 (*Suì*). The character they write for me — 祟 (*Suì*), 神祸也 (*shén huò yě*), "a calamity sent by the gods," made of 出 (*chū*) over 示 (*shì*), emergence over omen — that character is not on the card. What is on the card is 岁 (*suì*). The year. The harvest. The

perfect homophone the whole country chose when it decided my name was too 晦气 (*huìqì* — ill-omened; the word for a thing you do not say out loud) to say out loud. 守祟 (*shǒu Suì* — keeping out Sui) became 守岁 (*shǒusuì* — keeping watch over the year). 压祟钱 (*yā Suì qián* — money that presses down Sui) became 压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián* — New Year money). They erased me from my own defeat, and then, four thousand years later, they gave a janitor my emptied name.

There is a joke in this. I do not find it funny. I am lying. I find it extremely funny. I have been alive for four thousand years and this is the first joke that has ever been about me. I have never been the subject of a joke. I have been the subject of a legend, a custom, a prohibition, and a children's rhyme, but never a joke. It suits me. I was never going to be the punchline of anything else.

The job: 合同工 (*hétonggōng* — contract worker; no tenure, no status, renew or vanish), janitor at 李子坝小学 (*Lǐzǐbà Xiǎoxué* — Liziba Primary School), a public primary school in the 山城 (*Shānchéng* — the Mountain City, which is what Chongqing calls itself, being a city stacked upright on its cliffs), five minutes from where the 轻轨 (*qīngguǐ* — the elevated monorail) goes through a residential building, which I thought for the first week was a miracle of engineering and the second week was a miracle of noise, and by the third week I stopped hearing it, which is the first thing this century has taught me: you can stop hearing anything.

And the city itself. I had haunted the flat empire for four thousand years — courtyards, thresholds, the horizontal dark of sleeping villages, shadow laid out like cloth on level ground. Chongqing is not that. The municipality is 82,400 square kilometers of slopes stacked on slopes, and barely a seventh of the land lies level enough to build on without stairs, so the city never flattened the hills. It climbed them, and made climbing the price of everything: the school run, the market run, the walk to the bus, the walk home. When the gorges flooded, over a million people moved here, and the city took them without ceremony, uphill. Even the fog arrives climbing. I understood within a month, in the knees, why nothing here is ever unguarded: the geography itself is a guard. A village you can slip into. A slope you have to earn. The whole city is an anti-demon architecture,

all ascent, no dark corners, and they hired me to maintain the one building in it with a room nobody visits.

The 门卫 (*ménwèi* — the gatekeeper) is 老周 (Lǎo Zhōu — Old Zhou), a retired soldier with a thermos and a 报纸 (*bàozhǐ* — newspaper, folded to the chess problems) and a radio that plays opera at a volume designed for a battlefield. He is the door god of this building, and neither of us knows this. He showed me around on the first day, and the school looked at me the way schools look at janitors: through me. This is the first professional discovery of my new life: I have spent dynasties being unseen, and it turns out the modern world sells invisibility as a contract position with 五险 (*wǔxiǎn* — the five social insurances; the paper halo of employment). I am the most powerful demon of stealth in the history of the species, and I am paid minimum wage to be invisible. The books balance.

The 教导主任 (*jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* — the dean of studies) is 马建国 (Mǎ Jiànguó). He is calm the way rivers are calm. He handed me the uniform — dark blue, which I approve of, I am a black-bodied demon and blue is the closest the school allows — and a pair of white rubber gloves, which I have worn every day since, because I am a black-bodied, white-handed demon and the legend must be maintained even in a janitor's closet. The 黑身白手 (*hēi shēn bái shǒu* — black body, white hands; the whole of the legend's silhouette). Look at us now. We mop.

The first night I killed a lamp. It was instinct. There was a 日光灯 (*rìguāngdēng* — a fluorescent tube) in the 储物间 (*chǔwùjiān* — the storeroom) that was too bright, and I did what I have done since before the 汉 (*Hàn*) dynasty, which is to reach out with the cold and put the light out. It died like a good lamp. The next day an electrician came, and Mǎ Jiànguó asked questions, and I learned two things: the word 追责 (*zhuīzé* — to be held accountable; the modern word for a drawn sword), and that the modern world does not let you kill its lamps without paperwork. I have not killed a lamp since. I have been in this body for nine months and I have killed exactly one lamp. In four thousand years I have killed a billion lamps. The building has defeated me with an inspection form.

The 打卡机 (*dǎkǎjī* — the clock-in machine) is worse. Every morning at 7:40 I press my thumb to it and it beeps and says 谢谢 (*xièxie* — thank you).

Every morning. A machine thanks me. The demon who was beaten by an entire civilization's pocket change is now thanked daily by a machine that doesn't know I exist. I have started to look forward to it. That is how you know the prank is working: the demon is grateful to the machine.

The 声控灯 (*shēngkòngdēng* — a sound-activated light; it hears you coming) in the corridor is my second great antagonist. It is a light that turns itself on when you approach. It has never once failed. I stand in the dark at 3 a.m. — the old hour, the 四更 (*sìgēng* — the fourth watch, the deepest fold of the night, the hour I have owned since before they wrote the hours down) — and I move, and the light comes on, like it is showing off. I stand still. It goes off. I move. It comes on. The building is mocking me. The building is the entire country: it has built its walls out of my weaknesses and hired me to maintain them.

The children — the small ones — I saw them for the first time at 课间 (*kèjiān* — the ten-minute break between lessons), when the bell rang and a river of them poured into the corridor. Red everywhere. Red scarves, red armbands, red shoes, red backpacks. I pressed myself against the wall with my bucket and let them flow past, and none of them looked at me, and it was the first time in four thousand years that a crowd of children has passed within touching distance and I have been the one afraid.

That was the second thing I learned this century: I am afraid of them. Not of what they can do. Of what I am. Because at 午休 (*wǔxiū* — the noon rest, when the whole country still puts its head down on its desk), when they put their heads down on the desks — hundreds of heads, foreheads up, the old geography — my fingers curl. The old arithmetic starts. Three touches. One, two, three. I have done this four thousand times four thousand. The itch is the oldest thing I own.

This is what Fate gave me, as a prank: the demon of the unguarded moment, stationed in a building where nothing is ever unguarded, among the only creatures I have ever been allowed to touch, with instructions I cannot read and a name that isn't mine.

Tonight I did the *sìgēng* patrol. 3 a.m. The corridor. The *shēngkòngdēng* showing off. I stopped in the middle of the third floor and I waited for the old feeling — the hunger, the night-sense, the whole terrible machinery of who I am

— and nothing came except the knowledge that I should finish the 三年级 (*sān niánjí* — third grade) bathrooms before six.

I looked at my hands. White gloves. Black body, white hands. The legend, in workwear.

"Fine," I said, to the corridor, to the *shēngkòngdēng*, to Fate, wherever it is. "You want a janitor. You have a janitor. A demon with a mop is still a demon."

I mopped the third floor. It was very clean. Everything I touch is very clean now. It is the only thing I have ever made better.

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CHAPTER 2

Hands

The hands are the problem.

In the legend they are the only visible part of me: *hēi shēn bái shǒu*, wholly black, only the hands white. The hand reaching for a forehead. That is the whole image. I have been reduced, by a thousand years of retellings, to a reaching hand.

This body's hands are pale, calloused, mortal, and always gloved. I wear the rubber gloves for two reasons. The first is hygiene, which the school requires. The second is that I am afraid of what the bare hand still is. I do not know if the touch still works from inside a body. I have no intention of finding out. I have spent nine months wearing gloves and avoiding foreheads, which is a sentence I could not have imagined under the Hàn and which is now the entire content of my professional life.

By June the gloves had a private smell of me — rubber, sweat, the chalk-dust ghost of a hundred blackboards — and the body produced the sweat without asking, a small treachery I have stopped counting. The gloves go home at night and dry on the windowsill of the *dānjiān* next to the coins, and in the morning they are stiff until the hands warm them, and the hands warm them without being told. The body is loyal to its habits. It is the only loyalty I have ever been given by anything.

The school performs my ritual every morning at ten. The 广播 (*guǎngbō* — the loudspeaker system) plays the 眼保健操 (*yǎn bǎojiàn cāo* — the eye-protection exercises, a state ritual of self-administered temple massage) music — a calm, insistent melody, the most effective 守岁 (*shǒu Suì*) in the modern world — and five hundred children stop what they are doing and massage their own temples, their own foreheads, with their own fingers. My touch, mass-produced, voluntary, twice a day, for the health of the eyes. I watch from the corridor with my bucket. I have seen my signature performed by my victims for nine months, daily, and not one of them has ever gone mad. Either the legend is wrong about the dosage, or I have been outmoded by optometry.

Though lately a question has started to sit in me like chalk dust. The touch has only ever ruined: one, fever. Two, delirium. Three, and the child is never the same. But watch the mothers' fingers, the children's fingers, walking their own temples twice a day, and you have to ask what the gesture does in the other direction. A hand on a forehead that ends a fever instead of starting one. The city's medicine is full of things that began as superstition and turned, under charts, into treatment. My touch. Mass-produced. Voluntary. Twice a day. For the health of the eyes. What is it for the health of? I do not know. I have no intention of finding out. I have told myself that too, and I have noticed that telling myself things twice is how the body learns them.

The first time I touched a child was an accident. A boy in 二年级 (*èr niánjí* — second grade) slipped on the wet floor — my wet floor, my mop, my fault, the arithmetic starting early — and I caught him by the head. One hand, gloved, on the back of a small skull. I held him for one second. He was warm. He said 谢谢岁师傅 (*xièxie, Suì shīfu* — thank you, Master Sui) and ran off, and I stood there with my hand open, and the whole afternoon I could feel the one touch on my palm like a brand.

I checked him for fever for three days. I am not proud of this. I loitered near the 医务室 (*yīwùshì* — the infirmary) at suspicious hours until the 校医 (*xiàoyī* — the school doctor), a woman named 张医生 (Zhāng yīshēng — Dr. Zhang) with the calm of a *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn*, asked me if I was sick.

"No," I said.

"Then why are you always standing outside the infirmary?"

"I'm checking on someone."

"Who?"

I did not have an answer that would fit inside a janitor's life. I said I was checking on the mop. She looked at the mop. The mop was fine. She let it go, because she is a school nurse and has seen everything and is paid to let janitors be strange.

The boy's name is 郑悠悠 (Zhèng Yōuyōu — Youyou, a name like a slow afternoon). He is the danger. Every day at *wǔxiū* he puts his head down on his desk in 三年级二班 (*sān niánjí èr bān* — Class 2 of Grade 3) — he was *èr niánjí*

when I arrived, he is *sān niánjí* now, the years turn, he does not notice, he only naps — forehead up, mouth open, drooling slightly, the most defenseless object in the history of defenseless objects. And his mother packs him a lunchbox, and inside the lunchbox there is a note, and the note says: 悠悠，好好睡。妈妈爱你。 (*Yōuyōu, hǎo hǎo shuì. Māma ài nǐ.* — Youyou, sleep well. Mama loves you.)

I can read that. The body's education is not much, but it is enough for a mother's note. The mother signs herself 妈妈 (*māma*) and nothing else; the hand is round and unhurried; the ink is blue. I have never seen her. I read it once, standing in the doorway at 12:50 with my mop, and I have never been the same. I have been alive for four thousand years and no one has ever written me a note. No one has ever packed me a lunchbox. No one has ever told me to sleep well, that they love me. I have been the reason the whole country stays up all night, and the country has never once told me it loves me, and I am not asking it to, and also, apparently, I am standing in a doorway at 12:50 every day to make sure a boy I have never spoken to gets his nap.

For one afternoon I hated her. I will be honest, since honesty in round numbers is the only kind I keep: the mother, the boy, the lunchbox, the whole arrangement of being loved on a schedule. The hatred had a temperature and a length — one bus ride, roughly — and it was the most human thing I had done all year, and I have not repeated it, and I am not sure whether that is discipline or cowardice, and I have stopped asking.

I tell myself it is 职业操守 (*zhíyè cāoshǒu* — professional ethics; the phrase the school rewards). The 班主任 (*bānzhǔrèn* — homeroom teacher) 李老师 (Lǐ lǎoshī — Teacher Li) has noticed. She says: 王师傅 (*Wáng shīfu* — Master Wang, what the adults call me; the children's name for me is one character truer), you are the most dedicated cleaner this school has ever had. You are always outside my classroom at the same time.

I say: 这边人多 (*zhèbiān rén duō* — busier over this way).

This is not an answer. She does not press. She is young and kind and exhausted and she has a 家长群 (*jiāzhǎng qún* — the class parents' group chat)

with four hundred messages an hour, and she has learned not to ask janitors questions they will not answer.

The itch. I should explain the itch. It is the yearly recurrence, the engine of who I am, the thing that has brought me back on 除夕 (*Chúxī* — New Year's Eve, the last night of the lunar year) night every year since before the 嘉兴 (*Jiāxīng*) household, before the coins, before the custom that buried me. It lives in the hands. It is strongest at the *sìgēng*, in the dark, near sleeping children. It is the arithmetic of my existence: one, two, three.

It has not left me. It is not the prank's fault; the prank left me my nature. It is strongest at 12:50 in the doorway of *sān niánjí èr bān*, where the drooling head is. I stand there and my fingers curl and the old arithmetic starts, and I look at the lunchbox, at the note, at the words *māma ài nǐ*, and I do the only thing I have ever done in four thousand years that was not in my nature:

I don't.

I picked up a notebook last week. I can barely write; the body's hand knows maybe forty characters, and most of them are wrong. But I know one. I practiced it for a week, on the inside cover, over and over, the way I have seen children practice characters they are afraid of losing: 祟 (*Suì*). 出 (*chū*) over 示 (*shì*). Emergence over omen. My name. The only character in this whole century that says who I am.

I keep the notebook under my pillow in the 单间 (*dānjiān* — a single room; one bed, one window, one demon). It is the only thing I own that is mine. Everything else in that room belongs to a dead man named 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*), and 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*) belongs to the school, and the school belongs to the children, and the children belong to their mothers, and their mothers write them notes.

I am not in the chain. I am the chain's outside. I have always been the outside.

Tonight I did the rounds. 12:50 came and went. The note stayed in the lunchbox. The head stayed on the desk. The itch came, and went, and I mopped the corridor, and I said, to no one, because the mop was busy:

"One day I'm going to figure out why I didn't."

The mop did not answer. The mop is my only colleague. The mop and I have an understanding.

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CHAPTER 3

Eight Copper Coins

I keep eight one-yuan coins in my pocket. They are my pension. They are also my humiliation, which in my line of work is the same thing.

The defeat, for the record, happened like this. I had been doing the rounds for a while — a long while; the year-end circuit, house to house, the one night a year the world belonged to me. I was small then. *hēi shēn bái shǒu*, foot-tall, a shadow of a man in moonlight, only the hands real. I came to 嘉兴府 (*Jiāxīng fǔ* — the old prefecture of Jiaxing, in the wet green country south of the river), to a household of the 管 (*Guǎn*) family, 老年得子 (*lǎonián dézǐ* — a child gotten in old age; the parents nearly dead with love for one late child). They had kept the vigil all night, as everyone did — 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*), the whole country staying up to keep me out, which was like staying up to keep out the cold, which was the point, because I am the cold and the cold is the year ending and you cannot keep it out, you can only keep it company.

At the *sìgēng* they dozed off. I slipped in on the 阴风 (*yīnfēng* — the yin wind, the cold draft that is my native way of moving). The child was asleep with eight coins wrapped in red paper beside his pillow — 包了又拆，拆了又包 (*bāo le yòu chāi, chāi le yòu bāo* — wrapped and unwrapped, unwrapped and wrapped again; the parents had let him play with them to keep him awake, and he had fallen asleep with his toys). I reached. The white hand. The forehead. One touch.

The pillow 迸出一道金光 (*bèng chū yī dào jīn guāng* — burst out with a sheet of golden light).

I have been hit by the sun, by 钟馗's (*Zhōng Kuí* — the snarling god who hunts demons for the celestial civil service) sword, by the entire year-end expulsion machinery of the empire, and I have never felt anything like that flash. It was eight coins, and it was eight immortals, and it was the whole idea of protection made visible. It hurt me. I screamed. I fled. 尖叫着逃跑 (*jiān jiàozhe táopǎo* — screaming as it fled). That is the phrase they use. The demon screamed

and ran. Every telling, every version, every single one: the demon screamed and ran.

The next year the whole country knew. The charm had spread like fire — which was apt, because fire was the other thing I couldn't stand. Everyone wrapped eight coins in red paper and put them under the pillows, and the custom was named after my defeat: 压祟钱 (*yā Suì qián*), money that presses down Sui. And then, because my name was *huìqì*, inauspicious, because people found saying it brought bad luck, they renamed it. 岁 (*suì*) and 祟 (*Suì*) sound the same. The charm that beat me took my name, cleaned it up, and used it to mean the year.

Here is a thing I have never said out loud: I do not know how old I am. Four thousand years, I say, and the number has calcified into fact through repetition, but I have never kept a ledger. A demon rounds up his age the way emperors rounded up their years — 万岁 (*wànsuì*), ten thousand years, shouted at thrones by men who died at forty. The empire exaggerated everything upward. I am at least honest enough to be dishonest in round numbers. The 3,947 consecutive years I count elsewhere are the one figure I keep exact, because that ledger is not vanity. That one is attendance.

守祟 (*shǒu Suì*) became 守岁 (*shǒusuì*). 压祟钱 (*yā Suì qián*) became 压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*). The vigil against me became a party about the year. The whole culture scrubbed me out of my own story, and then it gave me a holiday.

I read about it in the *ménwèi*'s *bàozhǐ*. Lǎo Zhōu leaves the 晚报 (*wǎnbào* — the evening paper) on the gatehouse table, and I read it over his shoulder, standing in the doorway like a man who is not reading. There was an article about 压岁钱's (*yāsuìqián*) origins, and it printed the character 祟 (*Suì*) once — once — correctly, in the middle of a paragraph, like a man who accidentally says a ghost's name and hopes no one heard. And then it never said it again. The rest of the article used 岁 (*suì*), or just "the little demon," or "the legendary creature."

I stared at the one correct character for a long time. The *ménwèi* asked me what I was looking at.

"Nothing," I said. "Can't read."

"Then what are you looking at?"

"The shape of it."

He let it go. He is a door god; he has seen everything; door gods do not ask questions.

The coins. I took eight one-yuan coins out of my first paycheck, because a demon who has been beaten by eight coins should at least be paid in eight coins. They live in my pocket. I take them out at night and line them up on the windowsill of the *dānjiān* and look at them. Eight coins. The 八仙 (*Bā Xiān* — the Eight Immortals, the folk pantheon's walking committee), disguised as currency, the firewall that ended my career. I have been thinking about them for a year now, and I have reached a conclusion I do not like:

They were never trying to hurt me. They were telling me no. There is a difference. Being hurt is something that happens to you. Being told no is something you have to hear. I have been hurt a thousand times. I have never once been told no, because nothing in four thousand years has ever been brave enough to say it to my face except eight coins.

I tried to exercise my powers this month. Scientifically. The prank left me the body but I wanted to know what the body left me. Results:

One: the *yīnfēng*. I stood in the empty 操场 (*cāochǎng* — the sports yard) at dusk and reached for the cold, the way I have done since the *Hàn*. A draft moved a leaf half a meter. A teacher walking past said 谁开的窗 (*shéi kāi de chuāng* — who left the window open). Power level: fan.

Two: 灭灯 (*mièdēng* — lamp-killing). Forbidden. *zhuīzé*. I have been in this body nine months and I have learned the modern world's true exorcism, and it is not Zhōng Kuí and it is not red paper and it is not the *Bā Xiān*. It is paperwork. Someone, somewhere, writes something down, and you are finished. I am a *hétonggōng*. The *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* could end me with a form. I have never feared Zhōng Kuí's sword. I fear Mǎ Jiànguó's clipboard.

Three: 隐身 (*yǐnshēn* — the vanishing of the body). I stood in the corridor at 早自习 (*zǎo zìxí* — morning self-study, the hour before the first bell) and did nothing, and no one looked at me, and I realized I had been standing in the corridor for nine months and no one had ever looked at me. The power works. It works too well. I have been invisible since March, not because I am a demon, but

because I am a janitor. The profession is the power. The power is the prison. I have never been more powerful. I have never been more powerless. I have never understood this species at all.

The 食堂阿姨 (*cítáng āyí* — the canteen auntie; every school has one, and no one knows her age) is named 张阿姨 (Zhāng āyí — Auntie Zhang). She feeds me. I did not know that being fed was a thing that could happen to me. On my second week, she saw me eating alone — the body eats, I have to keep it alive, it is a chore like any other — and she put an extra dish on my tray without asking. 王师傅,多吃点 (*Wáng shīfu, duō chī diǎn* — Master Wang, eat a bit more). I stared at it. It was 回锅肉 (*huíguōròu* — twice-cooked pork; boiled, then fried back through its own fat). I had never been given food in four thousand years. The 山臊 (*shānsāo* — the mountain pest, my ancestor, a foot-tall fever-spirit of the western ranges) used to steal salt from travelers' fires. We are the ones who take. We are not the ones who are given.

I ate it. It was the best thing I have ever eaten, and I have eaten at the courts of emperors, which is a lie, because demons do not eat at courts, demons take what is not watched, and this was watched, and given, and it was 回锅肉 (*huíguōròu*), and I have thought about it every day since.

I don't know what to call the feeling. I have a vocabulary of four thousand years and no word for being given food. I called it 好吃 (*hǎochī* — good-to-eat; the whole of my gratitude).

I priced it, afterward, in the market column of the *wǎnbào*. Pork leg, boneless: 10.8 yuan for half a kilo. Lotus root, 4.5. Winter melon, 2. The dish she added to my tray was worth perhaps four yuan, and my room in Liangjiang rents for six hundred a month — twenty-five square meters, a shared squat toilet, a window that faces another window at the distance of an argument — and my wage I will not write down, but it covers the rent eleven months in twelve, and the twelfth is why the coins stay in my pocket. I have taken temple gold by the kilogram. I took it without weighing it, because weighing is for creatures who can lose things. Four yuan, weighed, was heavier than all of it. The body keeps its own books, and its books are the only ones that have ever been true about me.

The mop and I discussed it at length. The mop is the best listener I have ever had, which is a sentence that tells you everything about my life.

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CHAPTER 4

The Red Scarf

The children are armed.

I have spent four thousand years being driven off by the year-end expulsion machinery of the empire — 傩舞 (*nuówǔ* — the masked exorcism dances), 爆竹 (*bàozhú* — firecrackers), 桃符 (*táofú* — peach-wood charms nailed over doorways), 门神 (*ménshén* — the painted door gods), Zhōng Kuí hunting me through the 五祀 (*wǔsì* — the five household sacrifices, the year-end audit of hearth and door) — and I have to tell you, none of it compares to the 升旗仪式 (*shēngqí yíshì* — the Monday flag-raising ceremony). Every Monday at eight, the whole school forms up in the *cāochǎng*, and the 国旗 (*guóqí* — the national flag) rises, and the 国歌 (*guógē* — the national anthem) plays, and five hundred children stand at attention with red scarves around their necks, and I stand at the back with my bucket, trapped inside a ceremony that exists, historically, to expel me.

Red. The charm-color. The color of 春联 (*chūnlián* — the spring couplets, poems on red paper pasted in pairs at doorways) and 红灯 (*hóngdēng* — red lanterns) and the flash that ended my career. The entire school wears it daily, voluntarily, in the form of a necktie for children. The Young Pioneers have been armed against me for seventy years and not one of them knows it. I am the only being in the building who can see the war, and I am on the wrong side of it, and I work for the enemy, and the enemy pays me.

The 大队长 (*dàduìzhǎng* — brigade leader of the Young Pioneers; the highest rank a ten-year-old can hold) is a girl named 林小满 (Lín Xiǎomǎn). She is ten. She stands on the platform with a red armband and she leads the oath, and her voice is steady, and she looked at me once, during the ceremony, from the platform, across the whole *cāochǎng* — a small, sharp look, like a person filing something away — and I looked away first.

She is not a filing cabinet. I called it filing; it is not. I have watched her since. She straightens the flag rope when it snags on its cleat; she reported the broken hinge on the third-floor door to the *hòuqín* office within the hour, in writing, with the date on it; she writes the date on everything, because a thing without a date is a thing that can be lost. A child who believes the world is kept by writing things down, and kept properly, and who has not yet learned what gets written down about whom. Once, at dusk, I saw her at the gate standing very straight beside a father who talked into his phone for a long time — not at her, into it, the phone held like a torch — and she waited the way soldiers wait, and then they walked down the hill, and neither of them spoke. I filed that. I have no right to the verb, but I filed it.

I will come back to this. The universe has a way of telling you which moments are load-bearing, and a ten-year-old filing me away felt load-bearing. I should have paid attention. I am four thousand years old. I know better than to ignore a person who files things.

毛毛 (Máomao — "Fuzzball," a nursery name) is in 一年级 (*yī niánjí* — first grade). He is afraid of everything, which is a full-time job in a school, and he has chosen me as the worst of it. He saw me in the corridor at *zǎo zìxí*, in the half-dark, with my bucket, and he told his *bānzhǔrèn* that there was a black shadow in the hallway. His *bānzhǔrèn* said it was Wáng shīfu, the cleaner. Máomao did not believe that Wáng shīfu was a person. Máomao was sure Wáng shīfu was a ghost.

This is the funniest thing that has happened to me in nine months, because Máomao is right. The only child in the school who has correctly identified me is six years old and wrong about everything else. He is afraid of the dark, of the water fountain, of the 消毒水 (*xiāodúshuǐ* — disinfectant) smell, and of me. I am afraid of him, because he wears a red scarf, and he screams, and he is six, and he has no fear of being afraid, which is the most frightening thing a creature can be.

We have an arrangement. I stay far away. He stays far away. We are both terrified of each other, and we are both correct, and the school has no idea that its

janitor and its most anxious first-grader are conducting a cold war across the 食堂 (*cítáng* — the canteen).

The fire drill was the low point.

The 警报 (*jǐngbào* — the alarm) sounded — a mechanical scream, sudden, enormous — and the school evacuated in three minutes, orderly, the way they have practiced, teachers counting heads, children holding hands. And I — I am of the *shānsāo* bloodline. *Shānsāo*, my ancestor, the fever-spirit, was driven from the mountains by the crackling of bamboo in fire. 爆竹以辟山臊恶鬼 (*bàozhú yǐ pì shānsāo èguǐ* — "firecrackers to drive off the mountain pest and evil ghosts"). Noise is the primal horror. Loud, sudden noise is the thing my blood was built to flee.

I dropped the bucket. I ran the wrong way. The *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* found me huddled by the 消防栓 (*xiāofángshuān* — the fire hydrant), and he stood over me, calm as the 嘉陵江 (*Jiālíng Jiāng* — the river that wraps this city, gray-green and unhurried), and he said:

"王师傅。演习。别怕。" (*Wáng shīfu. Yǎnxí. Bié pà.* — Master Wang. It's a drill. Don't be afraid.)

And he handed me a wet towel.

I have been hunted by the entire year-end machinery of the empire and I have never been more humiliated. The demon who has faced Zhōng Kuí without flinching was found crouching by a fire extinguisher by a man with a clipboard. And the worst of it — the true, unbearable part — is that Mǎ Jiànguó was not mocking me. He was calm. He is always calm. He handed me the towel like it was the most natural thing in the world, like calming terrified janitors was a normal Tuesday, and then he walked away to count heads, and I have thought about him every day since.

庄子 (Zhuāngzǐ — the fourth-century-BC philosopher of uselessness and calm) said it: 其鬼不祟 (*qí guǐ bù Suì* — "its ghosts do not Sui"; ghosts cannot haunt the settled). I have spent four thousand years testing that sentence on sleeping children and finding it true. I have never once tested it on a *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn*. Mǎ Jiànguó is the settled mind made flesh. He is the one man in the building I cannot haunt, and the joke is that I am not trying to haunt him, and

he is calm anyway, and I am terrified of him in a way I was never terrified of Zhōng Kuí, because Zhōng Kuí wanted to drive me out and Mǎ Jiànguó just wants me to finish the *sān niánjí* bathrooms.

The red scarf. A child dropped one in the yard. Zhèng Yōuyōu — the napper, the note-boy, the whole reason I own a mop schedule — dropped his red scarf, and the 值日生 (*zhírìshēng* — the student on duty; children in rotation, sweeping, erasing, carrying) brought it to me, because returning lost things is apparently the janitor's job, and I had to carry it.

Red. The charm-color. My defeat, in fabric form, with a name tag in it.

I carried it at arm's length, on a stick, like a man disposing of evidence. The children thought I was being hygienic. I was being exorcised. I returned it to Zhèng Yōuyōu at the gate, and he took it, and he said:

"谢谢岁师傅。" (*Xièxie, Suì shīfu.* — Thank you, Master Sui.)

My name. 岁 (*suì*). Spoken by a child. The first time in four thousand years a child has addressed me with anything but fear, because in four thousand years no child has ever known who I was, because my name was scrubbed from the record, because the record refuses to say me.

I saved the moment. I have no idea why I saved it. I put it somewhere in my chest, next to the *huíguōròu*, and I went home, and I took off the gloves, and my hands were shaking, and it was not the itch, and I have no word for what it was.

I opened the notebook. I wrote 祟 (*Suì*). Then, under it, I wrote 守 (*shǒu* — to keep; to guard; to hold).

Two characters. The vigil's original name: 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*). Keeping Sui. The whole country has been keeping me for a thousand years and I never understood, because I thought 守 (*shǒu*) meant keep out.

I closed the notebook.

The mop and I had a long conversation about this. The mop was there. The mop is the only being in the world who has heard me say the words *māma ài nǐ*, and the mop has never once asked me to explain myself.

The mop and I are going to be fine.

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CHAPTER 5

Sneaky, Furtive, Up to No Good

The 语文课 (*yǔwén kè* — Chinese class; the lesson where the language itself is the specimen) was teaching idioms, and the idiom was mine.

I was mopping the corridor outside 五年级二班 (*wǔ niánjí èr bān* — Class 2 of Grade 5), which is not my corridor — the *wǔ niánjí* wing is the *bānzhǔrèn* 刘老师's (Liú lǎoshī — Teacher Liu) corridor, and we have an understanding about territories — but a child had spilled something, and spilled things are my jurisdiction, and so I was there, and the window was open, and I heard everything.

The 老师 (*lǎoshī* — the teacher) wrote it on the board. Two characters, doubled. 鬼鬼祟祟 (*guǐguǐsuìsuì* — ghost, ghost, Sui, Sui). Sneaky. Furtive. Up to no good. The dictionary gloss: 行动不光明正大 (*xíngdòng bù guāngmíng zhèngdà* — acting without openness or honesty).

My name. Doubled. As a grammar exercise.

Four thousand years ago, some ancestor of the language looked at what I do — slip in on the *yīnfēng*, touch, vanish — and named it after me, and the language has been saying my name twice, every day, everywhere, ever since, and no one has ever known. I am the only being in the history of the tongue whose name became the word for his own behavior. 作祟 (*zuò Suì* — "to Sui": to make trouble from the dark). 鬼祟 (*guǐ Suì* — ghost-sneaky; suspicious). The staff room says 这感冒又在作祟 (*zhè gǎnmào yòu zài zuòsuì* — "that cold is acting up again") every winter. The *jiāzhǎng qún* says 这作业真作祟 (*zhè zuòyè zhēn zuòsuì* — "this homework is truly haunted"). They say my name a hundred times a day, in every city, in every dialect, and they mean a cold, a homework assignment, a broken elevator.

And the city's favorite verb is 搞 (*gǎo*). The grammarians say it began as a concrete word — to handle, to do — and ground itself down over the centuries into a key that fits every lock: 搞饭 (*gǎo fàn*), cook. 搞钱 (*gǎo qián*), make

money. 搞定 (*gǎo dìng*), done, settled, finished. The city built itself a word that does all work. Then it took my name and built the one verb for work done in the dark. Between 搞 and 作祟 (*zuòsuì*) is the whole distance between the city and me: they have a word for labor and a word for haunting, and the laboring word became a greeting and the haunting word became a diagnosis, and neither one belongs to me anymore, and I use them both, and I am the only person in Chongqing who knows what he is saying.

I have been in the language all along. The culture didn't erase me. It made me a verb.

The *lǎoshī* asked for a sentence. A boy in the front row put up his hand. He is nine, and he has the confidence of a creature who has never been defeated by anything, and he said:

"新来的王师傅走路鬼鬼祟祟的。" (*Xīn lái de Wáng shīfu zǒulù guǐguǐsuìsuì de.* — The new Master Wang walks all sneaky-like.)

The class laughed. The *lǎoshī* said: 不要这样说老师傅 (*búyào zhèyàng shuō lǎo shīfu* — don't speak of the old workman that way). The boy said: 我说的是岁师傅 (*wǒ shuō de shì Suì shīfu* — I said Master Sui). More laughter. The whole class laughed. Five hundred years ago, saying my name was *huìqì*, inauspicious, the sort of thing that got you a bad harvest. Now it is a grammar exercise about a janitor's walk, and the janitor in question is standing outside the window, holding a mop, listening to the entire species use his name as an insult, correctly, for the first time.

For one second — I will be honest, since honesty in round numbers is the only kind I keep — I wanted to put out every lamp in the wing. The old reflex. The billion lamps. The cold reaching up my arms like water finding a channel, and the whole corridor going dark, and the boy finishing his sentence in the dark. The flash passed. I have a rule about lamps now — *zhuīzé*, the paperwork — and underneath the rule, the truth, which is that I did not want the dark. I wanted something I still do not have a word for. It is not revenge. It is the feeling of being seen and named in the same second, which the legend never warned me about, because the legend never imagined I would be found by children.

I stood there. The mop handle was the only thing holding me up. And the first time it happens, it is a ten-year-old telling the class I walk sneaky.

I should have been furious. I have a temper. The dossier — I have seen the 华文教育网 (*Huáwén Jiàoyù Wǎng* — the Huawen Education Network, a folklore site for overseas Chinese classrooms) page, I know what they say about me — the dossier says I am 烈而多变 (*liè ér duōbiàn* — fierce and mutable), quick-tempered, and it is true, I once knocked over an entire 供桌 (*gōngzhuō* — an altar table) because a 供品 (*gōngpǐn* — the offerings) was inadequate. But I was not furious. I was something else. I was standing outside a window in June, holding a mop, listening to a classroom say my name, and the word they used meant sneaky, and they were right, and I have never been so seen in four thousand years.

They see me. They see the janitor. They do not know they are seeing me, but they are seeing me. The demon of being unseen, seen, daily, as a subject of mockery, by children who will never know how much of their language is my name.

I walked away. I had to. I mopped the *yī niánjí* wing, which is the *zhírìshēng*'s wing, and I mopped it twice, which was an act of territorial aggression I have apologized for only to the mop.

The 学霸 (*xuébà* — the ace of the class; the child who wins at existing) is named 唐圆圆 (Táng Yuányuán). She is nine, she is in 四年级 (*sì niánjí* — fourth grade), she does 奥数 (*àoshù* — Olympiad math) at recess, and she has decided that my mopping technique is inefficient.

"岁师傅 (*Suì shīfu*)," she said, at the 大队部 (*dàduìbù* — the brigade office; headquarters of the Young Pioneers) door, with a stopwatch. "You take 43 seconds to mop a standard 1.5-meter tile. The theoretical minimum is 31. I have done the math. Your route is 17 percent suboptimal."

I am a four-thousand-year-old demon. I have been present at the burning of cities. I have been blamed for the fall of dynasties. I have been hunted, named, and erased by the most powerful civilization on earth. And I stood corrected by a nine-year-old with a stopwatch and a 草稿本 (*cǎogǎoběn* — a scratch notebook), and I had nothing to say, because she was right. My mopping route was 17

percent suboptimal. I have been mopping for a year and a *sì niánjí* student has optimized me.

"Would you like me to model your route?" she said.

"No," I said.

"You would save eleven minutes a day."

"I like the eleven minutes."

She looked at me the way Lín Xiǎomǎn looks at me — a small, sharp look, a person filing something away — and she said: "That is not a rational reason, but it is a human one." And she walked off with her stopwatch, and I have never been so insulted and so proud at the same time.

The *jiāzhǎng qún*. The *bānzhǔrèn* Lǐ lǎoshī's phone pings all evening. Lǎo Zhōu, the *ménwèi*, who has opinions about everything, said: 现在的家长群比六百只麻雀还吵 (*xiànzài de jiāzhǎng qún bǐ liùbǎi zhī máquè hái chǎo* — the parents' group chats these days are noisier than six hundred sparrows).

I thought about it. In my day, the whole village stayed up in silence on *Chúxī* night, lamps burning, to keep me out. Now they stay up all night typing at each other. The vigil has become a group chat. The charm has become a notification. The one night a year the species used to spend fighting me is now spent fighting each other about homework, and I don't know if I have been defeated or retired.

"Lǎo Zhōu," I said. "What do people do on *Chúxī* now?"

He thought about it. "看春晚嘛。抢红包嘛。" (*Kàn Chūnwǎn ma. Qiǎng hóngbāo ma.* — Watch the Spring Festival Gala. Grab red envelopes.)

抢红包 (*qiǎng hóngbāo*). Robbing the red envelopes — the 红包 (*hóngbāo* — red envelope; cash in festive paper) being the charm's modern wrapper. The children now fight over the charm. The thing that beat me is now a competition, and children scream with joy when they win it.

I laughed. It was the first time this body has laughed, and it was a dry, dead sound, like a door closing, and Lǎo Zhōu looked at me.

"Wáng shīfu?"

"没什么 (*méi shénme* — it's nothing)," I said. "Mopping."

I went and mopped the stairs. My laugh scared me. Demons do not laugh. I have been in this body too long.

Or: I have been in this body just long enough.

I have stopped keeping track of which one it is. The mop and I discussed it. The mop, as always, was silent. The mop and I have an understanding, and the understanding is that I do the talking and the mop does the listening, and it is the healthiest relationship I have ever had, which is a sentence I do not say out loud, because if I say it out loud I will have to think about what it means, and I have been avoiding thinking about what it means for a year now, and I intend to keep avoiding it for the rest of this prank.

The year turns. June becomes July. The itch is quiet these days. I should be grateful. I am grateful. I am also, inexplicably, uneasy. ---

CHAPTER 6

The Empty School

暑假 (*shǔjià* — summer vacation) came and the school emptied, and I discovered that the prank had a second joke in it: I was lonely.

I have been alone for four thousand years. Alone is my native language. I have spent millennia slipping through sleeping houses at the *sìgēng*, alone, by design, by nature, the dark's only employee. Loneliness was never the thing that happened to me. It was the thing I was made of.

And then the school emptied, and the bells stopped, and the *yǎn bǎojiàn cāo* went silent, and the red scarves went home, and I stood in the corridor of *sān niánjí èr bān* — Zhèng Yōuyōu's desk empty, the lunchbox note gone home with its owner — and the silence was the worst thing I have ever heard, and I have heard a thousand years of them.

The 火炉 (*huǒlú* — "the Furnace," the city's oldest nickname) summer helped. Chongqing in July is a furnace, and I am, after four thousand years, a cold draft. My one power. The *yīnfēng*. It works. I am the only cool place in the building. The *cítáng āyí* Zhāng āyí noticed.

"王师傅,你身上凉快。夏天站你旁边舒服。" (*Wáng shīfu, nǐ shēnshang liángkuai. Xiàtiān zhàn nǐ pángbiān shūfu.* — Master Wang, you're cool to the touch. In summer it's comfortable standing next to you.)

The demon of cold drafts, beloved for his one useless power. In the *cítáng*, with the fans dying, the staff stands near me like I am a machine. I have never been useful to anyone. I have been feared, named, erased, and blamed. I have never once been useful. It is a new feeling, and I don't know what to do with it, so I stand very still and let them be cool, and I call it my job, and it is not my job.

Zhāng āyí feeds me 绿豆汤 (*lǜdòu tāng* — mung-bean soup, the green cure for furnace season). Cold, sweet, green. She asks about my family. I don't have one. I say so. She says: 那以后阿姨就是你的家属 (*nà yǐhòu āyí jiùshì nǐ de jiāshǔ* — then from now on, Auntie is your family). A stranger claims me as family. In four thousand years, no one has ever claimed me. I am the thing

families are claimed against. I drink the *lǜdòu tāng*. It is the second best thing I have ever eaten, after the *huíguōròu*.

There was a snake. A 家蛇 (*jiāshé* — a house snake; the kind that lives in the eaves and eats the mice), in the *chǔwùjiān* — July, Shānchéng, they come down from the hill. The 保安 (*bǎo'ān* — the security guard) was afraid. The *ménwèi* Lǎo Zhōu was afraid — a door god, afraid of a snake, which is the sort of thing that restores my faith in the species. I caught it with a bucket. I have a professional kinship with reptiles; my ancestor *shānsāo* lived in the western mountains, barefoot, stealing salt, a foot-tall fever-demon who was classified by the 神异经 (*Shényì Jīng* — the Classic of Gods and Strangeness, a Han-era bestiary) as 鬼魅之类 (*guǐmèi zhī lèi* — "of the category of ghosts and spirits"), though human in form. The snake and I have more in common than either of us would like to admit. I carried it up the hill and released it, and it looked at me, and I looked at it, and I said: 走吧 (*zǒu ba* — go on; get). We both know what happens if you stay.

One Sunday that month the school closed for a boiler inspection, and I had the day, and I did not know what a person does with a day. I walked down the hill. It took the knees forty minutes to forgive me. I passed the noodle stall where the man throws the dough and the chili oil goes up into the air like weather. A 麻将 (*májiàng* — mahjong) parlour sat above an optician's — four old people and their tiles, the war in there older than any war I have ever watched from a doorway — and someone's grandson on the pavement outside shouted 雄起 (*xióngqǐ* — rise up!) at a phone game. The city keeps score out loud. That is the difference between the city and the villages I used to slip through: everything here is declared, priced, posted, argued. In the villages the losing was silent.

Then a funeral shop, white and gold, its window full of 纸扎 (*zhǐzhā* — paper offerings; the craftsmen fold them for the dead): paper villas, paper cars, and this year, the shopkeeper was telling her customer, paper telephones, so the dead can keep their group chats. The dead get *jiāzhǎng qún* now. 白事 (*báishì* — white affairs, the city's word for funerals) run twenty thousand and up in the city, one stop, one invoice. Under the hill there are people paid to visit graves for other people — 代客祭扫 (*dàikè jìsǎo* — proxy grave-sweeping: they kneel, they

pour, they weep on schedule, they send photographs as proof of grief) — and in the spring of 2020, when the plague kept everyone home, twenty-six million people swept their ancestors' graves through an app. The city has outsourced the vigil. It pays strangers to return to the dead, on schedule, with photos.

I did the rounds for four thousand years and no one paid me and no one photographed it and no one wept.

The heat came off the pavement like a tide. I walked back up the hill, and the bucket I had brought for no reason grew heavier with every switchback, and by the gate my shirt was pasted to my back and my knees were filing complaints in a language I had no words for. The body keeps its own ledger too. I stood in the gate's shade until the sweat dried, and I thought: this is what the city does to everyone, every day, on purpose, and everyone pays the fare and climbs. I had four thousand years of slipping. The slope does not care what you are. It bills the knees either way.

Mǎ Jiànguó was doing a 假期安全检查 (*jiàqī ānquán jiǎnchá* — a holiday safety inspection). He saw the whole thing. And he smiled — the first time I have seen the settled mind move — and he said: "王师傅,胆子大。" (*Wáng shīfu, dǎnzi dà.* — Master Wang, you've got nerve.)

A 表扬 (*biǎoyáng* — praise; a word with a weight to it). From the calm one. Four thousand years, zero *biǎoyáng*. One year, one *biǎoyáng*. I have never been praised. I have been feared, named, erased, blamed, and beaten by pocket change, but never praised. I don't know where to put it. I have no shelf for it. I put it next to the *lǜdòu tāng*, which is not a shelf, which is a chest, which is where I keep the things I cannot explain.

August. The last week. I stood in the empty *cāochǎng* and thought: they're coming back. The small ones. I have spent four thousand years dreading the return of children. I have spent one summer counting the days.

I bought a new 扫把 (*sàobǎ* — a coarse straw broom, the mop's stiff-haired cousin) with my own money. The old one's bristles were worn. The *hòuqín* would have replaced it. I bought one anyway, because I have never bought anything for anyone, and this is for the school, which is not anyone, which is

everyone. I tell myself it is for the school. It is for the school. The *sàobǎ* is for the school. The mop knows.

Before the school emptied entirely, 林小满 (Lín Xiǎomǎn) came by the *dàduìbù* with a form for me to sign — the *hòuqín* needed a signature for the new broom, which she had volunteered to deliver, and nobody had asked her to. She watched me sign it the way auditors watch, and then she said, not looking up: 王师傅,你暑假也天天来。 (*Wáng shīfu, nǐ shǔjià yě tiāntiān lái.* — Master Wang, you come every day even in the summer.) It was not a question. I said the floors need it in the heat. She wrote something down — the date, I suppose, and the answer — and she said: 好的。 (*Hǎo de.* — All right.) And she left, and I stood there holding the pen, and I understood that I had been counted. Somewhere in a ten-year-old's files there is now a record that the janitor came to an empty school every day of the summer, with the date on it. I have been part of a ledger before. It has never been a kind one.

I have a theory about the prank now. It is this: Fate did not trap me. Fate got tired of watching me lose, and gave me the one thing a demon cannot have — a place. A place with a schedule and a uniform and a *dǎkǎjī* that says *xièxie* and a *cítáng āyí* who claims me and a door god who smiles and a *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* who hands me wet towels.

I have been a haunting for four thousand years. A haunting is a thing that returns. It has no place. It returns to where it was, not where it lives, because it does not live.

I think I may be living. I have no idea what to do with it. I am four thousand years old and I have no idea what to do with living, so I do the only thing I know: I wait for the year to turn, and I keep the school clean, and I keep my eight coins in my pocket, and I keep the notebook under my pillow, and I keep the *sàobǎ* for them.

The fog came in off the Jiālíng Jiāng that evening, and I stood in it, and it felt like home, which is a sentence I have never been able to say about anything, because I have never had a home, because I am the thing homes are kept against.

The fog is just weather now. That is the prank. My native element, demoted to weather.

I went inside. I mopped the *yī niánjí* wing. It was already clean. The mop and I have stopped caring about whether the floors need it. The floors never need it. The mop and I need it. We need the motion. We need the night. We need the sound of the mop on the floor, which is the only sound in the building, which is the sound of a demon keeping himself alive by keeping a school clean.

Somewhere in the building, a *shēngkòngdēng* came on by itself, showing off.

I let it have the win. I have been letting it have the win for a year now. There is a word for this, I think. I don't know the word. The mop knows the word. The mop is not telling.

※

CHAPTER 7

September

September came, and with it the small ones, and the school filled up like a heart filling with blood, and I stood at the gate with the *ménwèi* and watched them pour in, and I understood, finally, what the *shǔjià* had been: the empty school had been my body, and the children are the blood, and the school is a heart, and I am the janitor of a heart.

The new *yī niánjí* kids are smaller than the old ones, which should be impossible, and louder, and redder. The 开学典礼 (*kāixué diǎnlǐ* — the opening-of-term ceremony) was held in the *cāochǎng*, and the 校长 (*xiàozhǎng* — the principal) spoke. Her name is 周文秀 (Zhōu Wénxiù). She is a woman with glasses and the calm of a *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* and something else, something warmer. She spoke about the new term, about hard work, about the school being a family. And at the end she said:

"也感谢王岁师傅。暑假的卫生保持得非常好。" (*Yě gǎnxiè Wáng Suì shīfu. Shǔjià de wèishēng bǎochí de fēicháng hǎo.* — And thanks are owed to Master Wang Sui as well: the cleanliness through the summer was excellently maintained.)

My name. 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*). Said correctly, by an authority figure, in public, in front of the whole school.

I was standing at the back with my bucket. I had to look at the floor. I have looked at a lot of floors in my life. I am an expert on floors. This was the first floor I have ever been grateful for, because it gave me somewhere to look while the whole school said my name and meant it.

Lín Xiǎomǎn was on the platform — she is *dàduìzhǎng*, she does the 主持 (*zhǔchí* — the emceeing), she is ten and she has the posture of a general — and she looked at me during the *xiàozhǎng*'s sentence, the same small, sharp look as before, a person filing something away. And I have been four thousand years old for a long time, and I know what a person filing things away looks like, and I knew, at that moment, that the filing cabinet had my name in it.

Zhèng Yōuyōu is *sān niánjí* now. He still naps. He still drools. The lunchbox note still says *māma ài nǐ*. The 12:50 patrol continues. The *bānzhǔrèn* Lǐ lǎoshī said: 王师傅你真是认真,天天这个点来拖三年级 (*Wáng shīfu nǐ zhēn shì rènzhēn, tiāntiān zhège diǎn lái tuō sān niánjí* — Master Wang, you are so conscientious, coming to mop the third grade at this hour every day). I said: *zhèbiān rén duō*. She laughed. She thinks I am diligent. I am guarding. The difference is invisible from the outside, which is the only difference the world ever sees.

Mǎ Jiànguó had a meeting about the cleaning schedule. I know this because Lín Xiǎomǎn was 值日 (*zhírì* — on duty) in the office that day, and *zhírìshēng* hear everything, and *zhírìshēng* tell the *dàduìzhǎng* everything, and the *dàduìzhǎng* files everything. The *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* said: 王岁师傅的保洁时段很奇怪 (*Wáng Suì shīfu de bǎojié shíduàn hěn qíguài* — Master Wang Sui's cleaning shifts are very strange). He said it without judgment, the way a river says things. Someone proposed adjusting my hours. Mǎ Jiànguó said: 先看看 (*xiān kànkan* — let's watch a while; we'll see). *Xiān kànkan.* The settled mind, in no hurry. I have been in this body a year and I have learned that Mǎ Jiànguó says *xiān kànkan* to everything, and the world obeys, because the world is afraid of his clipboard.

教师节 (*Jiàoshī Jié* — Teachers' Day, September the tenth). September tenth. The children bring the teachers flowers and 贺卡 (*hèkǎ* — greeting cards, hand-drawn, glitter-glued), and the teachers' offices fill with paper suns, and the corridors fill with children running to deliver their love to the wrong people. And Máomao — the scared one, now *èr niánjí*, slightly less scared, still afraid of everything — gave his *hèkǎ* to the wrong person. He thrust it at me in the corridor and ran. He was too afraid to give it to his *bānzhǔrèn*, and I was closer, and it was a clerical error of courage.

The *hèkǎ* said: 老师辛苦了 (*lǎoshī xīnkǔ le* — teachers, you have labored; the standard formula of thanks). With a drawing of a sun, and a stick figure, and the stick figure was holding a mop. He drew me. He was too afraid of me to speak to me, and he drew me holding a mop, and he gave it to me, and he ran.

I keep it. I keep it in the notebook, between 祟 (*Suì*) and 守 (*shǒu*). The demon of darkness, collecting light. The notebook has three things in it now: my name, the vigil, and a child's drawing of a sun.

The 学区房 (*xuéqū fáng* — school-district housing; an apartment bought not to live in but to zone a child into a good school) talk. At the gate, at pickup, the parents talk. A father said: 这个学校划片到一中 (*zhège xuéxiào huàpiàn dào Yī Zhōng* — this school is zoned into Number One Middle School). Another said: 那还要买 (*nà hái yào mǎi* — then you still have to buy the apartment). The arithmetic of modern protection, performed at the gate at 4:40 every afternoon. A mother with a phone calculator said: 报个奥数班,一学期三千六。 (*Bào ge àoshù bān, yī xuéqī sānqiān liù.* — An Olympiad-math term is three thousand six hundred.) A father said the lottery had eaten his neighbor's deposit — 民办摇号 (*mínbàn yáohào* — the private-school lottery; since 2022, when the applicants outnumber the seats, a computer draws the names and no interview is allowed) — 摇了三年,一个没中。 (*Yáo le sān nián, yī gè méi zhòng.* — Three years of drawing, not one hit.) Another mother said 指标到校 (*zhǐbiāo dào xiào* — quota-to-school: the good high schools hold seats for each feeder middle school, so the middle school you enter at eleven is the doorway the exam waits behind) the way other people say a saint's name, and a fourth said 五金花 (*wǔ jīn huā* — the Five Gold Flowers, the five elite primaries of the city) the way other districts say bank names, and a fifth said the elite branches are not all real: the nameplate is on the building, 挂牌 (*guàpái* — the hung name; an elite school's name on a gate that its own teachers never visit), but the core teachers rotate down to some branches and never to others, and the mothers know which. I mopped past them, mopping it all into the same bucket.

The mothers do not mention the 高考 (*gāokǎo* — the college entrance examination) because it is twelve years away for these children; they schedule backwards from it, the way I once scheduled backwards from the *sìgēng*: the right primary, the right middle school, the right examination hall, and every year of childhood a corridor to walk down with the exam at the end of it. The whole city is aimed at one June. I stood in it with a mop, the only creature present whose future was not scheduled.

Mopping away from them, I thought: in my day, the charm was eight coins under a pillow. Now it is a 房产证 (*fángchǎnzhèng* — a property deed). The culture has upgraded its exorcism to real estate. The thing that threatens the children now is not me. It is the 房贷 (*fángdài* — the mortgage). I have been out-horrified by a mortgage. I have spent four thousand years being the worst thing that happens to children, and the modern world has produced a better 祟 (*Suì*) than I ever was — a 祟 (*Suì*) that lives in the *jiāzhǎng qún*, wears a suit, and takes the *xuéqū fáng* — and I should be offended, and I am, on the children's behalf, which is new. I have never been offended on anyone's behalf. I have been the offense.

The itch started at the end of September.

It is the yearly recurrence. The engine. The thing that has brought me back on *Chúxī* night for 3947 consecutive years, like the cold, like the year ending, the one appointment I have never missed. It starts in the hands. It is a clock. It winds up in October and it peaks at the *sìgēng* of *Chúxī*, and it is the oldest thing I own.

It started again, on schedule, in a janitor's body in a Shānchéng school, and I stood at the 12:50 doorway of *sān niánjí èr bān* and I felt my fingers curl, and I looked at the drooling head, and I looked at the note, and I said, to no one:

"Not you. Not ever you."

I have no idea where that came from. I am four thousand years old and I have never said 不是 (*bú shì* — no; it is not) to anyone. I have never had a you.

The mop, as always, was silent. But the mop, for the first time in our relationship, leaned slightly toward me, which I have chosen to interpret as agreement.

The clock is winding. *Chúxī* is coming. I have never missed the appointment. I am going to miss the appointment. I have decided this. I don't know how to decide things. I am a demon of recurrence, of return, of the same night forever. I am the thing that comes back. I have never once in four thousand years decided not to come back.

The decision is the hardest thing I have ever done. It is also, I am beginning to understand, the first thing I have ever done.

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CHAPTER 8

The Old Illness, At It Again

October, and the itch is a full orchestra.

The old illness is 作祟 (*zuòsuì*) — the staff room says it every winter, about colds, about the flu, about the 电梯 (*diàntī* — the elevator) that breaks on Wednesdays — and they do not know that the old illness, the original 作祟 (*zuòsuì*), is standing in the corridor with a mop, listening to them use his name for a broken elevator.

The migraine starts in October. It is the recurrence, winding itself up, the way it has for 3947 years. My hands ache at night. I dream of the circuit — the houses, the *yīnfēng*, the lamps going out, the *sìgēng*, the touch — the whole terrible machinery, replaying, on schedule, in a *dānjiān* in Chongqing, while a ceiling fan turns and a *qīngguǐ* passes through the building below like the world's largest heartbeat.

I have never missed the appointment. I have returned every year, every single year, since before the Jiāxīng household, since before the coins, since before the custom that buried me. I am the recurrence. The year turns and I come, the way the cold comes, the way the year ends. I have never once stayed home. I have never once decided. There was nothing to decide. I was the thing that returns.

The 于史无据 (*yú shǐ wú jù* — "without basis in the written record"; the verdict historians pass on things that were never written down). I found it in the *ménwèi*'s *wǎnbào*, over his shoulder, the way I read everything now — standing in the doorway, pretending not to read, reading everything. An article about 压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*), a 春节文化 (*Chūnjié wénhuà* — Spring Festival culture) series, and a folklorist quoted: the 祟 (*Suì*) legend is 于史无据 (*yú shǐ wú jù*) — without basis in written history. The 记者 (*jìzhě* — reporter) wrote my character once — once, correctly, in the whole article — and then never again.

Lǎo Zhōu said: 看啥子,王师傅,你还识字嗦? (*Kàn sházi, Wáng shīfu, nǐ hái shízi so?* — What are you looking at, Master Wang? You can read, can you?)

I said: 认得几个 (*rènde jǐ gè* — I recognize a few).

I walked away with the sentence in my chest like a coin in the throat: *yú shǐ wú jù*. Without basis in written history. The demon even history disowns. I was a fiction before I was a body. Now I am a body that is also a fiction. I have never been real. The only record of me is the customs that refuse my name. I am the most famous demon in the culture's warmest custom, and no one has ever written me down, because writing me down was *huìqì*, because saying my name was bad luck, because I am the name disaster gets when it has no name.

I went home. I opened the notebook. 祟 (*Suì*). 守 (*shǒu*). A child's drawing of a sun. I thought: this is my 史 (*shǐ* — the written record; history itself). This is all the history I have. A janitor's notebook with a sun in it.

yú shǐ wú jù. But the notebook has a drawing in it. A child drew me a sun. That is a record. That is a 据 (*jù* — evidence; a written basis). I have one 据 (*jù*), and it is a first-grader's sun, and it is worth more than every 史 (*shǐ*) that refused to say me.

The near-touch.

wǔxiū, *sān niánjí èr bān*, 12:50. The classroom was empty of adults — Lǐ lǎoshī was at a meeting, the *zhírìshēng* was at the *dàduìbù* — and Zhèng Yōuyōu was asleep, head on the desk, forehead up, the old geography, the old invitation. And the itch was at its peak — the whole October, the whole 3947 years, all of it, in my hands — and I stood in the doorway, and I took off the gloves. I don't know why I took them off. I have never taken them off at 12:50. I took them off, and I stood over the sleeping head.

They came off with that small sound rubber makes, and the air of the classroom touched my hands for the first time in a year, and the hands were mine and they were not mine. The boy's breath moved the fine hairs on his neck. The fluorescent tube hummed one note above hearing. The desk's edge held a lunch smell — pork, rice, the sweetness of something a mother had packed at six in the morning — and the red scarf was draped over the next chair, and the dust I had not yet mopped lay on the windowsill in a thickness the sun was measuring. One inch from a forehead, bare skin knows what it is near. The palm read the boy the way a tongue reads a tooth: the warmth coming off the skull in waves, the pulse at the temple going at a child's rate, the whole small machinery of him running

unattended. And the itch was in the hands the way heat is in a stove — not a thought about it, a property of it. The middle finger curled on its own. I watched it curl. The knuckle rose and the fingertip drifted a half-inch off my palm and hovered there, pointing at the boy like a compass needle, and I stood in a doorway in October and watched my own hand remember its work.

In my pocket, one of the coins went warm. Not hot — warm, the way a coin goes when a hand has held it, except no hand had held it. It lay against my leg like a small animal that had turned over in its sleep. I did not take it out. I did not look at my shadow, which lay on the classroom floor pointing the wrong way, toward the door, as if the light were standing behind the boy.

The arithmetic started: one, two, three. One touch, fever. Two, delirium. Three, and the child is never the same. The mind-ruin. The only thing I have ever done. The only thing I am.

And the note was there. The lunchbox. The note: *Yōuyōu, hǎo hǎo shuì. Māma ài nǐ.*

I read it again. I have read it a hundred times. It is the only *shǐ* I have that says a mother's love exists, which is a strange thing for a demon to keep, but I keep it, in my chest, next to the *huíguōròu* and the *lǜdòu tāng* and the *biǎoyáng* and the sun-drawing, and it was there, in the doorway, at 12:50, in October, and it said the same thing it always says, and I have never understood it, and I never will, and it does not matter, because I put the gloves back on, and I picked up the mop, and I mopped the corridor, and I said, to no one, to the itch, to the recurrence, to the whole 3947 years:

"今年也不来了。" (*Jīnnián yě bù lái le.* — This year, too, I am not coming.)

The demon who returns every year has stopped returning. It is the first time in four thousand years I have missed the appointment. It is the first time in four thousand years I have had an appointment to miss, because it was never an appointment, it was a compulsion, it was the thing I was.

I was furious afterward. A demon should not have to be told no. Nothing told me no. The note told me no. The note is not even for me. The note is for a sleeping boy, and I read it as an instruction, and I obeyed it, and I have no idea

when I started taking instructions from lunchbox notes, and I have no idea when I started needing to be told no, and I have no idea when the no became mine.

I mopped the same corridor nine times. I rearranged the *xiāodúshuǐ* bottles by height — I cannot read, so I arranged them by height, which is the janitor's literacy — and Dr. Zhang came out of the *yīwùshì* and found me re-shelving her disinfectant, smallest to largest. She looked at the shelf, and at me, and said: 摆得比原来好。 (*Bǎi de bǐ yuánlái hǎo.* — Arranged better than before.) And she went back in. She is paid to let janitors be strange, and in eight months she has never once asked why. I used to think that was indifference. It is not. It is the vigil, practiced in miniature: she keeps her room, I keep my floors, and neither of us checks on the other more than the keeping requires. Mǎ Jiànguó found me at six p.m., arranging *xiāodúshuǐ* by height, and he asked if I was all right.

"没得事 (*méi dé shì* — nothing's wrong; Sichuan for it)," I said.

He nodded. The river nodded. He left. The settled mind sees everything and is calm about it. I have stopped trying to understand Mǎ Jiànguó. I have accepted that he is a natural phenomenon, like the fog, like the *qíngguǐ*, like the *shēngkòngdēng* that shows off.

The turn came at the 大队会 (*dàduì huì* — the brigade assembly, the whole Young Pioneer cohort in one room).

The *dàduìbù* announced the 寒假 (*hánjià* — winter vacation) research project — *Chūnjié wénhuà* — and the *dàduìzhǎng* got to choose her topic, and Lín Xiǎomǎn stood up, ten years old, red armband, and she said:

"我要研究压岁钱。我要研究它的来历。还有那个被删掉名字的祟。" (*Wǒ yào yánjiū yāsuìqián. Wǒ yào yánjiū tā de láilì. Hái yǒu nàge bèi shān diào míngzi de Suì.* — I am going to study yasuiqian. I am going to study where it came from. And the Sui whose name got deleted.)

I was mopping the corridor outside the *dàduìbù*. I heard my name. My real name. 祟 (*Suì*). Said by a child, in a school office, with intent. The first time in four thousand years anyone has said my name in a school, meaning me, meaning to find me out.

I dropped the mop.

The mop clattered. The *dàduìbù* went quiet. The 大队辅导员 (*dàduì fǔdǎoyuán* — the brigade counselor, the adult attached to the Young Pioneers) looked out the door.

"Wáng shīfu?"

I picked up the mop. "没得事。拖地。" (*Méi dé shì. Tuō dì.* — Nothing's wrong. Mopping the floor.)

I mopped away. And the itch — the whole October orchestra — went quiet. Because something else had taken its place. Something I have no name for, because I have never had it, because I have spent four thousand years being the thing children are protected from, and a child has just announced, in a school office, in front of the *dàduìbù*, that she is going to find me, and write me down, and give me back my name.

And underneath the quiet, the other reading, the one I do not say out loud even to the mop: being written down is what destroyed me. *Yú shǐ wú jù*, the historians said — without basis in the written record — but there were books once. 祟书 (*Suìshū* — the divination booklets, the diagnostic literature that told a frightened household which spirit had caused the fever, and what to write on red paper to pin it). A child with a red pen and a filing cabinet is either a rescue or a diagnosis. I have been in one of those books. It was not a rescue.

I have been hoping for four thousand years without a word for it. The word is 希望 (*xīwàng* — hope). I found it in a school office, at a *dàduì huì*, said by a ten-year-old with a red armband.

The mop and I had a long conversation about this. The mop was silent. The mop is always silent. But the mop, for the first time in our entire relationship, seemed to be waiting.

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CHAPTER 9

Research

December. The *dàduìzhǎng* is conducting research, and I am the subject, and neither of us knows how to do this, and we are both doing it perfectly.

I watch her the way I watch everything now: from the corridor, with the mop, invisible, the profession's gift. She works in the 图书馆 (*túshūguǎn* — the library) on the school computer — *dàduìzhǎng* privileges — and she prints things, and she leaves them out, and the *dàduìbù* is mine to clean, and I read everything.

She found the legend. The Huáwén Jiàoyù Wǎng page, the same one I have seen in my own dossier, the same Jiāxīng household, the same eight coins, the same 压祟钱 (*yā Suì qián*). She read about 守岁 (*shǒusuì*): 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*), they called it first, and then, because saying my name was *huìqì*, because 岁 (*suì*) and 祟 (*Suì*) sound the same, they renamed it. 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*) became 守岁 (*shǒusuì*). 压祟钱 (*yā Suì qián*) became 压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*). The custom that beat me took my name, cleaned it up, and used it to mean the year.

I watched her read that sentence. And she — ten years old, *dàduìzhǎng*, the posture of a general — she said, out loud, to the empty library:

"凭什么!" (*Píng shénme!* — By what right!)

Why! On whose authority! The first time in four thousand years anyone has objected to the renaming. The whole country has been saying 守岁 (*shǒusuì*) and 压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*) for a thousand years, and not one of them has ever stopped and asked what happened to the other character. And a ten-year-old in a school library, doing *hánjià* research, has just objected, on my behalf, to the culture.

I had to sit down on the steps outside the library. I sat down. The bucket sat with me.

She wrote the 作文 (*zuòwén* — the composition; the weekly essay, graded out of a hundred). 《压岁钱的来历——被删掉名字的祟》 (*Yāsuìqián de láilì — bèi shān diào míngzi de Suì* — "The Origin of Yasuiqian: The Sui Whose Name

Was Deleted"). She handed it in, and the 语文老师 (*yǔwén lǎoshī* — the Chinese teacher) Lǐ lǎoshī gave her 95分 (*jiǔshíwǔ fēn* — ninety-five marks), with a note: 想象丰富,语言生动。祟的传说属于民间故事,可注明出处。 (*Xiǎngxiàng fēngfù, yǔyán shēngdòng. Suì de chuánshuō shǔyú mínjiān gùshi, kě zhùmíng chūchù.* — Rich imagination, vivid language. The legend of Sui belongs to folklore; cite your source.)

The one true believer, graded for imagination. The only person in the building who knows the truth, marked down for it, gently, kindly, by a teacher who means well and does not know that the subject of the *zuòwén* is employed by the school and has a mop.

I read the teacher's note four times. 可注明出处 (*kě zhùmíng chūchù* — cite your source). Four characters at the bottom of the page, and underneath them the whole old machinery, humming. A source. A citation. A place in the record where a thing gets pinned so it can be checked, and the checking is the pinning. I would bet the coins in my pocket that this is how the *Suìshū* began: one careful person, meaning well, writing down what the fear was called. For one afternoon — between the last bell and the mopping — I was folklore again: *mínjiān gùshi*, a folk story. Filed. Harmless. Extinct. Properly footnoted. The filing cabinet of the whole culture, open, with a card in it that had my name on the front and "legend" on the back.

I read the *zuòwén* on the *dàduìbù* desk. She left it there. I cleaned the *dàduìbù*, and I read it, and the *zuòwén* said: 祟不是坏蛋。祟只是没人给他写名字。 (*Suì bú shì huàidàn. Suì zhǐshì méi rén gěi tā xiě míngzi.* — Sui is not a villain. Sui just has no one to write his name.)

A ten-year-old's thesis. The entire book, in one sentence. *Suì bú shì huàidàn. Suì zhǐshì méi rén gěi tā xiě míngzi.* The card comes out of the drawer. That is what her thesis is for.

I went and mopped the bathroom. I have to mop the bathroom when I feel things. It is the only place in the building where the janitor can be alone, which is the only thing the janitor has ever been, which is the whole problem. The bathrooms of 李子坝小学 (Lǐzǐbà Xiǎoxué) are the cleanest in the municipality.

The *xiàozhǎng* has noticed. She thinks it is *zhíyè cāoshǒu*. It is feelings. The feelings of a demon, expressed in floor cleaner.

The test. She tested me.

She is *dàduìzhǎng*. She has access. She put a red envelope on my mop bucket in the corridor — a *hóngbāo*, red, the charm-color, the defeat in paper form — and she watched from the 楼梯转角 (*lóutī zhuǎnjiǎo* — the stairwell landing).

I saw it from three meters away. The red. The shape. The whole 3947 years of it. The thing that beat me, in paper form, sitting on my bucket like a verdict.

I recoiled. I left it. I mopped around it. I could not touch it. I have not touched a *hóngbāo* since I woke up in this body. I will never touch a *hóngbāo*. The *hóngbāo* is the wall between me and the species, and I have accepted the wall, and I mop around it, and the wall and I have an understanding.

She retrieved it. She was satisfied. She knows. I know she knows. We are both pretending not to know, and it is the most delicate dance I have participated in since the 唐代 (*Tángdài* — the Tang dynasty, when the empire was certain of everything) court, and I am a *hétonggōng*, and she is ten.

Lǎo Zhōu told me she has been asking questions. "王师傅,那个妹儿在调查你嗦。你犯啥子事了?" (*Wáng shīfu, nàge mèi'ér zài diàochá nǐ so. Nǐ fàn sházi shì le?* — Master Wang, that girl is investigating you, you know. What did you do wrong?)

"*Méi dé shì."

"她问王师傅是不是怕红领巾。问王师傅为什么大年三十要值班。问王师傅的手为什么总是白的。" (*Tā wèn Wáng shīfu shì bú shì pà hónglǐngjīn. Wèn Wáng shīfu wèishénme dànián sānshí yào zhíbān. Wèn Wáng shīfu de shǒu wèishénme zǒngshì bái de.* — She asks whether Master Wang is afraid of the red scarves. Why Master Wang takes duty on the thirtieth. Why Master Wang's hands are always white.)

I said nothing. The *ménshén* looked at me. The *ménshén* has seen everything. The *ménshén* said: "王师傅,你的手确实是白的。" (*Wáng shīfu, nǐ de shǒu quèshí shì bái de.* — Master Wang, your hands really are white.)

I said: "手套 (*shǒutào* — gloves)."

"你夏天也戴。" (*Nǐ xiàtiān yě dài.* — You wear them in summer too.)

"规矩 (*guījǔ* — rules; the way things are done)."

He let it go. He is a door god. Door gods know when to let things go. It is the only reason I still work at this school.

I went home and I stood in front of the mirror. The body's face — middle-aged, ordinary, the face of a thousand *hétonggōng* — and I took off the gloves. The hands. Pale. The white hands of the legend. The *hēi shēn bái shǒu*, in work-wear.

I thought: she's going to find out. A child is going to find out who I am.

The demon of stealth, being found. The demon of being unseen, being seen. The one thing that has never happened in four thousand years, because no one has ever looked, because I am the thing people protect their children from, because the whole culture built its warmest custom on the principle of not saying my name.

She is going to say my name. She has already said it, in the library, in her *zuòwén*, at the *dàduì huì*.

I should run. I cannot run. I am a *hétonggōng*. I have a *dǎkǎjī* that says *xièxie*. I have a *cítáng āyí* who claims me. I have a mop.

I stayed. I don't know why I stayed. I am four thousand years old and I have never stayed anywhere.

The mop knows why I stayed. The mop has opinions. The mop is not telling.

元旦 (*Yuándàn* — New Year's Day, January the first: the calendar's new year, a rehearsal for the real one). The school's New Year celebration. The children performed — a 合唱 (*héchàng* — a choral number), a 小品 (*xiǎopǐn* — a comedy sketch), a 朗诵 (*lǎngsòng* — a recitation) — and I did the 布置 (*bùzhì* — the decorating), which means I hung the 拉花 (*lāhuā* — paper streamers) and the 灯笼 (*dēnglóng* — lanterns), which means I armed the fortress with my own hands, which is my job, which I have accepted. Red everywhere. My defeat, in festive form, hung by the demon who lost.

Lín Xiǎomǎn performed in the *lǎngsòng*. It was about 春节 (*Chūnjié* — the Spring Festival, the lunar new year). About family. About the year turning. She looked at me once, mid-poem, from the stage, and I looked away first, and the

xiàozhǎng — Zhōu Wénxiù, standing next to me at the back, come to watch the children — said, without looking at me:

"王师傅,今年过年回老家吗?" (*Wáng shīfu, jīnnián guònián huí lǎojiā ma?* — Master Wang, going home to your old village for New Year this year?)

"不回了。" (*Bù huí le.* — Not going back.)

"那三十晚上来学校吃饺子。我叫食堂留火。" (*Nà sānshí wǎnshang lái xuéxiào chī jiǎozi. Wǒ jiào cítáng liú huǒ.* — Then come eat dumplings at the school on the thirtieth night. I'll have the canteen keep the fire on.)

An invitation. The *xiàozhǎng* inviting the demon to *Chúxī* dinner at the school. The warmest custom in China, extended to me, by a woman with glasses, who does not know she has just invited the 祟 (*Suì*) to the vigil.

"谢谢校长 (*xièxie xiàozhǎng*)," I said.

She walked off. I stood there. The *Yuándàn* fireworks went off somewhere over the Jiālíng Jiāng — the noise, the *shānsāo* fear, the primal horror — and I did not flinch, because I was thinking about 饺子 (*jiǎozi* — dumplings).

I was thinking about *jiǎozi*.

A four-thousand-year-old demon, thinking about *jiǎozi*, at a school New Year party, because a *xiàozhǎng* invited him to *Chúxī* dinner.

The prank has gone horribly right.

※

CHAPTER 10

the Wrong Name

Before the 元旦, though, there was a Tuesday. The photograph.

A father came to the school at 12:40 on a Tuesday in December to deliver a forgotten water bottle — 水壶 (*shuǐhú*), the kind with a strap — and he was early, and the corridor was empty, and he found me standing in the doorway of *sān niánjí èr bān*.

I was standing in the doorway the way I stand there every day: bucket at my feet, mop resting, watching the sleeping heads with the patience of a man watching a fire he has decided not to light. To Lǐ lǎoshī this reads as diligence. To me it reads as the only appointment I keep. To a father who does not know me, arriving unannounced into an empty corridor, it reads as a man standing over children and watching them sleep.

He raised his phone. I heard the shutter — that small water-drop sound they all make — and by the time I turned he was holding the bottle against his chest like evidence, and he said: 你天天中午都站这里? (*Nǐ tiāntiān zhōngwǔ dōu zhàn zhèlǐ?* — You stand here every day at noon?) I said the floors, the patrol, the noon check. He looked at me the way you look at a stray dog near a playground, and he left, and at 1:15 the photograph was in the *jiāzhǎng qún*.

I read it at 1:30, on Lǎo Zhōu's phone, because Lǎo Zhōu reads the group the way he reads the paper, over the top of his glasses, slowly. The caption said: 三年级二班门口,中午,保洁员站着看孩子午睡。已经不止一次了。 (*Sān niánjí èr bān ménkǒu, zhōngwǔ, bǎojiéyuán zhànzhe kàn háizi wǔshuì. Yǐjīng bù zhǐ yī cì le.* — At the door of Class 2, Grade 3, at noon: the cleaner standing, watching the children nap. It has happened more than once.) And then the replies came down like weather. 有没有搞错。 (*Yǒu méi yǒu gǎo cuò.* — Has everyone lost their mind?) Someone said call the *xiàozhǎng*. Someone said the man is fine, he mops, he is always there. Someone said that is exactly the problem, that he is always there. By evening someone else had said the one who took the photograph should reflect too: 拍照的人也要反思。 (*Pāizhào de rén yě yào*

fǎnsī. — The one who took the photo should also reflect.) The group turned, briefly, on its own witness, which is what groups do when the anomaly turns out to be everyone. Forty-two messages in an hour. The machine for turning anomaly into crisis, working as designed, on my behavior, which was neither diligent nor criminal and was now, officially, both.

I stood in the *ménwèishì* while the phone lit and lit. The demon of the unguarded moment, photographed standing guard. The one thing the year had taught me — that the same behavior reads as diligence from the inside and as loitering from the outside — I had written in my own notebook, in my own words, and here it was, happening, with a shutter sound.

马建国 (Mǎ Jiànguó) was informed. Of course he was. He read the thread at the office door, the phone tilted so the parents could see him reading it, and he typed with one thumb, unhurried, while the office watched:

Xiān kànkan.

Two characters. The thread went quiet within the day. In the *jiāzhǎng qún* the problem was handed to the calm, and the calm took it, and nothing else was said, and no one was fired, and the floors went on being mopped by the man in the photograph, who had learned at last what the vigil costs when seen from outside: nothing. Nothing happened. Nothing happens. The building keeps its children and its custodian both, and the difference between the two is invisible from the outside, which is the only difference the world ever sees — and I had thought I understood that sentence. I had written it. I had not lived it from this side.

And then the mother came.

Not to complain — the thread had gone quiet, and complaints need a crowd. She came on the Thursday, at 12:50 exactly, and she did not come to the office or the gate; she came to the corridor of *sān niánjí èr bān*, and she stood at the far end of it, near the stairs, where the light is bad, and she watched.

She watched her son sleep. She watched me watch her son sleep. The corridor held the three of us the way a held breath holds sound: the boy at his desk, forehead up, the note in his lunchbox; the janitor in the doorway with the mop; the mother at the stairs' mouth with her hands folded, doing nothing, saying nothing, for eleven minutes. I stood still. The itch did not come. The mop

dripped once onto the tiles and I did not wipe it, because wiping it would have been a movement, and movements are how you answer questions nobody has asked.

At the end of it she looked at me — not at the janitor, at me; I have learned the difference, and the difference is duration — and she nodded, once, the nod you give a colleague across a room. At the mouth of the stairwell she stopped, and she said, not turning: 门口的地,中午拖一遍。 (*Ménkǒu de dì, zhōngwǔ tuō yī biàn.* — Mop the ground by the door, once at noon.) The ground where I stand. Not the corridor, not the school — my post. She had read the vigil's geography in eleven minutes of standing, and she gave it back to me as a duty, which is how note-writers love: as logistics. Then she went and woke her son and took him home for the afternoon, and the corridor was empty, and I stood in the doorway a while longer because my legs had decided the watch was not over.

In four thousand years, no one has ever watched the watching. She watched. She will never know what she watched. Or she knows exactly; the note-writers always know exactly. Either way she nodded, and I am keeping the nod the way I keep the coins.

January. The 值班表 (*zhíbānbiǎo* — the duty roster).

The *hòuqín lǎoshī* typed it — the *hánjià* duty roster, who covers the school over the holiday — and it hangs in the 门卫室 (*ménwèishì* — the gatehouse; one desk, one thermos, one television, one door god), and everyone reads it, and no one reads it carefully, because it is a *zhíbānbiǎo*, and *zhíbānbiǎo*s are not literature.

My row said: 王崇 (*Wáng Chóng*).

崇 (*chóng*). Lofty. Worship. High mountain. 山 (*shān* — mountain) over 宗 (*zōng* — ancestor: the character for reverence). The character people write when they mean me, because they cannot be bothered to write me, because they do not know me, because the culture scrubbed me and left a typo-shaped hole where my name used to be. I have been 祟 (*Suì*) for four thousand years, and the world has only ever written 崇 (*chóng*). The demon of stealth, elevated, every time, to the wrong character. The only time anyone has ever worshipped me — 崇 (*chóng*) means worship — is this typo. And it is wrong for both my names: wrong for the

body (王岁 (*Wáng Suì*), not 王崇 (*Wáng Chóng*)) and wrong for the demon (崇 (*Suì*), not 崇 (*chóng*)). Two wrongs, one character, and the character means lofty, and I have never been lofty, I have been small, I have been a shadow in moonlight, I have been the reaching hand, I have been the thing the whole country stayed up to keep out, and no one has ever once written me down right.

I stood in the *ménwèishì* and stared at it. Lǎo Zhōu said: "王师傅,看啥子?" (*Wáng shīfu, kàn sházi?* — Master Wang, what are you looking at?)

"Nothing. Can't read."

"You been reading that *zhíbānbiǎo* for ten minutes."

"I like the shapes."

He let it go. He is a door god. Door gods let things go.

Lín Xiǎomǎn saw it. Of course she saw it. She checks the *zhíbānbiǎo* — she needs to confirm I am on duty *Chúxī*, she is building the case, she has a theory and the theory requires me to be present at the demon's night — and she saw 王崇 (*Wáng Chóng*), and she — ten years old, *dàduìzhǎng*, the posture of a general — she said:

"这是错的!" (*Zhè shì cuò de!* — This is wrong!)

The *hòuqín lǎoshī* said: "哪个字错了?王崇嘛。" (*Nǎge zì cuò le? Wáng Chóng ma.* — Which character is wrong? It's Wang Chong, isn't it.)

"是王岁!岁!不是崇!" (*Shì Wáng Suì! Suì! Bú shì Chóng!* — It's Wang Sui! Sui! Not Chong!)

"王岁王崇,差不多嘛。" (*Wáng Suì Wáng Chóng, chàbuduō ma.* — Wang Sui, Wang Chong — basically the same.)

She took out her red pen. The *dàduìzhǎng*'s red pen. The pen that grades, that corrects, that files. And she wrote, over 崇 (*chóng*), on the official *zhíbānbiǎo*, on an official school document, in red pen — which is a crime against 制度 (*zhìdù* — the System; the way things are done and written down) that the *hòuqín lǎoshī* witnessed with the horror of a man watching a building collapse — she wrote:

崇 (*Suì*).

Her handwriting. Careful. The 出 (*chū*) over the 示 (*shì*). Emergence over omen. My name. On an official document. Written by a child, in red, over the typo that elevated me.

The *hòuqín lǎoshī* nearly fainted. Red pen on an official form. The *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* must be informed. The *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* was informed.

Mǎ Jiànguó came. He looked at the form. He looked at Lín Xiǎomǎn. He said: "哪个写的?" (*Nǎge xiě de?* — Who wrote this?)

"我。写错了就改,改了就对了。" (*Wǒ. Xiě cuò le jiù gǎi, gǎi le jiù duì le.* — Me. Written wrong, so corrected; corrected, and now it's right.)

The *dàduìzhǎng*'s 条例 (*tiáolì* — rulebook) logic. The settled mind considered it. The whole office held its breath. The *shēngkòngdēng*, somewhere in the building, came on by itself, showing off.

Mǎ Jiànguó looked at the character 祟 (*Suì*) on the official form — a four-thousand-year-old character on a 2024 *zhíbānbiǎo*, in a child's red pen — and he said:

"改了就对了。" (*Gǎi le jiù duì le.* — Corrected, it is right.)

And he turned to the *hòuqín lǎoshī*: "打印一张新的。" (*Dǎyìn yī zhāng xīn de.* — Print a fresh one.)

He did not ask who 祟 (*Suì*) was. He did not need to. It is a *zhíbānbiǎo*. It says 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*). That is who the janitor is. But for one moment — one moment — in an office, in Chongqing, in January, my real name sat on an official document, written by a child in red pen, and the calmest man in the building looked at it and said: *gǎi le jiù duì le*. Fixed is right. Right is right.

Then he did the thing I had waited a year for without knowing its name. He sat down. He poured two cups from the office thermos, and he said: 坐。 (*Zuò.* — Sit.) And I sat, on the visitors' chair, and the settled mind and the unsettled one drank tea in an office in January while the new roster printed somewhere down the hall.

He talked about the floors. Thirty years of them — the tiles laid in 1998 that sing in the winter, the second-floor corridor that floods when the pipe joint fails, the way the school smells of chalk and disinfectant and small bodies, and he can no longer smell any of it, which he said was the price and the point. He said the

parents change every six years and the school never does; he said everyone in the *jiāzhǎng qún* is now a witness with a camera, and a witness with a camera is a different animal from a witness with eyes. "家长群里,人人都是记者。" (*Jiāzhǎng qún li, rénrén dōu shì jìzhě.* — In the parents' group, everyone is a reporter.) 他把领口松了一格。 (*Tā bǎ lǐngkǒu sōng le yī gé.* — He loosened his collar by one notch.) The river has a notch. And then he said, to the tea, not to me:

"演习那天,你往火跑。" (*Yǎnxí nà tiān, nǐ wǎng huǒ pǎo.* — On drill day, you ran toward the fire.)

I said nothing. There was nothing to say. The water in the cup went still.

"往火跑的人,要么不识路,要么心里有比火更怕的东西。" (*Wǎng huǒ pǎo de rén, yàome bù shí lù, yàome xīnli yǒu bǐ huǒ gèng pà de dōngxi.* — People who run toward fire either don't know the way, or they have something in them more frightened of than fire.) He drank. "你的腿不抖了。" (*Nǐ de tuǐ bù dǒu le.* — Your legs don't shake anymore.) And he straightened his collar, and he stood, and he was a river again, and I walked out of that office knowing that I had been watched since the fire drill by the one mind I cannot touch, and that the wet towel had not been a kindness. It had been a reading. The settled mind reads everything. It reads slowly, and it never says what it knows until the knowing is thirty years old, and then it says it to a teacup.

I was outside the window. I heard it. I went and mopped the bathroom. The bathrooms of 李子坝小学 (Lǐzǐbà Xiǎoxué) are immaculate. They are immaculate because a demon is being loved and has nowhere else to put it.

The *chūnlián*. The school gate. Lǎo Zhōu and I put them up together — the *ménshén* and the 祟 (*Suì*), on the same ladder, arming the same fortress — and Lǎo Zhōu read them aloud, because I cannot read, because the body's literacy is a form of hiding, because I have been hiding in the body's illiteracy for a year and the *ménshén* has accepted it:

"爆竹声中一岁除,春风送暖入屠苏。" (*Bàozhú shēng zhōng yī suì chú, chūnfēng sòng nuǎn rù Túsū.* — Amid the crackle of firecrackers the year departs; spring wind carries warmth into the New Year's wine.)

王安石 (Wáng Ānshí — the Song-dynasty statesman-poet). A thousand years old. 一岁除 (*yī suì chú* — the year departs) — 岁 (*suì*) — my name — in a *chūnlián*, on the school gate, written by a poet a thousand years ago, meaning the year, meaning the harvest, meaning the homophone they cleaned me into, meaning me, if you squint.

"好联 (*hǎo lián* — good couplet)," Lǎo Zhōu said.

"嗯 (*èng*)," I said.

The *ménshén* stood guard while the demon hung the verse about his own name on the front door. The culture's exorcism apparatus, staffed by its own demon. I have been assimilated. The fortress has conscripted me. I am the 岁 (*Suì*) of 李子坝小学 (Lǐzǐbà Xiǎoxué), employed, contracted, beloved, and I hang the wards with my own hands, and the wards have my name in them, and no one knows, and I have never been so safe.

期末 (*qīmò* — end of term). The 散学典礼 (*sànxué diǎnlǐ* — the closing assembly). The children left with 寒假作业 (*hánjià zuòyè* — winter-vacation homework). Lín Xiǎomǎn walked past me at the gate, carrying her research folder, and she said, quietly, so no one heard:

"岁师傅,我研究完了再告诉你结果。" (*Suì shīfu, wǒ yánjiū wán le zài gàosu nǐ jiéguǒ.* — Master Sui, when my research is done I'll tell you the result.)

She is ten. She is conducting research on me. She has a folder. She has a red pen. She has already written my name on an official document and gotten away with it.

"好 (*hǎo*)," I said.

The demon and the scientist. Co-conspirators. The only two people in the school who know who I am, and one of them is wrong about everything else.

Chúxī is in six days. The new *zhíbānbiǎo* — printed fresh, correct, 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*) — has me on duty 除夕夜 (*Chúxī yè* — the night itself). I volunteered. I always volunteer. It is my night. The school thinks I am dedicated. I am. In a way. The most dedicated demon in the history of demons — dedicated to the school, to a mop, to a lunchbox note, to a child's research project.

I have transferred my loyalty from the night to the institution. The institution is the school. The school is the children. The children are the heads. I guard them now.

The demon of the unguarded moment has gone over to the other side — the guarded side — the side that stays up — 守岁 (*shǒusuì*) — I have become the thing that defeated me: a procedure, a habit, a vigil.

I am 守岁 (*shǒusuì*) now. I am the custom. The warmest custom in China, wearing a janitor's uniform, mopping a corridor, waiting for *Chúxī*.

And for the first time in 3947 years, I am not going to do anything with my night. I am going to 守 (*shǒu*) it. I am going to keep it.

守祟 (*shǒu Suì*). I finally understand the title of the vigil. It was never 守岁 (*shǒusuì*) — keeping the year. It was 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*) — keeping me.

The whole country, for a thousand years, staying up to keep me. To hold me. The custom was never a weapon. It was a cradle. And I have spent a thousand years being held, and I called it a prison.

I thought about this for a long time. Then I did not think about it. Then I thought about it again.

Six days. Then my night. And for the first time in four thousand years, I am not going to haunt it.

I am going to keep it. ---

CHAPTER 11

The Empty Building

Chúxī. The school is closed. Everyone is home. I am at the school.

I came at six, as I always come, because it is my night, because I have never once missed it, because the appointment is the oldest thing I own. Lǎo Zhōu covered the early watch — the *ménshén* holds the gate until ten — and then he handed me the keys and said: 王师傅,三十晚上辛苦你哦,我屋里等我吃团年饭 (*Wáng shīfu, sānshí wǎnshang xīnkǔ nǐ ó, wǒ wūtou děng wǒ chī tuányánfàn* — Master Wang, the thirtieth night is hard on you; my family's waiting for me to eat the reunion dinner).

But he did not leave at once, and I did not know why, and then I did. He poured two 搪瓷缸 (*tángcí gāng* — enamel mugs, army crockery) from the thermos and handed me one, and we stood in the gatehouse with the stove ticking, two men and a door between us and the whole city's warmest night.

He talked the way old soldiers talk, in supply lines, and he talks in 言子儿 (*yánzi'er* — the city's rhyming wisecracks, a folk art of the quick answer) when he is easy, and plain when he means it. The north: he had served in the north forty years ago, on a river bridge, in the winter, and the bridge had needed standing on and he had stood on it, and that was the whole of the story he told, and it was the whole of the story. His wife: gone eight years. His daughter: in Shenzhen, calls on Sundays, sends photographs of a grandson he has met twice.

He said the bridge was never attacked in the end, and he was never sure whether the standing on it had prevented anything, or whether the standing on it had just been what the years were for. 站着站着,事情就没有了。 (*Zhànzhe zhànzhe, shìqing jiù méiyǒu le.* — You stand long enough and the thing is gone.) That is the door god's whole philosophy, and it is the vigil's too.

Then he said: 站门这个事,要有伴才站得久。 (*Zhàn mén zhège shì, yào yǒu bàn cái zhàn de jiǔ.* — Keeping a gate: you need a companion to keep it long.) I said I was not going anywhere. He said: 嗯。我知道。 (*èng. Wǒ zhīdào.* — Mm. I know.) And we drank the tea, and the tea was terrible, and neither of

us said so, and that was the first friendship I have had in four thousand years that was not mediated by a mop.

The door god left. The demon was alone in the fortress.

First, the canteen. The fire was kept — the *xiàozhǎng*'s instruction, carried out by hands I did not see: the big pot on the low burner, a ladle across the top, and a covered plate set out at the one table with a view of the river. *Jiǎozi*. Under the plate, a note in a brisk hand: 趁热。 (*Chèn rè.* — While they're hot.)

I sat in the empty canteen on the thirtieth night and ate dumplings that a woman with glasses had ordered kept warm for a man she believes is called Wáng Suì. The steam went up and the city murmured behind its windows, and I ate all of them. I have taken offerings off altars. I have taken, and taken, and taken. This was the first meal anyone ever cooked for me on purpose, and I could not finish the thought, so I finished the pot instead, and washed it, and wiped the table, and turned off the fire, and thanked the room.

Then I did my rounds.

The city was quiet. The 主城 (*zhǔchéng* — the main city, the nine districts at the river's bend) has banned fireworks — 2019, the ban, I read it in the *wǎnbào* — and so the city was quiet in a way I have never heard in four thousand years of *Chúxī*. I remember the firecrackers by the million, the *bàozhú yǐ pì shānsāo èguǐ*, the whole species arming itself against me with noise, one night a year, for a thousand years. The *shānsāo* in me feared it. The 祟 (*Suì*) in me was driven by it. It was the sound of my defeat, and it was the sound of the year turning, and it was the only sound I had.

Now: silence. And the 春晚 (*Chūnwǎn* — the Spring Festival Gala, four hours of television the entire nation watches at once), muffled, in a hundred windows up the hill.

The species has retired its exorcism. It does not need to drive me out anymore. It has forgotten me. The one night a year it used to spend making itself loud against me, it now spends watching television, and I am alone in the fortress it built against me, and the fortress is empty, and the city is quiet, and I have been waiting four thousand years for them to stop — and they have stopped — and it is the loneliest sound I have ever heard.

I did my rounds. The corridors. The classrooms. Empty desks. The *yǎn bǎojiàn cāo guǎngbō* silent. I walked *sān niánjí èr bān* — Zhèng Yōuyōu's desk, empty, the lunchbox note gone home with its owner — and I stood in the doorway at the old hour, 12:50, the hour I have guarded for a year, and there was no head to guard, because the head is home, asleep, in a bed, with a note in the kitchen that says *māma ài nǐ*.

The head is home. And I am here. And there is no one standing in any doorway tonight.

For one second — one second — the old arithmetic flickered. The whole city asleep. The one night. The only night. My night. No one watching. No cameras in the houses. No *shēngkòngdēng*. I could walk down the hill. I could — the 3948th attempt. Three touches. Any house. Any sleeping head.

I waited for the itch.

I stood in the dark classroom — the *shēngkòngdēng* had given up on the empty corridor, the building had finally stopped showing off — and I waited for the old hunger, the whole 3947 years of it, the engine, the recurrence, the thing I am.

It did not come. Or it came, and I did not answer. I do not know which. I have never known which. I have spent a year not knowing which, and I have decided it does not matter. What matters is what I said. I said it to the empty desks, to the dark, to the whole quiet city:

"*Jīnnián yě bù lái le."

The demon who returns every year has not returned. It is the second year. The first was an accident of a body. This one is a choice. I have never made a choice. I have been a haunting — a thing that returns — and tonight I am standing in the dark classroom of the school I guard, on my night, in my hour, and I am not returning.

I am not recurring anymore.

I don't know if I am relieved or annihilated. The mop is silent. The mop is always silent. The mop and I mop *sān niánjí èr bān*. The floor is already clean. We mop it anyway. We need the motion. We need the night. We need the sound of the mop on the floor, which is the only sound in the building, which is the sound of a demon keeping himself alive by keeping a school clean.

The 春晚 (*Chūnwǎn*) through the window. The *ménwèishì* has a television — Lǎo Zhōu's television, the *ménshén*'s — and I did not go in, because the *ménwèishì* is Lǎo Zhōu's, because the *ménshén* is not here, because even now — 尊卑 (*zūnbēi* — high and low; senior and junior; the old ladder of who may sit where), four thousand years of hierarchy — the demon does not sit in the door god's chair. I stood outside the window, in the cold, and I watched the *Chūnwǎn* through the glass.

The 主持人 (*zhǔchírén* — the hosts) in red. The 歌舞 (*gēwǔ* — the song-and-dance numbers). The *xiǎopǐn*. The whole country inside, warm, together, watching the same screen. And I am outside, cold, watching the watchers. The 守岁 (*shǒusuì*) inverted. I — the reason for the vigil — standing the vigil — alone — for the country that forgot my name.

And I thought: this is what 守岁 (*shǒusuì*) always was. One person, staying up, so that nothing bad happens to the sleeping. I was the thing that was supposed to be kept out. And I am the one keeping.

I stood there until midnight. The countdown. The *zhǔchírén* counting — five, four, three, two, one — 新年好 (*xīnnián hǎo* — happy new year) — and the muffled cheers from the windows up the hill, and somewhere far away, an illegal 鞭炮 (*biānpào* — firecracker), defiant, a single crack, the old world firing one last round at me, and missing, and I did not flinch.

一岁除 (*yī suì chú*). The year departed.

I said, quietly, to the year, to the city, to no one:

"*Xīnnián hǎo.*"

The demon of New Year's Eve said *xīnnián hǎo* to the New Year. The first time in four thousand years I have greeted the thing that owns me. The year turns. I am still here. I am still 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*). I am still 祟 (*Suì*). The fog rolled in off the Jiālíng Jiāng. Nothing happened. No gold flash. No Bā Xiān. No Fate. Just the year, turning, and me, in it.

I have been waiting four thousand years for the night to end. Tonight, for the first time, I am not waiting.

I picked up the mop. The *yī niánjí* bathrooms. I was halfway down the corridor when I heard it: a sound at the gate. Small. Metallic. Like a stone — or a shoe — on the 铁门 (*tiěmén* — the iron gate).

I stopped. I listened. The demon listens. Four thousand years of listening.

The sound was a child, climbing the gate.

I walked toward it.

※

CHAPTER 12

Lin Xiaoman

I heard her before I saw her: a shoe sliding on iron, twice, then the small held breath of a person who has decided to commit. The fog was thick that night, the street a corridor of orange lamps, and the gate — eight feet of vertical iron, the bars an arm's width apart — had a child on it. The coat first: red, of course, the charm-color, because the *dàduìzhǎng* wears red even to climb gates. Then the rest of her: one glove on a bar, her schoolbag swung to her back, her breath going up in a small flag of steam, her shoes — school shoes, smooth-soled, made for floors, not for iron — finding holds the shoes were never designed to find. Three bars from the top. Her face was doing what her voice does during the oath: steady, with the cost somewhere underneath where no one checks. My pulse — the body's pulse — jumped when I heard the shoe slide, a blunt animal alarm, and I stood in the fog listening to my own blood do what blood does.

She had run down the hill in that. Fourteen minutes from her door to mine, downhill, in fog, in the cold, past every lit window of the vigil, with a folder against her chest. The descent, when I lifted her down, took four seconds. The climb had cost her the whole evening. That ratio is the whole of courage, and I have watched four thousand years of it from the dark side of thresholds, and I had never once seen it performed upward, at night, by a ten-year-old, toward a demon.

She was on top of the *tiěmén* — ten years old, *dàduìzhǎng*, in the red coat — her 书包 (*shūbāo* — schoolbag) over one shoulder, frozen mid-climb, caught, like a cat on a wall, and she looked down at me and said:

"岁师傅。" (*Suì shīfu.*)

"你啷个来了?" (*Nǐ làng gè lái le?* — How come you're here?)

"我来找你。" (*Wǒ lái zhǎo nǐ.* — I came to find you.)

"你屋头的人呢?" (*Nǐ wūtou de rén ne?* — Where are your people?)

Silence.

"吵架了。" (*Chǎojià le.* — They fought.)

The 年夜饭 (*niányèfàn* — the New Year's Eve meal) fight. The parents, at the *tuányánfàn*, on *Chúxī*, the one night of the year the culture set aside for warmth — arguing about 报班 (*bāobān* — buying children slots in cram classes), about *xuéqū fáng*, about the arithmetic of a family, about money, always money, the modern *yāsuìqián*, the *fángdài*, the whole ledger — and she had run out the door, down the hill, through the cold, to the only place she knew was safe.

The school. The school is closed. But the janitor is always here. The janitor is always here.

"下来 (*xiàlái* — come down)," I said.

I held the gate. She dropped into my arms. I caught her — the second child I have caught — the first was a boy in *èr niánjí* who slipped on my wet floor — and this is the *dàduìzhǎng* — and I held her, one white-gloved hand on her back, and the old arithmetic flickered — one, two, three — the sleeping child, on my night, in my territory — and I did nothing. I have been doing nothing for a year. It is the most I have ever done.

The *ménwèishì*. The *ménshén*'s chair was empty. *zūnbēi* — four thousand years of hierarchy — and I sat the child in the *ménshén*'s chair, and I wrapped her in Lǎo Zhōu's 军大衣 (*jūn dàyī* — the army greatcoat; green wool, smells of petrol and forty winters), and I made tea with the *ménshén*'s 保温杯 (*bǎowēnbēi* — the thermos flask), and I thought: Lǎo Zhōu won't mind. The *ménshén* minds nothing. The *ménshén* and the 祟 (*Suì*), same building, same war. There was never a war. There was a vigil.

She talked. The fight — 爸爸说报班,妈妈说先买房 (*Bàba shuō bāobān, māma shuō xiān mǎi fáng* — Dad says sign him up for classes; Mom says buy the apartment first) — the *xuéqū fáng* — the family's *yāsuìqián* arithmetic, spent on the one night of the year the culture set aside for warmth — and I thought: four thousand years ago, the whole country stayed up to keep me from the children. Now they stay up to argue about the children. The exorcism has changed. The demon has been replaced by the 账单 (*zhàngdān* — the bill). The thing that threatens the children now is not me. It is the 贷款 (*dàikuǎn* — the loan). I have been out-horrified. The modern world has produced a better 祟 (*Suì*) than I ever was — a 祟 (*Suì*) that lives in the *jiāzhǎng qún* and takes the *xuéqū fáng* — and I

should be offended, and I am, on her behalf, which is new, which is the whole new me, which is the prank.

Then she took out her research folder.

The *hánjià zuòyè*. The project. *Yāsuìqián de láilì*. She showed me: the legend, printed from the school computer; the 守祟→守岁 (*shǒu Suì → shǒusuì*) research; the *zuòwén*, *jiǔshíwǔ fēn*, *xiǎngxiàng fēngfù*; and her conclusion, written in red pen, in her *dàduìzhǎng*'s hand:

岁师傅就是祟。祟就是岁师傅。 (*Suì shīfu jiùshì Suì. Suì jiùshì Suì shīfu.* — Master Sui is Sui. Sui is Master Sui.)

I read it. My name. My identity. My four thousand years. In a ten-year-old's red pen.

I said nothing.

She said: "你莫装了。你的手,白的。你怕红领巾。你大年三十要来值班。你走到哪里哪里冷。" (*Nǐ mò zhuāng le. Nǐ de shǒu, bái de. Nǐ pà hónglǐngjīn. Nǐ dànián sānshí yào lái zhíbān. Nǐ zǒu dào nǎli nǎli lěng.* — Stop pretending. Your hands: white. You fear the red scarves. You come on duty on the thirtieth. Wherever you go, it goes cold.)

The evidence. The case. The *dàduìzhǎng* has built a case against the demon, and the evidence is: my hands, my terror, my schedule, my cold. All of it true. All of it me. The one thing that has never happened in four thousand years — I have been seen — is happening, in a *ménwèishì*, in a *jūn dàyī*, by a ten-year-old with a folder.

I sat down on the floor. I am good at the floor. Four thousand years of floors. I said:

"你啷个不怕我?" (*Nǐ làng gè bú pà wǒ?* — How come you're not afraid of me?)

She said: "我查了的。你只摸睡着的娃儿。我又不睡。" (*Wǒ chá le de. Nǐ zhǐ mō shuìzháo de wá'ér. Wǒ yòu bù shuì.* — I looked it up. You only touch sleeping kids. And I wasn't asleep.)

She is staying awake. She is keeping the vigil. The custom, inverted, performed by its smallest practitioner, against its own demon, out of love. 守祟

(*shǒu Suì*). The child is guarding against me, and the child is guarding me, and it is the same thing, it was always the same thing.

I am four thousand years old. I had to go stand in the cold for a moment. I came back in.

She was asleep.

In the *ménshén*'s chair, wrapped in the *jūn dàyī*, the research folder open on her lap, her head fallen to the side — the sleeping child — on my night — in my territory — head exposed — the old geography — the old invitation — the old arithmetic:

One. Two. Three.

I stood there. The itch. The whole 3947 years of it, all of it, in my hands, in the dark, on my night, no one watching, the last watch, the *sìgēng*, the old hour, the moment the legend says I have always come.

I stood there and I did the thing the vigil is for, which is nothing. The *jūn dàyī* rose and fell with her breathing. The stove in the corner ticked as it cooled. Outside, the city was quiet the way it is quiet once a year, and somewhere up the hill a window laughed, and somewhere a mahjong tile clicked down on a felt table, because even tonight there are four old people at war somewhere, and the folder lay open on her lap with my name in it in red pen, and the red pen had rolled to the edge of the chair and stopped.

I counted her breathing the way I once counted touches. Twelve a minute. A child's rate. I had dynasties of practice at standing over sleeping children, and every hour of it had been aimed, and this was the first time in my existence the standing was the whole of the work. The watch was the work. The watching was the keeping. And the question I planted in the spring — the one about the touch in the other direction — answered itself here without being asked: this is what it does. A hand on a forehead that ends the fever of being alone. The city's medicine will never chart it. I was performing it in the dark, on the one night of the year, for free.

I understood at 3 a.m., in a gatehouse, in an army coat, with a ten-year-old asleep under my only blanket, why the country has never once explained the custom to the thing it is customed against: the custom is not explained to the kept. It is performed. And I was, for one night, the performance.

And I looked at her. Ten years old. Asleep. In my chair. With my name in her folder, in her red pen.

I took the *jūn dàyī* and I arranged it over her.

I sat on the floor with my back to the wall.

And I kept the vigil.

守祟 (*shǒu Suì*). For real. The first real 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*) in four thousand years. The demon keeping the child. The country kept me for a thousand years, and I never understood, because I thought the vigil was a wall. Tonight I understand. You stay up not to keep the demon out. You stay up to hold the child in. The vigil was never a wall. It was a hand. And I am the hand now.

3 a.m. The *sìgēng*. The old hour. Nothing came. Nothing will come. The demon has retired. The demon is on duty. I am the custom now. I am the warmest custom in China, in a janitor's uniform, in a *ménshén*'s chair, holding a child's sleep in the dark, on the one night of the year that belongs to me.

I have never been more myself. I have never been less what I was. I don't know how to feel. I know exactly how to feel. I have been feeling it for a year. I just had no name for it.

The name is 守 (*shǒu*). To keep. To guard. To hold. The character in the notebook. 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*). It was always the same word. And it meant, all along: I will not let anything happen to you. Not even me.

Dawn came. The *ménwèi*'s clock said seven. The light came over the Shānchéng, gray and gold, through the fog off the Jiālíng Jiāng. I was still sitting. She was still asleep.

The gate. A car. A voice. Her father's voice — 小满 (*Xiǎomǎn* — her milk name; also the solar term when the grain half-fills)! — and her mother, crying — and Lǎo Zhōu, the *ménshén*, who came back early, who could not sleep, who found the parents at the gate, who let them in — the *ménshén* opening the gate for the family — the demon holding the child — the two guards, the old and the new, the wall and the hand.

The mother took her. The mother was crying. And then she stopped crying long enough to see the chair — the *ménshén*'s chair, the *jūn dàyī* still folded over its back where I had arranged it, the tea gone cold in the *ménshén*'s cup, the

folder open on the seat with my name in her daughter's red pen. She looked at the chair the way you look at a bed someone has kept warm for you, and then she looked at me, over her daughter's head, and there was nothing in her face that needed translating. Lín Xiǎomǎn woke, still half-asleep, and she reached for her folder, and she took out the last page — the title page of the project — and on it, in red pen, big, practiced:

崇 (*Suì*).

The character. Written right. The first time in four thousand years anyone has written my name and meant me.

She held it up to me. She said, sleepy, small, in 重庆话 (*Chóngqìnghuà* — the Chongqing dialect, flat-bladed, pepper-hot):

"岁师傅,我把你的名字写对了。" (*Suì shīfu, wǒ bǎ nǐ de míngzi xiě duì le.* — Master Sui, I wrote your name right.)

The character. 出 (*chū*) over 示 (*shì*). Emergence over omen. My name. Correct. By a child. In red.

And the sun came up over the Jiālíng Jiāng.

And my hands — for the first time in 3947 years — did not itch.

And I knew the prank was over. Not because Fate ended it. Because I finished it. I — who have never finished anything except being defeated — finished the prank.

I said, in the *ménshén*'s doorway, with the *ménshén* watching and the family crying and the child holding up my name like a lantern:

"谢谢你。" (*Xièxie nǐ.* — Thank you.)

The first time in four thousand years anyone has thanked me. No. The first time in four thousand years I have had anyone to thank. Four thousand years, and no one to thank. One year, and a child. The books balance.

I said *xièxie nǐ*. And then, because I am four thousand years old and do not know how to be seen, I went to mop the bathroom.

The mother said to Lǎo Zhōu: "你们这个师傅,人真好。" (*Nǐmen zhège shīfu, rén zhēn hǎo.* — This workman of yours is truly a good man.)

Lǎo Zhōu said: “嗯。就是有点怪。大年三十非要来守楼。” (*èng. Jiùshì yǒudiǎn guài. Dànián sānshí fēiyào lái shǒu lóu.* — Mm. A bit odd, though. Insists on keeping the building on the thirtieth.)

Lín Xiǎomǎn, in her mother’s arms, half-asleep, said:

“他不是怪。他是祟。他守我们守了一千年了。” (*Tā bú shì guài. Tā shì Suì. Tā shǒu wǒmen shǒu le yī qiān nián le.* — He isn’t odd. He is Sui. He has kept us for a thousand years.)

Nobody heard her properly. The parents heard *tā shǒu wǒmen shǒu le yī qiān nián le* — he has kept us for a thousand years — and the mother cried harder, thinking it was a child’s poetry.

It was exactly that.

※

CHAPTER 13

Daybreak

正月初一 (*zhēngyuè chūyī* — the first day of the first moon; New Year's Day by the old count). Morning. I walked home through the fog, 爬坡上坎 (*pápō shàngkǎn* — up the slopes and over the humps, which is how Chongqing people say "walking anywhere"), and the city was quiet, and the year had turned, and I was still here.

A kid on a 滑板车 (*huábǎnchē* — a kick-scooter) waved at me. A random kid. He waves at everyone. I don't know that. I waved back. The first time in four thousand years I have ever waved at anyone. One year, one wave.

I slept. The first sleep of the year. I slept through *Chúxī* — through the whole of it — for the first time in 3947 years. The demon finally kept the holiday. I dreamed of nothing. No children. No gold flashes. No eight coins. Nothing.

I woke at noon. The sun. My hands.

I looked at my hands. Pale, calloused, mortal. The white hands of the legend. I flexed them. No itch. I put the gloves on. I took them off. I put them on. I don't know what to do with hands that don't itch. I have never had hands that don't itch. I have been the itch. I am not the itch anymore.

I went to the school. It is closed. I went anyway. The demon's lair is the school now. I have transferred. I am a school demon now — 校祟 (*xiào Suì*) — the 祟 (*Suì*) of 李子坝小学 (Lǐzǐbà Xiǎoxué) — the school's very own haunting — employed, contracted, beloved.

Lǎo Zhōu was at the gate, eating 汤圆 (*tāngyuán* — glutinous rice balls in sweet soup, round as the first moon). "老王!过年好!来吃汤圆!" (*Lǎo Wáng! Guònián hǎo! Lái chī tāngyuán!* — Old Wang! Happy New Year! Come eat tangyuan!)

The *ménshén* and the 祟 (*Suì*), on *zhēngyuè chūyī*, at the school gate. The *ménshén* offered me a *tāngyuán* — round, sweet, for the year, 团团圆圆 (*tuántuán yuányuán* — all-round, all-together; the pun inside the snack: eat

round, be reunited) — and I — the demon of *Chúxī* — I ate the 初一 (*chūyī*). The yin joined the yang. I said:

"*Guònián hǎo.*"

The demon of the New Year said *guònián hǎo*. Lǎo Zhōu said: "你也过年好!" (*Nǐ yě guònián hǎo!* — Happy New Year to you too!) and he gave me another *tāngyuán*, and we stood there, the two guards, the wall and the hand, eating *tāngyuán*, saying *guònián hǎo*, at the gate of the school we both keep.

The war is over. There was never a war. There was a vigil. And the vigil has ended. Everyone is home.

Lǎo Zhōu went home at noon. His family. I was alone at the school on *zhēngyuè chūyī*. The empty school, again. And it did not feel like *shǔjià*. It felt like rest.

I sat on the *cāochǎng* steps. The fog. The *qīngguǐ* passed through the building above — Lǐzǐbà, the train through the building — every five minutes the building shakes — and I, who thought the world had gone mad on day one, now find the shaking comforting. The building is alive. The city is alive. I am alive.

I — who was never alive. I was a haunting. Hauntings don't live. They return. And I have stopped returning.

I am here. I am. This is the first time in four thousand years I have been here — in the present, in a body, in a city, in a year. 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*). The year. The year is me. I am the year. And the year is only one year. And I am only one man.

And it is enough. It is more than enough. It is everything.

I went home in the evening. The *dānjiān*. I took out the notebook — 祟 (*Suì*), 守 (*shǒu*), the sun-drawing — and I wrote, in my slow, careful hand — the body's hand, barely literate, but I know these characters — 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*). And then, under it, smaller:

王岁 (*Wáng Suì*).

My two names. The vigil and the year. The custom and the man.

I closed the notebook. I took out the red envelope. Lín Xiǎomǎn's. The eight one-yuan coins — she put them in, 像传说里一样 (*xiàng chuánshuō li yīyàng* — just like in the legend), eight coins, the *Bā Xiān*, the old defeat, given back, by

a child, as a gift. The charm, inverted. The child gave the demon the 压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*).

The demon is the child now.

压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*). The money that presses down the year. I put it under my pillow.

I lay down. I slept. I did not dream. I did not return. And the year turned, and the year was kept, and the one who was kept kept the year.

Somewhere, the *Bā Xiān*, if they exist, are laughing. And the laughter sounds like the whole country — staying up, one night a year, for a thousand years — keeping me.

The warmest custom in China. And I finally understand: it was never about keeping me out.

It was about keeping me.

And I am kept.

And I sleep.

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CHAPTER 14

New Year Money

开学 (*kāixué* — the first day of the spring term). The children came back — redder, louder, richer. 压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*) talk at the gate, the children comparing charms: 我收了八百 (*wǒ shōu le bābǎi* — I collected eight hundred). 我一千二 (*wǒ yīqiān èr* — me, one thousand two). The arithmetic of the custom. Four thousand years ago they compared coins under pillows; now they compare 数额 (*shù'é* — the amounts). The custom has grown up. It has industrialized. It has become a 银行转账 (*yínháng zhuǎnzhàng* — a bank transfer). And the children are still doing it — still keeping me — and they don't know, and the custom doesn't need to know, and the custom just needs to keep.

Lín Xiǎomǎn walked past me at the gate. Ten years old. *dàduìzhǎng*. The only one who knows.

"岁师傅,我研究完了。" (*Suì shīfu, wǒ yánjiū wán le.* — Master Sui, my research is finished.)

"*ńg.*"

"结论:你不是坏蛋。你是被删了名字。" (*Jiélùn: nǐ bú shì huàidàn. Nǐ shì bèi shān le míngzi.* — Conclusion: you are not a villain. You are the one whose name got deleted.)

"*ńg.*"

"我给你写回去了。" (*Wǒ gěi nǐ xiě huíqù le.* — I wrote it back in for you.)

"我看到咯。" (*Wǒ kàndào lo.* — I saw it.)

"以后每年我都给你写。" (*Yǐhòu měi nián wǒ dōu gěi nǐ xiě.* — From now on, every year, I'll write it for you.)

And she walked off to the *shēngqí yíshì*, and I stood there with the mop, and the mop listened, and the mop, for once, had nothing to say. The mop has been my only friend. The mop has been promoted. The mop has been replaced — by a ten-year-old with a red pen. The mop understands. The mop is fine. The mop is also a little proud.

The new *zhíbānbiǎo*. The *hòuqín lǎoshī* printed a fresh one — correct, 王岁 (*Wáng Suì*), no typos — and in the corner, small, in red pen:

祟 (*Suì*).

Lín Xiǎomǎn got there first. Of course she did. *dàduìzhǎng*. Access. And the *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn* saw it, and the *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn*, calm as the Jiālíng Jiāng, said nothing, and the *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn*, later, alone, in the office, looked at the character 祟 (*Suì*) for a long time, and said nothing.

Zhuāngzǐ said: 其鬼不祟 (*qí guǐ bù Suì*). Ghosts cannot haunt the settled. The calm one is immune to hauntings — and to the truth of them — or maybe the calm one knows exactly, and is calm about it. Mǎ Jiànguó has been calm about everything for thirty years. A *jiàodǎo zhǔrèn*'s calm is a form of 定 (*dìng* — settledness; stillness; the unshakeable calm of the career bureaucrat). The settled mind. The one mind I could never touch.

I was never going to touch it. I was never going to touch anything again. I am on the other side now. I am a *hétonggōng* with a 劳动合同 (*láodòng hétong* — a labor contract, the paper that makes the haunting legal) and *wǔxiǎn* and a red-pen mark on the *zhíbānbiǎo* that says my real name.

I am, at last, on the record.

Zhāng āyí's *hóngbāo*. At 开工 (*kāigōng* — back-to-work day, the day the canteen fires burn again), in the *cítáng*, she gave everyone a *hóngbāo* — the *hòuqín* staff, the *ménwèi*, the janitor. "岁师傅,新年好,这个你收倒。" (*Suì shīfu, xīnnián hǎo, zhège nǐ shōu dǎo.* — Master Sui, happy new year; this one you take.)

yāsuìqián. For the grown man. By kindness, not fear. The custom, given to the demon.

I held it. Red. The charm-color. Warm.

"谢谢张阿姨 (*xièxie Zhāng āyí*)," I said.

I did not open it. I know what's in it. It doesn't matter what's in it. It's a *hóngbāo*. It's the custom. It's the warmth. It's the whole country, in paper form, saying my name without knowing it.

I put it in my pocket. Next to my own eight coins. The old defeat and the new.

The spring term gave me conversations I had not earned.

The first was 郑悠悠 (Zhèng Yōuyōu), awake — actually awake, at 课间, at the water fountain, doing the thing he does at recess, which is nothing, slowly. He saw me mopping the drain and he said, with the confidence of a boy who has known me all his life: 岁师傅,那条蛇你放哪里的? (*Suì shīfu, nà tiáo shé nǐ fàng nǎlǐ de?* — Master Sui, where did you let the snake go?) I said up the hill, past the wall, where the bamboo starts. He considered this with his whole face. 它应该留下来的。 (*Tā yīnggāi liú xiàlái de.* — It should have stayed.) Why? 学校老鼠多。 (*Xuéxiào lǎoshǔ duō.* — The school has a lot of mice.) And then, after a pause the length of a whole other thought: 我妈说你现在中午都看着我们睡觉。 (*Wǒ mā shuō nǐ xiànzài zhōngwǔ dōu kànzhe wǒmen shuìjiào.* — My mom says you watch us sleep at noon now.) The fountain ran. I said someone has to keep the floors. He said: 她说是守护。 (*Tā shuō shì shǒuhù.* — She says it's guarding.) And he went back to class, and I stood at the fountain with the mop for a long time, because a fourth-grader had just used the correct verb, and his mother had taught it to him, and I am keeping that too.

The second was 毛毛 (Máomao), who stopped running. He found me in the *èr niánjí* wing, where the light is bad at the far end, and he did not run — which, for 毛毛, is a treaty — and he said: 走廊里的黑影子不见了。 (*Zǒuláng li de hēi yǐngzi bú jiàn le.* — The black shadow in the corridor is gone.) I said the lights were fixed. He said: 我妈妈说是王师傅把它赶跑了。 (*Wǒ māma shuō shì Wáng shīfu bǎ tā gǎn pǎo le.* — My mom says Master Wang drove it off.) And then, with the pity of the strong for the weak: 它找不到工作,只能到处跑。 (*Tā zhǎo bú dào gōngzuò, zhǐ néng dàochù pǎo.* — It couldn't find work, so it just runs around.) And he gave me the orange from his pocket, because his mother says you should share with people who don't have any, and a shadow with no job is a person who doesn't have any, and he walked off chewing, and I stood there with an orange in my glove like a man holding a live coal.

The cold war is over. The terms were an orange. I ate it that night at the *sìgēng*, at the top of the stairs, and it was the sweetest thing I have eaten since the *huíguōròu*, and I have eaten at the courts of emperors, which is a lie, which I keep

telling, because the lie is load-bearing: demons do not eat at courts. They get fruit from six-year-olds and they stand in the dark being grateful.

And a third conversation, briefer. Táng Yuányuán, with her stopwatch, timed the new broom against the old from the doorway of the *dàduìbù* and reported that my route is 9 percent faster with the new one, and that I kept the old one anyway, which is not rational. She has a notebook now — the stopwatch grown into a ledger — and she wrote something in it, dated, and said: 数据说该扔。(*Shùjù shuō gāi rēng.* — The data says throw it away.) I said the old one heard everything. She looked at me the way Lín Xiǎomǎn looks at me — the small sharp look — and she said: 那不是理性的理由。 (*Nà bú shì lǐxìng de lǐyóu.* — That is not a rational reason.) And then, closing the notebook: 但是是人话。(*Dànshì shì rénhuà.* — But it is a human one.)

wǔxiū. The first day back. 12:50. The patrol. *sān niánjí èr bān* — no, 四年级二班 (*sì niánjí èr bān* — Class 2 of Grade 4) now, the years turn — Zhèng Yōuyōu, still napping, still drooling, the lunchbox note still saying *māma ài nǐ*.

I stood in the doorway. I waited for the itch.

It did not come. It has not come since *zhēngyuè chūyī*. The itch is gone. The hunger is gone. What is left is: the patrol. The habit. The vigil. The custom.

I — who was the reason for the vigil — am the vigil.

守祟 (*shǒu Suì*). I am the character in the notebook. I am the warmth.

And I thought: this is what it was all for. Four thousand years of being beaten by pocket change, and the pocket change was the point. The eight coins were never a weapon. They were a welcome. Eight immortals, disguised as money, under a child's pillow, saying: you can't have this one. This one is kept.

And now I am kept. And I keep.

The bell rang. The children poured out of the classrooms. They poured around me, through me — the invisible man — and I am invisible, and it is the happiest I have ever been — invisible, and seen, by one — the only two states that matter.

For a thousand years I thought the whole country stayed up to keep me out.

I was wrong. They stayed up to keep me.

压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*) — the money that presses down the year — every red envelope, every year, was a little weight on my chest, so I wouldn't drift away. I have my own now. I keep it under my pillow. I am the child.

Someone always stays up.

守祟 (*shǒu Suì*). The vigil. It was never a wall. It was a hand.

And I — 祟 (*Suì*) — the spirit-calamity, 出 (*chū*) over 示 (*shì*), emergence over omen — I am the hand now.

I picked up the mop.

On the first warm afternoon of the new term the mop broke — the handle, hairline-cracked since January, gave way at the neck with a sound like a knuckle, and the head rolled across the tiles and lay there, spent, and I stood in the corridor holding a stick. I sat down on the floor next to it, which is a thing the janitor can do because no one is watching, and I looked at it for a while. Fourteen months. It had heard everything. The new *sàobǎ* stood in the *chǔwùjiān* where it has waited since summer, stiff-bristled, a soldier who has not yet been told what the postings are like. I did not throw the old one away. I put it in the corner of the storeroom, head up, the way you leave a flag.

The *hòuqín* will list it as consumable stock. The ledger is correct. The ledger is always correct, and it has never once been true.

The *shēngkòngdēng* came on as I mopped the last landing with the new broom, showing off, and I let it have the win. I have been letting it have the win for a year. But this morning it stayed on after I stopped moving. It had never stayed on for me before. I stood in the light without moving for a while, the way you stand in a doorway, and I thought: it is not showing off. It is standing guard. We have that in common now, the light and I.

The demon of the unguarded moment, at last, is guarded.

And he is the guard.

守 (*shǒu*). To keep.

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Author's Note

The folklore is real. The 祟 (*Suì*) legend — the black-bodied, white-handed demon who touches sleeping children on 除夕 (*Chúxī*), driven off at 嘉兴 (*Jiāxīng*) in the Sòng by eight coins wrapped in red paper, the birth of 压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*); the pun-renamings 守祟 (*shǒu Suì*)→守岁 (*shǒusuì*) and 压祟钱 (*yā Suì qián*)→压岁钱 (*yāsuìqián*); the idioms 鬼鬼祟祟 (*guǐguǐsuìsuì*) and 作祟 (*zuòsuì*); the 祟 (*chóng*)/祟 (*Suì*) misspelling; Zhuāngzǐ's 其鬼不祟 (*qí guǐ bù Suì*); the historians' verdict that it is all 于史无据 (*yú shǐ wú jù*) — all of it is drawn from the record, except the school, the mop, and the ten-year-old with the red pen.

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The mop and I have an understanding. The mop is silent. The mop is wise. — 祟 *(*Suì*),* 王岁 *(*Wáng Suì*),* hétonggōng*, Lǐzǐbà Xiǎoxué*

Colophon

祟，神禍也。

Suì, shén huò yě.

Sui: a calamity sent by the gods. — 說文解字 · 示部, c. 100 CE — 出 over 示, emergence over omen. The definition stood for two thousand years; the pronunciation was retired for being unlucky to say.

Sui is the demon on the far side of the New Year's Eve vigil — 祟, 出 over 示, a calamity sent by the gods, the character the whole country swapped for the word for "year" so it would never have to say his name. The record gives him one night and one act: touching a sleeping child's forehead. It gives his defeat a place (Jiaxing, the Song), a method (eight coins wrapped in red paper), and a charm whose name the language sanded into 压岁钱, New Year money. This novel gives him what the record never did: a body, a contract, a mop, and the narration — four thousand years of being told no by an entire civilization, in a first voice that finds it funny, then finds it isn't, then finds it is.

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.

Beaten by Pocket Change · 14 sections · 25,240 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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